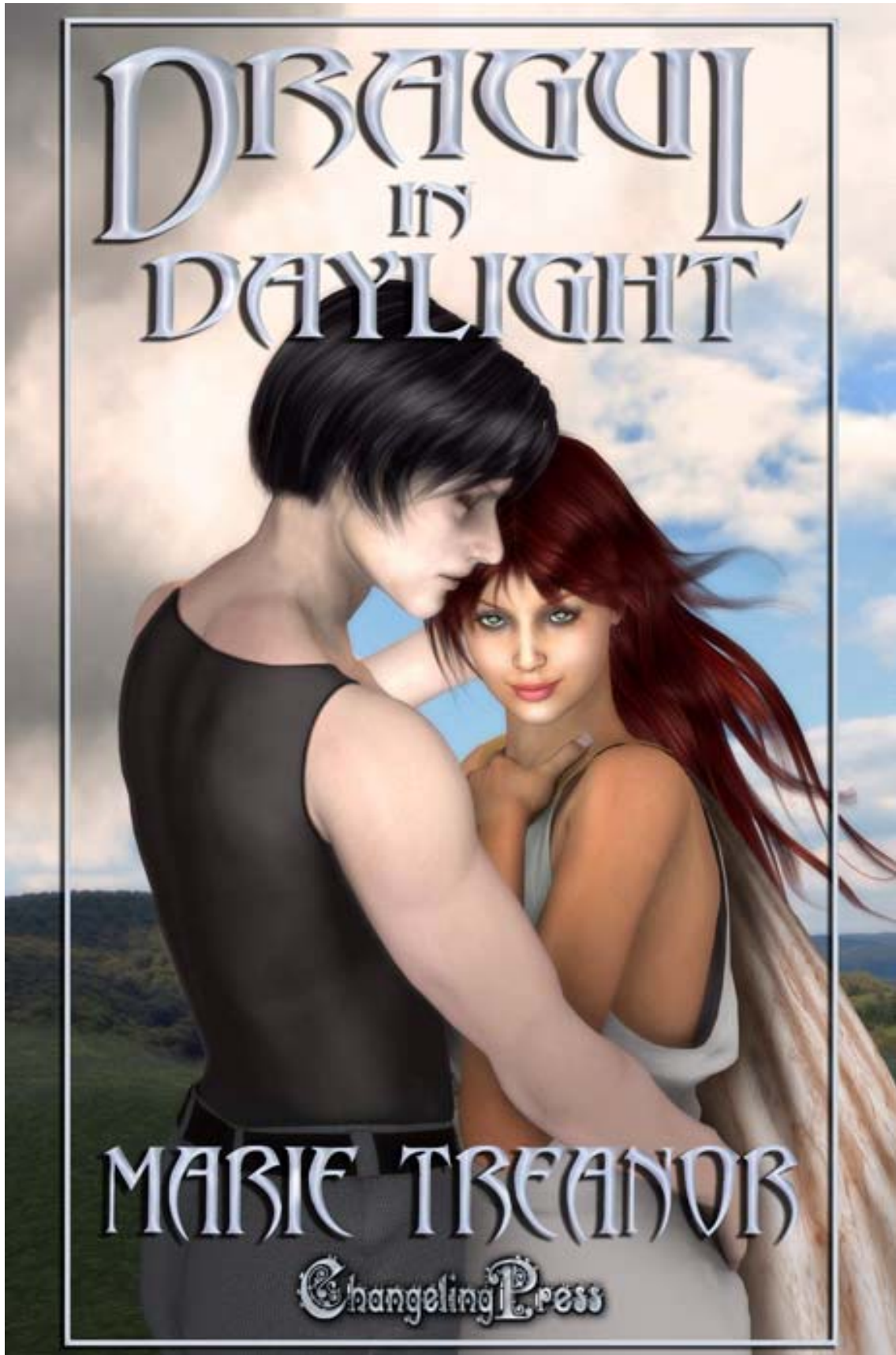


DIRTGUIN IN DAYLIGHT

MARIE TREANOR

Changeling Press



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ISBN: 978-1-59596-702-2
Formats Available:
HTML, Adobe PDF,
MobiPocket, Microsoft Reader

Publisher:
Changeling Press LLC
PO Box 1046
Martinsburg, WV 25402-1046
www.ChangelingPress.com

Editor: Crystal Esau
Cover Artist: Zuri

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Dragul in Daylight

Marie Treanor

The secret of the Dragul is out.

Human agents of the Dome are delighted to capture a shape-shifting dragon. Michael and Aaron, on a mission from the City of the Damned, are even more delighted to rescue her, especially when she turns out to be Danna, the beautiful winged Dragon Dancer, revered by her people and her king.

Danna can't explain her powerful reactions to Michael, the half-human vampire -- unless he is her One, which would be an unthinkable tragedy when their destinies lie so far apart...

Chapter One

The soft ground shook beneath Michael's feet. He stopped dead, staring at Aaron, who stood perfectly still at his side. The thud came again, making the leaves above them tremble as if in panic. At the same time, a human shout reached them, muted by the thickness of the woods.

"You said there was someone else here," Aaron murmured.

"*Someone* else," Michael corrected grimly. "This is several... Come on."

Without waiting for agreement, he sprinted through the trees. His direction wasn't random. He simply followed the sounds in his ultra-perceptive ears and the clamouring of his other sense, blasted by someone else's anxiety. And he moved fast, too fast for his friend to keep up, although it never entered his head that Aaron wouldn't follow.

The wood soon thinned, letting the late afternoon sun shaft through. Michael sniffed the air, sifting through the fresh damp smell of the undergrowth after rain and the various musky animal scents. He could smell human. And he could smell something definitely not.

Excitement rose swiftly. He had known they were close...

Abruptly, he halted, for his quarry was directly in his line of vision.

The sparse trees opened up into a meadow, all green grass and wild flowers. Trampling it were four men, wrestling the corners of a large net while a fifth shouted orders and aimed a weapon -- a rifle -- at the plunging creature they had trapped.

Michael's breath caught. No wonder the ground had trembled...

Abruptly, the creature stopped trying to escape the net and stood still. Its great scaly body trembled though not with fear, for its eyes flashed fire. From the point of its powerful tail to its long, white teeth, covered now as the dragon closed its mouth, it was

a magnificent specimen. Strong, alien and peculiarly beautiful. A faint stream of what might have been steam, or smoke, trickled from its nostrils.

Even captive, it was awesome. Michael found himself smiling as he hadn't smiled in a very long time. The dragon moved, turning its great head toward the wood, toward him.

Behind him, Aaron said breathlessly, "Jesus Christ, what's that?"

"That, my friend, is some unscrupulous agents of the Dome, capturing one of our soon-to-be-allies. No doubt to force negotiations. Ready to go in?"

"Not that I mistrust your judgement, Michael, but our ally looks perfectly able to take care of itself! If what Beth says is true, it can easily fry that net as well as the bullies at each corner."

"I know," said Michael, "but a good ally shows the enemy where to get off. I'll get the guy with the gun first."

"Mike, they'll all have guns!" Aaron warned.

"I know. Take care."

Without waiting for more -- the men were winding the net around the dragon, drawing closer -- Michael burst through the trees and sprinted across the grass.

His attention focused on the gunman who was advancing on the dragon and still hadn't seen him...

Fool! Stay back or I can't fight them!

The voice in his head took him by surprise -- but not enough to shock him or even slow him up. Instinctively, he knew it came from the dragon. Somehow it arrived in his head with this information.

He spoke back to it. *You don't need to fight them now. We're the cavalry.*

It was a weird kind of telepathy, more conceptual than verbal, as if it could have been understood in any language. Interesting. Almost as interesting as the voice itself. Low and pleasant, husky with anxiety, and definitely female.

At last the gunman saw him, let out a shout of warning, and swung the rifle away from the dragon toward Michael.

Michael jumped, partly to keep everyone's attention on him and *off* Aaron, and partly because he just liked to do it.

The gunman's mouth fell open as Michael shot into the air and flew straight at him like a bullet. Panic dawned, but no constructive thought before Michael's boots slammed into his head. Landing lightly on his feet, he grabbed the gun by the barrel, threw it unerringly at the head of the nearest net man. Before it had even struck him, Michael jumped across the dragon for the most distant captor. Like the other two, he went down like a stone. But Michael had to turn quickly to deal with the fourth man who ran at him, wrenching a handgun loose from his belt as he came. This was more of a fight, but the outcome was never in doubt for Michael. Nor was the knowledge that Aaron could -- and did -- deal with the final man.

"Four to you, one to me?" Aaron said quizzically. "Show-off."

"Sometimes, it's good to be a vampire."

He spoke vaguely, for his attention was distracted by a vague smell of burning. Turning, he saw that a large hole had been burned through the net. And the dragon had gone.

Instead, a naked woman calmly rolled up the net.

Aaron's jaw dropped. "Where the hell did she come from? Where did it..."

"Go?" Michael finished. "Nowhere. Nowhere at all."

In profile, she presented a charming if tantalizing picture as she knelt among the net, all long, strong thighs, and curved hips. Long, thick hair the color of ox-blood fell to her waist, hiding her breasts. She rose and turned to face them, holding the rolled up net in front of her like a shield, from breast to the juncture of her legs. Even so, her beauty was staggering. The luxuriant hair framed a face of delicate, even-featured beauty. She stood perfectly still, gazing at them. Michael walked slowly toward her, observing as he went that despite the frailty and delicacy of her face, she was tall for a woman, all voluptuous curves and long, luscious legs...

Lust thudded into him like a blow. Not only was she beautiful but she stood there quite unafraid. The magnificent dragon was no less splendid as a woman...

I am not a woman. I am Dragul.

Behind her, something stirred, as if by the wind or the agitation of her body. Wings. Long, pale wings the color of skin or warm sandstone...

Michael expelled his breath and came to a halt before her. "I know," he said aloud, and smiled.

The Dragul's breasts heaved beneath her hair, and though the thickness of the rolled net prevented Michael's observation of the full effect, the very knowledge that it was happening went straight to his still hardening cock.

Still in his head, she said abruptly, "You should not have interfered."

"We couldn't let them take you. They'd have used you as a hostage to get to your people."

"I was quite able to deal with it myself, and what's more," she added disdainfully, "you were well aware of that."

A straight puncher -- and a strong telepath. He hadn't even felt her probe. Hastily, he re-checked his mental barrier. At the same time, he said easily, "True. But it goes against the grain not to show the Dome who's strongest now and again. It's good for them."

He had no way of knowing if she could tell he had also wanted to impress the Dragul with his strength and courage. He sent a quick probe into her mind, but it met nothing. She had shields that made his mother's seem like eggshells, and they didn't even seem to *be* there.

At last, he began to get an inkling of the sheer power Beth had tried to convey. No wonder she wasn't afraid of them, even of him.

He held out his hand, saying easily, "My name is Michael..."

"I know. Beth's Michael."

Ignoring his hand, she turned to the man behind him. Aaron, who was not remotely telepathic, looked both bewildered and frustrated by the one-sided conversation he could hear. But this time the Dragul spoke aloud, her voice an exact replica of the one still echoing in Michael's head.

"And you are Aaron, also Beth's friend." His hand she took, if only briefly. "You are welcome in the Kingdom of the Dragul."

She turned away and began to walk across the flowered meadow to the stream beyond. The two men exchanged glances, and then with a shrug, Michael began to follow her. Aaron smiled and fell into step beside him.

The Dragul's hair and folded wings hid most of her flesh, including the upper part of her smooth buttocks -- but not enough to calm Michael's smouldering lust. Her naturally elegant movement in front of him made it difficult to walk without pain, but he forced himself to follow, barely aware of their triumph in achieving what he supposed was an invitation.

Aaron said dreamily, "I knew that one day I'd be grateful Eve chose you instead of me..."

Michael frowned at him. "Meaning what?"

Aaron's brow lifted. "Meaning you're spoken for, mate." He grinned after the Dragul's gorgeous, winged back, and her taut upper thighs undulating in the sunshine. "And I'm not. Not yet... Jesus Christ, what's that?"

Michael's head snapped upward. For an instant it looked like another dragon dropping through the sky, but it was too small for that. Like a great golden eagle, it swept down toward them until he saw that it was a man. A winged man with angelic golden hair and below a plain black tunic, the sort of body you had to be wary of. Here was power, Michael thought grimly, bracing himself. And threat...

The winged man came to a graceful landing between them and the Dragul female. It crossed Michael's mind, not quite pleasantly, that he might be her mate. Oh well, it was a long time since he'd been in a fight that presented any challenge...

Don't be an arse, he told himself irritably, you're here to keep the peace!

Almost as if he'd heard him, the male Dragul's lips quirked upward.

The female said silently, "Aurel, these are Beth's friends."

So this was Aurel. Keeper of the Dragul Laws. And of Beth, apparently...

Aurel spoke aloud. "I know. Are you hurt?"

"A few scratches," the female said hesitantly.

Aaron stepped forward quickly. "I'm a doctor -- let me see --"

"Your kindness is appreciated, but unnecessary here," Aurel said politely. "Our physiology is a little different. You would like to visit Beth." As he spoke, he took a bundle of soft, shimmering white threads from a concealed pocket in his tunic and shook them, before passing them casually to the female. But it wasn't jumbled threads she pulled over her head, it was a white tunic that fit loosely over her body and around her wings.

A conjuring trick...

Aurel smiled. "We shall show you more. Come."

* * *

Since morning, they had walked through land that appeared untouched by the radiation still poisoning the rest of the country to some degree. Over hills and glens and unexpectedly dense woods, the trees and grass had seemed to become gradually greener, the late summer flowers brighter and more exotic, the air cleaner and fresher, the streams more frequent and lively. By the time they had encountered the trapped "dragon," Michael had found it almost idyllic. That had been the edges of the Dragul Kingdom.

Entering it took away the "almost." The Dragul led them along grassy paths that didn't seem to be tracks at all until you compared it with the wilder undergrowth on either side. They were surrounded by beautiful, rolling hills, divided by deep valleys veined with gushing streams. Here and there, large, camouflaged houses were built into the hills and rocks, not hiding, simply blending with their surroundings.

As a city boy, who had once loved roaming the open country in jaunts with his father, Michael was impressed.

Wordlessly, Aaron picked a large, beautiful lily-like flower from the side of the track, and handed it to him.

"What have I done to deserve this?" Michael asked sardonically.

"It shouldn't grow here. It isn't warm enough."

"Apparently it is..."

Thoughtfully, he gazed ahead. Aurel had just flown off again, back the way they had come. Michael wondered what he would do with the injured Dome dwellers, but mostly, he wondered about the dragon girl who walked so gracefully in front of him without once turning back.

Impulsively, he loped forward the couple of steps that took him to her side. Her glance betrayed unexpected alarm, quickly veiled. Michael smiled, and held out the orchid to her. Startlement flitted across her lovely face, quickly followed by bewilderment and uncertainty.

How odd that her expression gave so much away when her mind was so easily and firmly closed to him. And that she should be so wary of him now when he had detected no fear of him at all at their initial encounter...

"It's for you," he explained, reaching for her hand and closing her fingers around the lush stem. Her skin was warm and smooth, softer than silk. "By way of an apology."

Blood trickled around her wrist from some abrasion hidden by her long sleeve. A nasty looking bruise spread down toward her hand. And as an unexpected jumble of anger and sympathy began to crowd him, he found himself stroking his thumb tenderly over the bruise.

Her breath caught, she tried to tug free, and reluctantly, he let his hand fall away. He liked the feel of her in his hold, and he liked the faint tinge of color his touch had brought to her cheeks -- although he wasn't vain enough to imagine that was caused by anything warmer than embarrassment.

She cleared her throat slightly, as if unused to using it. "Apology for what?"

He shrugged. "For butting in on your fight."

She looked flummoxed. For a long moment, Michael thought she wasn't going to answer and didn't know whether to be piqued or amused. Then, with apparent difficulty, she said, "I am not ungrateful for the risks you and your friend took on my behalf. But we might all have been killed by your methods."

"Unlikely. Dome dwellers are rotten fighters -- they rely too much on weapons and can't cope with anything that moves faster than a slow jog."

A hint of a smile gleamed in her amazingly deep, sea-green eyes. "You fly without wings."

"I jump," said Michael deprecatingly. "It's just a trick my mother taught me. She's a vampire."

Unfazed, the Dragul woman only nodded. "Like Beth's father."

"Beth avoided the tricks. I embraced them."

She looked at him directly, the brief softening over. "What else do you do? Kill for blood?"

Stupidly, it felt like a kick in the stomach. Michael did what he always did when kicked. He smiled. "I'm not allowed to in the City."

"Or anywhere else," said Aaron dryly from behind. "He's a policeman."

Her eyes widened as she looked from Aaron back to Michael. "Like Aurel? You are Keeper of the Law?"

"Beth really hasn't told you much about us, has she?" Aaron said ruefully. "And no, not quite like Aurel..."

As if speaking his name had conjured him up, Aurel reappeared over the crest of the nearest hill, and flew down beside them, folding his great bat-like wings silently behind him.

"You didn't kill them," he informed Michael and Aaron. "Although I doubt they'll remember too much about what happened. Or where."

So he could alter memories. Interesting...

Aaron gave a twisted smile, but Michael caught the Law Keeper's gaze, and held it. "It won't make any difference in the long term. They'll be back. In one guise or another. Word is out about your people."

Aurel shrugged. "Perhaps we were naive to assume we could remain hidden... But on the same subject, how did -- er -- *word* reach you? I was under the impression that in the so-called City of the Damned, only Beth's parents knew of our existence."

"Well... Beth's parents are very close to mine, and to Will, the City leader." Though the Dragul's gaze was very intense, it didn't appear intentionally intimidating, so Michael shrugged and told him the truth. "Your existence is not generally known, but we had word that the Dome knows. For our own safety we have to pay attention to that. And... Beth and I grew up together. We have a telepathic link that she may not care to use, but I do occasionally. The rest of us wanted to know she was all right."

"And is she?"

Living in a fairy tale kingdom with a gorgeous man who subjects me to hot, prolonged sex every night -- and most days too? I suppose you could say I'm not unhappy!

They were Beth's teasing words, in answer to his own question. Remembering it made him grin. A faint spark in Aurel's eyes betrayed he had read the memory too. Despite Michael's apparently useless mental barrier.

"You must make a hell of a policeman," Michael observed. "Do you want a job?"

"If I ever want to change, I'll look you up."

Michael grinned, liking the Dragul Law Keeper almost in spite of himself. But Aurel had already stepped back to talk to Aaron, asking him about medicine in the City, and Michael was left once more in the company of the dragon girl.

Looking straight in front of her, she walked with incomparable grace at his side, seeming to glide over the ground, her curvaceous body naturally sinuous, elegant and unconsciously arousing -- at least Michael imagined it was unconscious. But the undulation of her hips inside that loose tunic was still playing havoc with his libido.

She took him by surprise speaking into his head. "It isn't that she doesn't talk of you. It's that she tells us of your life *with* her, not what you do apart from her. She misses you and Aaron. And Eve."

Eve. He really didn't want to go there. It was an old pain, so familiar he would miss it if it ever left him. But the Dragul chose that moment to turn her head and meet his gaze directly. And abruptly Michael wanted to close her too perceptive eyes, and her mouth, with passion, feel her writhing under him, pliant and pleading. He would soon drown that intolerable understanding in fire...

He smiled, deliberately releasing the predator. "I hope she does. What's your name?"

She blinked. He heard her breath catch, saw a flurry of emotions sweep across her face again before she schooled it. "Danna."

"Danna," he repeated softly. "And what do you do?"

"Do?" she repeated, baffled.

"You have an ordered society; everyone has their job to do. Aurel is Keeper of the Laws. What are you?"

"I am the Dancer." With the words, her uncertainty seemed to vanish. A smile lit her eyes once more, warm, scarily deep and sexy as hell. "I am the Dragon Dancer."

Chapter Two

The man's blue eyes darkened till they looked almost black. They seemed impossibly intense as they held her gaze, but Danna wouldn't look away. A smile curved his full, sensual lips, knotting her stomach.

"Would you dance with *me*?" he asked softly, and Danna had the feeling he was offering rather more. In spite of her returning self-confidence, it threw her.

She tore her gaze free. "I dance for everyone."

"I said *with* not *for*."

She said stiffly, "I would be honoured to dance with visitors."

"I'll hold you to that. But what puzzles me -- one of the many things puzzling me right now -- is what a dancer was doing keeping watch on us."

In spite of herself, her gaze flew back up to his. He was tall for a human, and even she had to look up at him. His straight dark hair flopped forward over his eyes. Beneath it his regard was teasing, yet curiously sharp, determined to get his answers. And it still held that frightening intensity.

Why *was* that so frightening to her? Intensity and emotion were her blood and air. She drew them in like a sponge, absorbing them and returning them in her dance. But he, this man, was alien, strange, alarming and not at all what she had expected.

He said, "Do you work for Aurel too?"

She stared at him, not quite understanding at first. "Of course not," she said at last with a contempt that was meant to wither.

He didn't look withered. "Then you watched us for pleasure?"

"For curiosity," she snapped back. "And I barely watched you at all!"

"I sensed you since morning. Close by. And distracted enough to walk into the Dome dwellers' trap."

"Which took you by surprise also," she said smoothly, finding a weapon at last. "Were you also so distracted by my distant presence that you could not sense the nearness of your enemies?"

He only smiled. He had a devastating smile which creased the corners of his eyes and entrancingly curved mouth and further intensified his gaze. "I must have been. You have quite a presence."

She chose to ignore that. "I was drawn by your mind. Even blocked as you are, it radiates something. An aura of some kind. I think it masked the presence of the others for me."

"Blocked as I am? I don't appear to be blocked at all, either to you or to Aurel." He spoke evenly, and yet she sensed his unease. The unamiable part of her, which wanted to pay him back for his effect on her, thought seriously about feeding that unease. Perhaps she even would have, had she not caught the faintest hint of vulnerability, a genuine fear of being read against his will.

She said, "We have ethics. And now that we know your mind, it is easier to respect your block."

His eyebrows lifted. His lips curved sardonically. "Meaning I broadcast like a radio?"

She found herself smiling back. "Not quite."

"I was sure you wouldn't know what a radio was. You have the most beautiful smile."

Her stomach twisted. After a moment, deciding to ignore his second statement, she said only, "Beth showed me one."

"You and Beth are friends?"

She inclined her head. With something approaching relief, she saw they had reached Home. He saw it at the same time, so she watched his stunned reaction as he gazed down over the array of hills and steep valleys among which they had built their city.

After the first instant, he took it in methodically, quartering it, observing the structure and the movement. His face gave little away, and she would not probe his thoughts, but she couldn't help wondering what he thought of it. She was sure its size surprised him, but the rest...?

What was his City like? The famous "City of the Damned" where mutant humans actually lived side by side with their so-called normal brethren. The City almost completely wiped out by war, which had somehow pulled itself out of the mire to thrive afresh. A huge, close-packed place according to Aurel...

At last he said bafflingly, "Home *and* garden..."

"You have no idea," said Aurel.

* * *

Beth had gone native. Bolting barefoot out of a palatial building on a grassy street, wearing only a deep green Dragul tunic, she hurled herself over the distance between them and into Aaron's arms while her own reached for Michael so that she could hug them both at once.

In that first glimpse of her face, Michael found no trace of surprise -- clearly telepathy worked well between Beth and her "husband." Nor could he find any trace of unhappiness: the City girl glowed with health and excitement. She even looked suntanned. Which was surely impossible. Like Michael, she was half-vampire, and although they could go out in the daylight without difficulty, they had to use vast quantities of sun-block. Vampires just didn't get suntans.

Aurel said resignedly, "I thought you'd be pleased. Look after your friends, Beth -- I'm going to the king."

"King?" Aaron repeated quizzically, as Aurel strode away down the street toward the big square they had already passed. Danna had already left them, with no more than a nod and civil farewell. She hadn't looked back. "There's a king as well?"

Beth laughed. "Very much so. His name is Vasil and he's gorgeous and brooding and knows everything."

"A bit like your Aurel in fact?" Aaron suggested.

"No," Beth said simply. "You'll find out in time. Come on, let's go inside -- Dragul houses are amazing. What are you doing here? Did Will send you, or are you here of your own account?"

"Can we go in first?" Michael asked mildly.

"Sure, but you won't get any more privacy there!"

At first it seemed she wasn't joking. She appeared to live in a huge office like an exotic town-hall. It transpired Aurel worked from his home, which doubled as library and drop-in law centre.

But once through the main hall, full of curious Dragul who bowed politely and stared blatantly, they went through a curtained archway to a stone staircase, which led up to an obvious living area -- massive, high-ceilinged rooms, bright landscape murals and soft sofas and cushions. And a huge window looking out over the city and the hills beyond.

"Wow," Aaron said, impressed. "I guess your Aurel is an important man."

"He is," said Beth, and there was both pride and warning in her voice. "Every aspect of the law is very important to the Dragul. I suppose you could say Aurel is number one under the king. So *did* Will send you?"

"Can we talk here?" Michael asked, looking around as he threw himself down on a very comfortable sofa.

Beth nodded, though she looked suddenly wary.

"Yes, Will asked us to come. That idiot from the Dome -- Niall? -- that you came up here with last month, reported a load of nonsense back to his government, some of it libellous -- against you -- and some of it fairy story. However, the bit about the dragon people *was* believed, and the Dome is making moves to annex both the land around the tether and the Dragul land. We know they sent someone up here to contact the Dragul. Fortunately they've just behaved so badly that they've ruled themselves out of any chance of alliance. Either with us or the Dragul."

"And the City?" asked Beth quickly. "What does it want?"

"Alliance with the Dragul," Michael admitted. "Or at least an agreement not to quarrel... Will wants me to check out security here, make sure there is no threat either from the Dragul themselves -- which he doesn't believe is likely -- or from the Dome through the Dragul."

"You'll have to talk to Aurel, and to the king," Beth said uneasily. "But I have to tell you they are strict isolationists. They have every reason to stay away from humanity, but they are determined not to leave here. You won't budge them on that. And they have a completely different idea of time -- they count in centuries, Michael, not years."

"Well, that's another reason I'm along," Aaron put in. "I'd really like to study their medicine."

"And their genes," Michael put in sardonically. "My mother is wetting herself with curiosity about their genetic make-up."

As she was meant to, Beth smiled at this unlikely image of the ice-cool Katia, but Aaron added seriously, "It could be really useful for us in the City, with our differences in life-span. We all age at different speeds now and we need to know why and how to level it out."

"You're right," said Beth, pouring large glassfuls of sparkling water from a fountain that stood in the middle of the room. "We have much to learn from the Dragul. But what do you imagine you have to offer them? Offhand I can't think of anything that would come close to making them reconsider their isolation."

Michael said, "You."

She paused to stare at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean they have normal affections. They are not so determined in isolation that they kept you out. Will thinks that is our chief hope."

* * *

Beth said, "I'm not the only human here, you know. There's Iona, whom they found abandoned here when they first came. She was a baby. I'll take you to visit her when you've eaten."

They were sprawled on the floor, eating fruit. "Sorry there's nothing heavier," Beth apologised. "They don't eat meat. In fact they don't eat at all."

Aaron stared at her. "Of course they eat something!"

"They live on energy. Wind, fast-flowing streams, warm, pumping blood..."

She met Michael's gaze. Aaron glanced from one to the other. "Wow," he said again.

Beth changed the subject. "So you met Danna? As a dragon?"

"Well, not 'met' exactly. We were ill-advised enough to mount a rescue when some Dome goons had trapped her in their net."

"Show-off." Beth grinned.

"She said she's a friend of yours," Michael observed casually, leaning back against the cushions.

"I like her."

"She told us she's a dancer. But somehow I can't imagine her winding herself around a pole in some sleazy nightspot." Actually, he could, and it made it necessary to shift position to hide the effect of it. He added quickly, "In fact, I can't imagine there *being* a sleazy nightspot in this place!"

"You spend too much time in the club," Beth said dryly. "There's more dancing than sleazy dancing." She frowned. "Although to be honest, she's bloody sexy."

"We got that part," Aaron assured her.

Beth laughed. "I'm sure you did! But it's not just about *watching*... it's *feeling*. Her dance is part of their storytelling traditions, and somehow the story reaches you telepathically through her dance. It's an incredible experience -- emotionally, *physically* overwhelming... but you'll see it for yourself soon enough, I'm sure."

"Does she have a partner?" Aaron asked innocently.

Beth kicked him lightly in the ankle. "None that she mentions to me. The Dragul are -- liberal, until they find their One."

Liberal? Being liberal with Danna was a prospect Michael found incredibly arousing, but the idea of her liberality with anyone else? He wasn't sure whether that excited or appalled...

"How old is she?" Aaron asked curiously. "Within a hundred years!"

"I'm not sure. She's young for a Dragul, I think, but that still makes her older than you can imagine!"

Though Beth answered Aaron's questions, her gaze was on Michael. He returned it blandly, eyebrow raised.

She smiled, and suddenly stood up. "Come on, let's go and see Iona. As well as being human by birth, she's the healer's assistant, so Aaron can pick her brains!"

* * *

"So you met the humans? What are they like?" Iona demanded. The healer's assistant was understandably curious -- she was human herself, at least by birth. Danna had prepared herself for the interrogation, and yet she wasn't really ready to talk about the strangers.

At least not the dark one with the blazing blue eyes and the dangerous, predatory smile. The mutant-human who flew without wings, who talked lucidly with his mind and yet leaked a wild confusion of intense emotions, a baffling yet fascinating mixture of efficiency, arrogance and vulnerability...

Deliberately, Danna cut off her wayward thoughts.

"Male," she said calmly, sitting on the stool provided and submitting her cleansed wrist to Iona for the ointment. "A policeman and a healer. They're Beth's friends. Come to check up on her. And on us, I suppose."

And, no doubt, to pester the king for alliance or submission or whatever the City's government thought was necessary. She was sure they were not nobodies in their City... The dark one was a law keeper, and yet he fought like a warrior, all force and speed, the movement of his lithe body oddly beautiful for all its brutality.

Stop it, Danna!

"So where are they now?" Iona demanded, carefully rubbing the last of the ointment around the wrist abrasion and turning to the one on Danna's shoulder. "With the king?"

"Aurel took them to Beth." Danna regarded her thoughtfully.

Though she was a human without any of the genetic mutations which had occurred in the City of the Damned since the war, Iona's latent telepathy had been carefully nurtured by her foster parents until she could communicate as easily in the Dragul way as in the human. With Danna, who had been her friend since childhood, she tended to talk in a mixture of the two methods which others found hard to follow.

Danna said, "You must wonder about their world. Especially since Beth came."

Iona smiled. "We all wonder, I suppose. I've lived among Dragul all my life, so humans are as alien to me as they are to you. Is that better?"

"Much. Thanks, Iona. I think you're about to have more patients. Call Dmir back from his nap."

Iona laughed, and Danna shook down her sleeve, just as someone burst through the curtain.

Beth, followed by Aaron, and Michael.

Michael. The dark one. Her stomach gave that odd twist, driving her pulses. Something about that one *bothered* her. It wasn't just his looks, although the goddess knew they were attractive enough, or his all-too-fascinating contradictions. It was *him*, the way he looked at her, the way he spoke to her, the way he just *was*.

Although Aaron now wore a plain brown Dragul tunic, Michael still wore his own clothes, constricting trousers that hid his flesh and yet emphasized his narrow, flexible hips, a tight, sleeveless shirt that revealed the powerful muscles in his arms. The sweater she remembered was held casually over one broad shoulder.

His scanning gaze found her quickly and paused. Annoyingly, she could read nothing in his eyes, or his expression. He nodded casually, and his gaze moved on to Iona.

Nothing, she thought numbly. Though she might have been trying to avoid it, deep down she knew that the disturbance he caused in her was attraction. Desire, confused by his strangeness. And yet, despite his earlier behaviour, which she could have sworn was *flirting*? -- one of Beth's words -- now there was nothing.

Piqued, because the Dragon Dancer was not used to being passed over, she would have slid quietly out the door, except that Beth caught her arm, asking about the day's adventure and how she came to be caught. And then Aaron was there, enquiring after her injuries.

"Almost gone," she answered distractedly, shaking up her sleeve once more to show him the healed skin and the bruise-less flesh.

Aaron took her hand, staring. "So quickly? That's incredible! Mike, do you see this?"

Michael, who was sitting astride a chair beside Iona, glanced over, but Danna would not look at him. "Iona is an excellent healer," she said lightly.

"I have excellent tools," Iona said dryly. "Her quick recovery is a mixture of the herbal ointment and the Dragul's own self-healing powers. So Dmir -- the healer -- tells me. I certainly don't heal at that speed, even with the ointment."

"How fast then?" Michael asked. "If you had suffered those injuries, when would they have healed to this stage?"

Iona shrugged. "A day, maybe. Certainly by two days they would be completely invisible. With Danna, they will be gone by tonight."

Michael leaned forward. "Could you give us some of that to take back to the City?"

"I don't know," she said, flustered. "You would have to ask Dmir, but I don't see anything wrong in it... Danna?"

"How can I say?" Danna asked, amused. "I'm not a healer, just a dancer!"

"Just?" said Aaron, smiling down at her so that she remembered to take back her hand. "Beth's been telling us about your incredible dancing."

"Beth is too kind," Danna said uncomfortably. Michael had returned to Iona, asking her about her origins and her life among the Dragul. Of course, like drew to like, they were both human. He probably found her, Danna, grotesque and alien... Was he strong enough to have pretended earlier? To make sure she took him to the king?

With an effort, she brought her attention back to Aaron, returning his conversation, trying to feel consoled by the blatant admiration in his eyes -- and making sure her eyes never turned toward the other group formed by Iona, Michael and Beth.

In the City, apparently, they danced mostly in places called clubs, where they all danced together without form or story, although in the Dome, they had theatres where dances depicting stories were performed. Some were trying to introduce this form of entertainment to the City. To Danna it sounded oddly soul-less and cold.

"So when will we see *you* dance?" Aaron asked, smiling.

"I don't know..."

"I do," Beth interrupted, grinning, twisting round to look at them. "Aurel's just told me the king has ordered a garden-banquet for tonight, to welcome our guests. No banquet is complete without Danna the Dragon Dancer!"

"Tonight!" said Aaron triumphantly. "I look forward to it! And afterward, after your performance, would you dance with me?"

Now at last, she felt Michael's eyes upon her, but still she would not look.

She inclined her head to Aaron. "Of course."

"But not immediately afterward," Michael said. He had a deep, resonant voice, the voice of a storyteller, that sent shivers coursing through her body. Worse, she could see from the corner of her eye that he swung himself out of the chair and walked toward her. "You have to dance with me first."

Beside her, Aaron looked irritated. He aimed a kick at his friend's ankle, but Michael side-stepped it neatly. "Don't you?"

It was a mistake to meet his gaze. Intensely blue, it teased and devoured her, and when he smiled, she recognized deliberate seduction. It made no difference. She melted

under it like ice in the summer sun. Between her legs was hot and clammy, throbbing with sudden need.

She swallowed. "On the contrary, I do not have to dance with anyone."

"Unless you want to," Michael guessed, and when she inclined her head in what she hoped was a distant manner, he added, "Do you? Want to?"

The fire burned brighter. Trying desperately to douse it, she said coldly, "I have already said I am happy to dance with visitors."

His lips curved slightly. A faint breath of deprecating laughter escaped them, fascinating her. Inexorably drawn, her gaze slid lower down his broad shoulders and chest until, at eye-level, it encountered the blatant bulge of his crotch.

A fresh flood of moisture pooled between Danna's thighs. She knew triumph as well as excitement, for there could be no pretence here. The man was aroused. Very aroused, and judging by the size of the straining bulge, he was certainly worth arousing. It was so close she could lick it, pull down his zip with her teeth...

Shocked by her own lust, she hastily dragged her gaze back upwards. Their eyes met again, and held, and his, clearly, wickedly aware of her observations, blazed even brighter. His smile deepened, rocking her to her core.

"How *is* Eve, Michael?"

It was Beth, innocent and bland and fooling no one. The smile became fixed on Michael's sinful lips. The wild light in his eyes died. And yet despite the barriers she had erected against his leaking thoughts, Danna glimpsed profound, numbing pain.

Abruptly, he broke their eye contact and swung round to Beth. While he answered her, Danna let her breath out in a trembling rush. Of course he had a woman, and she would do well to bear it in mind! And yet in spite of the pain she had glimpsed, he spoke carelessly, as if he was discussing the weather and was slightly bored by the whole thing.

"Eve? Well, of course. Still in the Dome. She imagines she can change things there from the inside. I'm beginning to think she just likes it there. You don't talk to her?"

"I don't talk to anyone unless they insist."

"Sorry," said Michael, not sounding in the least apologetic that he had, apparently, insisted. "You pulled a big stunt without any warning."

"Sorry," Beth said gruffly -- and she *did* sound it. "I couldn't get Aurel to come with me to the City unless we met only my parents."

Michael threw himself back down in the chair he had recently vacated. "Ah, Bethy, Bethy," he mocked. "How the mighty have fallen -- under a man's thumb after all."

"Go to hell, Michael," Beth said dangerously.

"Assuredly," he grinned.

Danna? Can you dance tonight? It was the king's voice in her mind, impersonal and polite as he always was, drawing her inexorably out of their world and back to her own.

Of course. In fact, it was a relief to have an excuse, to be able to stand up and leave. Iona, sensing her discomfort, hugged her as she made her farewells. Beth grinned, and Aaron gallantly kissed her hand.

Michael, the dark one, only nodded distantly, as if his blazing lust had never been.

Chapter Three

It was Beth, not Aurel, who took them to the king, so the introductions were predictably informal.

"These are my friends, Michael and Aaron, from the City. Guys -- King Vasil."

The king, a dark and impossibly handsome Dragul in a scarlet tunic, inclined his head with dignity. "You are welcome in the Dragul Kingdom. I am pleased to meet the son of David and Katia."

Michael blinked. "You know my genealogy?"

"We are naturally aware of those who brought back the sun. We did not have the technology to reach so far into the atmosphere. Your parents first found the tether, and Beth's used it. They are all in our stories."

"Wow," said Aaron. He'd been saying that a lot since they'd got here and it was beginning to grate on Michael's nerves. To cover his irritation, he looked around the lush gardens. There was no sign of the dancer, though Iona, the healer's assistant, was tripping happily toward them. She paused a respectful distance away, until Beth stepped back to murmur something quietly in her ear.

The king had turned now to Aaron, with equal civility. "Aaron, you are also most welcome."

"Though lacking famous parents?" Aaron said with ill-timed humor.

The king, however, smiled faintly, though it didn't much lighten his profoundly dark eyes. "Human foster-son of the lupi," he said surprisingly. "Your fame is your own, a living symbol of unity for your City."

Michael regarded the king with unexpected approval. To be valued for himself was a great thing for a man who had grown up in the shadow of his younger, gifted friends.

Michael said, "Thanks for your hospitality. We're grateful to be able to see Beth. And, hopefully, to talk with you."

The king's eyes came back to him, and it struck Michael he would not really like this being as an enemy. "We welcome you to our hospitality -- and to talk, since you took the trouble to rescue one of our own. However, to save time and future misunderstandings, I must tell you now that no further visitors from your City will be welcomed here."

Straight to it! "Thanks for your directness."

The king's eyes gleamed brief amusement, but he said only, "Tomorrow, we will talk. Tonight is for fun. Enjoy."

He turned away, the "audience" clearly over, and fell back to listen to two Dragul who hovered near him.

Beth linked her arms in Michael's and Aaron's and dragged them with her. "You heard the king. Enjoy yourselves!"

"You weren't kidding about the isolationist bit, were you?"

"Nope."

They were in the big, grassy square which had been transformed by plants, vast numbers of flowers, glittering streamers and brightly coloured balloons without strings that hovered in the air and bounced away when you reached for them. Several Dragul children chased after them, laughing uproariously, and celebrating wildly whenever a balloon was actually caught.

Close to the palace building, a gate opened up into a more formal garden, where, among bubbling fountains, tables had been set with bowls of fruit and colourful glass goblets. It was toward this that Beth now urged them.

Iona came too. Michael heard her saying curiously, "You were fostered by mutant humans? Did you grow up alone among them?"

"I was the only non-lupi," Aaron said cautiously. "But my foster-siblings never treated me as anything but a brother. Their parents were mine in every way that mattered. And my grandfather used to visit a lot before he died."

"Died... I suppose you will die too."

"I suppose I will," Aaron said dryly.

"As will I," Iona said sadly.

Beth spoke over her shoulder. "Aaron, tell her she doesn't look sixty."

His attention caught at last, Michael stopped to stare at the human girl.

"Sixty?"

"Are you mutant too?" Michael asked.

"No, I'm told not -- why?"

"Must be something in the air," Aaron said, gazing at her. "As an unchanged human, I would guess you to be under thirty. Would you mind if I examined you sometime?"

Iona blushed.

"In a medical capacity," Aaron added hastily. "I'm a doctor!"

"I know you are," Iona said faintly. Michael caught Beth's eye and grinned. Leaving the other two, they wandered on to a table and helped themselves to apples and raspberries.

"Do they treat her?" Michael asked abruptly.

"Iona? I don't honestly know. I don't think so though. It may just be something to do with the purity they bring to the air and the water." She glanced at him over the rim of her glass. "You're thinking of your father. I wonder too if it would help my mother to live longer... Or Aaron, or any other humans in the City. It just seems hardest on the partners of those who do not age... Maybe I'm one of those partners. After all, who knows which way we mixed-race children will go? Aaron should talk to Dmir."

"I'll make sure of it," Michael said grimly. "Would it be rude to have a spot of blood right now?"

"There will be better opportunities later," Beth said vaguely. Following her gaze, he saw she was watching a group of children dancing to the music of a melodic, harp-like instrument. And with them was Danna, leading them, teaching them.

Smiling and relaxed as she had never been around him, she spread her wings and bent gracefully at the knee. The children copied her, like a flock of exotic birds. It was charming, and Michael was enchanted.

Unexpectedly, her gaze moved and found him. The smile on her lips froze and died, and Michael turned away without acknowledging her. For the first time in his life, he forgot to smile when kicked.

* * *

The children danced and sang and ran around shouting and laughing like all children do. Musicians played, everyone socialized with good humor and gentle charm, welcoming the visitors and inviting them to join complicated board games or conversations. In spite of himself, the time passed quickly for Michael.

As night began to fall, the children disappeared, along with the balloons and the board games. Torches were lit among the tables, which began to fill up with adults radiating anticipation and excitement. *This then, Michael thought, is where the real fun begins...*

At that point, Aurel appeared and led them to the table where the king already sat. So did Beth, who turned from her conversation with him to grin at her friends.

Placed with obvious honor between the king himself and Aurel, the Keeper of the Laws, Michael realized the tables were set out around a kind of grassy arena. To the sound of music, three Dragul juggled glittering glass balls without ever touching them.

"Neat trick," Michael observed, reaching for a peach and then laying it down on the table. Fruit was all very well, but he'd begun to ache for blood. The curse of his mother, the vampire. Perhaps it was the darkness adding to the atmosphere, but with heightened sensitivity he could hear the beating hearts around him, smell the warm blood they pumped.

And yet, surprisingly, he found he still enjoyed the conversation around him, the mixture of familiar -- Beth and Aaron -- and the unfamiliar Dragul who seemed to put City learning and knowledge to shame. But then, they had been around for...

"How long *have* you been around?" he asked Aurel.

"The Dragul? As long as the Earth. Or so the stories say. This Kingdom? Since your war emptied the land here and gave us the opportunity to return in peace."

"And isolation," said Michael. A smile flickered in the Law Keeper's eyes.

"You are curious about that. Let us tell you."

Unexpectedly, the Dragul rose to his feet and walked toward the arena. The harp stilled, the entertainers vanished. The buzz of conversation rose, and then fell away to an expectant hush. All eyes, all attention turned to Aurel.

And he was an impressive specimen, Michael had to admit; he had commanding presence, and the voice to carry it off.

In a rare moment of communication, Beth spoke inside his head. "Be prepared, Michael -- this is overwhelming the first time. I know."

Exactly how one man's words were meant to overwhelm him, Michael didn't ask. The Law Keeper began to speak aloud.

And Beth was right. Aurel's incredible stories unfolded vividly in his mind, providing a far deeper understanding than that of mere words. And by the end, he knew why the Dragul would not share their land with innately prejudiced and fearful humans, whatever their city or political beliefs. And why the Dragul around him were all so young. They were the young rebels who had left their elders underground to make a new kingdom above and wait for the light. The light that his parents and Beth's had eventually made possible, and that was told too.

It was astonishing, peculiarly moving to see his young parents as they discovered the tether and went hand in hand inside the wrecked carriage. Unknown to them, the Dragul, perhaps Aurel himself, had seen them.

He felt a moment of helpless rage, of grief, that in the intervening years his father had aged so beside his unchanging mother. Because he would age more and inevitably die.

Would he, Michael, die? No one knew what would happen to the mixed-race children, himself and Beth and Eve...

Hazily, he became aware that Aurel was holding out his hand, and that walking toward it from the far side of the arena was Danna the Dragon Dancer.

His heart beat faster. So this was it. Finally, he would see her dance.

But she danced with Aurel. While Aurel told a story of love that ordinarily Michael would have ignored as some silly fairytale, Danna danced it.

With her hand in Aurel's, she began slowly, her movements subtle, yet profoundly graceful as she turned around him. Gradually, the words and the dance became one in his mind, the actual visual feeding the one in his head while he began to *feel* what Danna danced.

Helplessly, he became lost in her emotions, in her desires. When she spun her body into Aurel's and laid his hand on her breast, he felt her pleasure, her ache, even while part of him raged that Aurel could touch her when he could not. And yet along with Danna's arousal, there was his own, hot and heady. He wanted Aurel to caress her, to give her the pleasure she craved. He wanted to watch. He wanted to feel. He wanted to kill Aurel.

Their bodies pressed together in graphic simulation of sex. Danna thrust her hips around him, into him, gyrating while her face revealed her ecstasy. Michael *felt* her ecstasy, wanted it for her and himself, and when she threw her head back and arched her back in climax, only jealousy prevented him coming in his own pants. Aurel's hand covered her breast, his hips seemed glued to hers. Wildly, Michael wondered if he was actually inside her, if her pleasure were real.

Christ, what wouldn't I give for that dance!

She straightened, throwing her head forward onto Aurel's shoulder. Aurel bent slowly and placed his mouth on her bare, entrancing neck. Michael gasped aloud, along with everyone else, as he felt the bite of Aurel's teeth on the dancer's flesh, the joyous rush of blood flowing from her to him.

They're vampires! My God, they're vampires...

Stunned, Michael let the knowledge wash through him, along with all the emotions and pleasures consuming his mind and body. But he was a man of action, and

he knew he had to act. Desperately, he stumbled to his feet, determined to save the dancer...

For myself!

No! At least maybe -- I wouldn't take much, just a taste of that sweet, sweet blood...

"Michael, sit down!" It was Beth's voice, urgent in his mind, her hand on his arm, pressing him back to his seat. "It's a ritual and doesn't harm her..."

Dragged out of his pain- and pleasure-filled daze, Michael stared at her. "They're vampires. Like us. What's all this 'oh my God, you kill for *blood*' crap?" Later, he was glad he'd spoken silently. At the time, he didn't care if his words echoed round the whole town.

"Nothing dies to give them life. They only take blood from each other... it's the energy that feeds them, not the nutrients. They don't drink it cold from a cup like we do."

"Like I do... you never drink."

She was silent, wrestling with some inner demon. Then: "I drink from Aurel," she confessed. "And he from me."

Michael stared at her. "A lover's caress? How can you stand it?" He meant the play between Aurel and Danna, and she knew it. But she only smiled and shrugged.

"It's ritual," she said again. "The marriage of the Law and the Story if you like. I was jealous too the first time. You shouldn't be."

No, he shouldn't.

Drawn in spite of himself, Michael turned back to the arena. Danna stood alone in the centre of the ring, head bowed, wings outstretched in a pose at once achingly vulnerable and sexy as hell. Michael became aware of the painful hardness in his jeans that only got worse as he stared at the still figure. So he shifted his gaze, searching for Aurel and finding him kneeling before the king while the king's teeth were buried in his neck.

Blood-lust rose furiously with all the rest. For an instant, it overwhelmed him. The intensity of emotion he normally kept at bay through work and physical action

now threatened to consume him in lust and mayhem. Hot and furious, his eyes sought Danna once more, and oddly, the quiet beauty of her stance calmed him. Slowly, he fought and won the battle, and dared to breathe again.

The dancer lifted her head. The harp strummed, and Michael realized it had only begun. This was Danna's time.

She danced an ancient battle, her limbs forming great, grotesque shapes, and sudden, deathly violence. Fierce warrior pride emanated from her, rousing and uplifting. And as she danced, her body changed, mistily at first, so that he blinked to clear his eyes. Slowly, she became the dragon, awesome and splendid.

Michael had seen the lupi of the City become wolves. He had been with Beth through her early changes, before she'd learned to control it. And with Eve, who controlled it in a different way. He knew the physical agony they suffered. Danna shifted like a mist, shimmering between whirling woman and tail-beating, fire-blasting dragon as she fought and danced, making him live the story of tragedy and victory and ultimate retreat.

It was shattering. And when the dragon lay down in her death throes, Michael, who hadn't cried since he was five years old, almost wept.

The audience greeted the end in stricken silence. Their grief weighed him down. And then, the music began again, a quiet rhythmic beat sounded on the harp strings.

The dragon on the ground shimmered once more, became the woman, and the woman moved to the rhythm, an arching of her naked back, then her hips thrust erotically upward, and she swung lithely into a sitting position as the melody began.

Heat rose in Michael, threatening to blind him. But this was a dance of joy, designed to lift the grief into a mood of fun and jollity. Danna's eyes shone with vitality. She smiled and danced a sheer love of all life, perfectly comfortable with her nudity, still manipulating her audience. Around Michael, echoing his own involuntary smile, he could hear laughter, felt a warmth and companionship that was beguiling. And yet beneath it, arousal still simmered, because she was naked to his gaze. And the most beautiful, sensual being he had ever seen or imagined.

Sweat glistened on her smooth skin. Her full, dark-tipped breasts heaved with exertion, but still she danced on into the next story of a great love that had once saved the Dragul race.

If her dance with Aurel had been arousing, this one was explosive. Sinuous and flexible, her body writhed its sensual magic, her long naked limbs stretching and curving. With each seductive parting of those luscious legs, she granted tantalizing glimpses of her sweet, hairless pussy, until Michael thought he'd burst out of his jeans. And then, almost finishing the job, she gazed directly at him.

At first, he thought it was just his fevered imagination, his own powerful desire that she dance for him, and even managed to laugh at himself as she spun around the arena. But then, coming to a halt with her back to him, she enfolded her body in her own arms while she undulated her hips and buttocks, and looked back over her shoulder, directly at him. Her eyes smouldered, sweat trembled on her upper lip, and she smiled.

That was when he lost the story completely. He didn't care about the great love she portrayed. He cared about her wanting him. The lust in her eyes might have been faked for the dance, but God, she cared enough to level it at him, and he was damned if he'd pass that up for anyone or anything.

He stared right back at her with burning eyes, let her see, if she could, every ounce of desire she inspired in him. He let her see it in his mind too. He didn't care what else she saw.

Her eyes widened, perceptibly, and he knew she had seen, knew it was not his imagination. She smiled, hot and sultry, and thrust her breasts out toward him. He was desperate to caress and lick them, see them peak at his touch, not just to the eyes of a hundred watchers...

The rhythm of the dance grew more frenzied, until Michael found he too was sweating in the chilly night air. He didn't care. He was consumed by the dance. He *felt* the love, the desire she portrayed, and gratefully, he sank into it. *He* was her lover. She

had surrendered to him, welcomed his hands on her soft, yielding flesh. He lay above her, thrusting into her tight, hot wetness, lost in her body's joy, her moans of pleasure...

She danced on, around the arena, yet always she came back to him, her eyes seeking him, her body tempting and teasing him. Dazed, only half in the real-world, the rest of him still lost in the vivid fantasy of her erotic dance, Michael gazed back at her. Perhaps she thought she was safe in the dance, but Christ, when she finished...

She finished, climactically, her body arched wickedly from toes to hands reaching out over her head. Her thrusting breasts stood proud in the torchlight, aureoles dark and nipples peaked and distended.

Michael found himself panting as if he'd been chasing some villain across the City all night. Deliberately, he sought to control it, while his eyes followed her greedily in her unwinding bow, her proud, graceful walk across the arena to receive the king's thanks. And his bite.

As she knelt, the king's fingers gripped her naked shoulders, his head bent to her angled neck.

Michael gasped aloud as Vasil's teeth pierced her skin. He could hear her heart pounding, feel the ecstasy of the blood drawn from her veins. He wanted to close his eyes, shut out the unbearable sight, but he couldn't and it would have made no difference anyway. He could still *feel*...

He felt he was there with her. That while the king drank from her, he knelt behind her, the weight of her breasts heavy in his hands as he caressed them, rhythmically brushing his thumbs across her taut, excited nipples. He felt his cock slide inside her with excruciating pleasure. At the same time, he bent to her neck, on the opposite side to the king, and sank his teeth into her throat.

They both drank from her together. He could hear all three of their drumming heartbeats, drowned in the strong, thick smell of her blood as it spilled over his lips and down his throat. He pushed his cock into her, hard, and groaned...

The groan was loud, jolting him out of the fantasy. Hers or his, or someone else's entirely, it was impossible to tell.

Slowly, the king straightened, inclining his head to Danna in polite thanks. Her breasts rose and fell, reminding Michael unbearably of how they had felt in his hands. His fantasy hands.

The blood still sang in Michael's ears. Fury, jealousy, desire, all vied for release, and he could do nothing about any of them. Not yet. She rose from the king, who flung a white tunic neatly over her head to cover her nakedness.

And then her eyes flickered again toward Michael, uncertainty now among their still smouldering depths. That's when he knew the fantasy had been hers.

Joy exploded inside him, fiercely triumphant.

He smiled at her, wicked and predatory, and her step faltered. He rose from his seat, and went to her. Only then did he realize that all around him, the Dragul were embracing, dancing, making love. Aurel held Beth in his arms, and Michael could swear he was drinking from her throat. It all added to his strange, wild arousal.

The Dragon Dancer lifted her gaze slowly to his. Her hectic flush, her trembling body, her lust-filled eyes, all betrayed her, but still she tried to reclaim the distance between them. She inclined her head.

"Oh no," Michael said softly. "You can't go back there. Not now. I want my dance."

He took her hand, drawing her with him, three steps backward until his back jammed against the table, and he drew her in. She was hot, shaking with exertion or desire, he didn't know which, only that it excited him unbearably. He put his arms around her, feeling at last in reality that soft, pliant flesh...

For an instant, she held herself rigid in his hold. He had time to wonder, frantically, if he had got it all wrong, if there was nothing there but her art, and if he would have to let her go...

And then she began to move. Supple limbs slid against his. Her hips swayed against his hardness, making him groan softly into her hair. She smelled of heady roses, and fresh, sweet air, and warm, pumping blood...

His breath caught. He moved with her, heard her own breathless little gasps.

“What now?” he said, running his hands up and down her back, stroking the strange, suede-like wings. Her whole back shivered and undulated to his touch.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I have my dance, and I love it. I mean I want more. I want your blood, I want your whole body. I want you.”

For the first time, her hands touched him, reaching around his neck, stroking the hair at his nape, then clinging there. She said, “Who is Eve?”

He froze. Following him, her movement stilled. Slowly, he raised his head from her hair and looked down into her face. Soft. Lustful. Sorrowful. How did all that get in there?

He didn’t want to talk about Eve. He couldn’t talk about Eve to anyone, let alone to her. The silence stretched between them. All he could hear was the beat of his own heart and hers, too fast, too needy.

She smiled, a quiet, gentle smile of loss, and stepped back out of his arms. She had already turned and begun to walk away before he realized what she was doing.

No, damn it, I will not let her spoil this! Maybe it changes nothing, but this is for me!

In two strides, he had caught her arm, finding and seizing her hand to pull her onward, away from the tables.

Chapter Four

Twisting her hand in an effort to free it from his bruising hold, she burst into panicked speech, "Michael, you don't want this! It's your -- ah!" She broke off, stumbling back against the trunk of an old oak tree, as his mouth slammed into hers, rough, hard, conquering, forcing her lips apart for his invasion.

In all her life, no one had touched her like that. It made her weak and helpless. And hot as fire.

After the first instant's stunned stillness, her mouth yielded without permission, opening further for him. She found her hands clutching him for support, for strength. For need.

He gave a half-laugh of triumph, and pushed his tongue deeper inside. His body pressed her back into the tree, grazing her wings, depriving her of breath. She didn't care. His big, rock-hard cock ground into her crotch, devastating her. She had never felt fire like this. Moisture erupted, trickling down her legs.

With a sob, she clutched his head closer to her, sucking on his tongue, pushing her own deep inside his mouth, licking his teeth and gums. She fought with him now for domination of the kiss, while her hips struggled to move, to dance between the tree and his crushing body. He adjusted his position to let her, and groaned aloud, tearing his mouth free to stare down at her.

His eyes blazed in the darkness, frightening her with the intensity of his lust, and yet she gloried in that look, in his body, wanted his mouth back.

"Eve is my friend, my lover."

He kissed her again, as if to wipe out the pain she couldn't hide.

"Eve is your One," she said in his mind.

"No. Eve is not my One, but it seems we have too much history to admit it. Eve does not love me."

Again, he took his mouth from her. Soft, rueful laughter shook his body. "Christ, I pick my times and places to bare my soul." He stared down at her, his expression changing to something approaching wonder. Slowly, he lifted one hand and touched her face. Moisture glistened on his fingers. She hadn't meant to cry, not for him or for her, or the girl who was not his One.

"Danna, dance with me," he whispered. "Just dance, don't weep... Tonight, for you and for me..."

With a gasp, she reached up with her mouth, fastening it to his, letting him devour her while she danced with her hips, with her whole body. She sobbed when his hand swept over her breast and closed, seeking and finding her peaked, aching nipple.

It wasn't enough. Briefly, he tried to find a way inside her tunic, then simply took it in his fist and ripped it, and at last her naked flesh was under his fingers, trembling into his touch. His other hand swept downward over the curve of her hip, pushing aside the lingering fabric of her tunic, caressing her buttocks and thigh, and sliding round to the hot wetness between. Sensitive, yet joyously direct, his fingers opened her labia, slid caressingly across her clitoris to her pulsing entrance.

Again he groaned. "Christ, I want to be in there..."

She stood on tiptoe and parted her legs further. It was the only invitation she was capable of, and he accepted it without hesitation. A brief fumbling at his trousers, an adjustment of position, and she felt the hot, hard length of his cock between her thighs, seeking and unerringly finding the slickness of her desperately weeping entrance. Without pause, he pushed his cock all the way in.

She cried out, and would have fallen, had it not been for the pressure of his body pinning her to the tree. He filled her, not just her vagina, but her whole awareness. She couldn't prevent the small, animal noises that escaped her, as she rocked on him, pushing her body even further onto his shaft, circling and returning.

He seized her mouth again and pulled his hips back, almost leaving her before he pushed his cock back all the way, hard, making her whimper and writhe. After that it was wild and fast, a furious fucking that neither was capable of stopping.

She spread her wings wide, partly to protect them from the tree, but mostly to express her growing joy. Seeing it, his handsome face suffused with delight. His hand reached behind her, touching one of the trembling wings, this time on the soft, ultra-sensitive underside, and when she moaned, he drew it nearer to him, and actually covered the tip of it with his mouth.

Oh goddess! The pleasure was so intense, shooting straight down her wings to her core, that she galloped now toward the ultimate fulfilment. As he drove into her, he flicked his tongue over the soft underside of her wing, in perfect time with his thumb across her nipple, and she shook into violent orgasm, clenching around his shaft until with one final, devastating thrust, he joined her.

Her knees buckled under the furious onslaught of pleasure, and although he had to support himself with his palm against the tree, he still held her up with his free arm while the tide of convulsions grew and held and slowly ebbed away. He stood against her, panting, teasing her gently with deliberate twitches of his cock inside her.

Slowly, making her shudder with renewed pleasure, he slid his mouth along her wing and released it. "I must remember that one," he said huskily, and kissed her mouth again.

Gradually, as normal awareness returned, the sounds of their surroundings began to drift back: the music and laughter from the garden, the distant hooting of an owl, and the soft rush of the breeze through leaves and long grass. The scent she would now always associate with Michael filled her senses: faint, fresh sweat and herbal cleanser mixed with the earthiness that was his alone. And his mouth, tenderly caressing hers outside and in.

"I'm sorry," he whispered against her lips. "I was too rough. I didn't mean to hurt you. You drive me so wild..."

Light as a butterfly's wing, his finger traced the contour of her lips, bruised and swollen from his passion. His remorse flooded her, enchanted her. She smiled, catching and kissing his finger. "Well," she said, "I am willing to be shown another side of you."

Deliberately, she left the timing open, holding his attention with her eyes so that he wouldn't see the interest they had already collected. She would use no pressure, had to leave the choice to him. And yet her heart beat and beat with hope, her throat constricted with the effort of hiding her own wishes.

His hot, clouded eyes had grown watchful. "When?" he said.

"The choice is yours."

He smiled. The predatory glint flashed again in his eyes, and her heart turned over. "How about now?"

She touched her forehead to his, covering her relief, her happiness.

"Come on," he urged. "Do your thing with the tunic I so carelessly tore, and let's slip away to wherever you live..."

As he spoke, he stepped back to adjust and refasten his jeans. Then he bent and scooped up her discarded dress. She accepted it demurely, shaking it till the threads married up again.

She said carefully, "I will take you there, but I believe *slipping away* is no longer an option."

He frowned, casting a glance over his shoulder, and saw at last what she had hidden until he'd revealed his wishes. The interested spectators among the tables, regarding them with amusement and curiosity. Among them, the king stood alone, and turned away.

Danna wondered if she had unwittingly broken some unknown law in consorting with the stranger in public and instinctively looked for Aurel. He, his arm loosely around Beth, smiled lopsidedly and turned to Aaron, drawing him away.

Aaron was not pleased.

"Shit," said Michael ruefully. "Well, damn them, we'll worry about all of them tomorrow. Tonight is for us, remember?"

* * *

Aaron watched them go with something approaching bitterness in his heart.

Beth, Michael, Eve and Aaron. Since early childhood, their “differentness” had drawn them together, and the friendship had held through all the stages of growing up and learning and disagreeing. Between Aaron and Michael there had always been a special bond, that even their rivalry for Eve’s love could not shake.

Aaron hadn’t been surprised when Eve chose Michael. Though well aware of his own worth and intelligence, there was something about Michael that shone brightly, that inevitably captivated the girl they both loved. Aaron had given in gracefully, working through his heartache for the sake of the friendships he valued even more.

He had shared Michael’s pain when Eve returned more and more often to the Dome. Though they never discussed it, he knew Michael was hurting. He was generous enough never to have felt satisfaction at that pain. And yet the thought had crossed his mind, more than once, that at least Eve was still Michael’s. Somehow he knew these two brightest stars would come back together in the end.

Yet now, now when Aaron had finally felt another powerful attraction -- and Michael knew it -- the younger man had deliberately stepped in and taken her -- fucked her -- right under his nose.

He had both the women Aaron wanted, while Aaron was left, as usual, to clean up the mess. That hurt. That made him want to punch Michael’s face in, force him to eat his own careless, treacherous blood...

A light touch on his arm broke into his savage thoughts.

Irritably, he glanced round at Iona, the human assistant healer, and tried to school his features into careless amusement.

“The dance gets people that way,” she said lightly. “For the rest of us, the night is still young. Dance with me?”

* * *

Michael lay on his back on her large, round bed. He had made love to her again, this time long and tenderly, trying to make up for his previous, unforgivably rough

urgency. She had responded with like passion, her hands running constantly in fascinated exploration of his long, un-winged back. And Christ, she was so beautiful, it had taken all his self-control, including some he hadn't known he possessed, to hold himself in check. But this time he had tried to focus solely on her pleasure. He loved the way she arched into him, lifting her gorgeous, full breasts for his mouth to devour. He was entranced by the tiny noises of rapture and desire that emanated from her as he caressed her from hair to toes before he even turned his attention to the delight between her legs.

With his fingers, tenderly playing among her folds and gliding across her clitoris, he had brought her to the edge, arousing himself to fever pitch by avidly watching her reactions. When he withdrew his fingers, she had cried out in petulance, her nails digging painfully into his back. With wicked mischief, he had slid down her delicious body to find her pussy with his lips and excited both of them to screaming point by teasing her some more with his mouth, delving his tongue inside her, losing himself in her unique taste and smell.

Only when he felt her convulsions tremor on the edge did he move upwards again to hold her in his arms, to slide inside her, little by little, and watch her come long and blissfully while he thrust inside her in slow, gentle strokes to keep her there. His whole body had shaken with the effort to hold back from hammering her to find his own desperate release, but Christ, it had been worth it. His climax had a long, slow build-up that somehow, fed by her own contractions around him, the writhing of her body under and around him, led to an apex so intense he nearly lost consciousness. Only care for her kept him from collapsing on her in blissful abandon.

She stretched her lithe body under him, smiling with joy and triumph and holding the pleasure for him longer than he had imagined possible.

"All right," she said at last. "You have a gentler side."

He smiled, feeling like a large, sated cat with a big bowl of cream consumed and another to come later, and rolled onto his back. His arms still held her to him. She laid her head on his chest, her tangle of dark red hair falling across his skin like blood.

Blood.

His heart began to pound afresh.

She said, "Do you want blood?"

His eyes closed with the suddenly urgent longing. Slowly, he forced them open again. "I thought you had ethics about reading leaky minds."

"I was reading your body, not your mind. Well, maybe a bit of both. Besides, you asked for it earlier, remember? If you are -- hungry -- you can drink from me."

"Danna..." He broke off helplessly, blind blood-lust warring with his own code that one did not drink from friends, whatever he had said to her in the grip of her dance-induced lust. One drank from clinical blood donations, or from the willing, masochistic victims encountered in the City's sleazy clubs. Not from a beautiful, passionate lover who offered it like a biscuit with tea.

She lifted her head, smiling. "We are not so different. There is nothing shameful in sharing the resources of the Earth."

"Is that what the Dragul do?"

"Yes. It is one great cycle."

"Do other bodily fluids count as resources of the Earth?" he asked, lazily sweeping one hand down her inner thigh to find his semen trickling there.

"Of course." She smiled again, as his fingers slid higher to sink into her hot wetness, and her green eyes seemed to darken. Her wings trembled and unfurled, spreading out behind her.

"God, you slay me when you do that. You're the most beautiful creature I've ever laid eyes on. I can't believe I've made love to you twice."

"Two is not a good number for a Dragul."

"No?"

"No. One means you don't suit. Two means you do, but are prevented continuing..."

"What about three?"

"Three is better," she said judiciously. "If you've had a busy day."

"And four?"

"Four is getting there."

He reached for her as she began to kiss his chest, flicking a surprisingly wicked tongue across his sensitized nipples.

"And how many do you usually get, Dragon Dancer?"

She smiled around his nipple. "Four."

"From whom? The king?"

Her hand closed around his still hard cock, making the breath hiss from his mouth. "A few times."

Jealousy twisted through him like a plunging knife, vying with the sexy movement of her hand for his attention.

"And Aurel?" he asked, pushing the knife deeper in.

"Once."

"Does Beth know?"

"I've no idea. We are not a celibate people. Are you?" As she spoke, she rose up, straddling him, with his huge, angry cock held in both her delicate, torturing hands.

"No," he managed.

She smiled once more, and her wings moved, gently beating. She rose into the air, several inches, although she still held his cock while she hovered. Holding his eyes, teasing him as he'd earlier teased her. "For what it's worth, no one ever fucked me against a tree in full view of the king's party before."

"I hope he enjoyed the show," Michael said fiercely. "I sure as hell did."

"Good," said Danna and lowered herself with aching slowness onto his cock.

She slid over him like a warm, velvet glove, tight and moist and irresistible. Her hands fled before her pussy, and as she reached his balls, she leaned down and kissed his mouth, a brief, blatantly arousing kiss, thrusting her tongue into his, twisting once and withdrawing as she straightened her body.

Her wings fluttered, lifting her on his cock. He groaned, reaching for her hips.

"No hands," she said. "Not for either of us. Just your cock inside me. Trust me."

And so Michael lay back, so aroused he thought he would explode before she found any pleasure at all. But quickly, he became lost in the experience, drowning in the bliss he was as determined as she to make last.

With the gentle beating of her wings, she rose up and down on his shaft, squeezing and caressing him. Occasionally, she changed the position of her legs, holding them out behind her, then both to one side of him, to see which position he liked best. But the rhythmic rise and fall of her body, slowly massaging him to climax, never paused.

At some point, she began to lose her care for his pleasure in desperation for her own, and somehow that aroused him even further. Avidly, as she twisted, driving her clitoris against the base of his cock, he drank in her pleasure. He watched her eyes close in bliss, felt her increased rhythm, the hoarse catching of breath as her wild roll began. She convulsed around him once more and he came with her, building to a great shout of joy. Yet still her wings beat, still she rose and fell on his cock, intensifying the pleasure beyond endurance until with a cry she fell on him, her wings trembling back behind her body as she jerked and writhed at the apex of her pleasure.

From pure instinct, Michael rolled her underneath him, rose up on his knees between her legs and pounded into her. With ferocious triumph, he felt another orgasm spark for her from the embers of the last, revelled in her helpless cries of joy. It drove him on and on, making her come again and again until he was ready for another himself. Then he gathered her into his arms and buried his mouth in hers while he thrust hard inside her twice more and shouted his massive joy into her mouth.

When he became aware of anything again, he realized he lay with his head on her breast, idly stroking the top of her wing. He said, "Does that count as three or four?"

Sexy laughter gurgled from her throat, vibrating his cheek. "Eight. At least."

He smiled, lazily curling his tongue around her delectable, rosy nipple. "We'll have to make it ten before bed time. And then," he added, lifting his head and smiling at her look of delicious anticipation, "there's still the morning."

Chapter Five

Beth was waiting for him when he finally came back to the palatial house she shared with Aurel. He'd known she would be. With his superior senses, he had hoped to sneak past her, but unfortunately Beth was half-vampire too, with lupi thrown into the mix, so if anything her hearing was stronger than his.

She had been sitting alone on a luxurious sofa, her back to the door of the room while she gazed out of the massive window at the rising sun. But as he trod softly past the door, she said, "Michael."

He paused and gave a resigned sigh. "Beth."

"Do you want to tell me how you're not messing things up?"

Michael gazed at the ceiling as if hoping for strength, or at least escape. In the end, realizing there was neither, he walked into the room and threw himself down beside Beth.

"Messing what up? And for whom?"

"Leaving your own personal life aside..."

"Yes, let's leave that well aside."

"... the king is fond of Danna."

"I know exactly how fond he's been," Michael said edgily. He hadn't meant to sound so savage. It just came out that way.

Beth's eyebrows flew up. "Really? Oh, I didn't know *that!*" She coughed. "But I'm not talking about *that*, I'm talking about *affection*. The king is fond of Danna, and will not look kindly on anyone hurting her."

"She seemed quite happy when I saw her last."

"Smug bastard," Beth said with annoyance, and Michael laughed. "Michael, I'm serious! If you want to bring the Dragul closer to the City you won't do it by messing with the locals!"

"Speaking as one who has already so messed," Michael murmured.

Beth flushed. "That was different. You can't have flings here, Michael, and still expect to do what you came for. What if Danna falls in love with you?"

Michael stood up, moving restlessly toward the window. "What if I fall in love with Danna?"

"Have you?"

Michael gave a short, contemptuous laugh.

"I hope you do. Serve you bloody right! Michael, if you're not serious about the Dragul treaty, move over and leave it to someone who is. Go home, and tell Will to send someone else to help Aaron."

"Bossy boots," he mocked.

"Stop it."

He sighed, and turned back to face her. "All right, I've stopped. I'm sorry. I went with the moment, not the greater good. But I still mean to bring some sort of mutually helpful alliance home with me. Satisfied?"

For a moment, she searched his eyes. A faint smile began to lurk around her own. "I suppose so. Go and change then. The king wants us in conference in an hour. And, Michael," she added as he began to walk away from her to the door.

He glanced back at her and saw that the smile had gone. Instinctively, he knew that this was it. "Yes?"

"Talk to Eve."

Curiously, it didn't hurt. "I don't have a loud-hailer strong enough. Or even a radio."

"Michael, you're the two most powerful psychics of our generation. You don't need a bloody radio!"

"Beth, will you get off my back? Why the hell should I bother Eve? This changes nothing between her and me."

She didn't even flinch. "I'm not talking about Danna here. It's time you talked to Eve, Michael."

He closed his eyes, letting his head fall back against the doorjamb. Knowing she was right didn't make it any easier.

* * *

Aaron was civil but distant as they walked across to the king's palace. Michael, lashing himself for letting his cock do the thinking last night and so standing on his friend's toes -- again -- pretended not to notice. It was easy enough in the company of Aurel and Beth who were bidden to the same conference.

On the other hand, the king revealed no such displeasure. Greeting them with the same polite friendliness he had shown on the previous day, he invited them all to sit among the comfortable cushions of a spacious room with tapestry-lined walls. And when they were settled, he looked expectantly at Michael.

Michael gave a rueful smile. "Okay, let me start by saying that after Aurel's 'stories,' I completely understand -- as I was meant to -- your reasons for avoiding contact with humans."

The king inclined his head.

"And I'm sure both Beth and Beth's parents have impressed on Aurel the City's virtues of living together."

Aurel nodded in wry imitation of the royal gesture. The king ignored him.

"Well, understanding and respecting each other's point of view, we also have to consider the reality."

"Which is?" Aurel prompted.

Michael shrugged. "That your isolation *is* effectively over. Your existence is out in the daylight. Both the City and the Dome are aware of you, and you can't deal with that by ignoring it. If you do, the Dome will simply overrun your land. You could fight

and defeat them, I have no doubt, with both hands tied behind your back, but I don't get the impression that that's the solution you're looking for."

"So what would you recommend?" Aurel enquired. "Let me guess. That we ally with the City to discourage the Dome."

"It seems the only sensible way forward. The City would undertake not to build or farm on any of the land occupied by Dragul, and to watch your back with our own. You must know there are a million things we are desperate to learn from you -- but perhaps there are things *we* can help *you* with..."

"Like?" Aurel asked, with polite incredulity.

"Like our scientific research into the upper atmosphere. You," he nodded at the king, "already told me that despite your deep knowledge and understanding of the Earth you didn't have the technology to bring back the sun."

"But you did," the king acknowledged. "And thereby made our lives here above the ground complete. We are forever grateful. But unless you plan to start more nuclear wars, I don't see the advantage of an exchange of this knowledge."

"Yes, you do," Michael said shrewdly. "You love the Earth like your mother. You soak up knowledge about her for its own sake. But I only gave it as an example... Look, I don't believe isolation is good for anyone. Talking, understanding, that's how you avoid wars like the one that so nearly destroyed us all. You've heard me revile the Dome and what it stands for, but I've learned from visits there too, and I would never stop talking to them. Will, the City's leader, will never stop talking to them, or to anyone. If you ask me, isolation is the fastest way to stagnation."

"I don't believe we did," Aurel remarked, regarding his fingernails, and when everyone stared at him blankly, he glanced up. "Ask him," he explained.

"I've learned a bit about your history," Michael went on, ignoring that. Neither did he explain he had learned it from Danna in the quiet moments of the night, more than from Beth or Aurel. "Think of the reasons you came back above the ground, defying the elders and tradition and safety for change, the chance of a better life..."

"But even that's not the point. The change has already begun. Beth is here, living among you, one of you through Aurel. Aaron and I have come. Everything is changed through contact, and you can never go back. Even Iona, however contented, however much she loves you, has had a glimpse now of another world and will want to explore - and will want to come back. With her friends.

"In my opinion, you need to embrace that change before your hand is forced in ways that may be disastrous, before people leave you the way you left the elders."

Silence filled the audience chamber. Beth stared at him with a mixture of awe and fright. Beside her, Aurel stirred. "You must make a hell of a storyteller. Would you like a job?"

A breath of laughter escaped Michael. "If I ever want to change, I'll look you up."

"The reason he asks," the king said slowly, "is that he has a vacancy for an assistant. Avram left us when Beth first arrived. So afraid of the results of any contact with humans, he betrayed our existence to your Dome enemies, in the belief it would send us back underground. He was wrong. We are never going back. But it illustrates your own point. Things have already changed, and we must indeed embrace that."

Michael clamped his jaw together, in danger of bouncing it off the floor.

The king smiled apologetically. "On the other hand, my friend, how we embrace it is not up for negotiation with you." He was silent then. So was Aurel, and yet Michael knew they were communicating.

He glanced up abruptly. "Stay with us another day or so. I am happy for Aaron and our healers to exchange information. Before you leave, I will give you a message for your leader. It may not be the one you're looking for."

Michael nodded. "It may not be. But a message of any kind is better than silence."

* * *

"Unless it's a declaration of war," Aaron observed as they left the palace. He was grinning, the triumph of the occasion overcoming his disgruntlement, at least temporarily.

Michael grinned. "Even then it would be better to know."

"I take my hat off to you. I thought you'd blown it, but you got further than I ever imagined."

"Well, I have a sneaking suspicion I wasn't saying anything they hadn't already thought for themselves. Look, I'm going for a walk, clear my head -- I'll meet you later back at Beth's."

He turned away from the suddenly shuttered look in Aaron's eyes, but the guilt followed him. He knew he should talk to his friend, try and make it right. Only what could he say? "I knew you wanted her. Well, I did too, I just didn't tell you. And I didn't let Eve stand in my way either. I got to her first and Christ, I don't care how pissed-off you are with me, it was worth it for a night like that. Sorry."

Smiling sourly, he ignored the instinct that wanted to take him back to Danna's now, not just to enjoy that delectable body again, but to talk about the morning's discussion. About Aaron. And Eve.

Deliberately, Michael turned his steps to the outer hills. Though the sky was a pale, uninteresting grey, dotted with the odd flying Dragul in the distance, it wasn't raining and it wasn't cold. Michael strode out, revelling in the exercise, in the open space, in being blessedly alone. With relief, he breathed in the fresh, clean air of the Dragul Kingdom, expelling his tension and his guilt and his confusion.

He found a steep, difficult hill, just what he was looking for, and began to climb. In places he had to haul himself up with his hands, but, legs aching pleasantly, he made it to the summit and sat there, looking down on the Dragul city below, and the infinite stretch of wild, rolling land beyond.

You could feel for this country. Even in Michael's cynical soul, it spoke, evoking emotion he had no name for. But it was a peaceful feeling, almost a cleansing one. For a

long time, he let it wash over him, inhaling the deep, grassy scents around him. And then, because it was inevitable, he called with his mind. *Eve? Eve, are you there?*

There was a pause, then clear as a bell, in tones of surprise and pleasure and wariness all rolled into one: *Michael?*

Can you talk?

There was another pause, then, with less pleasure and more wariness: *Of course. What about?*

Michael looked up at the sky. Unrelieved grey, like his heart had been for so long. Because love was dead and he was incapable of reviving it. Because it should have been forever, and because his memory was full of her. Eve as a clever, mischievous child, twirling in games with him and the others. Eve standing up for herself, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Beth in some childish conflict and refusing to let him intervene. Eve suffering the changes as she became the wolf, and fiercely learning to control her inner beast. Eve, his friend.

He had no idea how to begin this conversation. So because she *was* first and foremost his friend, he just said it. *Eve, shall we call it a day?*

Over the miles, her amazement hit him like a blow to the stomach. Michael kept looking at the sky, giving her time. And at last her mind's voice came to him, rich with amusement and relief. *About bloody time!*

Michael closed his eyes and smiled. *I'm sorry. I was waiting for you to do it. After all, you left me first.*

No. That came back fast and rueful. And then, with a return to brightness. *Are you okay?*

Fine. I'm absolutely fine. Eve? In the only way that matters, I'll always love you.

There was that pause again. He could never remember Eve's words coming so slowly before. He'd surprised her by doing this now. Like him, she'd imagined they would have done it face to face. Which was why she never came home, why he never went to the Dome. Though long ended, their fear of parting had kept them from the relief of release.

Friends... I haven't forgotten any of you, you know. I never will...

I know.

And we can stay in touch now without fear of upsetting each other, she teased. Have you seen Beth?

Beth is fine. She's done the right thing, Eve.

Good. Good. Tell her... She broke off in a jumble of confused thoughts, quickly superseded by laughter. *Never mind! I'll give it to her myself! Got to go, Michael. Take care...*

And you.

His mind as silent as the surrounding hills, Michael opened his eyes and gazed down once more at the Dragul city. Chiefly, he was conscious of overwhelming relief, because finally he had done it. It was over. And despite the inevitable sorrow, he was glad. So glad.

Taking a deep breath, he rose to his feet, and began to climb back down the hill.

In the only way that matters, I'll always love you. His words to Eve, and he meant them. But *was* it the only way that mattered? Unbidden, Danna swam into his mind, smiling lips parted, her eyes clouded with passion.

So lust was important too. And now he was free to enjoy it.

Chapter Six

Danna had spent the day teaching children to dance. Now, as darkness fell, she was in her studio, putting her body through the gruelling exercises that kept it supple and flexible and strong enough for the exertions of the dance. The trouble was it didn't stop her thinking or longing. It didn't stop her hoping, or constantly scanning for his approach to her house.

He never came. She knew she shouldn't mind. He had only left her this morning. There had been a huge build-up of sexual tension within him that she had been glad to release. He had slaked her own sexual hunger, indulged her craving for newness, for something and someone out of the ordinary. And for the Dragon Dancer, who had shared the beds of the two most powerful beings in her kingdom, Michael was very far from ordinary.

She knew she was exotic to him too. Last night's sex had been mind-blowingly good for both of them. But she was not of his world, just a pleasant distraction from the cares -- personal and political -- that he had brought with him. She had no right to make it more than that, and she wouldn't.

But it didn't stop her feeling it. A deep ache, a ferocious joy all at once, and all centred on seeing him again. She had never known anything like this before and she had no idea what to do about it. Except exercise and dance and wait and hope... and how did you exist through the centuries like that?

She laughed at herself. It would ease. Her obsession would die from lack of nourishment. Unless...

Unless he was her One.

And that was unthinkable. She didn't want him to be her One, because he didn't feel it too. Because deep down she knew there was no future for them, and she didn't want a lifetime of missing her One...

Annoyed with herself, she spun across the floor and spread her wings to carry her farther. Then, throwing herself back on the ground, she wiped the sweat from her brow and walked through to her bed-chamber.

She was in the stone bath when she heard him. Not in her house, but in her mind.

"Danna..."

"Michael." Her heart thudded in her ears. She had to hide the tumult inside her before he felt it too.

"I wasn't sure I could reach you like this... would you mind if I came over?"

"You could..." It came to her that she was at a crossroads in her life -- like choosing the path of the Dragon Dancer. She had fought hard to win that title and to keep it. And it seemed to her, she had a similar choice here. She could accept that she was beaten, that Michael would go and never look back with more than a smile. Or she could fight for him...

Her thoughtfulness seemed to provoke him. "You can also tell me to bugger off."

She laughed. "What a quaint image. Are you at Aurel's?"

"Yes..."

"Then why don't I come there? I can travel more easily." *And I can give you what you need...*

"But can I sneak you past Aurel?"

She smiled. "You won't have to."

"Of course," he said wryly. "I forgot, you already have the key."

"We don't use keys and we don't need them. Are you in bed?"

"Yes -- are you going to ask me what I'm wearing? I thought that was my line."

"Sometimes I have no idea what you're talking about. I won't be long."

* * *

Beth was right. Dragul ideas of time *were* elastic. Lying in bed, restless with lust, his hugely erect cock straining against his naked stomach, Michael just hoped she wasn't going to make him wait the full century.

He had forced himself to stay away from her all day, even after putting things right with Eve, because somehow the idea of using Danna as a simple lust object seemed wrong. She had a big, generous heart, and an understanding, a compassion that went way beyond any he had ever encountered. As for her body and what she could do with it... well, he couldn't go there or he'd explode. But he was only too aware of her worth, and of his own base instincts.

Yet lying in bed, alone and aroused by constant memories of last night, he couldn't stop thinking about her. His telepathic call had come almost by accident. So superior were her abilities to his he hadn't really thought he could reach her that way. But when she had answered with such alacrity, his heart had soared. So had his cock. His brain was humming with all the things he would do to her when she eventually came through that door...

His hand holding his throbbing cock, his eyes fixed on the curtained arch, he almost missed her arrival. But the movement of the dark shadow crossing his window attracted his attention, and held it. For it was Danna, landing on the broad sill.

Michael felt his eyes widen. Then, in an instant, he was out of bed and across the floor, feeling helplessly all around the window frame for a catch to let her in.

Husky and amused, her voice spoke inside his head. "Stand back, Michael."

Expectantly, he obeyed. Outside, silhouetted against the night sky, she stood very still. And he had forgotten her beauty. Not all of it, just the part that tugged at his heart and made it ache...

The glass shimmered, and he blinked. Danna stepped through the window and walked into his lifeless arms.

In spite of himself, he closed them around her, hugging her warmth against his nakedness while he stammered out like a fool, "How did you do that? How --"

"It's just a rearrangement of matter. Like shape-shifting."

"Bloody hell."

She was tracing a line of kisses down his jaw, her hips moving gently, subtly against his painful erection. Happy to be distracted, he slid his hands down her back, playing against her wings with his fingers until he could reach under them to cup her taut, round buttocks.

"You look pale, Michael," she observed, sliding her mouth down his freshly shaven chin to his neck.

He swallowed. "That's anxiety. I thought you'd never get here."

"I thought it was hunger." Her lips closed on his skin. He felt her tongue probe the vein, and abruptly, he became aware of the rhythmic beat of her heart, the strong, sweet smell of her blood.

He closed his eyes, fighting it. *Please, Father, it's your strength I need here now, not my mother's, please not my mother's...*

Her teeth grazed his skin. To distract himself from the blood, he stripped the white tunic from her, loving the smoothness of her naked flesh, and wishing he could see more of it. But she seemed obsessed with his throat, and his gentle tugs didn't budge her.

When her teeth sank delicately into his flesh, the shock of the pain made him gasp. But at once she spoke in his mind. "I taste your blood, I share it... Oh, come inside me, let's take these pleasures together..."

She lifted her leg over his hip, pressing closer to him, giving him access. At the same time, he felt the pull of her mouth, felt the unfamiliar, aching pleasure of his own blood leaving his body and going into hers. Like his semen into her pussy...

His breath caught. His hands gripped her buttocks harder, lifting her, so he could push his cock inside her.

Oh Christ!

It was incredible. The feel of her hot wetness clamped around his cock, her hot mouth pulling his blood. At last he began to understand the bliss of his willing victims.

He moved his head, letting her drink deeper, pushed his cock harder into her, and groaned aloud.

He couldn't last like this. It was killing him...

Feeling it, she laughed softly in his mind. "Let it go. Drink from me too. I want it."

"Now?"

"Right now, please..."

Shuddering with the pleasure of her body and her mouth, he bent his head round, brushing his mouth against the vein that beat at the side of her neck.

The king and Aurel had both drunk from her. He should be different, he should be strong for her.

Hell, they'd both fucked her too.

"None of that matters. I want your blood. You want mine. Drink from me, fuck me, make me come..."

With another groan, he sank his teeth into her flesh, felt her breath catch against his own. Her delicious blood spilled into his mouth and he drank, pushing into her hard. Then, pulling back, he sucked from her throat, and thrust his cock into her again. His whole body shuddered with pleasure. So did hers.

Enchanted by the novel sensations, by the extraordinary intensity of every movement, every taste of her, he wanted to make it last. And yet he couldn't. He wanted to come while still drinking, and he couldn't drain her dry. Besides, he was so desperate for release, he doubted he was capable of making it last.

Giving in, he fucked her hard and fast, grasping her buttocks to hold them steady while he drove into her. She hooked her legs around his waist, spread her wings to take some of the weight, but he didn't care about that. Right now he was so high, he could have carried any weight at all if it meant he could still be inside Danna.

The demented rhythm of their feeding and fucking carried them across the room toward the big, round bed. And just when he felt he couldn't hold himself back any

longer, she convulsed around his cock. Her mouth loosened as she cried out her joy, and with one more suck, one more thrust, he was there with her.

His knees buckled, and they both fell onto the bed, collapsing in an abandoned tangle of limbs as the orgasm tore through him and his seed shot into her in stream after stream of joyous release.

When at last it began to die away, and with the same instinct they had sealed each other's wounds with their tongues, he gathered her into his arms more comfortably. "Thank you," he whispered, and she smiled into his lips, answering him in the same way.

"It was my pleasure, believe me."

* * *

He woke to the pale grey light of dawn. He was still inside her, semi-hard, and he was conscious of a satisfaction and contentment deeper than any he'd ever known before.

She lay on her side, with her back to him, her dark red hair spread out above her on the pillow, the tips of her beautiful wings tickling his nose. For a while, he studied those, fascinated by the veins and bones, entranced by the soft, intricate web of their underside.

Raising himself on his elbow, so he could see her face, peaceful and smiling, even in sleep, he skimmed his finger across her cheek in the lightest of caresses.

He didn't want to wake her. He had a desire to make love to her while she still slept, to let her wake to the pleasure like a gift. In return for the wondrous one she had given him last night. Not that there hadn't been more sex after the initial encounter -- it was a point of honor to give her no less than four bouts, after all -- but this one was only for her, no matter how aroused he got.

Fully erect now, from just thinking about it, he began to move within her, thrusting gently. She stirred in her sleep, instinctively moving with him. Her thighs parted further and she emitted a little moan of pleasure. Reaching over her, he slid his hand between her thighs, gathering up the hot moisture that had seeped there. Slowly,

lightly, he stirred her clitoris, rubbing his rough thumb over it, feeling it throb and grow under his touch. He moved faster, matching her quickened breathing.

She was nearly at climax when her eyes opened, cloudy with sleep and sexual passion. Quite naturally, she twisted her head round to find his mouth, and he gave it, kissing her deeply, swallowing her moans as she came. All the time, he watched her, avidly, totally absorbed by the play of expression on her face, every tiny desire and satisfaction, her growing flush as she neared completion, and most of all, her total abandonment to the orgasm he gave her.

It was a long time before she stilled. Slowly, he released her mouth. She smiled at him, reaching up with one hand to touch his cheek in an oddly moving gesture of tenderness.

But her smile froze. Her eyes moved beyond him. She said aloud, "Aurel."

Michael's head whipped round.

The Keeper of the Laws stood there, regarding them blandly. "Good morning."

Michael stared at him. "How long have you been there?"

"Not long," Aurel soothed. "I let her finish her pleasure first. Yours, however, I don't care about."

Michael looked back at Danna. "Oh, I've had mine too," he said, and watched, enchanted, while her face flushed anew. Only then did he turn back to Aurel. "What do you want?"

"The king has reached his decision. He will speak to you later on, of course, but he has authorized me to pass this on to you now."

"I'll get up..."

"No, don't bother. This won't take long, and it seems to concern Danna anyway."

Unfazed by their nakedness, or by the fact that they were still joined, he sat on the chair by the bed.

Reluctantly, Michael slid his cock out of her and reached for the sheet to cover her. She cast him a quick smile of gratitude, and while Aurel began to talk, he got up and padded across the floor in search of his jeans. His cock stood up like a ramrod

against his stomach and he was aware of Aurel's sardonic observation. He didn't care. His pleasure would be all the more intense the next time he had Danna...

With difficulty, he forced his mind to follow the Keeper's words.

"We agree with you that we cannot change what has already happened. Like it or not, we are, as you said, now in the daylight, and we have to share the world with those around us. Namely the so-called City of the Damned, and the Dome, who holds authority over most of the rest of the island."

Michael nodded, pulling on his jeans and fastening them. He couldn't help being flattered by the way Danna's eyes followed him, as if already she wanted him again.

Aurel said, "We believe you have no ill-intent toward us at this moment. And we believe the Dome's methods, whatever their cause, are occasionally unacceptable. We are happy to exchange information with your City. However..."

"Why did I know there would be a however?" Michael murmured.

"We do not know that you are capable of protecting us from other human aggressors, and even if you are, things can change. Therefore, as you said, we have to talk. To you, and to the Dome."

Michael stared, jerked at last fully out of his daze of lust and unfulfilled pleasures. "You're going to talk to the Dome?"

"The king told you that you might not like our answer."

Michael sighed. "True."

"It will be open talks, all of us together, no private negotiations. At least, not by us."

"Fair enough," Michael agreed. It wasn't what he'd come for, and it wasn't what he wanted, but it was something. It might even be good for City-Dome relations, which had certainly deteriorated since the discovery of the Dragul.

"Our one problem remains -- how to deliver the invitation to the Dome government to come to our talks."

"I can see that it's passed on for you."

"I don't think that would be terribly diplomatic, do you?"

"Point."

"However, you can come with me when I deliver it myself."

Michael stared at him. "You're going to the Dome?" The idea of the winged being among the Dome dwellers, who were totally freaked just by the lesser mutants of the City, was mind-boggling.

"Hardly. The delegation who tried to capture Danna is currently camped in the village by the tether."

"That's a day's walk!"

"An hour's flight."

"I thought I was coming with you."

"I can carry Aaron with me. You can go with Danna."

"Danna can't carry me and fly!"

"She can when she's the dragon."

Michael closed his mouth.

Aurel said casually, "One more thing. The king and I have talked about this too. I'm not joking this time. There really is a place for you here. You keep the law in your own City, and you *are* a storyteller, with your talents untapped. I need an assistant and I am happy to train you."

Michael stared at him. *Too soon*, he thought stupidly. *Too soon... But then, that's real life for you. Bloody real life. Well, fuck it, it's been one hell of a ride and though I don't deserve you, I shall miss you...*

"I'm genuinely flattered," he said ruefully to Aurel. "And part of me would like to learn your trade, compare it with mine. Because that's the rub, Aurel, I *have* a trade already and it's one I won't give up. I'm good at it. There would be nothing for me to do here in that line. You've got crime licked. In the City it's still rife and always will be. I'm needed there, not here. I've grown to like your kingdom, but I couldn't live in it."

At last, forcing himself, he looked at Danna. Telepathically, he said softly, "As *you* couldn't live in a City without dance. Could you?"

Almost, he wanted her to say yes. No, he *ached* for her to say yes. But her eyes slid away from his. Slowly, she shook her head.

Chapter Seven

Flying over the hills was amazing, exhilarating. Riding on the back of his lover was frankly weird, but unexpectedly wonderful too. The great dragon that was Danna carried him easily through the clouds, her enlarged, scaly wings beating strongly through the air currents while he held on to her prickly neck, relishing her movements beneath him.

Beside them flew Aaron on Aurel's back. Aurel made a huge dragon, bigger even than Danna, magnificent yet far less appealing in Michael's eyes.

Weird. Three days ago, he had never seen a dragon. Now he was comparing their charms.

Wickedly, he looked forward to the humans' reactions to their appearance at the tether camp. Yet he was almost sorry when it came into view, the scattering of houses and stalls around the tether, and the specks milling around among them.

As they came closer, and lower in the sky, he realized that most of the people had fled indoors. Only the two guards remained, shading their eyes against the sun to stare up into the sky, and even they backed away as the dragons came in to land.

They were Michael's men. Until recently, the inhabitants of the village had been solely scientists working from the tether, and the engineers who maintained it, together with a smattering of occasional support workers to supply food and basic hygiene. Only since some fools from the Dome had tried to kill Beth had it been considered necessary to deploy the guards. Now a visible police presence discouraged any such maverick behaviour. In fact, disarmed it. Literally.

The guards were lupi, like many of the police, and they were used to the unusual. However, even they looked stunned by the arrival of two dragons in their camp. They backed off further, warily, but didn't flee. Just as well for them.

Michael slid off Danna's back, with a quick caress. The guards' eyes widened. "Sir?"

"Yes, it's me. Everything okay?"

The senior one said wryly, "Apart from the panic caused by your unconventional arrival, sir -- yes!" His gaze slid beyond Michael to the dragons, and he nodded at Aaron.

Michael said, "How many visitors do we have here, Matt?"

"Five from the Dome. All came in together yesterday. I think they're planning to head back south today --"

He broke off abruptly as a bunch of men erupted from the building on the right, immediately beginning to spread out in a circle. Michael recognized all of them, and the leading man, the one nearest him, toted a rifle.

Michael said irritably, "Put that down, you stupid wanker!"

Perhaps it was his tone, but this time, whatever the reason, the man recognized him. His jaw dropped. His eyes, looking suddenly hunted, glanced right and left as if for a way out, and saw the guards closing in before their circling manoeuvre had really begun.

"All right, all right," the man said, lowering his weapon. "I didn't realize you were here to take care of things. We were just trying to help."

"Sure you were. Matt, why were their weapons not confiscated?"

"They were, sir. I believe they've just -- er -- liberated them while our attention was elsewhere."

"Review of security necessary," Michael murmured. "Gentlemen, return your weapons to my men, if you please, and then we can talk."

Like naughty schoolboys, the men who had tried to trap Danna obediently gave up their guns, all the while casting suspicious glances at the two dragons, who returned their stares placidly.

"What's the matter?" Michael said. "Afraid she's come after you for revenge?"

Although his back was to the dragons now, Michael felt the change behind him. From his pocket, he drew the silky white tunic he had held for her and reached back over his shoulder. Her fingers plucked it from his, and a moment later, dressed, she and Aurel stepped forward into his line of vision.

The Dome dwellers looked petrified. But from the other buildings, a trickle of people began to emerge, curious, interested.

Michael said, "This is Danna, whom you assaulted earlier in the week. And this is Aurel, Keeper of the Laws of the Dragul Kingdom. Because they are more forgiving than I, they persuaded me to escort them here to meet you. Not to arrest you, unfortunately."

With a flourish, he bowed to Aurel, waving him forward as he himself stepped back.

Aurel, every inch the magnificent Law Keeper, bowed to the Dome dwellers.

"Since our peoples share the same island, I am empowered by Vasil, my king, to give you this message to pass on to your government. It will, I know, be to everyone's advantage, if it gets there."

From his tunic, which had no obvious pockets, he took out a square of something like parchment. Taking a step nearer, he held it out to the leader of the Dome dwellers, who instinctively backed further away.

Aurel's lip curled, and the man pulled himself together, returning to his previous place and taking the letter. He coughed. "Thank you. I will undertake to deliver it to my government as quickly as possible."

"I would start now," Michael suggested significantly.

"Of course" was the civil if slightly stiff response. He had himself better in hand now, but the other Dome dwellers looked as if they didn't know whether to be more frightened of the Dragul or of Michael.

In his mind, Danna said ruefully, "You're not just any old policeman, are you?"

"Of course not," said Aurel in the same way. "He is the City's Chief of Police."

"Deputy Chief," Michael corrected mildly. "But if Will can ever persuade Lara to retire, then I believe I'm the prime candidate."

When he glanced at Danna, she was smiling. And yet he could swear there were tears glistening in her eyes. When she spoke again, it was just to him. "You are an important man in your City. And I can see you were made for it."

* * *

Striding from their official audience with the king, Michael's heart felt leaden. It wasn't just the pain of parting with another lover, or of seeing and feeling her pain. There was something more. It felt... wrong.

Frowning, Michael stopped and stared up at the sky. The clouds had lightened, and the sun was burning its way through. But he didn't see that, he saw Danna's face, lit with passion and softened by something both stronger and deeper that thrilled him and yet scared him to death at the same time. When she came in his arms this morning, he'd wanted to weep. The way she'd looked at him...

Slowly, experimentally, he stopped fighting it. Bit by bit, he let down the barriers he'd built not against the invasion of others but against his own feeling. They'd made the job easier, made facing people's constant fear of him more bearable. And they'd made the grief of losing Eve endurable.

Beside him, he was vaguely aware of Aaron talking quietly and urgently with Iona who had come up to him from the square. They seemed to have formed some sort of relationship that at least eased Michael's conscience. In front of him, Beth and Aurel made their way home, not touching but as together as --

Abruptly, Aaron's voice broke into his rambling thoughts, his hesitant, yet thorough searching of his own heart. Aaron said fervently, "I'll be back, Iona, I promise. I have to go to the City just now, but think about it, and I'll be back."

I'll be back. Whatever happened in the future, Vasil's conference had effectively lifted his ban on entertaining further visitors from the City. Hell, the king had even offered him a job, even if he couldn't take it...

I'll be back...

Who ever said there was only one way? His breath caught. He started to run. "Beth! Beth, wait, I want a word! And don't let him fly off, I need to pick his brains too!"

* * *

Danna threw herself into her exercises. She knew she was going to have a lot more of this over the years, to deal with the pain, so she might as well start now.

She could go with him to the City. He still wanted her that much. But she couldn't bear it when he tired of her. To be with your One when you weren't his -- it could only happen between mixed-race couples, she thought. Michael was not for her, only to show her that her way was solitary.

Dropping down in the splits, she whirled around on her bottom, sprang up, arms stretched high above her head -- and saw him in the doorway.

Dressed in fresh jeans and what looked like a Dragul-made shirt, he rested his shoulder against the archway, watching her.

Her heart leapt the way it always did on seeing him. Her arms fell to her sides while she tried to control her breathing. At least the vigorous exercise gave her a cover.

He said, "No wonder you're supple."

"Have you seen the king?" she asked, carefully non-committal. "I expect you've come to say goodbye."

"Yes. And not yet." He straightened and came further into the room. "Danna..." He came to a halt close to her but not touching. She ached for his touch. She wished he would leave so that she didn't break down and keep him longer through pity. "Danna, do your people ever mistake their One? Find out they were wrong?"

Surprised, she answered, "Very occasionally, but it has happened. It is tragic."

He nodded. "Yes, I can imagine. Even for my people. Eve and I thought we would always be together, but we were wrong. We grew up, grew apart, and suddenly it wasn't right anymore."

"I'm sorry," she managed.

He nodded again. "I was too. Only now... it's such a relief, only I'm afraid of making another mistake."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to hurt you."

"Me?"

His lip quirked. "I wasn't speaking hypothetically, Danna. If I've got things wrong, tell me now, but I've been talking to Beth and Aurel, and I think -- I hope -- that I might be your One. Is there a chance of that?"

She couldn't help it. Closing the space between them, she rested her forehead on his shoulder. Unable to speak, with her voice or her mind, she simply nodded.

At once, his arms closed around her. She felt his cheek on the top of her head. "Thank Christ..."

"Michael, it's not just a chance. I know it is the case. But you mustn't let that influence you. You are not Dragul and I would rather die than bind you here. You said yourself you have to go back to the City, and I -- perhaps something in me would die there... Is love enough?"

"Perhaps. But for both of us, what we do is part of who we are, and I would never change an inch of you. I love you."

She gasped at that and lifted her head, uncaring of the tears, and he kissed her mouth deeply before sweeping his lips over the wetness of her face. Instead of speaking, she opened her mind to him, felt him pause, stock still as he absorbed her emotion.

"My God," he whispered. "For me?"

She smiled. "For you, my love, my One."

He crushed her in his arms. "Then listen, listen to my plan -- I got the idea from Aaron... Okay, you are still the Dragon Dancer, I am still the cop, but I spend all my free time here, and you spend all of yours with me, either here or in my City depending on what works at the time. It won't be perfect, for the urge to spend every waking -- and sleeping! -- hour with you is strong. But could you live with it?"

"I could live with it. I would love to live with it."

"Then begin by coming with me to the City today. The king wants to use you as a messenger."

Suddenly, the mood had lightened, and she could laugh, regarding him roguishly as she slid out of his arms and made for the doorway. "And what do *you* want to use me for?"

"Sex," said Michael huskily, and came after her.

Marie Treanor

Marie Treanor was born and brought up in Scotland, but for some years moved around the UK working and studying. Now she is back home and happily married with three young children. Having grown bored with city life, she lives these days in a picturesque village by the sea where she is lucky enough to enjoy herself avoiding housework and writing stories of romance and fantasy. You can find out more about Marie and her books on her website: www.marietreanor.com, and by subscribing to her Newsletter: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/marietreanornewsletter>. She also shares the Sexy Delights loop with fellow Scottish author Kyla Logan. Find out more at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/sexydelights>. Marie loves to hear from readers, who can contact her at marie@marietreanor.com.