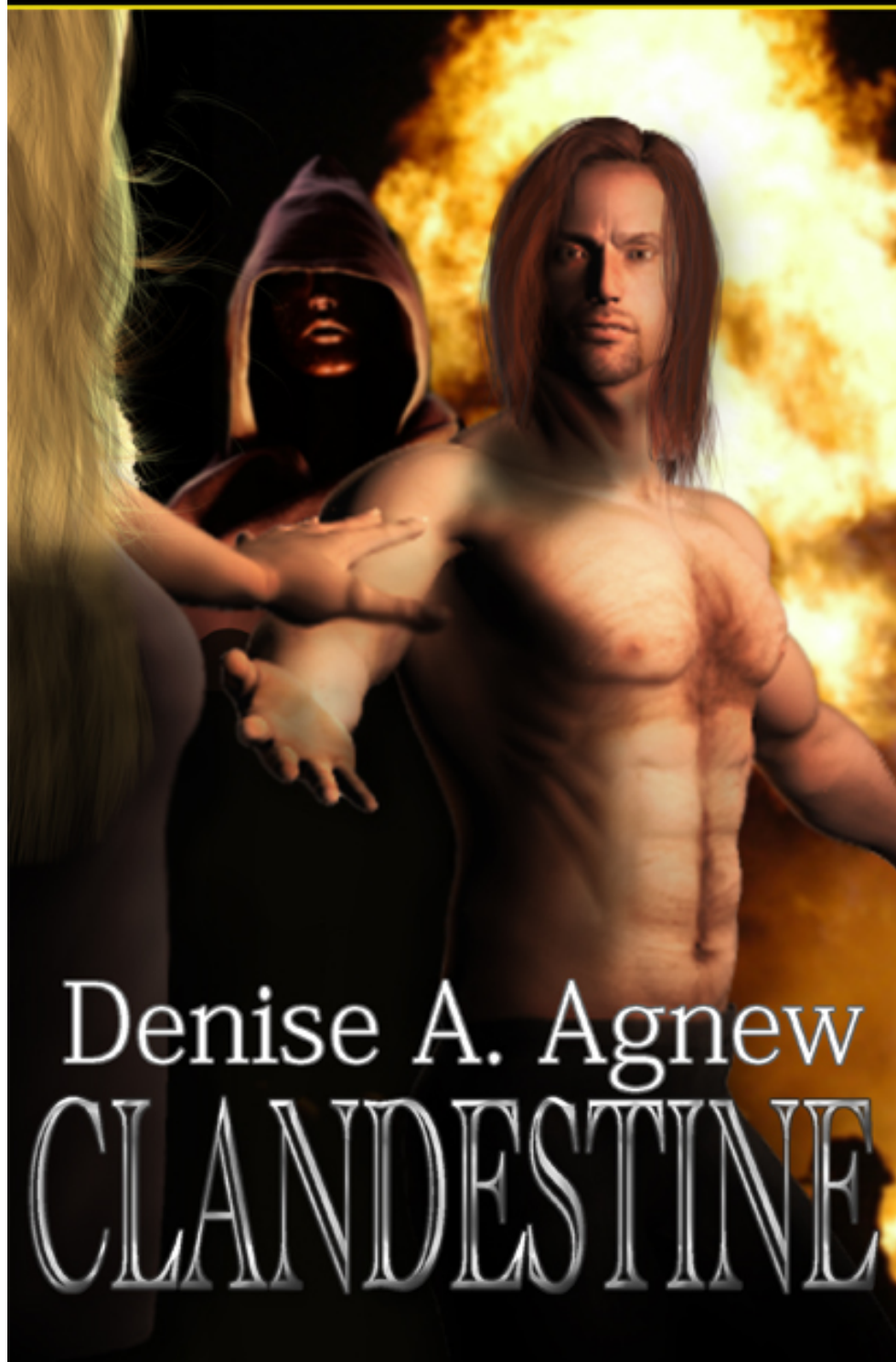


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Clandestine

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***SPECIAL INVESTIGATIONS AGENCY:***

***CLANDESTINE***

**Denise A. Agnew**

## **Dedication**

*Simply, to Mom*

*Who loved to read and instilled that same love within me when I was a little child.*

*Thanks, Mom.*

*August 17, 1921 – November 10, 2006*

## **Chapter One**

*Midnight, October 25*

*Special Investigations Agency*

*Location: A top-secret location somewhere in Colorado*

The SIA ruined the only chance Grey O'Toole had to get laid tonight.

As he walked through the sleekly modern atrium of Special Investigations Agency, he hoped whatever brought him here after midnight could be slam dunked quickly. After returning from his last assignment in Spain, he wanted a vacation. Instead, a message flashed on his I-Doc communicator as he left the airport, saying he must report to SIA right away.

So much for his date with Amanda. She hadn't understood the second interruption to their plans in three weeks. She'd warned him one more time would be all it took and she never wanted to see him again. Such was the life of a Special Agent with the SIA. None of his girlfriends in the past understood frequent absences he couldn't explain. They figured he was jerking them around, and would dump him faster than he could say shit on a swivel stick. Tonight had been no exception. When he'd called Amanda from the airport and explained that work hailed him, the proverbial excrement hit the oscillating device. She'd slammed the phone in his ear.

Another one bit the dust. He'd dated five women this year. That was a record for him. For the first time he realized he didn't feel one twinge of pain or concern that he'd gone through that many girlfriends in a year.

He sighed and took the elevator down to his office on sublevel one. As he stepped off the elevator, he soaked in the atmosphere of the lonely corridors. Grey liked this time of night, when shadows crept along the ground and revealed all the secrets the sunlight tried to hide.

*A dichotomy.*

Most people didn't understand that as much evil hid in the sunlight as did in darkness. They went about their merry lives content with the sun on their faces, certain evil approached only with the night. They didn't know the international SIA watched their backs. He was a part of that worldwide force, but for a while he'd like to pretend obliviousness as much as the next guy.

He flipped on his I-Doc and glanced at the cryptic message again. "Report to office and contact Quinton Maybrick, Controller. Dorcas Shannigan will supply backup information and indoctrination. Mac Tudor, Division Chief."

At the thought of Dorky, Grey felt a strong stirring of pleasure in both his mind and his cock. A very strong stirring. His heartbeat picked up and he took in a big breath. Yeah, maybe a lengthy conversation with her would give him a much needed attitude

adjustment. He liked Quinton Maybrick, an Englishman with quick wit and slicing intellectual prowess, but talking with Dorky fed him with true pleasure.

Just then he saw a shadow coming down the hall and blinked twice before he realized Agent Conall Tierney walked his way. Conall had this intriguing way of showing up in a blink of an eye, and Grey wondered often if the tall, laconic man didn't have a touch of the netherworld about him as well. Conall kept to himself most of the time, and considering he worked only at night, it wasn't a difficult thing to do.

Rumors about his strange abilities flew about the complex, but Grey didn't pay much attention to them. He concentrated on the more serious points in his job, disinterested in the eccentric facets of his co-workers' lives.

Except for Dorky.

Smooth-voiced information operative extraordinaire. He thought about her way too often these days.

"Hallo," Conall said as he strode up to Grey, the Irish tone in his deep voice evident even in one word. "Fancy seeing your arse this late at night."

"Not because I wanted to be here, that's for certain. What brings you here?"

Conall raked a hand through his blond hair. "The usual. Two putrid ghosts and an assortment of complaints about demons at an old air force base."

Grey snorted. "Now that's not something you hear every day."

"I'm going out to Martin's Air Force Base down by Colorado Springs and check out the reports."

"Good luck. I'm stuck with a new assignment and I just got back from Spain."

One of Conall's thick eyebrows twitched. "Missing another date?"

"How did you know?"

"Sure, and he doesn't know he wears a mighty fine scowl. I could see your frown from fifty yards away."

"All I know is that I was looking forward to a long night with Amanda and then my I-Doc screams and ruins the night."

Conall chuckled, his eyes twinkling with a wicked fire. "Got it that bad, I see."

"Guess I'll have to content myself with talking to Dorky."

Conall's expression altered enough to tell Grey that the Irishman could understand his attraction. "That should cure what ails you. Maybe you should ask *her* out."

Befuddled, Grey planted his hands on his hips and considered the notion. "You're yanking my chain." Concern made Grey ask, "Why do you think I ought to ask her out?"

"She's a woman, you're a man in need of a woman. What can it hurt? She's well thought of, fun to talk to, smart, and you have a serious hard-on for her."

Startled, Grey gaped at the other agent for a full twenty seconds before he could speak. "I do not."

"Yeah, you do." Conall started to move down the hall again. "Think about it."

As Conall walked away, Grey continued his journey toward Quinton Maybrick's office.

He walked quickly down the corridor, doing his best to daydream about a nice hot shower and falling into bed later. Wired, he knew in an hour or two he'd crash. The high-density assignment in Spain had taken everything within him and assured he would need at least two days of rest and relaxation to power up to full potential. That's why he didn't look forward to starting another case right away.

He reached Quinton Maybrick's suite of offices and opened the outer door. Quinton's secretary didn't greet him, but he saw the Controller sitting behind his big desk.

"Come in," Quinton said as he smiled and gestured for him to proceed. "Sit down."

After Grey sauntered in and sat in one of the two leather chairs in front of Quinton's desk, Quinton fumbled about with some papers on his desk for a bit longer. He pushed a hand through his curly, collar-length blond hair.

The Englishman's office didn't have the same ambience as many at SIA. No, Quinton managed to bring all of England with him when he'd immigrated many years ago. A small British flag was framed on one wall, an American flag on the other. A large portrait of a British warship from the 1800s hung on another wall. The back wall, behind him, held rows upon rows of books, including Shakespeare and tomes on the spy game. Quinton had transferred from SIA in England, and while no one ever said why, the picture of the beautiful brunette on the credenza behind him might have been the inspiration. Grey knew Quinton wasn't married, but that didn't mean anything these days.

Grey, in fact, had an aversion to marriage. No, he couldn't think of one thing that would entice him to the hitching post.

Quinton looked up, his blue eyes huge behind his thick, silver wire-rimmed glasses. "Glad you could stumble your way over here, O'Toole. How was Spain?"

Grey snorted. "You know how Spain was. Hairy. Ugly and hairy. And I'm not talking about the women."

Quinton's eyes widened slightly then he laughed. A hearty, appreciative laugh. He might look stuffy around the edges, but he possessed one hell of a sense of humor and a good nature. "I'm glad to hear that. I take it your report will be on my desk in full by the end of next week."

"You'll have it before then."

"Brilliant. Now, on to the next escapade."

Grey slouched down in the chair, his body starting to protest long hours awake. Grey shrugged and a dull ache ran through his well-used muscles. More than one kick-butt-and-take-names session had used his body to the limit. He needed to get back to

the gym and work on his physique even more if he wanted to win the next hand-to-hand combat that came along.

Grey clasped his hands over his stomach and relaxed. "I can hardly wait."

Quinton's eyes narrowed as he placed a folder in a pile to the left. "You're sarcastic tonight. I take it you are dead on your feet."

"Yep. I'm getting there."

"I'll make this quick then. I would have waited until tomorrow, but this is urgent."

*It always is.*

The world was always being eaten or beaten by some evil force or vain bastard bent on domination.

Quinton pulled another file from his desk, this one thick. "We have a situation right here in Colorado. On the outskirts of Denver this man has put down roots in an expensive, exclusive area." He opened the folder, drew out a photograph and turned it around so Grey could see it. A man in a white lab coat stared out from the photo. "Professor Derek Van Doren is missing. We also think he's being chased by unseen forces."

"So?" Grey asked. "He should call the Ghostbusters, right? There are ghost investigators who can take care of that."

Quinton threw him a hard glance. "Do you think we wouldn't have thought of that?"

Rubbing his hand over his eyes, Grey said, "Yes. Sorry. Go on."

"This is a more serious case. Professor Van Doren is a renowned psychic research scientist. He's worked for close to twenty years on a variety of bizarre cases himself. Vampires, ghosts, poltergeist phenomena, werewolves, shape shifters, fairies and elves—"

"Fairies and elves?" Grey sat up straighter. "You're kidding me, right? I mean I know the others exist based on what we've encountered in SIA, but—"

"I am not kidding. Fairies and elves."

Grey cleared his throat, his senses suddenly wide awake and kicking. "Okay. I thought I'd heard everything."

Quinton's blue eyes held a touch of amusement. "No one has ever heard of everything."

"Never say never."

"Exactly."

"Okay. Go on."

"Anyway, Van Doren went into seclusion for a good reason. He was working on a theory that would blast away everything humans have come to believe about their world. Certainly, the possibility of ghosts occurs to many people. Some individuals



believe in vampires and werewolves. Van Doren discovered something a lot more interesting."

Quinton paused, glancing at Van Doren's folder. Grey waited and waited. Finally, the Controller continued. "Van Doren has a degree in metaphysics, plus a doctorate in psychology and a few other degrees including genetics and chemistry. He has a genius I.Q."

Not much surprised Grey these days, so he took what Quinton said about the scientist's profound theory with a grain of salt. "So what's his theory? Those canals on Mars really were built by little green men?"

"I wish I could say it was that simple."

Growing more interested in the case and hanging by a thread of anticipation, Grey leaned forward. "Have you ever met him?"

"No, but I'm told everyone who has will never forget him. He has some intriguing attributes that have made his life exceedingly difficult at times."

"His personality?"

"He is a genius and many of them are eccentric. From what his dossier shows, he is quite a philanthropist. He's given away a few million to charity over the last ten years."

Grey allowed one eyebrow to twitch upward. "A few million?"

"Indeed. And this picture is one of the few photographs of him in existence outside of normal identification such as a driver's license."

Grey perused the photograph. The guy looked way too young to have accomplished so much. He had thick, short dark hair, piercing black eyes and a face women probably thought handsome. "That's a bit weird."

"Extraordinarily bizarre. It was taken by an X-55 SIA spy camera one month ago before he left our labs."

Everything inside Grey seemed to come to a stop. His heartbeat slowed, his breathing deep. "Our labs?"

"The paranormal lab unit down in the second subbasement below the library. He's been working there for the last six years."

A pattern emerged in Grey's mind. "Wait a minute. He's one of our own and we're investigating him?"

Quinton looked uncomfortable, and he sat back until his big leather chair seemed to swallow his tall, slim frame. "He's no longer one of our own because he took off five days ago and hasn't been heard from since."

"Are you worried he's been kidnapped?"

Quinton shook his head. "There's no ransom demand. Besides that, we don't think he's been snatched. He took several classified documents with him relating to SIA when he left."

Anger did a slow build inside Grey. "Ah shit."

"We hope he hasn't turned traitor, but since few people other than those in the highest echelons of SIA had much contact with him, we can't be certain. He's always been well thought of by those who know him. We need you to confirm whether the house he purchased last year is where he is hiding. We've tried satellite imaging but can't confirm any sign of life there. Attempting to break onto the grounds of his house has failed."

"Failed? No way. Any number of our agents could break into a house."

"Apparently not *this* house. The first agent who made an attempt broke his collarbone. The second agent broke his leg."

Grey sat up straighter, his mind running at about three hundred miles an hour. "Nasty."

"We need you to do the honors this time. You've always been one of the best agents we have at breaking and entering. I'm so glad you decided to be on the right side of the law. You would have made a crackerjack thief."

Pride didn't enter into Grey's feelings. He thought of breaking and entering as a fabulous game, a talent he'd honed and molded over the years. "I *was* a thief, remember?"

"As a boy. I don't count that unfortunate past."

At least Grey could be thankful for Quinton's confidence. Few people knew about his checkered past, and he wanted to keep it quiet. Many misfits led normal lives because of the SIA. Well, if you could call being a special agent *normal*.

Grey perused the file a few moments until he saw one paragraph on the bio sheet that made him pay a lot more attention. "It says here he's prone to strange visions and even stranger...abilities. What exactly are these abilities?"

Quinton leaned toward the desk, his hand reaching for a fist-sized tension ball. He gripped it and gave the object a quick squish and release. "Read through the file. It tells you almost everything you need to know. Before you get too far, speak with Dorcas Shannigan. She'll fill you in on the more bizarre aspects of this case."

Grey couldn't help the shit-eating grin. He stood up. "I'm on it."

Quinton put up one hand. "Before you leave, there is at least one other thing you should know. There is one possibility why Dr. Van Doren left the SIA and took the documents."

"Other than being a traitor."

"Quite. He told Dorcas he thought his life was in jeopardy because of what he knows. He thought someone in either the SIA or another agency might be out to get him."

Grey frowned. "That's a heavy charge. Why did he tell Dorcas?"

Quinton shook his head and then took off his glasses. He rubbed his eyes. When he looked back up he said, "She claims she doesn't know why. I think she might be lying."

Surprise stopped Grey's breath for a moment, then he said, "That's ridiculous. Why would she do that?"

Quinton stood and came around the desk as he escorted Grey from his office. "I don't know. I hardly believe it myself, but some of the higher-ups want her involvement scrutinized."

Stopping at the outer door to the offices, Grey inhaled deeply. "Wait a minute. You aren't just asking me to investigate this doctor's disappearance. You're asking me to investigate her motivations."

His eyes serious, the Controller nodded as he held the door open for Grey. "Yes."

Grey didn't like it one bit, agitation rolling up in a dark wave. "She's worked at SIA for how long and suddenly she isn't trusted?"

"I didn't say I don't trust her. I do. But I have no choice. We have to make sure there isn't anything untoward happening. You understand that as well as the next agent. No one is immune."

Grey made an exasperated sound. "Son-of-a-bitch-in-heat."

"That is about the size of it."

As Grey headed to his office, he wanted to curse long and loud. Investigating Van Doren could be an interesting challenge, but he never figured he would have to add Dorky to the list.

It didn't take him long to make it back to the large open area where his desk sat among many others. He preferred his desk out here among the usual noise of the younger, less experienced agents. At thirty-two, he'd accumulated ten years of operative time already and felt like an old bull on the block.

*A bull in a china shop.* The words filled his head, sultry and secretive like the woman who had said them not so long ago. Dorky had called him that more than once to describe his haphazard desk, his messy file system and the fact his hair had a tendency to stand up in disarray. Hell, at least scruffy hair fit right into fashion. It had taken a whole week for it to dawn on him that she'd seen *him* when he never saw her. Either that, or his legend had reached the subbasement library on its own.

He unlocked the office area and strode into the room. A lone agent, a brand new probationary, worked at the far back of the area, his attention glued to his computer and an MP3 player attached to his head.

Good. With this case dogging at his heels already, Grey didn't have any time to lose. He needed to get cracking, and talking to an overeager puppy of an agent didn't fit into his plans.

His desk sat halfway down the rows and toward the wall. He dropped into his chair and turned on the natural light lamp on his desk to counteract the harsh fluorescent tubes above. He fired up his computer and then reached for the phone.

Wait. He needed to read this file before he tried calling Dorky for additional information. It didn't take him long to scan the information because the file didn't

contain much. Suspicion rose inside him. How did Quinton expect him to do his job without a full dossier?

Van Doren had worked on a secret project, but the few memos in the file didn't explain what. As he read the file a strange pattern emerged from the information. Van Doren worked with metaphysics on a daily basis, including studying meditation, hypnosis and biofeedback.

"Pretty mild stuff," Grey said.

Sure, a few agents with SIA remained skeptical about the paranormal, but most didn't because they dealt with it day after day. Yet these experiments didn't seem that shocking or to have a reason to be kept secret. One of the last papers in the file dealt with Van Doren's project before he disappeared.

Grey read the paper with fascination.

*Subjects are tired of experimentation and would rather resign than be subjected to more scrutiny. The answer for subjects' immortality remains elusive. I feel it would be dangerous to press further and the subjects' fears increase as they claim that a great evil approaches. And I have felt it myself. She is right.*

Someone had blackened out the rest of the memo. "What the hell?"

He scanned through the papers again, certain he'd missed something. He wanted to call Quinton and demand why he'd been tossed this useless file.

"Immortality," he whispered.

Looking up, he located the young agent in the back of the room. The man still worked on his computer.

Had Van Doren discovered the key to immortality and *this* was the big secret people couldn't handle? If so, Grey understood a little of the apprehension. He rubbed his hand over his stubble-rough jaw. Okay, so he needed more details to launch this investigation and he wouldn't accomplish it sitting around with his thumb up his ass.

Calling Dorky would be the ticket. Then he remembered Quinton's requirement that he investigate Dorky as well. Damn it. How could Quinton expect him to do that? A burning started in his gut and he swallowed hard and took a deep breath to calm the anger boiling inside him. How could anyone think Dorky might betray the SIA? He knew her too well to believe it.

But he'd been given an assignment and to do anything other than follow it went against his personal work ethic and the trust Quinton placed in him. He closed his eyes.

*I'll talk to her first. Worry about her involvement later.*

More than anything, he wanted a dose of Dorky's sin-and-sweetness voice. He couldn't wait for her whiskey-and-velvet tone to wash over his ears and into his senses. She'd become a drug, a substance he needed more than his double shot of espresso in the morning, his favorite prime rib at Mallino's Steakhouse or a sip of favorite merlot. All the things he thought meant so damned much paled when he imagined one day without her silky smooth voice purring in his ear.

He yawned. Shit, he was tired.

He pushed the speed dial button with her name on it. As the phone rang, he leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on his desk. Anticipation sent excitement down deep in his gut and straight to his cock. Hell, all he had to do these days was call her and his Johnson jumped to attention.

*God, I'm fuckin' pathetic.*

One ring. Two. Three. Four.

A sinking sensation started in his stomach.

"Dorcas Shannigan, Division Eight." Her slightly out-of-breath voice sounded as if she'd just finished a round of heady sex.

A thrill shot straight up his spine.

"Damn," he said without thinking. "You did it to me again."

"Grey?" Her sultry voice simmered with pleasure.

Damn, he liked it when she sounded happy to hear from him. "In the flesh, sweet Dorky."

"I've never seen you in the flesh." A soft laugh echoed over the line.

He heard the smile in her voice and gobbled it up like a starving man. "Oh yeah? You have seen at least a picture of me before. You've got access to photo files in the library."

"How do you know what I can access, O'Toole?"

"An educated guess."

"Okay, you've found me out. I saw the one you took two years ago to update your security clearance badge."

He groaned and reached for a pen on his desk. "That's the crummiest picture of me ever taken. Makes me look like a geek."

"Are you? A geek?"

"Hell no."

She laughed again. The heated sound, like a woman teasing her lover, hardened his cock to granite. He almost moaned with the pleasure and the agony.

"That picture makes my hair look black," he said.

"I know. In real life it's the deepest warm burgundy. Red but rich like dark velvet."

Her tone slid over him like a hot toddy on a cold day, a drugging shimmer. Every one of his nerves prickled with delight.

"Your eyes are a startling shade of dusk, like a stormy day," she continued. "I take it your parents named you Grey?"

Whoa. All his male ego points sat up, noticed and started to crow. He shoved back the ego trip and allowed the fact she'd paid that much attention to what he looked like grow inside him with invigorating heat. "No. You know my full name. Douglas Grey

O'Toole. An old friend when I was a teenager told me my eyes were like storm clouds. Not brown, not black. Grey."

"Mmm," she said like a woman sucking on a gourmet chocolate. "Well, I like it."

*Oh yeah.* He closed his eyes and imagined her mouth sealed over his cock, sucking, stroking, licking.

*Stop.* If he didn't cease he'd have to head home and jack off more than once to release the tension.

"Thanks," he said as he clicked the pen open and closed. "No one's ever flattered me like that before."

"Oh, I never flatter. I only compliment with complete sincerity."

"After ten years of talking to you, I guess I should know that."

"Has it been that long? Seems like only yesterday you called me about that New Orleans case. I'm feeling nostalgic now that fall is here."

She coughed delicately, and then he heard her take a drink of water.

"All right?" he asked.

"I'm wonderful."

Yeah, he just bet she was. The smoky tones in her voice suggested she would be the best fuck he'd ever experienced. He couldn't be one hundred percent sure of her true age. God, he hoped she wasn't some eighty-year-old granny.

He almost laughed. As Quinton would say, not bloody likely.

"I'm glad you're home," she said softly.

Home. No matter where he traveled, Colorado always felt great when he returned. More than that, it felt like home because of her. "Did you miss me?"

Her sigh melted over him like chocolate fudge. "I always miss you."

Pleasure swamped him. His breathing and pulse sped up, his heart in pace with growing need. He shifted in his chair and tried to ease the tightness in his pants. His long-sleeved shirt felt hot as hell, and he flipped open a couple more buttons.

"Did you mark the days I was gone on your calendar?"

"I love you, Grey, but I did have other things to do as well."

He grinned. "Well then, let's cut to the chase." He made a rash decision, but one he didn't think he'd regret. "Can we talk about the details in person?"

When she didn't speak, disappointment ran through him. Finally she said, "Quinton told you everything on Derek Van Doren?"

"No, he said I needed to get the rest of the details from you." He explained what he'd learned from the Controller. "Some crap about immortality and a great evil was slipped in there too. This is such a blivet."

"A what?"

"Ten pounds of shit in a five-pound bag. Blivet or not."

Unexpectedly, she laughed, and that honey-laced sound made him want to reach across the electronic wires separating them and taste her lips. God, they had to be sweet to utter such beautiful music.

"That's a good one, Grey."

"Don't try to distract me. What is so special about Van Doren other than some paranormal abilities?"

"It's more than paranormal talents, Grey. Much more. He harbors a secret so extraordinary that the human race just isn't ready for it."

Tired of the veiled disaster scenarios, he said, "He knows something about aliens and UFOs?"

A small, startled inhalation came from her mouth. "No."

"Then what is this mystery? It can't be very damned secret if you know and I don't. My security clearance is Top Secret."

She sighed. All the teasing left her voice. "This is serious, Grey."

"I understand that." Ire rose to the surface and destroyed the warm and fuzzy feelings he'd experienced a few moments ago. "How am I supposed to tackle this if no one will tell me what the hell is going on?"

"First of all, I can keep secrets from you in this case because I have a Level Ten clearance."

His heart about stopped. He wanted information, and by God, she'd given it to him. No one other than the head of SIA, former Army Colonel Ian Frasier and his panel of ten board of directors secured that level. Nothing went past ten on the need-to-know scale.

"Level Ten? You're on Frasier's Board?"

"No and yes."

He growled and scrubbed a hand through his hair in frustration. "Which is it, Dorky?"

"No, because I'm down here in the subbasement with all the other night crawlers. Yes, because I advise the board and in order to do that, I have to be a part of the group."

"A secret board member, right?"

"I'm number eleven. The one that doesn't exist."

She must place some trust in him. "Why would you be in a nonexistent status?"

Again, her smooth voice said, "I can't tell you that, Grey."

Frustration red-lined. "All right, then what can you tell me? In order to figure out what happened to Van Doren and keep him safe from these bad guys that no one will tell me about, I have to know something. Otherwise, there isn't any point in going to his house at all, is there?"

For the third time her silence stretched across the line like a living, breathing entity. He almost felt the tension coming off her in waves. He didn't have ESP or other psychic

abilities, but he could swear he felt her touch him in some way, mind to mind. A gentle caress through walls and wires.

"I can tell you that he's in grave peril and that if he's found...if he's found a lot of people will die."

"That doesn't tell me much."

He heard her shuffling papers. "It tells you how crucial the situation is and why Quinton asked you to do this. But I wish he hadn't."

That stung a little. "You don't think I can do the job?"

"Oh no, it isn't anything like that," she said with haste. "It's because this is the most dangerous assignment you could ever be involved in. I don't want you —"

She cut herself off.

Gratification threatened to wear away his train of thought and resolve. Maybe she cared about him a little. Had she been about to admit it? Surprising warmth went through him.

"I swear, Dorky, if you don't give me solid intelligence to work with I'll come down there —" He sat up straight and lowered his feet to the floor with a solid thunk. "Hey, wait. That's a good idea. We can talk about this in person. We'll finally meet after years of jack-jawing on the phone."

"No."

"What?"

"You know the rules. No one comes down here. No one...no one sees me."

His heart tightened when he heard the tentative, almost sad tone in her voice. What must it be like to work in her dark, lower floor environment? Did she get to talk to anyone other than by phone? He'd go nuts under those conditions.

"I need to know what to do, Dorky. Quinton has given me permission to break into Van Doren's house. You don't want me to go in there blind, do you?"

He heard the intake of surprised breath. "What?"

"He wants me to break in."

"Don't do it, Grey." Her voice held urgency.

He couldn't think of a thing to say. She'd sideswiped him with the request.

For the first time since Grey listened to her liquid voice two years ago, he heard desperation strain her voice as she said again, "Please don't do it, Grey."



## Chapter Two

*Please don't.*

Dorky heard the anxiety in her plea and realized she'd made a critical error. The minute he'd asked to see her, something he'd never done before, her brain had gone into serious chaos meltdown.

She stared at her computer cursor, the low light in her cavernous office dimmed at the late hour. The thought of seeing Grey in person, in the flesh as he'd called it, sent her into instant panic. Not because she didn't want to see him. Because she did.

More than she wanted anything in her life.

The instant she'd seen his security identification years ago, she'd wanted to see more. Later she'd seen other photographs of him supplied by the agency databank she could tap into any time. Those pictures made her soul crave things she'd experienced far in the past. So long ago, she could scarcely remember. She hadn't indulged her needs in such an eon. A man's embrace, his touch, his —

"Dorky?" His knee-weakening voice, so damned husky and deep, made her toes curl and an answering tug pull deep between her legs. "You still there?"

"Yes."

"I can't go against Quinton's orders. You know that."

She must not allow him to discover Derek's secret. If she did, it would mean far more than the scientist's life at stake. "I know."

"Then why did you ask me not to break into his house?"

How could she begin to explain? "I'm asking you to trust me. Do you trust me, Grey?"

Immediately, he said, "With my life."

*With my life.*

The liquid, warm tone of his voice stirred her as no other man's voice could. His voice held a sexy sound overlaid with the South. New Orleans, to be exact. It awakened dangerous feelings, forbidden and insistent. Laced with a seductive nuance that always sent tingles of desire coiling into her stomach, his voice challenged, delighted and aroused. She yearned to hear him speak other words. Hot, sex-charged, knee-buckling suggestions.

"Dorky." His voice hardened. "You have to give me something. If you don't want to talk on the phone, we can meet."

"No!"

"Okay, okay. Take it easy."

Soothing, his tone eased into the confusion surrounding her thoughts. "It's complicated."

"So it's complicated. I need to do my job. If I'm not breaking into Van Doren's house and the satellite images say he's not there, how do I find him? Help me."

She battled with herself, trying to decide how to handle this. "I didn't know you were the agent they'd assigned. Why did it have to be you?"

"Why does it matter?"

"Oh shit. Did I say that out loud?"

His soft chuckle sent renewed spirals of heat up her spine. A liquid pool of crazy longing spread throughout her body. "You sure did. Now tell me why it matters who takes the assignment."

She scrambled for an answer. "Because."

Another rumbling, warm laugh tantalized her. "That's not good enough. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't proceed as I've been assigned, and I'll give it consideration."

He'd forced her to cut for the jugular. She swallowed hard, her heart picking up the pace. "If you do, you'll be dead within minutes of breaching the compound."

The minute she said the words, she wished she could take them back, but she couldn't let him be harmed. How could she live with herself if anything bad happened to him?

"The way I understand it, there were other agents injured, but not killed, when they tried to break in. So the whole death thing seems a bit exaggerated, don't you think?"

"No. Not this time."

She couldn't tell him that Derek planned to reinforce his boundaries with lethal force. The agent would pick at her until she told him how she knew the information. After all, he'd spent too many years working on his interrogation skills.

"Is that worry I hear in your voice?" he asked softly.

Tears welled in her eyes and she fought them back. "Of course it is. You're a...you're a fellow agent."

"Uh-huh. And here I thought you might be turning all tender and maternal on me."

She snorted a laugh. "Grey, my feelings for you don't even approach maternal."

"Wow," he said softly. "So you're saying you feel something deeper for me?"

*Oh, no. Is it that obvious?* One tear trickled down her cheek and she wiped it away. She should have told him that her feelings for him were like a sister's for a brother, but she knew damned well he wouldn't believe that. No, they'd opened up too much, revealed too much over the years.

She had to maintain control of her fluctuating emotions. "This is serious. Flirting with me won't change anything."

His voice took on an edge, the inflection she imagined he used in cross-examination. "You've known Dr. Van Doren a long time. Why did he leave the compound with SIA documents?"

A sinking sensation dropped into her stomach. She hated this. "All I can tell you is not to go to Derek's house."

"Damn it, you know I have to."

She gazed around the lonely semi-darkness of her office, feeling the isolation more than usual. She grabbed a pen and started doodling on the desk pad in front of her. "All right. If I can arrange for you to meet Derek, will you stay away from his house?"

"You're in contact with him? Why didn't you tell anyone?"

She closed her eyes. "I'm telling *you*."

"Okay." His accent thickened, the soft Southern hint warming her. "So you don't trust Quinton or the other people in Level Ten."

Through all the conversations she'd experienced over the years with this man, she felt to her bones he would never do anything to harm her. "I can't trust them with this one thing. The situation is too complex."

"Is it something paranormal?"

She sighed with weariness. "Beyond that."

He laughed softly. "All right. I didn't know there was anything beyond paranormal. Arrange a meeting with Van Doren and let me know where and when."

Relief flooded her. "Where will you be?"

"At my computer trying to figure out another way to approach this problem."

"You won't leave and try to go to Derek's house, right?"

"Not without your signal."

"If you do and you get dead, I swear —"

"You'll kill me?"

Lightness returned to her heart, despite the desperate situation. "Yes."

"Then I'd better be careful. I sure as hell wouldn't want you mad at me. You could mess up my personnel file, cancel my cable service, hijack my car and God knows what else."

His evil sense of humor made her smile. "I could steal your underwear and socks from your house before you even knew what happened."

His trademark husky laugh filled her ear. "God, sugar, I can't wait to meet you."

Her breath caught. Whenever he purred that endearment, which he didn't do too often, her heart turned over and something funny happened to her ability to think.

She struggled to say, "We can't meet, you know that."

He made a scoffing noise. "Damn it, what is the big deal anyway? No one, no matter how hard I've tried to find out, can tell me why you're cloistered away from the world. It's crazy."

Heaviness entered her heart. "It just is, Grey. You have to accept it."

"You know me better than that."

She knew it all right. "You're always fiddling away at things, picking at a scab until it bleeds. Don't you know not every mystery can be solved?"

"Who says? Besides, I think you secretly want to meet." His voice took on that provoking timbre that spelled incredible sex. "You want to know if this thing between us could go anywhere."

Dorky needed to stop him now or she'd confess things she couldn't afford to, like the fact he was the hero in all her wildest, most erotic dreams. "There is nothing between us but a friendly professional relationship."

"Right. Can't you feel the electricity whenever we talk? It's like a freaking live thing."

She stuttered the only answer she could think of. "In your dreams, O'Toole."

"At least one thing will happen when I finally meet you, so I'll warn you right now."

His caveat sounded grim. "Oh?"

"I'm going to kiss you."

She blinked. Her heartbeat quickened and heat rushed throughout her body and straight into her face. Her fingers trembled as she scribbled absently on the notebook in front of her. She drew a heart, then a big arrow through it.

"Kiss me?" she asked.

"Yeah. Long and hard and deep. I'd better sign off now, but I'll be waiting to hear from you."

When he hung up, she sucked in a breath. Her hormones continued to react to the insane idea of Grey kissing her. Even a small peck on the cheek would probably send her into atomic meltdown.

*Long and hard and deep.*

She was a dead woman. Dead.

"Oh God," she said.

New heat between her legs moistened aroused tissues. Imagining lovemaking with Grey was bad enough. Feeling his naked body sliding along hers, tasting his skin, taking his body into her—

*Stop.*

She put her head down on her desk. She groaned in a misery she hadn't felt in eons. Lack of sleep. That's all this crazy reaction to Grey amounted to, and maybe after she made contact with Derek she could take a small nap. Unlike most people, she didn't

need any more than three to four hours of sleep a night. She chose to work ten to fourteen hours or more a day for that very reason, including a few hours on the weekends. She loved her work.

She sat up and shifted in her chair, aware of aching muscles brought on by tension.

Damn, damn, damn. That cocky, crazy special agent would be the demise of her yet. Damn his gorgeous, sexy hide. She wanted to march right to his office, give him a piece of her mind and rage at him for making her life a living hell.

Talking to him over the years had become a ritual. Sometimes she talked to him more than once a week, and as time went on, each conversation became more and more suggestive. More reckless and uninhibited. Standard operating procedure said their conversations were inappropriate. The allure of teasing him, of imagining what it would be like to taste and touch him, to come face-to-face with all that bristling masculinity wiped away common sense. She'd spent so many years following the rules. Grey became her little piece of defiance.

Lately, whenever she'd spent more time than usual with him on the phone, she went to bed so aroused her body tingled nonstop. On those nights she'd lain awake, her fingers between her thighs as she'd fantasized about what they could do together. Her orgasms took the edge off exquisite tension, but she craved to know whether his touch could send her into the stars. She sighed with regret. She would never know.

She leaned her head back and closed her eyes. Time to contact Derek.

*Derek?*

She projected, using years of training and accumulated power to send a mental message to him.

*Derek, I must speak with you.*

Tingles started at the back of her neck. He planned to answer. Good. She relaxed in her chair.

Derek's kind voice feathered into her mind. *Yes, Dorky? It's very late. Is everything all right?*

*We've got major trouble.*

*What sort of trouble?* He sounded unconcerned and impatience made her reply with an edge.

*Grey O'Toole was assigned to your case. You know Grey. He's tenacious and won't hesitate to jump on this like a terrier.*

*You tried to dissuade him, I hope?*

*Of course. It didn't faze him. He plans to go to your home anyway.*

*What? He can't.*

*That's what I told him. I'm really worried he'll get hurt or worse.*

*You know I can't turn off the force field. Derek sounded desperate. If I do –*

*I understand. Is there anything you can think of that would change his mind? Could you – would you agree to meet him on neutral ground?*

Derek stayed quiet for so long, she thought maybe she'd lost the connection.

Then his voice came into her head loud and clear. *A meeting? Outside the grounds of my home?*

*Yes. Can we do it safely?*

*I don't see how. Besides, what good would it do? The agency considers me a fugitive. They probably consider you an accomplice. You know Grey will try to persuade you to tell him why I left the agency and absconded with the documents.*

Frustration and anger at the situation grabbed her by the throat and threatened to choke her. Everything about these tangled circumstances tested her resolve, her ability to think straight and pursue the right path. *Right on all counts, Derek. What do I do?*

*Perhaps I could meet him, but it will have to be by holograph.*

*What?*

*You recall the machine I developed? The prototype? I have a copy of it here. Could you somehow coax Grey to your apartment and turn on the unit I gave you?*

*We don't know if my unit works, remember?*

*I think it will. It is worth a try. Otherwise...well, Grey will try something brave and foolish like coming here, and you know what that means.*

Fear crawled inside her. *I can't let him do that. If anything happens to him...*

A soft chuckle echoed in her mind. *I see how it is. For years you've talked with him and now he's special to you. It's very dangerous though. You know that.*

*Derek –*

*Uh-uh! No denying it now. I've been around too many years to fool.*

She smiled. *I do like Grey, but it's not going to keep me from doing my job and keeping Grey out of harm's way.*

*He's an agent for the SIA. How do you suppose to keep him out of harm's way? He's been tackling dangerous cases since he started work there.*

Good question. Realistically, it was impossible. Before tonight she'd shut out the thought of him hurt or killed on assignment. Perhaps her unfailing confidence in his ability to do his job kept her from thinking his demise was possible. Now his humanity, his vulnerability slapped her in the face.

*Do you think you can convince him to come to your apartment tonight?* Derek asked.

Panic, something she almost never experienced, rose in her throat. *I can't. He can't see me.*

*I know he isn't supposed to, but we're already operating outside SIA protocol. It's the only way. Talking him to death over the phone or email won't accomplish anything and won't stop the young pup from doing what he wants.*

She knew this intellectually, but emotionally she didn't want to hear it. Everything about this case strained the boundaries of not only SIA rules and regulations, but it put her, Derek and Grey in a tenuous, unspeakably dangerous situation.

She said the only lame thing she could think of. *It's too dangerous.*

*So is allowing him to come to my home. You don't have a choice.*

Her heart sank. She didn't have a choice. Not if she wanted to keep Grey safe. *I'll do my best. I'll try to convince him.*

When he spoke next, the seriousness came through loud and clear. *Do better than your best, Dorky. If he comes to my home, he is as good as dead. You know that.*

Yes.

*Your concern for Grey does you credit.* A soft chuckle echoed in her ears. How could he have a sense of humor while the world threatened to fall apart around them? *No wonder Grey is half in love with you.*

Her throat tightened up at the suggestion. *That's ridiculous. Grey likes to chase skirts. He's only interested in the challenge of me, not the real me.*

*How do you know?*

*Because he can't keep a girlfriend to save his life.*

*It's his work. His lifestyle isn't for most women. It doesn't mean he's not capable of loving. As for the rest of the people here, they might be beyond redemption. It's foolish to keep on trying when nothing can be changed.*

Disheartened, she struggled with her next words. She'd always admired and respected Derek for his kindness and genius. She considered him one of the wisest individuals she'd ever known. When a man as great as him gave up, it sent a shockwave across her psyche.

*I don't believe that. I can't believe it yet.*

*Then if you have faith in humankind, you must try to save it by getting Grey's cooperation. Can you do that?*

*By the Goddess, I hope so.*

\* \* \* \* \*

An hour went by, and while he searched the computer files available to him from the library, Grey couldn't find anything to explain why Van Doren would have left with classified documents. The newbie agent had left a while ago, dark circles under his eyes and a weary look on his face.

*Good. I need privacy.* Privacy to dig into the files and to imagine what it might be like to kiss Dorky.

Damn her.

He wanted to strangle her as much as he wanted to kiss her. And he *would* follow up on his threat. After all, with the trouble she'd put him through, she deserved a good, hot, deep kiss.

Tired, he decided staring at the computer screen had fused his synapses. What did it matter? If he did figure out a way to get to Dr. Van Doren, all bets were off. He rubbed his eyes.

Before he could think of making coffee to jumpstart his heart, the Hallelujah Chorus started playing on his phone.

Dorky.

He'd programmed the phone to let him know when the call came from her.

"Sweet Dorky, tell me good news," he said into the phone.

Her voice, when it came, held a seriousness that worried him. "You get your wish. We will meet."

The pronouncement surprised him even though it shouldn't have. He'd half expected for her to find a way to weasel out. A bolt of unadulterated excitement ripped through him. He suddenly felt sixteen years old and ready for his first fuck.

"When?" he asked.

"Give me thirty minutes."

"It won't take me thirty minutes to get to the subbasement."

"No, but you're not exactly going to the information library."

He drew out his next word. "Okay. Fire away on the directions."

She described to him the maze of elevators, staircases and tunnels that led from his office to where he needed to go. "Be careful. It's possible to get lost."

Confidence now strummed in his veins at the same time as overwhelming excitement. God, he *was* going to get to meet her at last. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been this wound up. "You forget how long I've been working at SIA. I've been to every inch of this place."

"Almost every inch. You *can* get lost, believe me."

Doubts remained in his mind, but he decided not to argue. "I'll take your word for it. All that is going to take thirty minutes?"

"No. Just give me another thirty minutes before...I won't be ready to see you before then."

Hesitation in her voice, the lack of enthusiasm for seeing him, wore away at his newfound zeal. "Dorky?"

"Yes?"

"You don't sound too interested in meeting. You're not even curious about what will happen between us?"

A seductive laugh filtered over the phone. His groin tightened. "You're starting to sound like a woman, Grey."



A big grin parted his lips. "Damn, coming from anyone else I'd take that as an insult."

"Oh, don't worry. Your manhood is still intact as far as I'm concerned."

A relentless need to test, to provoke her into some sort of monumental confession, spurred him onward. "When I see you, I promise I'll show you how much of a man I am."

He could have sworn he heard an intake of breath, as if he'd shocked or maybe aroused her. "Get off the stick and get down here already."

"Yes, ma'am."

He hung up and stared at the blinking cursor on his computer. He couldn't believe it. Finally, after years of jabbering, he would meet the one woman who haunted his dreams. Yeah, when Grey reached Dorky, when he touched her, she would know how much she'd tormented him in no uncertain terms.

He glanced over the directions he'd written down, stored it with his photographic memory and left the office.

After taking the elevator down to the basement level, he turned right and passed various offices related to disease control. Not disease control related to humans, but the odd afflictions that could strike otherworldly creatures such as vampires, shape-shifters and assorted half-human beings. Only one area in the wild world of SIA.

SIA was started and the headquarters built twenty years ago with secrecy in mind, and no one knew the main branch location except for top-level officials in Washington DC and those who worked for the SIA. He never thought about the surreptitious activity apparently taking place right under his feet. He should have, but years of gallivanting around the world kept him too busy. A man couldn't be in two places at once, unless of course, he had a doppelganger. At least *he* didn't have paranormal abilities. Nope. He relied on his wits and determination to accomplish the job. That's all he needed.

Ten minutes later, he wondered if Dorky purposely misled him. He'd followed her directions to the letter. He'd taken another elevator down past the library level and opened three more doors with his access card. The problem came when one door slid open, he stepped through and walked four steps into the area beyond. He heard footsteps behind him and glanced back. No one.

He continued onward, but less than a few feet later, he heard the footsteps again, this time hurrying as if they wanted to catch up with him. He stopped and whirled toward the sound, his body tensed. He shouldn't feel uncomfortable anywhere in the safety of SIA, but right this minute he'd never felt more exposed in his life. While he stared at the empty hallway, an inexplicable disorientation overcame him. Hadn't he been through this hall once? The doors on either side of the antiseptic-looking hallway didn't identify where they led. No personal or departmental names. The whole damn thing went beyond clandestine.

"Creepy," he said to the empty hallway.

Despite the blank, almost annoyingly white walls, the area didn't feel empty. He could swear eyes watched him and plotted his demise. As the weird feeling persisted, he took a deep breath to stem a bizarre and rising dread.

Two seconds later, he had a reason to panic.

Out of thin air two bodies formed, materializing into head-to-toe crimson-cloaked forms resembling the reaper. Yards of material floated around their bodies, as if wind licked at their heels. Silence moved in their presence and he acknowledged bone-deep trepidation inside him. No time to regret that he didn't have his weapon. He doubted a gun would put a dent in these bizarre figures.

A word flashed into his head, sibilant and mixed with the breaths of the peculiar creatures in front of him.

*Die.*

Okay, he thought he'd seen and heard everything.

Apparently not.

They charged him.

Training kicked in and he lurched away, aiming at the first form with a roundhouse kick. He connected with solid flesh, and the satisfaction made him grunt. No time for crowing his victory. Although the figure staggered, the other came around and smashed him in the torso with a punch so hard he thought every one of his ribs must be broken. Pain lacerated his midsection and he couldn't breathe. He staggered and almost lost his footing. He punched through the agony and lack of oxygen and powered another martial arts move that served him well in the past. His parlay missed.

The androgynous creatures came at him again, one delivering a chop to his jaw. Splintering pain stabbed his skull. He fell against the wall, senses swimming. His training kept him on his feet and ready to fight.

One thought screamed through his mind at light speed. Wherever these creatures came from, they didn't belong in this world. Somehow they'd escaped from the depths of some heretofore unknown hell.

He just happened to be in the right place at the right time to deal with the mess.

*Figures.*

With determination born of rock-solid anger, he leapt away from the wall.

With a shriek that resembled a cat caught in a meat grinder, the other monster launched at him and drove him back against the wall. A weight settled across his throat as the heavy thing leaned against him. The creature had to be seven feet tall, and Grey craned his neck to look up at it. In pain and pissed off, Grey dared gaze into the thing's face. A black maw greeted him. Yet the darkness, covered and contained only by the hood, wasn't empty. It yawned with an evil he could feel down to his blood and bone. It reached for him, threatening to consume his humanity. This outrageous being wanted his brain. His knowledge. Somehow, he knew what it wanted most of all.

*They want Dorky. The bastards want her.*

"Ah, *hell* no."

With a burst of strength, he swung into a chop that cracked the creature right across the throat, assuming it had a throat. It fell back, a scream of outrage piercing the air.

"No more playing, boys," he rasped. "You want Dorky? I don't think so."

With a surge of power he didn't know he had, he swung into jabs, stabs, punches and kicks that came from his depths. Moves he hadn't used in ages came out of him like lightning, drawing on last reserves of strength. Every move connected, pushing back the intruders. Nothing kept them down for long. They came at him again and again and again.

Just as fast as they'd appeared, they dematerialized.

Shocked, he stood still, breathing hard. With fists clenched, feet apart and ready for another attack, he waited. Nothing. Not another sound or indication they remained in the area.

*Dorky.*

God, what if they'd already reached her? What if they'd hurt her?

He turned and rushed for the last door, the goal he'd almost reached before the attack. She was somewhere beyond this barrier and nothing would keep him from her. His key card worked in the last slot, and as it slid open, he stepped inside.

And came up against a solid, beige wall. Nothing else. No windows, no openings of any kind. The door behind him slid shut and he whirled in panic. He'd never been claustrophobic in his life, up until now. He placed his hands against the steel door, knowing his so-called wits wouldn't do jack shit to get this door open. He put the key card into the slit on the door, hoping it would open again and set him free. Nothing happened. He turned and faced the blank wall one more time. All together, his space consisted of about a foot between each door and several feet to the right and left. Trapped in the narrow slit, he stared in disorientation. A wave of dizziness hit, and he fell against the wall, palms flat against cold concrete.

"Shit," he whispered. "What the fuck?"

As if his obscenities worked like secret passwords, the wall in front of him dissolved, shimmering like water before disappearing. He almost fell into the room beyond but managed to keep his footing.

What he saw before him rivaled anything in his imagination.

## Chapter Three

As the wall to Dorky's office dematerialized and Grey stood in the opening, her mouth fell open in complete astonishment. Her heart thumped anxiously in her chest and her blood raced in her veins. Grey stood in front of her, alive and kicking.

She knew what he looked like, but faced with the real man, her heart and body reacted with soul-searing attraction. Experiencing the full force of six-foot three-inches of bristling, ready-to-kick-serious-ass male sent her into a strange fright.

*May all the gods and goddesses help me.*

Without a doubt, she had never seen a more intriguing, gorgeous man in her life. Considering how many men she'd seen, that said quite a bit.

He dragged a hand through his burnished dark copper hair, the tousled, collar-length strands shiny, wavy and thick. Strands fell over his forehead. His Roman nose was classically shaped, his jawline a rugged cut. His skin didn't have the typical pale hue of a redhead. He'd managed to maintain a light tan from his frequent jaunts to hotter climates, or perhaps his ancestry was more than Irish. His body held the bristling, tight masculinity of a highly conditioned man. Broad shoulders and arms filled his navy shirt to perfection. One shirtsleeve was torn at the shoulder and the open throat of the shirt arrowed down all the way to his belly. Her attention pinpointed his chest and the generous sprinkling of russet hair over muscled pectorals and a six-pack stomach. Female appreciation darted deep into her belly and she licked her lips.

His pewter and dusk gaze, shadowed by thick russet brows, captured hers and held it. Fire brimmed in those eyes, mixed with purpose and irritation. "Dorky?"

His husky voice, so familiar, sent curls of answering excitement all along her body. Almost afraid to answer, she opened her mouth and nothing came out.

He frowned and stalked toward her. The open area behind him rematerialized into solid matter. He swung around to look and when he turned back to look at her, his glower remained.

Her heart felt like it might pound out of her chest. She took one step back. Two. "I didn't know you were out there. Then I heard a commotion and I opened the...the door."

She continued retreating until she bumped into a desk behind her. When Grey stood less than a foot from her, he stopped. His heat seemed to sear into her, making her even more aware of his masculine energy. At five-foot eight-inches tall, she rarely felt intimidated by a man's height. His presence managed to alarm her in a completely new way.

"You've got to be Dorky," he said, his voice amazingly soft considering the ire in his expression. Then his voice went deeper and huskier. "You're as beautiful as I imagined."

A flash fire ignited inside her. Ages had passed since an attractive male had been this close to her, much less complimented her. Dorky's body went on overload. Her breasts prickled with heat. In her belly, an answering tug sent new waves of incredible attraction moving inside her.

"Thank you," she said, a little bewildered.

He looked down at her, weighty emotion flashing in those incredible eyes. Her breathing quickened as his body heat warmed her. The man was danger on two legs, an exceedingly difficult person to ignore. His lips parted, his chest heaved in and out with one deep breath. For a second she thought he would follow through on his earlier threat to kiss her. She expected it. Had imagined it many days and many nights over the years.

She craved it.

With reverence, his gaze traced her face. For one moment, a smile took over his whole face. "I can't believe it's you."

He sounded so happy—his pleasure sent an answering wave of delight through her. "What were you expecting? An ancient hag?"

He chuckled. "I didn't know."

Disappointment stabbed her when she realized he didn't have any intention of kissing her. The man liked to flirt, that was all. God, she must banish these ridiculous, girly fantasies about him before she became infatuated with the idea of romance. Romance didn't find her often. Not very often at all. Now that she'd met him, they could move on to more important and pressing ventures.

She reached up, concerned about a trickle of blood she saw on his temple. As she touched his jaw and turned his head slightly to the side, the prickly sensation of his five o'clock shadow made her fingers tingle. "You're hurt. If I'd known the Realm Guardians would attack—"

He caught her hand and held it. "I'm fine."

His gentle but unbreakable grip made her wrist and fingers fill with warmth. A strong array of conflicting sentiments coursed through her psyche. Concern for his physical wellbeing, anger, fear all intruded. Familiarity came along with these feelings, as if she'd known him all her life.

"You're not fine. You look like you've been through hell."

With a sardonic tilt to his mouth, he said, "Gee, thanks."

"You're welcome."

His devouring gaze held her rooted to the spot, anticipation jumping and sparking in her body like a live wire.

If he would just reach out...if she would just reach out.

The respite lasted but a second then his expression clouded. "Would you mind telling me what the hell is going on? Who are those freaky things that attacked me outside in the hall? And what about that weird wall? How did it dematerialize like that?"

The man was too potent and vital to ignore and so were his questions. When he released her, she moved away from her desk and put distance between them so she could think straight.

"One question at a time," she said softly.

He heaved a deep breath. "All right. Who the hell jumped me and tried to rearrange my face?"

"Realm Guardians. At least I'm assuming that's what attacked you."

"What the hell is a Realm Guardian?"

She shook her head. "There's so much to explain. It'll take time. Derek can explain everything you want to know."

He jerked his gaze away from her and scanned the room. "He's here?"

"Not in a real sense. You'll see him on a holograph."

Anger flashed in his eyes. "I thought you said I'd meet him in person." His eyes deepened, if that was possible, into a darker shade. "All of this is confusing as hell, Dorky, but I'm going to find the truth. So if you're stalling, you can give it up."

An awkward silence ensued.

Eventually he looked around and said, "This is your office?"

"Welcome to the paranormal information library. Want a tour?"

"What I want to know is what the hell is going on."

She circled around the expansive room, touching this and that with reverence. "Patience. I think that's a quality you lack sometimes, isn't it, Grey?"

Annoyance flashed across his handsome face. "In spades. If it means I can get the job done, then impatience is my middle name. I was attacked by...by whatever you called those things and you want to take me on a tour?"

Answering anger made her gentle feelings for him retreat to the background. "The tour isn't useless trivia. It will help you with this assignment. Derek's laboratory is on this floor as well."

He frowned. "I didn't see a door with his name on it down here."

She smiled. "You didn't see a door with *my* name on it either."

Bewilderment clouded his eyes. "This Level Ten stuff is way out there. So the SIA has secrets from the SIA?"

"You could say that. Come on. Take a minute to walk with me and I'll show you a few things before Derek is ready for you."

She sensed that he hadn't gained any patience. She deliberately took a deep breath and watched as he did the same. Good. Maybe the calmness of her place would permeate him and he'd slow his relentless pursuit of answers.

He followed her around the room. Despite the place being almost a prison, she loved the coziness and familiarity. Rows upon rows of tall bookshelves lined the walls. Filing cabinets covered another wall. As the human eye followed down the corridor where legions of bookshelves flowed, the illusion said the chamber went on forever. Her desk sat alone almost in the very middle of the room, its massive mahogany presentation impressive. Her giant leather chair swallowed her whenever she sat down.

"Jeez," he said as he placed a palm on her desk. "This thing is huge."

"It's very old." She didn't plan to tell him *how* ancient or he'd laugh at her. "The SIA allowed me to bring things from home."

"Allowed you to bring things from home?"

"That's right."

His gaze narrowed. "This whole setup is about the strangest thing I've seen."

A secret smile touched her mouth. "Oh no, it isn't. There are many stranger things you *could* see."

He grunted, a masculine sound that rumbled up from his chest. He wandered around behind her. "Will you stop a minute? This place is great, but it doesn't explain a damned thing. I need answers now, and I want to talk to Dr. Van Doren."

"All right. I should have known I couldn't stall you."

She walked over to a cabinet on the back wall and opened it. Inside was a copper-colored round device about the size of a small hatbox. "You've seen holographs before at SIA, but this one is particularly powerful." She placed it on her desk, opened the top and put the lid aside. When he came nearer, she put one hand up. "Not too close. It disrupts the utility waves. This prototype is a little tricky anyway. Derek didn't have a chance to work out the bugs before he left."

She clicked the button on the side of the box. A whooshing noise swished from the box and a beam shone from an aperture at the crown. The light formed a cone shape about ten feet across with the largest portion at the top. Interest entered his eyes as he stared at the developing hologram.

"Good, it's working. The thing's finicky sometimes," she said.

"I don't see any hologram—" He cut off as a three-dimensional shape filled the light area. "Van Doren."

As usual, the doctor looked cheerful, even though circumstances lately didn't warrant much laughter. With his thick hair, silver-rimmed spectacles and gorgeous smile, most people guessed him to be around thirty, thirty-five years old tops. He looked professional in a lab coat over a sweater and dark slacks. His friendly smile relaxed her a little. She marveled at the clarity of the hologram. Though they could see right through him, the image stayed remarkably sharp.

The doctor glanced around. "There you are. I was beginning to wonder if you'd stood us up, Grey."

As she feared, Grey didn't seem to think the comment funny. "I'd like to cut the shit and get right to the point."

Ever the gentleman, humor sparkled in Derek's dark eyes. "What is the point? I understand that you've been assigned to break into my home."

*Oh damn. Why did he have to be so honest?*

Grey glanced over at her, indignation icy in his eyes. "I see someone has filled you in on the situation."

Heat burned her face. "Of course I told him why you wanted to meet."

Grey paced closer to the hologram box. "This is one of your inventions, Dr. Van Doren?"

Derek nodded. "It is. I'm just glad it chose to work today. This prototype gave me fits."

Grey cleared his throat. "Back to the subject at hand. Dorky tells me I'll be injured or killed if I try to infiltrate your compound. Why is that? Have you invented some bad-ass security mechanisms?"

"Exactly." Derek clasped his hands behind his back and looked professorial in every way.

Grey's skeptical expression intensified. "And you couldn't let me through so we could talk?"

With a weary sigh, Derek shook his head. "First of all, you are assuming that I'm at my home."

Grey put his hands on the desk and leaned closer to the box. "So you're telling me you're not? Why would you need unusual security measures if you're not there?"

Derek chuckled. "I said I *might* not be there. If not, then I want special security to keep my home safe. If I am there, then I need special security to keep certain intruders from entering."

Grey moved away from the desk, ever the restless one, it seemed to Dorky. When he moved nearer to her and stood way too close, she almost moved away. Instead, she enjoyed his heat and the comfort of having him nearby.

"Intruders like the wild-ass creatures I ran into outside of Dorky's office?"

Derek's demeanor turned serious. He glanced from Grey to Dorky. "What are you talking about?"

"Realm Guardians," she said.

Derek scrubbed at his jaw with one hand. "Oh my."

Grey snorted. "That's a mild way to put it."

"I didn't expect them to attack again," Derek said.



Grey threw a hard glance at Dorky, and the intensity of his scrutiny burned all the way down to her flats. "Again?"

Silence covered the room while she tried to decide what and how much to tell him. "The Realm Guardians have been searching for me for many years. They finally found me. I'm not sure how, but they did. Derek and I think someone at SIA tipped them off to my location. That's really the only way anyone could discover my whereabouts."

Deep worry entered Grey's eyes and added to the force of his scowl. "That's why you're cloistered in here most of the time and no one ever sees you? You're being stalked by some paranormal son-of-a-bitches?"

She couldn't help but smile. The worry in Grey's eyes sent warm feelings straight to her heart. He did care about her, and the idea felt so good she waited too long to answer him.

"How can you smile?" Grey headed her direction again. "Why hasn't someone at SIA helped you with the situation?" He glared at Derek. "Why didn't you insist she get help? If I'd have known—"

"Easy, easy." Derek held his hands up. "The only ones who know about her predicament are Level Ten...and now you."

Without thinking, she reached out and clasped his upper arm to placate him. She wished she hadn't—the steel-hard strength of his biceps under her fingers made new arousal surge into her belly. "Grey, please don't get so worked up. There isn't anything Level Ten can do about it. This is my problem alone."

"And mine," Derek said.

"That's crap." The growl in Grey's voice said exactly what he thought of her statement. He pointed toward the wall he'd walked through not long ago, and the gesture removed her grip from his arm. "There are some bizarre red-cloaked cretins out in the hallway with your name on their radar screen and the premier intelligence agency in the world can't help you? Why would supernatural creatures stalking an SIA employee be classified?"

She sighed. "Because if anyone found out why they wanted me, it would create major worldwide complications."

Grey's mouth curved into a sarcastic smile. "Right. You can't go to friends for help? I would have helped you if you asked. Now why the hell are they after you and what do they have to do with Van Doren's problem?"

Derek cleared his throat and brought them back to him. "They are after both of us because of the problems we've caused them in the very distant past."

"Revenge?" Grey asked.

"Revenge and then some," she said.

She realized, as she watched emotions cross Grey's face, that he had difficulty hiding his feelings. She didn't know if that would hurt or hinder her cause. At least he should be easy to read.

"Perhaps you should finish telling Grey what is happening in full," Van Doren said.

"I wish *somebody* would." Grey's caustic tone made her flinch.

Before either of them could object, Van Doren's hologram blinked out.

"Damn it." Grey went back to the hologram box and stared at it as if he could use sheer force of will to make it do what he wanted. "Get him back. I had more questions. Like why he took classified documents off SIA property."

Wearied of the proceedings, she swept her long hair back with both hands and let it drift down her back. Grey appeared wound so tight he could burst a blood vessel. "I can answer those questions." She allowed her gaze to slip up and down his powerful body. "First of all, I think we should check your injuries."

"I'm all right."

"Then I've got a shirt you can borrow in the next room."

He shrugged. "I don't need to be clean. I need answers."

"Come into my apartment."

Incredulosity swept over his features. "Your apartment is down here?"

She headed for the maze of bookshelves on one side of the room. "Follow me. It isn't far."

As she walked, her navy leather flats made little noise on the composite flooring. She rarely wore heels because they killed her feet and her simple taste in clothing didn't require dressing up. Besides, who would see her? Unaccustomed self-consciousness made her wish she'd worn something better today. The navy pima cotton twin set and blue jeans molded her form, but not too tightly. Since she hadn't expected visitors today, now or in the distant future, she hadn't put much effort into her looks. Grey's rapt expression when he'd first spied her, so unlike what she was used to seeing in a man's eyes, reawakened feminine needs she hadn't acknowledged this deeply in years.

"I can't believe you live down here too," he said.

She reached the huge russet wood door to her apartment and pushed the button press handle. It swung open on smooth hinges. Specialized lights flicked on high above as they entered.

His reaction came fast. "Wow."

She laughed and glanced back at his bewildered expression. "Have a seat. Would you like something to drink?"

"No, I'm good." His attention traveled around the room and took in details as any good agent would. He plopped onto a stool at the breakfast bar. "This is fantastic."

Pleasure flowed through her. "Thank you."

Few people who'd seen this room, including the exclusive members of Level Ten, had reacted the same way. The area opened onto a sprawling living room, kitchen and dining room. A high ceiling gave the illusion of more space. Dark paneled wood, gleaming rose-hue marble columns and matching tiles added to the affluent impression.

A rich espresso leather couch, love seat, and matching recliner graced the center of the room. An enormous mahogany antique trunk served as a coffee table. Area rugs in rose and royal blue covered the floor here and there. Even the kitchen sported the latest black appliances, dark wood cabinets and granite counters. Her large bedroom, with a California king-size bed and a huge bathroom with whirlpool garden tub, defined luxury. She couldn't have asked for more.

She loved it.

Once inside the bedroom walk-in closet, she rummaged around. It didn't take long to find an old shirt Derek had left in her office one day and forgotten to take with him. She returned to the living room with the shirt and first-aid kit.

Grey stood at the refrigerator, leaning over just far enough to bury his head inside and tilt his butt up. She swallowed hard and took in the delectable contours of muscled male ass. *Oh yes. That was very nice.*

She cleared her throat and he started. When he turned around, he held bottled water. "Sorry. I changed my mind."

Dorky winked. "You are just a snoop."

An answering grin flickered over his mouth. "I am not."

With a mocking sigh, she laid down the shirt and the first-aid kit on the kitchen island counter. "What did you think you'd find in there? Alien eyeballs? Martian meat pies?"

"Yeah, right. I was thinking caviar and a magnum of expensive champagne."

"I have simple tastes, really."

He gestured at the room. "This isn't exactly inexpensive tastes."

Sadness threatened, but she pushed it away. She had everything she needed in life—moping about possibilities unrealized had never been her way, and she wouldn't start now. "Level Ten decided that considering the sacrifices I was making, they would be generous. I didn't ask them for this."

He twisted the cap off the water bottle. As he tilted it back for a long swig, his throat worked. With his shirt hanging in tatters, and his forehead smudged with blood, he looked every inch the battered hero.

*Oh Goddess, how sexy is that?*

Her heart started a funny rhythm, her stomach awash with butterflies. A flush heated her body until her nipples hardened.

He finished half the bottle then wiped his mouth with what was left of his sleeve. When he caught her staring, he tossed a sheepish smile her way. "Sorry. I guess fighting Realm Guardians works up a thirst."

"Of course it does. You're lucky they didn't use some of their other powers on you." She frowned, mind working fast. "I wonder why they didn't?"

"Other powers? Like what?"

She shook her head. "It's a long, long story. I'll tell you later. Here, sit down on this stool and I'll patch you up."

He did as told, all the while grumbling about it. "I told you I'm okay."

"Take off that shirt. You look like a refugee from a pirate ship. All you're missing is an eye patch and a funny accent. Oh, wait a minute. You *do* have a funny accent."

He stared at her like he'd never seen her before, then burst out laughing. "God, sugar, I sometimes forget how damned funny you are."

She crossed her arms. "Are you sure you don't have a head wound? You're acting a little giddy."

He sniffed. "Hell no. My head is harder than rock. It would take more than that to take me down."

She rolled her gaze to the ceiling. "Oh brother."

With one jerk, he finished ripping his shirt clean open and exposed the rest of his chest and powerful arms. As the shirt slipped off his arms, and he allowed it to fall to the floor, her stomach did a wild dip. She stared helplessly at his to-die-for muscles. She turned away from the tantalizing vista and took supplies out of the first-aid kit. He eased onto the stool and let his legs slouch open in that relaxed, male way. Another furtive glance got her more than she bargained for. His dark dress slacks couldn't hide his body. Long, well-defined thigh muscles outlined a distinctive and impressive bulge between his legs. She snapped her gaze back to the kit. *Goddess*. Relaxed, his penis must be large. What would it be like erect?

More heat poured into her face as the directions of her thoughts turned steamier and steamier. Apparently, she'd been starved for male company, because the first gorgeous man to walk in the door in forever seemed to have tweaked her hormones big time.

Her fingers trembled, and an unfamiliar nervousness took her by surprise. Normally she never found herself uneasy around men, so why he affected her this way didn't make sense. So what if he exuded enough testosterone to hold her interest hostage? There were many good-looking men in the world.

*Yes. But there is only one Grey.*

She plunged her fingers into his hair and searched his skull for injury.

"Mmm. That feels good," he murmured in a husky tone.

She refused to respond verbally to his flirtation, but her body did what it wanted. Another sharp tug of arousal in her lower belly told her all.

The silky, cool strands of his hair tickled her fingers. "Any pain or dizziness?"

"No. I'm good, Dr. Shannigan."

She wanted to smack him. She settled for glaring at his handsome mug. "Shut up. The SIA will never forgive me if I let one of their best agents run amok with a concussion." She turned his head this way and that, then looked in his eyes. "Good. Let me know if you start to feel nauseated or anything like that. All right?"

He smirked. "The only thing nauseating me right now is that I couldn't take out those Realm Guardians. By the way, you haven't explained why they're after you."

"Later."

"How much later?"

"Stop whining, O'Toole, or you won't get any dessert."

"Hmm. Dessert. Now that sounds interesting. What's the main course?" One corner of his sinful mouth turned up. He appeared boyish somehow, despite the rugged lines of his face.

*Stop flirting with him. It will only pull you deeper into his web.*

She stared shamelessly, unable to form a coherent sentence or thought for a few seconds. Finally, she found her tongue. "Cold pizza. If you're hungry there's some left in the refrigerator."

When he chuckled in genuine appreciation, the sound of his deep laugh sent new thrills into every corner of her body. This man was a potent enemy to her composure, and she had to think of some way to sidetrack him from sexual banter. Didn't she?

Work. That's what she needed to do. Activity always served in the past to distract her from bothersome complications.

Armed with disinfecting pads and cloth bandages, she set to work. She dabbed at the cut on his forehead. When she took a step forward, she bumped into one of his knees and stumbled a little. He immediately clasped her waist. The searing heat of his big hands made her pause and look down at him. Rather than seeing a wicked or teasing gleam in his eyes, she recognized incontestable male interest. He shifted and she stood between those thighs, too close to the impressive bulge she ogled earlier.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Helping you." He released her waist and relief made her sigh.

She continued dabbing at the cut. "This isn't too bad. It doesn't need stitches, but I'll put a bandage on it."

After applying some special oil on the cut, she secured the bandage moments later. "There. You'll be good as new in no time."

He sniffed. "What is that stench?"

She made a face. "It's not a stench. It's lavender oil. A natural antibacterial."

He wrinkled his nose. "Damn, I smell like a girl now."

"Get over it." He sucked in a breath when she searched around a red spot on his ribs. "I don't feel anything broken. Does that hurt?"

Searching and warm with interest, his gaze revealed hunger to know her in secret, deep ways that scared her. "No. It's your hands touching me. They feel too damn good."

She started to draw back, but he imprisoned her waist once more. When he stood up, his grip angled her gently against his body from chest to groin. Every hard, healthy

inch pressed to her. At her height, she rarely felt dwarfed by a man, but he made her feel small, feminine and cared for. Her nipples brushed against his chest, the exquisite sensation quickening her breath, and her heart started an erratic beat. She looked up, and captured by his intensity, she felt dazed and out of her comfort zone.

Before she could think or step out of his arms, he cupped her face in both of his big hands. His thumbs brushed her cheeks and Dorky warmed from the inside out with pleasure at his gentle touch. Goddess, if he didn't stop touching her, she would lose what composure she possessed.

"Remember what I said I'd do when we met, sugar?" His low, gentle question surprised her. His normal bluster had disappeared, washed away by tender attention she never imagined coming from him.

She couldn't forget. "Yes."

"Good."

Without another word, he leaned in and kissed her.

## Chapter Four

A sigh left Dorky as Grey's lips caressed with slow, undemanding persuasion. Molding and shaping, he tasted with finesse, with care, with long suppressed emotion. Her hands slipped around his waist and back and tested his muscles. Then she knew.

Knew he wasn't as composed as he seemed. He trembled slightly under the impressive breadth of his broad shoulders. Smooth skin over hardness shifted under her touch. A moan left his throat as he stuffed his fingers in her hair and slanted his mouth over hers. She'd never been kissed with such reverence, tasted and taken as if a man considered her his. Not even in her *other* life.

His tongue suddenly plunged inside and a whimper left her throat. Deep and certain, he caressed. Each stroke over her tongue made her long for a more sexual expression of male into female. Responding, she moved against him, feeling solid masculinity along her more pliable lines. She wanted more, and she worked her hands between them, sliding upward over his naked flesh. Her fingers laced through the hair on his chest, and his breath sucked in, pectoral muscles twitching under her palms. His nipples went tight, and she flexed her fingers in reaction. His skin felt so hot, so invincible. As if the Realm Guardians could not truly harm him. She committed his planes and curves, angles and textures to sensual memory. His arms dragged her closer still, encircling her with bands of steel-solid brawn. His power aroused her so quickly, so easily.

Again, she buried her fingers in his hair. Smooth and soft, the wavy strands tangled in her fingers. She ached to know more, to take this unexpected, passionate embrace to a deeper level. When one of his hands slipped up and covered the side of her breast, the exquisite feeling took hold of her breath. His thumb swept over her nipple, and she moaned at the tiny, almost painful prickle.

Oh. Oh, that felt beyond wonderful.

She was wet, and an achy need centered between her legs that could only be appeased if they took this embrace to the next level. While he massaged her breast from base to tip, he ended each pass with a gentle pinch to her nipple. His other hand slipped down to squeeze one ass cheek. He ground his erection into her belly, and a wild thrill zinged through her body. She wanted his touch, wanted to drag him right over to the bed and put out the fire raging inside. He switched breasts, treating the other one to the same tender but insistent exploration.

Then, without warning, he released her, holding her by the waist at arm's length. Breathing hard, chest heaving, he gazed at her with something like shock mixed with barely controlled lust. A blush heated her cheeks as embarrassment started to overwhelm frantic desire.

Grey's heart felt like it might pound out of his chest. A woman had never affected him so strongly, and his painfully aroused cock pushed against his pants. His skin felt flushed and his breathing a little too hard.

Grey gazed into her eyes and lost his head. A cool-warm combo of London blue topaz and blue as darkening sky, her gaze shimmered with a thousand questions. She looked unsure, her high cheekbones tinged pink with desire or embarrassment or maybe both. Everything about her looked delicate, and along with unwavering desire to devour her body with kisses, he wanted to protect her.

From the moment he'd seen her tall, slim body and the fragile, feminine planes of her face, he wanted her even more than before. Her voice, though sultry and enticing, had only touched the surface of her beauty. Unable to resist, he slipped his fingers through the long, wavy tumble of her champagne hair. Shot with caramel highlights, the mane fell to her waist. He almost groaned aloud when he thought of those thick strands falling over her small, naked breasts.

Like a Lady Godiva, she'd tempted him. Part of Grey felt ashamed. With tiny freckles over her upturned nose, and the youthfulness of her face, she looked too young and too vulnerable for him to touch this way.

"Grey," she said, her voice trembling soft.

With a muffled groan of surrender, he leaned in and quickly took her mouth one more time. If he never kissed her again, he wanted to remember this. She whimpered against his mouth. God, she tasted out-of-this-world delicious. When she'd flattened her hands against his chest and fingered his nipples, he'd about come unglued. He'd almost yanked her up against him and took her mouth with ravaging strength.

No. He couldn't do this.

He jerked back, taking three steps back. "We can't do this."

Even as he said the words, his heart ached.

Disappointment flickered through her eyes, raw and hurting, then disappeared as if the emotions never formed. He expected to feel satisfied that she'd felt something, that what they'd experienced went beyond physical, beyond his gut-wrenching need to touch, taste and linger over her lips and body. And God, yes. He wanted to do more. Damn him, he wanted so much his groin ached. When he'd kissed her his cock had jumped to attention, immediately hard as a fuckin' railroad spike. That startled look in her eyes probably had something to do with feeling his erection. He'd been so damned hard and pressed against her in need. How could she have missed a hard-on like that?

"I'm not saying I'm sorry that I kissed you. But I shouldn't have," he said.

"Why did you kiss me?" Breathily, her voice held curiosity and maybe indignation.

He crowded Dorky, his need to be near her almost overwhelming. He breathed her clean, rose scent and it damn near intoxicated him. "I kissed you because ever since I heard your incredible voice years ago, I've wanted to kiss you. I told you earlier, there's



something between us." He stalled, bravado removed now he faced living, breathing woman. "I don't know what it is, but if I could get away with it, I'd like to explore it."

"Oh." Her syllable sounded shell-shocked, her lips rosy pink as they formed that small sound. "We...we can't do this. We have a lot of work to do."

He inhaled and savored her scent again. He couldn't get enough of her. "We'll talk about it later."

She flipped that glorious long mass of thick hair back away from her face. He wished he'd stuffed his fingers in it, gloried in the sensation when he had a chance.

"Derek is right. You can't help on this assignment. Not only will the Realm Guardians be after you again if you interfere, but other bad things can happen."

He moved even farther away, pacing back and forth. "Such as?"

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

"Want to bet? Remember, this is the SIA. I've seen plenty of weird shit over the years. Weredemons. Werejaguars, ghosts, hauntings, poltergeists, strange beings. Now I find out there are creatures I never heard of called the Realm Guardians. So you could say there isn't much that can surprise me."

Those full, warm lips pursed, and he wanted to taste them once more. He couldn't take his eyes away from her face and the curve of those full breasts. Damn, she looked so good.

"Grey? You're traveling into la-la land again."

He grinned irreverently. "Is that what I'm doing? You have no idea, baby."

She stiffened and those eyes became blue ice chips. "Don't call me baby."

He put up both hands. "Sorry. I surrender."

She crossed her arms and sniffed. "I doubt that."

"Look..." He stepped close enough again that she had to look up at him, but she didn't back away. "I realize what we did was over the top, but I'll tell the truth if you will. We can get it out in the open what we feel and then that'll be the end of it. Okay? You won't have to worry about me touching you again."

Again, that flash of defiance came across her face and faded as quickly as it came. "I felt...different. Warm and giddy, and..."

He longed to reach out and touch her but he controlled the urge. "Yes?"

"Trembling inside."

He chuckled. He'd never heard her sound so out of control, and triumph darted through him. He could blurt out that he felt a deep response too, but he didn't want to frighten her away. Now that he'd tasted her, he didn't want to lose the wonderful friendship he'd built with her.

*Fuck me. I screwed up, didn't I? I kissed her when I shouldn't have.*

He shifted, eager in one way to get away from her before he lost all common sense. "I pushed you into it. I'm sorry."

*Liar.*

"You know I wouldn't hurt you?" he asked.

Her hard gaze softened considerably. "Of course not."

"Good. But I won't kiss you again."

*Liar.*

She heaved a small sigh. "Okay."

He couldn't decide if she sounded relieved or unhappy.

Silence dropped down between them while he took deep breath after deep breath.

She edged back, and he restrained the impulse to follow. A pulse fluttered in her throat, and her eyes widened. Damn, if he wasn't careful, he could fall into the startling intensity in her gaze.

"Grey?" Dorky's soft voice asked.

"My mother had eyes like yours," he said softly.

Her gaze widened, her lips parting. "Had?"

His throat tightened with emotion he had shoved to the back of his mind for so long. A hollow, aching feeling engulfed him. He swallowed hard. "She died when I was ten."

"I'm sorry."

The dark sympathy, the sweet agony in her voice and gaze lured him into saying more. "She was killed in a drive-by shooting. I was hit in the side and spent ten days in the hospital."

Her breath sucked in, pain etched in her eyes. She reached tentatively for him, her right hand cupping his left rib cage. His breath faltered and he quivered as heat spilled through his body. His cock came to full attention. Damn her.

"Oh Grey." Her whispery tone filled his ears. "Where were you hurt exactly?"

He placed his right hand over hers and guided it closer to the left side of his waist. "Here. Sometimes when it gets cold, my side aches. The doctors say it's scar tissue."

He didn't tell her to obtain sympathy, yet he saw it mingle with genuine concern in her eyes.

Her touch sent a hot shiver through him that almost made him groan. Warmth filled his side—a strange sensation he didn't wish to end. *God, I love her hands on me.*

Suddenly she drew her hand away. "No scar?"

"Pretty fucking remarkable for something that almost killed me."

She still stared at his side and her gaze cruised slowly up his chest and landed on his lips. "Tell me more."

He shook his head and didn't speak.

"Grey?"

He blinked and wiped away old memories. Most of his fucking life didn't deserve a replay. "Yeah?"

"Are you all right?"

"I'm great." He shook off lingering weariness and concentrated on what he must do next. "Dr. Van Doren isn't giving me any choice. I'll have to break into his complex."

"No."

Her firm reply propelled him into action. "Don't worry. I won't tell Level Ten or Quinton that you know where Derek is or that you have contact with him."

She humphed. "They already know that, I imagine."

He nodded. "Yeah."

Her gaze held puzzlement, "Then why are you trying to hide it?"

He pondered. Finally, he drew a deep breath. "Because no matter what Van Doren may have done, I'll never believe you're a traitor to the SIA."

Grey turned away before she could speak and he could see more of the raw thankfulness in her eyes.

He grabbed the new shirt she'd provided and shrugged into it. He buttoned it. "You always have men's shirts around?"

"I told you. It's Derek's."

His gaze narrowed as he stopped buttoning the garment. It was too tight across the shoulders. "Is there something going on between you and him I don't know about?"

Her mouth popped open and indignation flashed in her eyes. "Of course not."

Grey sniffed. "You've known him a long time. He's a single, eligible guy. You can't tell me he hasn't hit on you."

She crossed her arms and glared. "No, he's never hit on me. We're not romantically involved."

Relief surged inside him. "Good."

The word popped out before he could stop it. He caught her questioning look but ignored it. He turned away and started toward the wall he'd entered through earlier. "I'll call you later."

She hurried to stand beside him. "You're not going to Derek's now?"

He sighed. "No. I need some sleep and a shower. Just a couple of hours."

She nodded, but her gaze remained worried. "If you don't call me in a few hours, I'll call you."

He grinned. "Worried about me?"

"Yes, damn it." Her words went icy. "You're a pain in the ass, you know that, Grey O'Toole?"

He winked. "Yeah, I know. I excel at it."

A desperate look flashed into her eyes, erasing her perturbation. "Let me go with you to Derek's."

"Hell no. Impossible."

Returning anger mixed with the demand in her voice. "I can help you. You can't do this alone."

"You know better than that. Don't tell me to stop now."

"I am telling you." She took a step forward. "I can help on the ground. No more at-distance assistance."

"No." He turned his attention to the wall where the door had been. "How the hell do I get out of here?"

Without a pause, the wall disappeared and the corridor lay before him. He didn't turn to look at her. He never bothered with second glances. Seconds after he stepped through, the wall closed behind him. He marched down the hallway, determined to hit the cafeteria, then take a shower in the men's locker room. A very cold, long shower.

\* \* \* \* \*

Grey moaned, his body aching, his mind muddled. Where the fuck was he? He lifted his head. The office, half in shadow, was silent around him. While his division stayed closed most of the night, operations didn't cease—they moved to another division that held down the fort in the wee hours of the morning. He sat upright in his chair and glanced at the utilitarian clock on the wall across the room. Four in the morning. He'd managed two hours of sleep after a cold shower and gobbling the first hamburger and fries he'd enjoyed in a long time via the cafeteria. The shower hadn't done shit to banish the churning craving he experienced deep in his gut for Dorky. He licked his lips. Damn, but she'd tasted delicious. Fucking hot. He sighed and tried to forget her at least for the time it took to verify Van Doren's address on the computer. All the while he had the strange feeling Dorky monitored his movements through a camera in the room. He smiled and waved at the camera across the way, then winked. There. If she wasn't watching, some asshole in security would wonder if Grey's cheese had slipped off the cracker.

He jammed his fingers through his hair. Time to kick some ass and take names.

A short time later he entered the locker room, this time to change into a getup that resembled a black SWAT uniform, including bulletproof vest. If a cop stopped him on the way to Van Doren's, he could whip out his identification and the law wouldn't hesitate to let him proceed.

Piling into his nondescript dark blue sedan from the motor pool, he left the mountain facility and drove into the early morning hours. Traffic remained light as he traversed the winding road shaded by tall pines and the hulking embrace of the Rocky Mountains. His mind stayed on business for most of the way, but often his encounter with Dorky interfered. Fuck, it would have to. Her kiss, her touch had fired him in ways

he'd never experienced. Lust, yes. Desire of a man for a woman, yes. Yet something deeper and stronger pulsed between them, and as he'd told her earlier, he wanted to discover the substance behind it. Just not now. Not when he needed to complete this mission.

This case and his relationship with Dorky possessed all the earmarks of a cluster fuck. After all, he knew Van Doren was no dummy. Any man with half a brain would take Dorky's warnings to stay away from Van Doren's house to heart. Yet his wild side rebelled. He didn't want to listen. He needed to discover why Van Doren had stolen classified papers.

About an hour and a half later, he reached Van Doren's cloistered estate just outside the mountain range. Trees thinned here and opened into a large clearing not far from the plains on the eastern slope. Van Doren's adobe-style structure, a sprawling complex of over eight thousand feet, lay against a hillside. Grey pulled into a secluded county road about a half-mile away from the estate. He retrieved a tiny flashlight from one of the pockets on his lower pant's leg and pulled out satellite photos of the home. He'd approach from the back and enter through a fence.

While he hadn't questioned the injured SIA agent directly, he'd learned that the SIA agents who failed to gain entry to the complex had tried to cut a fence. Seconds later he left the car and headed down the road, keeping to the bushes at the side. Stealth came to him naturally, and yet he never took it for granted. He crept along, knowing the half-mile would take a while to achieve. He couldn't crash into the estate without who knows what alarm systems ringing. If two other agents had been injured making egress, he must stay cautious. Still, as he came closer to the property, his heart sped up, his breathing quickened. Here in the darkness before morning, in the quiet unbroken by birdsong or human-generated noise, he felt alone and yet incredibly at peace. He liked working alone, finding the target and doing what he must to accomplish the mission. He covered the half-mile in record time, welcome adrenaline streaking through his veins, his body primed for the next challenge. He approached the house from the back, determined to enter through an unorthodox method undetected by the two agents who'd failed. As he came within a hundred yards of the back wall, he knew that if he tried to scale it and come down the other side, he'd probably meet with guard dogs. An electrified fence also encircled the property like a castle's curtain wall. He'd seen the telltale entry point on the satellite map and wondered why the hell the other agents hadn't tried to enter from there. *Guess I'll find out.*

Going on his memory, he found the wooden door to the underground passage hidden in bushes about twenty yards from the fence. Before he could touch the door, something yanked him up and back with a furious jolt. He landed on his left side as pain curled from his side into his left arm.

He grunted, stunned into immobility. "Shit."

He blinked as he looked around, then sat up and twisted around to look. No one lurked close. He stood on shaky legs, pissed and damned curious about what had knocked him on his ass. He staggered toward the door again. As he reached out for the

door handle once more, he felt the punch come from the door, a slamming pressure that pushed him up off his feet. Sailing backward, he landed on the ground spread-eagled. Pain radiated upward into his skull, and the lights went out.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dorky jerked from her short sleep pattern with full awareness. She knew four hours had passed. She hadn't bothered to change into her long white nightgown – she'd fallen asleep on the bed in top and jeans. She sat up slowly and blinked in her bedroom's low light.

She reached over for the bed stand and turned on one more light. She felt rested, but disturbing thoughts niggled her mind. More than anything, she couldn't force one man from her mind.

Grey.

"I should have stopped him."

Self-recrimination slammed her. She'd hesitated to use her abilities to keep him from leaving her rooms earlier. Yes, she could have prevented him from leaving, but he'd probably hate her afterwards. Nothing like hurting a man's pride to bring him to heel or cause him to rebel. She imagined Grey would rebel. After all, his history showed his rough side.

He didn't realize how much she knew about him, but she wanted to know more. Had always wanted to know more.

Dorky shoved away thoughts of what-ifs and concentrated on what she could do now. Worry and doubt began to eat at her.

*Goddess. What if he did go to the complex and now he's...dead.*

No one should be able to penetrate Van Doren's complex. Not even Realm Guardians. A mere mortal man would be chipped beef on toast trying to breach the defenses Van Doren had erected. Anxiety assaulted her with a headache in her temples.

*But Grey is smart. Strong. He'll be all right.*

Remembering how his arms had felt around her stirred wild needs deep in her belly. As she cleansed, she recalled her reaction to his hard-core masculinity. She ached just thinking about their kiss. She didn't think she could take another embrace like that without combusting on the spot. She closed her eyes and imagined his hands cupping her butt, squeezing and stroking. His fingers twisting her nipples gently, his mouth and tongue teasing her clit.

"Oh my Goddess and God," she said as she rinsed away the last of the soap and shivered as her pussy ached. She was half tempted to take her satisfaction into her own hands. Literally. She decided against it – time was a-wasting while her hormones raged. She refused to allow another man she cared for to fall into danger if she could help it.

Memories threatened to overwhelm her of a time in her life that sometimes seemed within an arm's reach. In her mind's eyes a picture formed of a tall, muscular man with blond hair almost as long as her own.

Theodonus.

She sighed and frowned. No. Now wasn't the time to resurrect old hurts that couldn't be healed. Worry for Grey hurried her through the rest of the shower, and she dressed quickly in a light blue sweater and jeans. Back in her office, she attempted to call Grey on his I-Doc communicator but received no answer. She logged onto the main system and did a triangulation with the GPS in the I-Doc to pinpoint his location.

"No signal," she said in disbelief.

Where the hell did he go?

Okay, if he did enter the complex by some miracle, that would explain why the satellite couldn't obtain his I-Doc signal. Still...she didn't like it.

She plopped down in a leather chair near her bed and closed her eyes. She inhaled and relaxed immediately. "The Goddess and God surround me with the shielding white light of their love and protection." She chanted the protection three times and visualized the white light covering her like an aura around her body. "Goddess and God, though I have asked you to protect Grey, I know that he's stubborn as hell and doesn't always look out for his own safety. Please show me his condition at this time."

She waited, not pushing for an expedient answer no matter how much she wanted fast results. After about five minutes, a clear picture emerged in her mind of Van Doren's property and the surrounding terrain. She searched the grounds around the perimeter fence. It took time, but she spotted a prone figure along the western boundary near Van Doren's supposedly secret tunnel entrance.

Her heart quickened. *Oh no. No. Please don't let it be Grey. And if it is, please let him be all right.*

Supplying her vision with more power, she drew closer to the body.

Grey. Damn it, it was him. She concentrated on seeing him more clearly. Sprawled on his back with his arms and legs akimbo, his head tilted slightly to the right, he looked asleep. In her mind's eye, she drifted nearby Grey. She ached to touch him. She reached out, knowing in this non-corporeal form she couldn't feel his skin. His chest moved up and down steadily.

*Thank you.*

She disengaged and opened her eyes. While intuition told her Grey hadn't suffered severe injuries, she couldn't leave him there where Realm Guardians might harm him.

She hurried to her closet and grabbed a heavy coat and sturdy boots. Fall in Colorado could turn brutal as winter in many cases. If she needed to rescue Grey, she'd come prepared. She filled a pack with provisions. Good. Nothing like homemade trail mix for protein and energy.

Excitement mixed with fear. She hadn't left the SIA in months and then only for a short period. This adventure could lead to danger, to untold problems. Part of her craved the freedom, the other trembled under the thought of complications.

Then she thought about Grey, a strong man with no concept of what he dealt with. If anything happened to him, she couldn't forgive herself. More than that, the pain she'd feel would scale a height she'd never experienced before. Tears came to her eyes as she mulled over him hurt again or worse.

Once supplied with everything she needed, including a new device Dr. Van Doren had invented right before he left, she hurried to the middle of her office and stood in the clearest area. She closed her eyes and concentrated. Within seconds, a tingling sensation engulfed her body. Then, like a light switch, she felt her body blink out.



## Chapter Five

Dorky's physical form reemerged from a foggy state that seemed to last too long. When she opened her eyes, she stood next to Grey's body. Concerned, she slipped the pack off her shoulder onto the ground and knelt beside him. She palmed his right cheek and his cold skin alarmed her. Goddess, she wished she'd acquired healing skills.

Grey groaned, he twitched, and then he bolted straight upright with a healthy curse. "Fuckin' son-of-a-bitch!"

With a squeak of surprise, she jerked back and landed on her butt.

Grey's eyelids flickered, and he glared at her. "What the hell is going on?" He looked around rapidly. "Dorky?"

"Take it easy." She knelt beside him and put her hand on his big shoulder. "You were unconscious."

He frowned and shifted onto his knees and then his feet. "I'm fine. How the hell did you get here?"

"One question at a time. What happened to you?"

"Some energy from that door over there kicked me on my ass. I tried again and it apparently knocked me out."

He put his hand out to help her up, and when he pulled Dorky to her feet, she stumbled into his solid musculature. His right arm pinned her to his chest, hips, and thighs. She sucked in a breath as tingles built low and hot in her belly. If he could arouse her while a dangerous situation built around her, what could he do if...

Her gaze shifted to his. Filled with a powerful heat, his gaze said that if they were standing anywhere but right there she'd find herself in serious trouble. His arm tightened a second, then he released her.

Passion left his eyes and filled with stupefaction and maybe anger. "Now what are you doing here?"

Uncomfortable, she said, "It's complicated."

"No shit." He glanced around. "Nothing about this situation is easy." His eyes narrowed. "I'll bet you know about the energy field too." She didn't answer, and he continued. "Lucky for him it didn't kill me. I'd have to come back and haunt his ass."

She would have laughed, but the searching look in his eyes stopped her.

"You didn't warn me about it," he said.

Perturbed, she put weight into her words. "Would it have stopped you from trying to get in his place?"

"Hell no."

She sighed. "I rest my case."

He shifted closer, and her awareness of him increased. Dressed in black SWAT-type gear, he appeared one hundred percent as lethal as those highly trained cops. Something sensual and hot rolled through her body—she responded as any female would to primordial male, and it scared the stuffing out of her.

"Tell me what's happening here," he said.

"Derek designed several systems to keep his house safe."

"That's not all of it. You're holding back from me."

"I'll tell you if we go back to the safety of SIA." She folded her arms. "That's my final offer."

"Take it or leave it?" One of his eyebrows quirked. "I could make you tell me."

"How?"

A slumberous quality darkened his eyes. His jaw muscles worked and clenched. "Damn it, Dorky, you are one fucking vexing woman."

She shrugged. "You're just now noticing that?"

He snorted and turned away to stare at the door. "Tell me how to get in this door."

Oh wonderful. He'd decided to play hardball. "I don't know."

He turned back to her. "Yeah, why is it I don't believe you?"

She inhaled and tried to keep an innocent face. "As flattering as it is for you to think I know everything, I don't."

"Van Doren took you into his confidence. Why wouldn't he tell you how to enter the house?"

Stubborn man. Goddess, what would she have to do to convince him this wouldn't work? She assessed the wall not far off to their left, and the door half covered with foliage.

"I made a promise to him. He said only to go inside if I needed to escape." Dorky put vehemence into each syllable. "This isn't the way."

Grey's stubborn gaze captured hers and held. His frown, and the icy pewter hue in his eyes answered her entreaty. "The SIA demands I break and enter. I'm under orders."

"Don't do it. I'm begging you."

If she'd hoped his gaze would thaw, she was disappointed. "Sugar, you know I always do the job. I don't stop for anyone or anything."

Anger and fear rose up inside her at the same time. She wanted to grasp his broad shoulders and shake him. "Damn you, Grey O'Toole, I ought to—"

When she cut herself off, he moved closer. His fresh scent, all man and musk and trouble, stirred her senses and resurrected long suppressed needs. She'd forgotten what it felt like to care for a man this way. Then again, had she ever felt this? The heat, the

crazy-making lust and craving that drew her to Grey wouldn't diminish. Logic had nothing to do with it, and her heart dictated what she must say and do.

"You can't go, Grey. If you do...I'll be..." How could she admit it? "I..."

He smirked suddenly, good humor returning to the steel quality in his eyes. He reached out and brushed her hair back with a skim of his fingers. Yearning rose inside her and set her aglow.

"What, sugar? What will you do?"

"Resort to drastic measures."

His gaze turned from teasing and warm, to an inferno of heated need. A man in lust, a man wanting physical fulfillment in the worst way. Responding, she absorbed his intensity, the light that overflowed into courage and reckless abandon.

"You risk too much." Her voice sounded thready and hoarse. "Don't you understand I don't want you hurt anymore?"

One more time, his fingers brushed her jaw. Tenderness warmed his eyes and stole her breath. He cared for her — she couldn't mistake his genuine affection.

"Hey, don't you know?" His voice rasped, husky and deep. "It's in my blood to risk. I was born that way."

Fear mingled with her worry. "Please don't say that. You're scaring the crap out of me."

"You can't stop me, Dorky."

"Damn it." She wanted to brain him and make Grey see reason.

Time held place as she lost track of everything around her. Danger slipped to the back of her mind, and so did finding a way to force Grey to do her bidding. She trembled as the potency of the attraction between them drew her nearer. Nearer yet. Longing grew to a terrible peak inside as she tried to imagine how she'd lived so long without this acute desire.

"If I tell you everything, will you promise not to enter his house?" she said, feeling a bit breathless.

His head tilted to the side, his eyelids half-mast as he inched closer. His gaze danced over face as if he searched for a nuance, a vision of what she had in mind.

Grey's answer flowed hot, deep and seductive. "Only if you tell me how you really feel about me."

His unexpected request made her breath catch in her throat. Reality slammed her in the face, and she pressed her hands against his chest and backed away.

Shell-shocked, she shivered as sunlight tried vainly to warm the earth. Nature, with its singing birds and the cool wind ruffling her hair, tried to intrude upon the moment. She couldn't do this again with a man — couldn't survive more excruciating emotions. And a relationship with Grey would end. If she admitted it to herself, cutting contact with him would slice her like a knife deep into the heart with no hope of recovery.

Yet his words sounded way too much like another man's request at another place. Another time. Way too much like the last words she'd ever heard from that very special person.

"No. I...this isn't about you and me," she said through a rising tide of sorrow.

His eyes hardened, the tenderness and affection fading away.

Before she could regret her words, a huge shriek came from behind her and she flinched in reaction. Grey's eyes widened as he grabbed her arm and slung her behind him in a swift move. She slipped on some loose rocks and almost went down on her knees.

Two red-robed Realm Guardians materialized, their tall bodies stalwart and ready to fight.

"Great. Who invited you assholes to the party?" Grey asked between clenched teeth. "If it isn't one thing—"

His sidearm appeared in his hand with lightning speed.

"That isn't going to help." She moved swiftly toward her backpack lying on the ground.

"Damn it!" He reached for her, but she moved too fast.

She snatched open the bag as one figure leapt toward her with a high-pitched, awful scream. She jammed her hand into the bag for the new weapon.

Loud reports punctured the air as Grey shot at the Realm Guardians. Like a breeze through a window, the bullets passed through the Guardians and continued. She barely heard Grey's curses as she grabbed the weapon, drew out the palm-sized pyramid. If she could switch on the pyramid it would erect another force field around her and Grey before the guardians could —

One guardian slammed into her, its full weight crushing her into the ground and knocking away the pyramid. She gasped, her lungs and ribs racked with excruciating pain.

Grey's anguished cry burst from him. "No!"

She heard Grey struggling with the second Guardian but couldn't see them. Her vision swam with tears. Agony arced through her chest. She needed to escape. They had one more chance.

One more chance to live.

One more chance to save Grey.

With a last-ditch effort at concentration, she drew a gasping breath into her lungs and screamed.

Pitched at an excruciating level, the banshee-like noise would hurt a human's ears well enough.

The Realm Guardian attacking her flinched, covered the sides of its hooded head with its skeleton-thin fingers and reared back. It echoed a feral cry, the tormented scream matching with the other guardian's. Weight lifted off her chest.

To her surprise, the creatures disappeared. Trembling with reaction, she stayed prone. She gasped for breath, her lungs and ribs aching.

Grey turned toward her swiftly, holstered his weapon and dropped to his knees beside her. Desperation straining his features. "Dorky? Are you hurt?"

She shook her head and yet couldn't speak, gasping for each breath. She coughed.

His hands cupped her face, heavy worry lining his face. "Sugar, talk to me."

She parted her lips and tried. "I'm...all...right." She sat up with a groan and flinched. "Ow."

"Are you sure?"

"My ribs hurt a little."

"Fuck."

She started to struggle to her feet, and he lifted her into his arms. Surprised, she instinctively linked her arms around his neck.

"Wait. Put me down."

"You need medical attention."

"Nothing's broken. I'll be fine in a minute. But those creeps will be back. We need shelter. If you put me down, I can get us into Derek's complex."

He slowly placed Dorky on her feet. "Why now?"

She leaned over and reached for the little pyramid. "Damn. I would like to have used this."

"What does it do?"

"Creates a shielding barrier for us." She stuffed it in her pocket. Aching in every bone, she stalked toward the doorway he'd attempted to enter earlier. "Like I said, they'll be after us, and we need temporary shelter. Allowing you inside the complex is less of an issue than our safety."

Grey couldn't argue her point, but he reached out and caught her arm. "Don't go near there. You know what happened to me."

She gently disengaged his restraint and turned toward the door. "It won't happen to me. Trust me."

He did trust her. Implicitly. When she turned toward the door and held both hands at chest level, he watched with apprehension and curiosity. What the hell – ?

He saw the air shimmer, with one quick fluid motion near the door. The distortion quickly widened until it engulfed the area surrounding the steel doors. He heard the door latch creak then both doors flew back with a whoosh. She stumbled backward and he reached for her in alarm. When she fell into his arms, he held her body flush to his.

His arms slid around her warm body. Not even the bulky winter coat could disguise her lithe form.

When she turned around and broke from his grip, she stared into his eyes. "Not impressed?"

He uttered a disbelieving, half-hearted laugh. "Impressed? I fucking worship you."

His heart stuttered as he realized how close to the truth his statement came. When that shit-for-brains creature had attacked her, rage had thrown Grey into action. Still concerned, he wanted to hold her and make sure she stayed safe. Then he wanted to forget the mission and fuck her into the next century.

She smiled and gestured. "Right, tough guy. Come on. You've been pestering me about this. Let's get a move on."

Before she could enter the dark maw, he said, "You will tell me how you did that."

She didn't say a word, walking with complete confidence into the unknown. *Hell, O'Toole, maybe this isn't unknown to her at all.* He hesitated on the threshold. "You've been in here before?"

"More than once. I didn't think the Realm Guardians knew about this entrance, but that's why we'll need to seal this entry. Hurry."

He retrieved his sidearm, unwilling to march into the situation unprepared. "Where does this lead?"

"Into his lab. It's attached to the house. Close and lock the door behind you."

As he stepped into the dimly lit tunnel proceeding to the left and secured the door, she brushed past him. "Let me finish it."

He watched as she closed her eyes, lifted her hands toward the door without touching it. Less than a few seconds later, she opened her eyes and lowered her hands. "Finished."

"What did you do?"

"Sealed it. That force field that knocked you out flat? It's back in place. The Realm Guardians can't breach it. It's newly perfected technology he's been working on for a long time. It's like the little pyramid."

Suspicious, he asked, "Why didn't he offer the technology to the SIA?"

"He didn't have a chance. When I mean just perfected, I mean just perfected."

Shaking his head, he followed her as she led the way down the corridor. The tunnel was about fifteen feet wide, with dim recessed lighting spaced about every twenty-five feet in the ceiling. Curiosity compelled him forward—that, and he'd never allow her to traverse it alone. Slowly the tunnel inclined upward.

"How far is it?" he asked.

"Not much more."

He watched her slim back, the long flow of champagne hair rippling down to her waist, the steady sway of her slim hips. Jesus, he could barely find his fuckin' breath.

But he couldn't blame it on exertion. No, she'd taken the sails out of him, shocked him more deeply than he could remember in his life. When they reached a fork in the tunnel, she turned to the left.

"Where does the right fork go?" he asked.

She glanced back at him. "To the main house."

She walked alongside him now. "How many times have you been here?"

"Only two times, but I've had the full tour. Dr. Van Doren explained where everything is."

"Why?"

An exasperated twist caught her lips. "For just such occasions as this."

"This?"

"Dangerous times. We're entering a perilous time in SIA history."

He sniffed. "Yeah, right. Everyone always thinks their time in history is the worst. All you have to do is look back to realize that life in the olden days wasn't a piece of cake. Not only that, it was sometimes more dangerous."

She nodded, a world-weary sigh slipping from her rose lips. "Yes, I know. Believe me. What I mean is, we've entered a new *stage* of danger. There are forces at work here you haven't been exposed to in your work with the SIA."

He nodded. "Quinton mentioned fairies and elves."

She slowed to a stop and turned to him. Fluorescent light washed out her peach skin and gave her an unhealthy glow. "You know about fairies and elves?"

"Not much."

She stared at him for so long he almost spoke again. She started walking once more.

They continued walking in silence for some time before he asked a new question. "Quinton said you'd fill me in on Van Doren. So far, I don't know much. What caused him to hole up here like this? The fact he is richer than God?"

"In part. His house aboveground is large, but no one can see the underground part. His labs are at least five thousand square feet of space on their own. Top that off with the space above...well..."

He waited for her to finish, but she didn't. "Who in the SIA is out to get Van Doren?"

"I haven't discovered that yet. We were investigating leads when the Realm Guardians started plaguing us. Despite force fields used at the SIA facility, the Realm Guardians continue to taunt me."

"So you believe there's someone in the agency trying to hurt Van Doren?"

"Twice last month Realm Guardians outside the SIA attacked him. He managed to defeat them with his abilities."

"What abilities?"

When she stopped, he waited patiently for her to answer. She stared at the floor as she spoke. "Telepathy. Teleportation. Clairaudience, clairvoyance, telekinesis. You name it, he can do it all. He's been that way since he was a baby."

He folded his arms. "You're not serious? I know there are people who have one or two of those abilities, but all of them?"

Her face saddened, and he wanted to draw her into his arms and demand she tell him everything now.

"It's not as uncommon as you'd think in the other dimensions. I'm telepathic in some instances."

"What?"

"Yes. I've...read your mind on one or two occasions. But you're difficult to read. You're very...closed up."

He grunted. "Right."

"It's true."

He tried to absorb this new information, then realized he'd missed something she'd just said. "Other dimensions?"

"The Realm Guardians are from another dimension. You've heard of string theory, I imagine?"

"Yeah. A little. So you're saying those ugly robed creatures are from another dimension."

"Exactly." He didn't have difficulty believing it. When he stayed silent, she said, "You don't believe me."

He didn't look at her, just returned to walking. "Why would you lie to me?"

Dorky went silent again. He wondered if the freaking tunnel would ever end.

"Derek is from the Shadow Realm too," she said.

A shiver worked its way insidiously up his spine. The damn tunnel was freezing. Even his thick clothing couldn't keep the temperature at bay. He had a feeling what she told him next would chill him to the bone.

"He's not human," she said.

*Fuck me.*

"Not human."

"You're repeating me a lot, Grey."

He chuckled. "Well, sugar, I can't help it. This is pretty astounding stuff."

"It's complicated. We need to enter the lab before I explain more."

She continued walking.

"I read in his file that he's worked with hypnosis, biofeedback and meditation," he said.



"Of course. He's interested in all things paranormal. He knew months ago that Realm Guardians might enter this dimension and cause problems."

"So why do the Realm Guardians want to mess with him?"

"Not just him. Me too."

How could he forget? "This is some seriously weird crap."

She glanced at him and smiled. "You're just now noticing?"

Double steel doors stood at the end of the long corridor. When they reached them, she put her left arm out to block him coming any closer.

"Let me," she said. "There's a force field here too."

She disabled the field and then reached for the doors. They clicked, then the thick metal hinges groaned as the doors swung wide. Lights flickered on in the room ahead of them. Rows upon rows of laboratory equipment lined shiny silver tables and cabinets. As they walked inside, the doors closed with a solid thud behind them. She waved both hands, and he knew she'd replaced the force field.

She smiled. "Realm Guardians won't penetrate there."

"They got through the subbasement next to your office."

She sighed. "The lower levels of SIA don't have a force field strong enough to repel Realm Guardians. Werejaguars, weredemons, otherworldly creatures of all kinds. Not the guardians. If Derek had discovered this force field soon enough, he would have given it to the SIA for protection. As it stands now..."

"He's a fugitive."

"Yes."

He sighed. "You were able to drive off the Guardians with that scream. You about burst my eardrums."

"Sorry about that. It's something I learned to do a long time ago."

When she didn't explain, he decided not to press. In the scheme of things, did he need to understand everything about her right now? Probably not.

He followed Dorky through the endless rows of beakers, burners, microscopes and dozens of other accoutrements needed for experimentation.

"Jeez, what does Frankenstein do for entertainment?" Grey said.

She giggled, and the light-as-air sound sent lust straight to his groin. He couldn't keep his eyes off the curve of her lips, so damned lush and delicious. Her thick lashes, golden and long, fluttered downward over her eyes. His jaw clenched, and he maintained control. Now wasn't the time to turn horny.

Two wooden doors led to a smaller, but well-appointed den. When she closed the doors, he could almost forget how they'd come to arrive here. He took in the sumptuous surroundings. He walked back and forth and absorbed details. Tall bookshelves filled with history tomes and some science fiction novels lined three walls. Subdued Victorian *fleur de leis* wallpaper covered the walls. Two comfortable-looking

burgundy leather chairs sat on either side of a red brick fireplace. A matching sectional couch sat nearby. Most quirky of all – two brilliant lime bean bag chairs sat on one side of the room. *Ooookay.*

The place lacked something, though.

The warmth of a woman. Maybe Van Doren didn't have a babe to fill his bed.

"This place reminds me of your office," Grey said.

She stood in the middle of the room, her eyes somewhat wide. Her lower lip trembled. "He has comparable tastes to me. We come from...somewhat similar backgrounds."

Jealousy wound a steady path through him. He tried to shake it off. After all, Dorky had explained her relationship with Van Doren. The way she talked about him, in such awe, made Grey long for something closer with her. God, to have her undying devotion, her unrestrained passion. To have her talk about him like that. Yeah, he was jealous whether he wanted to be or not. When they'd stood outside the complex, and he'd asked her to tell him how she really felt about him, he'd shocked himself. He'd never asked a woman that loaded question in his life until now.

She folded her hands in front of her and stood straight as a stick. "Derek loves what he does. He enjoys inventing and experimenting. He has decades of experience. If he hadn't told me how to disable some of his security systems, you wouldn't be here now, no matter how good at breaking and entering you are. Three tries at that outside perimeter, and you'd probably be dead."

He pondered her wisdom. He shrugged. "Okay, I'll admit it. I'm good, but I'm not good enough to break into Van Doren's. Thanks for helping me."

She drew her lower lip between her teeth for a second. He wanted to gather her into his arms and smother her mouth with a kiss. The stilted, prim stance didn't fit her – man, what he wouldn't give to loosen her up. He wanted the sultry, joking, sexy woman he talked to on the phone almost every day. Where had she hidden?

*Maintain, O'Toole. You have a job to do.*

He walked toward her until a foot separated them. "Is helping Van Doren worth your career? Maybe even your life?"

She glared, those eyes sparkling like a cat's disdainful gaze. She turned away and slumped into a leather chair. "Yes."

Frustration and concern almost made him demand an explanation, but he left it alone. They had other priorities to tackle.

She suddenly inhaled deeply. "He's here."

"Who?"

"Derek. He's home."

Dorky couldn't believe she hadn't noticed Derek's essence before now. She swallowed hard. "He's in the complex somewhere."

"How do you know?"

"I sense his presence. It's one of my abilities."

She half expected him to make some crack, but he didn't. Instead, he kept those laser-sharp eyes on her.

Muddled by the Realm Guardian attack and conflicting loyalties Grey brought to mind, she said, "If you haven't guessed by now, one of the reasons why I hide down in the subbasement of SIA is my special abilities."

He crouched down in front of her, and her heart lurched and started a rapid tattoo. With him so near, she couldn't ignore their rapid-fire attraction.

His big hand cupped her knee, and she almost started.

"I was beginning to wonder," he said. "I think there's a hell of a lot you're keeping from me."

Under his watchful stare, Dorky's mental shields cracked somewhat. "There's so much I could tell you. But I can't."

His eyes hardened, but he kept his touch on her knee. It burned through her jeans. "Can't or won't?"

"Both. I didn't want you to come here. Now you're in horrible danger, just like me and Derek."

"Who is he hiding from?"

"I told you. Realm Guardians. They want both of us."

"Why?"

"It's complicated."

"You said that once already." He sighed. "In order to do my job, I need to know. And I'd rather hear it from you before I find Van Doren myself."

She hadn't removed her thick coat, and the cold went through to her heart. "I wouldn't recommend you find him without me warning him first. I'm not sure of every defense mechanism he has up, but it's extensive. You could get hurt again."

He shrugged. "More than I have already?" When she kept a firm frown on her mouth, he nodded. "Fine. You're my guide."

Dorky leaned back until the leather chair embraced her. Before she could formulate another answer, a message came from Derek.

*Dorky? I sense you close. You're in the house?*

*In the basement lab. I'm here with Grey.*

*She heard Derek's sigh. Very well. Did you let him in, or did he manage to find a way?*

*Your defenses knocked him out. We were attacked by Realm Guardians. One almost killed me. I screamed and chased it away. I feared they'd come back and knew we'd only be safe inside the complex.*

*I understand.*

*You're not angry?*

*No. You'd better come topside.*

*I'm sorry I couldn't keep him away, Derek.*

*Dorky, that man is one of the most stubborn people I've encountered. At least you could save his life. He wouldn't have lasted much longer with Realm Guardians after him.*

She felt Derek's mental connection with hers disperse, and she smiled.

Grey stood, folded his arms and looked down on her. "What's so funny?"

"I've been talking telepathically with Derek. He says it's okay to come upstairs." His eyes widened, and she grinned at his obvious disbelief. "I know it sounds incredible, but it's true. Not only does Derek have psychic abilities, but I have some of the same talent he does. I'm not as powerful as he is in most areas, but I'm stronger than the rest of my..."

She almost said it but cut herself off in time. He didn't need to know every detail of her existence. Not yet. Chances were he wouldn't believe her anyway.

He lifted his right eyebrow. "Your family?"

She rubbed her hands over her jean-clad legs, then stood. "Right."

Skepticism flashed through his intelligent eyes. When he stalked toward her, she almost stepped back. As her heartbeat raced and her skin flushed, she waited to see what he would do.

When he stood close, his body big and tall, she felt safe. Protected down to the last molecule. She shouldn't. True, Grey could protect any ordinary woman, but Dorky knew she wasn't normal. Never had been, never could be. Mental pain fragmented her soul whenever she spent too much time ruminating on the subject.

He cracked a smile, and it drove away the cool contemplation in his gaze. "Okay, as corny as it sounds, I'll say it. Take me to your leader."

She laughed, and his grin widened. When his hand came up and his warm grip touched her shoulder, she felt his care and concern. Not from any telepathic means, but from the admiration in his eyes. Despite the trauma of the last few hours, she knew deep in her soul that she could trust Grey with her life.

With her heart? She didn't know.

"Let's go," she said.

## Chapter Six

Dorky hadn't been to Derek's house in years, yet she imagined little had changed. Other than upscale technology and beautiful furnishings, Derek never forgot his roots and never played the rich man in any other way. Now, as she strode to the next floor, she saw the beautiful interiors once more. The staircase from the basement lab led to a wide hallway with mosaic flooring depicting a nymph tantalizing a satyr. Paintings of Roman ruins graced warm rust-colored walls on both sides. Light filtered through a fan window high on one end of the hallway. A large double door with fanlight above and etched glass stood at the other end. As their footsteps clicked on the floor, she breathed deeply and caught a lavender scent. Yep. The same scent she'd noted when Derek first built this house twenty years ago.

Derek appeared suddenly at the end of the hall, and she heard Grey's quick intake of breath. "What the hell?" He grunted. "Materialization is another one of his talents?"

"Yes," she said.

Grey shook his head. "Why does that not surprise me?"

His emerald green cardigan over a white shirt and tie and a pair of nondescript trousers made Derek appear like a geek.

He gestured them forward with a genuine smile. "Come in. You had me worried. I thought I detected something weird happening at the wall perimeter."

She stepped forward, and when she reached Derek, she went into his arms for a warm hug. "Wonderful to see you."

Derek squeezed her shoulders lightly and released her. "Fabulous to see you. Even if it is under alarming circumstances." He frowned when he looked past her at Grey.

She turned and backed up to allow Grey room to enter their space. "Dr. Van Doren, meet Grey O'Toole in the flesh."

Derek put his hand out and smiled. "Pleased to meet you other than in cyberspace."

Grey shook Derek's hand. Suspicion was written on Grey's features. "Van Doren. You have quite a setup here."

The scientist's eyes twinkled as he led them across a huge two-story foyer to an expansive great room. "You haven't seen the half of it."

Grey's eyes widened as he took in the living area. "You sure this isn't the half of it? You could fit a 747 in here."

Derek chuckled. "Pretty insane, I know. When I built this twenty years ago, I thought I'd have people visiting. As it is, I live here alone."

"Why?" Grey asked.

Derek's gaze flicked to hers. "How much does he know?"

"Not much," Grey said. "But I'm going to."

She stayed in the doorway as unusual tiredness washed over her. "Bits and pieces. Not much."

"Enough to realize I'm in for the long haul," Grey said as he moved farther into the room. "I'm not going anywhere."

Derek nodded. "I should have realized you wouldn't back off on this case."

"Yeah, you should have."

Derek's eyebrows lifted. "You're not going to let me off easy, are you?"

Grey's eyes held a cynical expression. His mouth curled up at one corner. "Nope."

"This isn't necessary. We can work together."

Dorky heard the sadness in the older man's mild-mannered tone, and as she stood in the doorway and watched the men, she hoped they'd get along. Hell would break loose otherwise. She closed her eyes and weariness seemed to float over her.

She rubbed her forehead. "Maybe we can argue about what to do next after Grey has a chance to rest. That force field really knocked him on his ass."

"Thanks," Grey said with gentle sarcasm.

She looked up and caught his amused gaze.

Grey sauntered her way, his eyes turning concerned. "Hey, you all right, sugar?"

"I'm tired, that's all." Heat passed over her and her ribs ached.

"Of course, my dear. Wouldn't you like something to eat first?"

"I wouldn't mind," Grey said. "My stomach is hollow right now. Dorky?"

She shook her head, and the room did a wavering, slow spin. She closed her eyes. She hadn't felt this odd in ages. Decades. "Umm...I don't feel..."

Grey cupped her face. "Dorky? What's wrong?"

Before she could answer, the room faded to black.

"Dorky, darling, it's time."

Dorky drifted in a dream world, her senses awash with yesteryear. So very, very long ago.

"Momma," Dorky said as she stepped from the celestial light of her home into the cool morning filled with breezes, emerging sunlight, and the promise of a beautiful day.

Birds twittered and the scents of flowers filled her day with sweet pleasure. Her life would stay this way, filled with her parent's love and the deep love of her man.

"You can't have it, Dorky. Your parents are gone. Your man is gone. All gone." The cruel man's voice represented the head of the Marcanas. "You can never return here. You've killed him, Dorky. You killed my son."

Dorky awoke with a jerk, a gasp on her lips. Her heart pounded and tears came to her eyes. That awful dream. *Damn it, why can't I shake this dream?* The gentle sound of a clock ticking soothed her. She breathed in deeply, and this time caught a minty scent. She lay on her back on a cushioned surface with what felt like a pillow beneath her head. Comfort and protection wrapped around her. When had she experienced this warm safety? So many years ago. Could she have made it home somehow?

She sighed and opened her eyes.

Her eyes saw easily through dim light. She lay on a king-sized bed with a blanket drawn up to her chin. Subdued light filtered from a stained-glass lamp on the bedside table. A shadowy figure slumped in a chair in one corner. Grey.

Eyes closed, he slept. Irrational fear made her heart thump with renewed anxiety. Her breath quickened. She sat up, tossed the blanket aside and slipped off the bed. Feeling steady on her feet, but aching in every limb, she paced toward Grey. When she reached him, the slow rise and fall of his chest should have reassured her. Instead, she leaned over and placed her hand with the lightest touch on his shoulder and felt the heat of his muscles.

He jerked and grabbed her hand, his eyes flying open to stare into hers. She gasped and tried to tug back. He held firm. Silvery eyes stared back into hers with steel-hard intent, then melted with fiery warmth she felt straight to her core. Low in her belly, an answering heat quivered and held steady.

"Dorky." He released her abruptly and sat up straight. "Jesus, you about scared the shit out of me." His gaze softened. "What are you doing out of bed?"

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine. You fainted, and I had to catch you before you landed on your head."

*Wouldn't it have felt nice to have those strong arms holding me once more?*

"Thank you, but I'm much better now." She stiffened when she thought of her vulnerability. "I haven't fainted in decades."

He lifted one brow. "Decades?"

She cleared her throat. "When I was a child."

Amusement flickered in his eyes. "You make it sound like you're eighty years old."

What could she say to that?

When she didn't answer, he stood. She stepped back—his body was far too powerful and intriguing at close distance. Who was she kidding? Any distance. He'd removed his special SIA soldier equipment, including his vest, weapons and other paraphernalia. Wearing a black turtleneck tucked into black cargo-type pants, his body screamed primal male. He scraped one hand through his tumble of hair. Goddess, she wanted to touch that silkiness one more time. She blushed furiously.

He glanced at her, but if he noticed her red cheeks, he didn't mention it. "Come on." He took her arm and led her back to the bed. "At least sit down."

"Grey –"

"Don't argue." His tone was no nonsense. "There's no reason you can't rest."

She glanced at the bedside clock as she sat down. "I slept that long? It is almost dawn."

He yawned and covered his mouth. "Yeah. I tried to stay awake, but I think Van Doren's secret alien ray thing kicked the shit out of me."

She laughed. "Secret alien ray?"

He shrugged. "Well, he wouldn't tell me what it was called. Said the less I knew about it, the better. In fact, he wouldn't tell me crap about what's happening. I threatened him, but he left the room. I didn't want to leave you."

Warmed by the caring in his eyes, she smiled in gratification. He sank onto the bed beside her. "I'm surprised you didn't try to intimidate him into answering you."

"Who says I didn't intimidate him?"

"Uh-huh."

"Now," he said, "I need some answers. No more hedging, no more lies."

Lies. Yes, she'd done plenty of that in her lifetime. She glanced over at Grey, but not for long. She could feel his scrutiny burning a hole in her a mile wide. How could she reveal the truth? Yet how could she continue to deceive him?

"I'm trained to get answers, to solve cases sometimes of a supernatural nature. You know what kinds of cases I've taken on. There isn't a reason to keep me in the dark any longer."

She nodded and scooted backwards, then piled pillows up behind her back. "I know. Weredemons, out-of-control entities, you name it, you've fought it. At least, you *think* you have."

His brows knitted. "What?"

"You said you wanted answers, but there are some things you're better off not knowing."

He shifted until he sat sidewise on the bed, one leg drawn up, his forearm draped casually over his knee. "Back up a few paces. Too many pieces of this puzzle don't fit. Van Doren said the Realm Guardian attack drained you. He also said you have a couple of ribs bruised, but they are healed already. You're moving like they don't hurt at all. I've bruised ribs before, and they hurt."

She sighed. "I know. Not only can I remove and replace force fields, I have excellent healing ability."

His gaze danced over her face. He scrubbed his hand over his jawline. "Okay, I can handle that. Where did you obtain these abilities?"

"That's a loaded one." She leaned forward to emphasize her next words. "And it will take a lot of time to explain."



He shrugged. "We have a lot of time. I contacted the SIA and they know we're here. I didn't fill them in on everything, just the basics. Quinton was happy when I told him I broke in. I didn't say you helped me because I figured if he doesn't know about your special...skills, that maybe I shouldn't tell him."

"Thank you. He doesn't know about them. Few people at the SIA do. Even Level Ten doesn't know most of what I can do."

He whistled softly. He smiled and crossed his arms. "This almost makes me think you're a secret weapon."

Damn him for being so clever. The man continually amazed her. "In a way, I am. How many people do you know, other than me, who can erect and destroy force fields with their bare hands? How many people do you know who can advise an entire government organization on paranormal threats because I have more experience with the concept than most humans in this dimension?"

"Just one. You."

She pointed at him. "That's right. So you could qualify me as a weapon used to fight paranormal dangers."

He studied her with eyes that asked a thousand questions. "I'll ask you in a minute how you became this one in a million. First, you need an update. I told Quinton you were injured when the Realm Guardians attacked. I used that excuse to buy some time why I haven't brought Van Doren or you in with me."

Something akin to panic stirred her gut. "Hells of Marcanas."

"Hells of what?"

"Marcanas are a people in the Shadow Realm. They live in catacombs."

"Have I met them before in some of my cases?"

"No. They don't venture into this realm often."

"You sure? Weredemons do on a regular basis."

"I know. Trust me, Marcanas know better than to come over here unless they can disguise themselves."

He leaned forward until their faces weren't that far apart. "What kind of disguises?"

She was on a roll, so she continued. "Many centuries ago a few Marcanas showed themselves to certain individuals here in this realm. In most cases when the Marcanas appeared it was without full materialization. They also have wings."

When she paused, a knowing look passed over his face. "Let me guess. People thought they were angels."

She chuckled. "Very good. Now they rarely show themselves, for a variety of reasons."

"Yeah, I can understand why." He leaned forward enough to look behind her. "You don't have wings, do you?"

Hearing the sardonic amusement in his voice, she said, "I'm not a Marcanas." Worry built inside her. "Did Quinton say he wanted you to bring us back?"

"Yeah, he did."

She sighed. "Damn it."

"Hey, there's no reason to worry." His voice softened, the husky sound soothing her with its liquid tone. "I won't let anything happen to you."

His words echoed a similar statement she'd heard long ago...one that hadn't come true. One that promised much yet couldn't deliver. She'd found agony, though it was not a physical one. She inhaled and then let out the breath slowly.

"You can't protect me. I'm alone." The words slipped from her before she could stop them, her throat tight, her eyes filled with stinging tears. "When it comes down to it, you can't help me, Grey. Whatever happens, I must do it myself."

A furrow between his brows deepened. "What? That's crazy. I won't abandon you, and I don't think Van Doren would either. From what I've seen he's extremely fond of you." His voice held a twinge of sarcasm.

Whether Grey would admit it or not, he was jealous. He still thought Derek wanted her.

She heaved a solid breath. "There are forces at work here that venture beyond training you received in SIA. I don't have time to teach you, and neither does Derek."

"Don't patronize me, Dorky." His voice came out cool and determined. He stabbed at his chest with his index finger. "Look me in the eye and tell me you think I can't handle whatever it is you're hiding. Tell me you can't trust me."

She hovered on the edge, tempted to lie. An ache centered in her soul. "I can trust you. I trust you so much it...it scares me."

She imagined her statement might placate him. Instead, she saw the explosion building in his eyes—the quick, undeniable burning. "Shit. Dorcas Shannigan, you *will* allow me to help you."

Startled by the vehemence in his determined words, she stared into his eyes. The sterling depths reflected not the coolness of silver but a passion that exploded any myths she'd erected in her mind about his iron-clad control. She'd broken that steely resolve apparently.

"Grey—"

"No." He put up one hand, and his fingers clasped her chin gently. He peered into her eyes. "You're crying."

"I'm not," she said, mortified. She knew tears shimmered and blurred her vision. "Not yet. Just...please don't yell anymore."

He closed his eyes and sighed. "Damn it, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell. I'm frustrated because you say you trust me, but you're keeping things from me way past the time for it. Real friends trust each other."

Friends. Oh, if he only understood how far past "friend" her feelings went.

She nodded, her heart heavy. Her throat tightened unbearably.

His fingers gentled until they caressed the side of her face. "Why do you think you're alone if you trust me?"

"Where I come from, there are people like me, but I'm...I'm considered a strong force. Stronger than Derek. It's not true, but that's how I'm perceived. It means my life is in danger there and here in this dimension. I'm in between worlds, and nowhere truly safe. It's not that I don't trust you."

His eyes reflected deep thought, a genuine need for answers and tenderness she absorbed gratefully. Before she could move, he slipped forward and drew her into his arms, his solid arms wrapping her close in a tender yet strong embrace. Surprised, she leaned her head against his shoulder, wrapped her arms around his neck and held tight. Her heart pounded to a new beat, one filled with anticipation and a solace she hadn't experienced in so long she couldn't remember the last time. *Goddess, his body is so warm, so secure, so powerful.*

"Take this illusion." He slipped his fingers into her hair and held her head against his shoulder. "For a few minutes." His voice held an exquisite tenderness that pierced her heart with a sweet, throbbing ache. "Know this, Dorky. No matter what you think, no matter what you believe you know about me, you can count on two things. I'd never hurt you. I'd die for you."

She drew in a shaky breath and slipped back far enough to look into his eyes. Unlike cold steel, his gaze filled with intention, truth and a passion. Her heart leapt with joy and then fell with a hard, heavy thud.

"Die for me?" she asked softly. "Goddess, no. I can't have another man die for me."

His brows drew together. "Someone died for you?"

"You weren't listening well earlier when I said I was between worlds."

His eyes narrowed, and she recognized when truth dawned on him. He drew back slowly. "You're—" He cut himself off. "Holy shit. Are you telling me you're from the Shadow Realm too?"

Oh, he'd guessed easier than she expected. Then again, she'd fed him bits and pieces over the last few hours. It made sense with his intelligence he'd decipher her cryptic insinuations.

"Yes." The syllable emerged thready. "That's right." She trembled inside with a horrible fear. Yet she knew she couldn't hide from Grey any longer. When Grey admitted deeper feelings for her, it strummed her heartstrings no matter how she tried to resist them. "I'm from the Shadow Realm. But that's not the part I think you'll have difficulty believing." Before Grey could reply to her proclamation, she continued. "Maybe you should leave now and escape this situation while you can."

"What?" He frowned deeply.

"Don't you understand, Grey? If you stay here with Dr. Van Doren and me, the SIA will think you're an accomplice. And the Realm Guardians will continue to search for

me and for Derek. We can't return to the SIA. If we do, we'll bring more than the Realm Guardians. We'll bring an incredibly strong evil right to the SIA's doorstep. Innocents will die. It could destroy the SIA entirely if it gets loose. Everything the SIA has worked for will perish."

"It gets loose?"

"An entity that makes its way into this dimension on rare occasions and causes varying degrees of chaos. When it's in our realm here every person who sees it visualizes something different."

"It's a shape shifter?"

"No. People's fear makes the creature appear as whatever frightens the human most. Their childhood fears come to life. It has driven some people insane. Derek and I are two of the few people who see Zurvan as it is in the flesh. Other people who've ventured into the Shadow Realm and lived to tell about it have seen Zurvan's true face as well."

"Zurvan?"

Curiosity replaced the amazed expression he'd sported a few seconds ago. She continued. "This evil is the basis for every religion's belief in a devil-like evil. Whatever that creature is called, this entity from the Shadow Realm copied it. It can appear as that symbolic evil to reinforce the belief. There is only one ultimate evil, Grey. It was given a name thousands of years ago by the people who live in the Shadow Realm. Zurvan."

He didn't say anything, and she waited patiently for any reaction whatsoever.

"That's what you were hiding from me?" he asked quietly. "This ultimate evil?"

"That and more."

"Tell me the more. What is it that I won't believe?"

"If you become more deeply involved, there's no going back for you or me. Once I tell you the entire story, the SIA will never stop hunting me. Or you."

"No," he said. "No way would they hunt us. Once they understand why you ran off, it'll all be cleared up. You came to help me. Now you've mentioned this Zurvan, I'm better equipped to deal with it when it shows up. We need to return to the SIA, though, before you get into more trouble."

She shook her head. "You don't understand. I'm forbidden to leave the SIA unless I have specific permission from the head of SIA. So you could say I'm already in trouble twofold."

"Bullshit," he said nonchalantly. "Why would any man in his right mind refuse you free movement?"

She sniffed. "It's obvious, Grey. I know more about the Shadow Realm than almost anyone on earth, including Derek. I'm invaluable to the SIA. They're my saviors, but they're also my prisoners."

"Why do you know so much about the Shadow Realm? Just because you're...you're from there?"

"Yes. And more. So much more."

He tilted his head back, closed his eyes and sighed. When he dropped his chin, he asked, "When was the last time you saw daylight outside the SIA?"

Sudden despair rose up inside her like an evil wind. Everyone knew wind blew when it wanted—nothing man or woman could do would stop it. Not even her kind could control nature. The Goddess and the God did what they liked when they liked.

"Dorky?" His question sounded almost gruff.

She could lie to Grey. She considered it ten seconds. "I go outside from time to time, but very rarely. And I've lived in my apartment, the one you saw, for twenty years."

He blinked. "What?"

"Twenty years."

He made a scoffing noise, and a teasing light entered his eyes. "Right, sugar. Tell me another one."

Well, okay. That was better than what she expected. She hadn't learned how to block his negative vibrations when he was depressed or in some other bad mood. Likewise, when he experienced happiness, it soaked into her like a bright, red wave of joy.

Goddess, why couldn't she block him as she could everyone else if she wished?

When she didn't speak, his smile faded. "The SIA hasn't been in existence for more than twenty years."

"I know. I was here from the beginning. It was what I knew...what I could tell the government...what I could show them that started the SIA in the first place."

Silence swallowed the room, and she could hear her heart thumping in her ears, a lonely and desperate sound.

"You're not old enough to have worked here then." His gaze intensified. "You're all of what? Twenty-nine maybe?"

*Oh, boy. This one would blow his mind. Really, really wreck it.*

She might as well spill her guts.

Dorky stared him in the eye—locked her eyes with the striking silver in his. "I was born two thousand years ago."

## Chapter Seven

At first Grey's expression didn't alter, and Dorky wondered if he thought her elevator didn't reach all the way to the top. She wouldn't blame him.

"Christ almighty," he said finally.

"I know it's hard to believe, but it's true. I was born in Ireland to a fairy named Ciarda from the Twlwyth Teg and an elf named Faodhagan of the Tuatha De Danaan."

His mouth dropped open only for a second. "You were born in our dimension?"

She nodded. "Yes. When I was five the elves and fairies realized this dimension was no longer the peaceful place they'd enjoyed. Humans had spoiled it with their wars and greed. So they entered a better dimension...the Shadow Realm. At that time the realm enjoyed relative peace. At least more peace than this dimension. Up until three hundred years ago, the Shadow Realm was my world. Something terrible happened that sent me to this Earth realm, back to where my ancestors first came from originally."

Grey closed his eyes a second then opened them as if making sure she was really there. Pure curiosity and wonder lit his face—she'd expected outright disbelief or even abhorrence. He reached up to touch her face once more, his touch reverent and so, so gentle.

"You're shittin' me," he said with a slight grin. "You're telling me not only that you're two thousand years old but that you—" He shook his head. "This is incredible."

Happy that he believed her, she said, "Because of my vast knowledge I'm not allowed to leave the SIA. Because there are so many things I can do that even if I made a mistake and accidentally showed those abilities...well, there could be consequences."

Tilting his head to the side in his trademark sign of extreme interest, he grinned, and the heaviness weighing down her heart lifted a bit. "I can't believe this. But that's all? Why would you telling me your age and where you're from alter anything? Why would you keep that from me? You know me, Dorky. You've talked to me about everything. Even sex."

She blushed. "Grey—"

"You can tell me the whole enchilada. Whatever it is, I can take it." Another smile touched his lips. "You said you trusted me with your life. Give me a chance to prove you can trust me with the rest."

Goddess, he was so handsome when he appealed to her sense of fair play. Why did he have to be so exquisitely charming? When he'd taken her into his arms to comfort her, something hard and resistant had irrevocably altered and relaxed. She didn't think she wanted to resurrect her resistance.

"It doesn't make sense to you because you don't understand the entire history of the Shadow Realm or my life there."

"Then why don't you tell me?" Again, he leaned forward, the persuasiveness in his tone quickening the speed of her demise. She drowned in the liquid persuasion in his gaze and the absolute assuredness he projected. Confidence, even arrogance, flowed from him. This was the same man she'd known all these years, but now she'd come face-to-face with Grey and shared dubious adventures, her feelings for him increased in complexity.

"Is Van Doren listening to us now?" Grey asked.

"No. Why?"

He shrugged. "I wondered. If he has a psychic connection to you, I figured there's plenty of other things he can do."

Surprise made her say, "I thought you'd be more skeptical about all this."

"All this what? It's not like you've told me much."

"It's difficult to know where to start."

He clasped her hands firmly in his. Her palms tingled. No, she couldn't do this anymore. Every time he touched her, she lost rational thought.

The intimate space between them built, and she wanted it so dearly she almost told him everything right then.

Unnerved, she slipped off the bed, out of his grip, and walked to the window. She peeled back the thick emerald green velvet curtains and watched daylight spread over the beautiful landscape she could see from this second story. Mountains rose beyond a rolling field, spearing high into a sky so deep blue she stared at it in wonder.

Yes, this was peace. What she'd known so many times when she lived where she belonged. Not here...not—

A pair of strong hands slipped about her waist, and she jumped. "Grey—"

"Easy. I didn't mean to scare you. I was watching you, and you seemed so sad. What's wrong?"

"If I tell you everything, you'll be entwined with a part of my life and a part of Derek's life."

"So? I'm already in your life."

"You'll be in worse danger than you already are. I couldn't bear that."

"Why?"

"Why?" Tears sprung into her eyes as she turned around and stared him down. Anger bubbled to the surface. "Do you really have to ask that?"

He kept his hands around her waist, and keen awareness stirred in her blood. She struggled to think clearly when he stood this near. His warm breath fluttered over her hairline.

Molten and filled with challenge, his gaze bored into hers. His mouth had turned into a tight line, humor gone. "You remember when I asked you to tell me how you really feel about me?"

"Yes."

"Tell me now."

His demand sent a shockwave of longing and purpose into her heart. "Other than Derek, you're the dearest friend I have." His frown didn't vanish, and her discomfort grew. "That kiss...well, it was wonderful. I haven't felt like that in a long time."

"Yeah? When was the last time you felt like that?" His voice turned whispery and warm.

She shook her head. "So long ago. In the mists of time."

Grey threaded his fingers into her hair and to the back of her neck. "You know what I want? I want my kisses to make you forget that other man...whoever he is or was."

She swallowed hard and admitted more. "A man has never..."

"Yeah?"

She swallowed hard. "I've never felt like this with another man."

Wonder eased the sharper angles of his masculine face, his eyes reflecting surprise and gratification solidified into one. "What did you feel when I kissed you?"

His other hand slipped over her cheek in a gentle caress.

A shuddering wave of need lit a fire in her belly. "Hot. Bothered."

He grinned, slow and secretive, as if he knew something she didn't. "I don't believe you."

Her eyes widened. "What?"

"When I kissed you it went beyond hot and bothered. We went up in flames."

*Oh dear.* Well, she couldn't deny it as much as she wanted to forget how insane he made her, how much she truly craved him.

"Yes."

His gaze turned superheated. "Damn, sugar. I didn't think you'd ever admit it."

Expectant, she hung on a thread of need, hope and fear. He twisted a thread of her hair into his fingers as if to anchor her in place. Unspoken promises and desires spun a gossamer thread between them. She couldn't want this, not when his eyes blazed with a passion and fire she craved in her loins and yearned for with every dream she possessed.

His amazing eyes blazed with frustration then settled to a slow simmer. "You don't trust me. Or you would tell me what the hell is up with you and the mad scientist. He has special powers and so do you. That's obvious to me. Do you expect me to turn away from that knowledge?"

"No."



She placed her hand on his forearm and muscles twitched under her touch. He sighed. "Why don't we stop arguing about this long enough to find something to eat? I am hungry."

"I'm starving."

"Okay, you have one up on me."

His crooked grin gave her a reprieve. "I have a feeling there's no such thing as having one up on you."

She'd enjoyed the flirting, the fine edge their conversations held over the years. She'd never guessed meeting him would guarantee their connection would grow hotter, their understanding deeper. His compliments had always sounded sincere, with a teasing ambiance. Now his praise came clearer, deeper in a way she didn't understand.

"You'd be surprised how many people have gotten one over on me," she said.

He shook his head, and a strand of his bright, rich hair flowed over his forehead in a disreputable tumble. "I don't believe it. Remember, I've worked with you for ten years. I feel like I know so much about you."

"You do." Her heart ached to explain all to him. But at what cost to his life?

When she hung her head, he asked, "Has anyone ever told you how beautiful you are?"

His statement caught her off guard. "No. Never. That's what the Irish call blarney."

He laughed, and the deep chuckle rumbled. "It's true. You have a quality I can't explain. It's almost...ethereal."

She wanted to deny it but decided to allow his praise to wash through her with gentle waves. When she dared gaze into his eyes, she saw genuine feelings. She could count on him. She could trust him.

Why did he have to be so damned handsome, so stunning in a rugged, totally masculine way? His gaze never left her, and the mutual staring match started to wear away her defenses.

"You're not so bad yourself," she said and blushed fiercely.

He'd pushed up the sleeves on the black turtleneck, but the garment clung nicely to his broad shoulders and those clear-cut pecs. Another almost uncontrollable rush of desire threatened to nix her common sense. Any sense, if she admitted it to herself. His mere presence stirred over-the-top sensations she couldn't control.

*Maybe you shouldn't control them.*

As if a little devil on one shoulder spoke in her ear, words from the depths of her need taunted her. *Maybe you should just –*

No. That way lay disaster.

*Besides, I don't understand what I feel for him, do I?*

"Dorky?" The softness in his voice came from deep in his chest. "Do you have any idea what you do to me?"

Dorky brushed her fingers over the golden-red hair along his powerful forearm. "No. What do I do to you?"

Before she could form an answer, his lips came down on hers. Warm, caressing and unbelievably delicious, his mouth thrilled her down to her very breath. Dorky sank into the sweetness. She couldn't help but respond, her mind forgetting all turmoil under his spell. The tempo changed from tender to primal as her hips thrust against him. His tongue drove into her mouth with hungry insistence. He palmed her ass cheeks and kneaded the flesh. She quivered in excitement under the intimate touch.

He drew her tight to him. Her body trembled as she moved in his hold, writhing under a growing tension. Her heartbeat hammered, breath rushing through her lips into his mouth. She plunged into a sensual world only Grey could create for her.

His hands seemed everywhere, searching desperately across her back under her shirt to the sensitive skin. She moaned softly as his lips caressed and she responded with equal fervor. He found the clasp on her bra and unhooked it with one flick. As he caressed bare skin, she twisted her fingers into his hair and drew him deeper into the kiss.

He broke away, breath rasping. Cupping her face between his hands, he whispered, "You drive me crazy."

"Is that a good thing?" Her hands slipped over his to keep their touch on her face. It felt so intimate, so intense, she didn't know if it was real. Only a dream could feel this wonderful.

He peppered kisses on her forehead, to her nose. She put her index finger over his mouth, eager to touch and trace the skin that gave her such pleasure. His tongue slipped out to lick over the slender digit. A fine shiver snaked through her body, followed by a low ache in her belly. She dared look into the silver depths of his eyes, so direct and unceasing. Tight desire unfurled in her lower belly as she drew her hand over his hair-roughened jaw. The moment stilled, drew out, demanded an answer. Happiness captured her breath, held it prisoner and made her forget what might become of them later. Here and now mattered—the future would take a backseat for now.

He drew her hands up to kiss the knuckles. Feather-soft, his touch warmed her clear to the soles of her feet. She watched in fascination and heightened arousal as he traced between her knuckles with his tongue. Electric quivers touched her body from nipples to pussy. As he drew her hands down to his chest, she felt the muscular planes twitch under the pressure of her fingers.

Taut hunger filled his eyes. "Touch me."

Feeling feral, unleashed, she drew upon the glorious abandon tracing a path through her veins. Her palms spread out over his sweater, and her touch roamed over the magnificent pectoral muscles, the solid ribs, his muscled stomach.

*Oh. Oh yes. I never thought I'd touch him this way again. I want this. I want it.* The need to have him and feel his cock sliding deep past her already swollen and slick folds ran heavy and hot within.

She reached down to his belt. She would —

He caught her hand in his and Dorky gazed up at him with a question. Animal desires burned inside her as he pushed her hand gently into place over his cock. She gasped at the heat. The thickness. The length. *Holy Goddess, by all that is sacred.* Her fingers stirred under his and he gasped.

"Damn. That feels way too good, sugar."

She moved her fingers and measured his cock with curiosity and enjoyment. How magnificent would Grey feel naked in her hands?

"This is all for you, Dorky," he said, voice raw with sex. He leaned forward until he nuzzled her neck. "All of this is yours. Just ask for it."

Then he leaned in and caught her mouth, and she met his aggressive kiss with ravenous passion. Her hand moved and caressed, pressing into his cloth-covered cock. He shuddered under her touch.

She moaned softly as he didn't hesitate to cup both her breasts. When he plucked the nipples with gentle attention, she quivered in his hold. She twisted her fingers into his hair and drew him deeper into the passion-filled kiss.

Brushing, flicking, lightly tugging, he tormented with unrelenting attention.

He broke from the kiss, eyes glazed with desire. "Sugar —"

"Yes."

He grinned. "You don't know what I'm going to say."

"You were about to say we shouldn't do this."

He frowned, his gaze confused and surprised. He stroked her cheeks with his thumbs, the raw desire in his eyes unmistakable.

"I was going to say stopping is the hardest thing I could ever do."

Leaning into his hard body, she reached up and pulled his head down, brought her mouth up to find his. He took her invitation without hesitation, a soft groan parting his lips.

The taste flamed immediately, a carnal blaze. His mouth twisted over hers, opened, his tongue plunging deep to stroke. The potency and excitement zinged through her blood like lightning in a storm. As his arms lashed around her like tight ropes, she leaned into him. Throbbing arousal spilled into her lower stomach, her clit and her hard nipples. She wanted his hands on her naked flesh, his mouth treasuring other skin a man hadn't touched in so long. Her nipples ached for slow licks and lingering suckling. Against her belly, his cock grew hard. She ached to hold that thickness within her folds. She could imagine, did imagine the slow, rhythmic thrust of steel-hard flesh caressing her hot, wet channel. She wanted it, craved it, died for it. Caught up in her needs, she

forgot her original intent, let it float away on the soul-stealing intensity of her passion for Grey.

Before she understood what happened, he'd backed her up against a wall. His hands went under her butt, cupped and caressed. He lifted her, and Dorky's legs went around his waist. He adjusted his stance, widening his legs. His cock thrust against the vulnerable tissues between her legs. She moaned softly, aroused beyond bearing. She felt the heat rise as he lined his cock up against her clit. When his hips started to move, she almost wrenched back and escaped the torture. No, no. Instead she rubbed frantically, wanting that exciting friction with everything inside her.

*Oh Goddess.*

Her clit throbbed under the repeated attention as his hips rotated, thrust, moved. Again. Again. Each soul-stealing thrust along swollen folds drew her main goal farther and farther away. She couldn't think, could barely breathe. His hands clamped tight on her ass cheeks, holding her for the continual friction of solid manhood against soft woman. Her breathing quickened, her heartbeat drummed thick in her ears. *Oh yes. Oh yes.* She would take this and live it, devour it until she couldn't think any longer about the danger awaiting Grey. She poured life into her thoughts, into the staggering energy growing between them. She kissed him with power and purpose, licking deep into his mouth and tasting his essence. His hips started a bump and grind, torturing her clit into full bloom. One kiss turned into another as he twisted his mouth this way and that. All the kisses she'd ever received in the vast years stretching behind her ceased to exist. Only Grey, concentrated on pleasuring, on showing her he cared, mattered in these minutes. Minutes she would remember for always. Forever.

She whimpered, enraptured in a passion so strong she didn't think she could stand another minute. Her breasts ached, her pussy clenched and released. She broke their kiss, her head fell back. She gasped for breath, a keening sound rising inside. *Oh heavens. All that is merciful, I can't take anymore.*

Her fingernails bit into his shoulders, and she heard him groan. But he never stopped the relentless movement of his hips. Her gaze locked with his, and her breath snagged on a staggering bolt of pleasure. A cry ripped from her throat, saturated with ecstasy. She shivered and wavered on a precipice. His eyes held pleasure, desire, happiness profound. She pushed her face against his chest and screamed as orgasm crashed through her. Breathless pleasure rained through her. Happiness hummed and sparked inside her as she drew his heat, his masculinity into her and savored. When had she felt this ethereal beauty before? If she had, she couldn't recall. Heaven, or what humans thought of as heaven, couldn't compete with this. She'd almost given up hope and forgotten what loving could produce. In its purest form, it guaranteed the most exquisite pleasure alive. Dorky knew then she'd never experienced a connection with another man quite like this.

Only one thing was missing.

Him. Inside her.

Thrusting out his pleasure, finding his own heaven and binding them on a cellular level.

For a spellbinding moment, she caught the fire in his dusky eyes. His gaze seemed powered by a demon she couldn't name but could feel down in the depths of her heart. He wanted her the way a man wanted a woman, fast, hard and filled with a sexual energy she'd never experienced before. It frightened her and drove her in one down-to-the-wire moment. She could take him into her body right here, right now and not have a second of regret.

Instead, she did what she knew she must. She unwound her legs from his waist and slipped down his body. She pressed her fingers lightly into his shoulder and directed her thoughts to rendering him senseless. He went boneless immediately, his eyelids fluttering. And she clutched him in her arms, helping him to slide down to the floor in a heap. Unconscious.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dorky paced the quirky den, glancing at the room with a distracted air. Filled with artifacts from Derek's many travels around this crazy world and the world of the Shadow Realm as well, Derek's den held the cozy air of a well-kept museum and the homey feel of a loved abode. Yet even the comfort of this room couldn't resolve the strong disquiet stirring inside her.

Derek stared at Dorky like she'd lost her mind. "You did what?"

"I knocked him out and tied him to the bed."

"Oookay." He blinked rapidly, as if she'd clonked him on the head. "I take it you used your...powers."

She nodded and sighed, then released a heady laugh. She grasped the long length of her hair and swept it back from her face.

"At least I know Grey won't wake up with a concussion," he said.

Of course, she wouldn't reveal what she and Grey had done right before she decided to knock him out. No. That would stay private. A swift, heady stirring low in her belly reminded her of those minutes of pure bliss.

She crossed her arms and strode across the parlor, her frown deep and her heart growing heavy again. "I'd never hurt him. You know that."

"Emm. Well..." He scratched his chin. "You could hurt him quite a bit, I think."

Irate with the situation, she wished they'd never started down this path. She turned toward the large picture window, her gaze steadying on the compound wall and the green foliage beyond. "I would never harm him."

She heard Derek's coffee cup rattling as it settled onto the saucer. He placed the cup and saucer onto the table next to his chair. "Knowingly." His feet plopped up on the stool. He lounged with a relaxed air she wouldn't have expected considering the circumstances. "So now that you have him tied up, what do you plan to do?"

Good question. Her mind, her heart rebelled against the idea of letting Grey wander the compound. "He'll get hurt or worse if I don't do something."

He placed his hands securely over his stomach. "Possibly."

Exasperated by her own indecisiveness and his cool-headed logic, she turned to one of the beanbag chairs and plopped onto it with a great sigh. She sank into the lazy comfort, the boneless complacency.

"Grey is impulsive," she said.

"Undoubtedly."

"He's a fantastic agent though."

"I'd agree."

"But he's stubborn."

"For certain."

"But quick-witted and competent."

"You'll get no argument from me. He's a genuinely talented agent."

She groaned and placed her fingers to her temples. "You're not making this easy."

He went silent as the grave, his gaze out of focus, his body emotionless. Her frustration mounted as seconds ticked by.

Finally, after she figured she'd aged a year, he spoke. "Perhaps you should disclose everything you're feeling for him. Down to the last degree."

Everything within Dorky stilled—her body tightened, her thoughts turned sluggish. "No."

"No?"

"No, I don't feel anything he needs to know."

"What do you feel that he doesn't need to know?"

Damn him for his centuries of insight. "I care for him. I want him to stay safe. I don't want him to—"

"Discover you're a descendent of elves and fairies? Realize that you love him?"

*Oh no.* She hauled butt out of the squishy beanbag. "I've known you for how long?"

He placed his index finger to his chin, bright eyes reflective. "Since you were but a twinkle in your father's eyes."

She sighed. "Two thousand years."

"Exactly."

She wandered aimlessly about the floor, adrift on a bad dream where she never reached conclusions, never found her way out of the maze. "During those two thousand years, have I ever told you a lie? Even a little white one?"

"Not until today."

She turned toward him, mouth agape, hurt forming deep down. Shame reddened her face. She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I don't know what to say. I don't—"

"Dorky—stop. I understand." He sighed, settling even deeper into his chair. "You're compelled by feelings for Grey. Whether you admit to the depth of those feelings, that's not for me to say. I understand why you won't admit your love to him. Remember, I witnessed what occurred thousands of years ago and just three hundred years ago."

God, she didn't want to think about those horrible times, but how could she ignore it?

Derek's eyes pierced her defenses. "I know you think you'll feel worse if you tell him your deepest wishes and feelings. But consider how you'll feel if something happens to him and you didn't speak up."

Dorky considered screaming. Kicking. Howling. Yet when the dice rolled, the cards were drawn—hell, Derek was right. Standing in the middle of Derek's beautiful, eccentric den, she didn't want to be brave, noble or any of the other adjectives she'd heard used to describe the best attributes of her kind.

"Don't you see? I'm tired. I feel like a giant has stomped on me. Plus, if I tell him right now all these...feelings...he might run."

Van Doren slumped lower in his chair, looking disgustingly grandfatherly and wise. "Where do you think he'll run?"

"Away. From me."

"And that would hurt."

"Yes."

"What about giving him a chance to show his true feelings? Isn't that important?"

"Of course."

Derek straightened, placing his elbows on the chair arms and making a steeple shape with his fingers. "What if you're afraid of him reciprocating your affection? Look how long it's taken him to break down your defenses so that you've allowed him into your inner sanctum."

She wanted to brain him for being so damn right. She'd reached the end of her desire for heartfelt conversation. "If anyone at the SIA discovered that I allowed him to see my office, my place...well..."

"Trouble."

"Yes."

"Then why did you do it? And why did you run to help him when he came here?"

"Because he's...him."

"Uh-huh." He nodded sagely.

Silence dropped between them for a significant time until Dorky walked toward him. She stopped near his chair. "You've been a friend to me forever. You're the very best person I've worked with. Your vast store of knowledge is incredible. But I can't just walk up to Grey and spill all my feelings."

"All right." He heaved a large sigh, exasperation in his normally serene expression. "What do you plan to do?"

"I don't know."

"Eventually he'll become angry enough you might make him do the very thing you're afraid of happening. Leave. Do you honestly believe he won't find out what you're hiding? Your history? The secrets of the Shadow Realm?"

He didn't need to say more. Her heart ached with an indecision she'd experienced one other heartbreaking time. "I told him a little before I knocked him out. Besides, the last time I allowed a man that close to me..." Misery stopped her.

"This isn't the last time."

She headed toward the door, recognizing how she'd made this situation worse and regretting every minute. "I should have told him everything up front."

"Yes. In my opinion."

She touched the doorknob, aware she verged on a revelation about herself. "Two thousand years. You'd think I would have learned by now."

Derek shrugged, his gaze warm and not the least condemning. "We all make missteps from time to time. It doesn't matter how long we've lived."

Suddenly the weight of all she'd seen and done over her years felt too large to handle. Her fingers tightened on the doorknob. She inhaled deeply. "You don't make mistakes."

He chuckled. "The stories I could tell. A person doesn't live through twenty-five-hundred years without stumbling and making some huge bloopers. Just not possible, I'm afraid. Dorky, you've always taken too much to heart that can't be helped." When she started to speak, he held his hands up. "You're sensitive, caring and more empathic than most individuals I know. But if you hadn't experienced that horrible time all those years ago, would you still feel this way?"

She released the doorknob. "Probably. It's not as if I wouldn't be empathic to people's suffering. To the sacrifices they've made for me."

"Let yourself be loved, Dorky. It's time to stop punishing yourself for things you couldn't control. Stop punishing yourself for loving someone."

Dorky understood Derek didn't only refer to her feelings for Grey. She knew he meant the incident years ago that shattered her world and sent her away from the Shadow Realm in the first place.

She rubbed her hands over her eyes. "I don't want to hurt him. If he ventures into the Shadow Realm... God, I don't want to think what could happen."

"You'll protect him."

"I won't be able to live with myself if I hurt him."

"You could hurt him emotionally. As they used to say long ago, he's sweet on you. Sweet enough to obtain a serious toothache. I've never seen a man so besotted."



She wrinkled her nose. "Besotted? That isn't a word people use much anymore."

He smiled. Derek watched her, his eyes glimmering with wicked amusement. She couldn't recall seeing him this tickled pink in a long time.

"No, but as a word it fits how he feels. Guaranteed. And if he's that in love with you, I doubt he'll run at the first sign of trouble. Talk to him. Tell him absolutely everything before it's too late."

## Chapter Eight

Dorky returned to the bedroom, half afraid to step inside. Then Derek's wisdom washed over her and reminded Dorky she could lose Grey anyway if she didn't level with him.

Lose him?

What if she'd never had him? Yes, he clearly cared about her and wanted her physically. The fear remained nonetheless, and she felt it wash over her. She remembered that long ago her mother had told her something very important that it seemed she'd forgotten.

*Let the fear wash through you, around you, over you. Then release it.*

Yes, she needed to do that now, no matter how difficult it became. But God, there was so much to explain to Grey.

*Get over it. Move on.*

She opened the door without another thought, walked through and closed it behind her.

Grey lay on the bed where she'd left him, his arms tied to the bedposts. His eyes were closed. Theoretically, he shouldn't still be unconscious, and a spike of serious worry made her hurry to the bed. She checked the pulse in his neck and it beat strongly and steadily.

She sighed in relief. She cupped his face and a tingle traced through her palm as his whiskered cheek caressed her sensitive skin. Desire coiled in her stomach, and she couldn't ignore the out-of-control feeling. She'd never seen him sleep, and the way his long lashes fanned downward and the peace in his face softened his features into a younger, more innocent Grey. Had he ever been that untroubled?

Now that he'd kissed her, that she'd crossed a line with him, she couldn't pretend any longer. They'd gone beyond any innocent, gentle caress into full-throttle hunger. Dorky wiped one hand over her face quickly, weary and broken in a small way. Not for the first time in her life, she wanted to run. She wanted to despair.

But she couldn't. It wasn't like her, it wasn't strong, it wasn't the woman she'd developed into over these many, many years.

Grey's eyes popped open, and Dorky jumped in surprise. His gaze held one undeniable emotion.

Anger.

"Grey –"

"What the hell happened?" He winced. He twisted and moved his arms in vain as he realized his predicament. "Damn it. Why the fuck —?"

"I'll let you go if you promise to hear me out."

His frown held thunder, and something she never expected to see in his eyes. Mistrust. As if she'd betrayed him. She had, in a way. Her heart sank.

"Maybe I'll hear you out, maybe I won't."

She wanted to erase that look from his eyes before it ate her alive. "Grey, I didn't do this to hurt you. I was worried that..."

His eyes narrowed. "What?" His eyes widened again, suspicion of a different kind filling his silvery eyes. "God, you don't think — you didn't tie me up because you think I'd hurt you?"

His stricken expression made her stomach clench. "No, of course not. I know you wouldn't hurt me."

"Good. Damn it, we were halfway on the way to fuck — making love."

She shivered at his hot, furious words. "Yes, we were."

His angry expression started to clear. "So are you trying to tell me that our kisses knocked me flat on my ass?"

"No. Of course not. Your head hurts?"

"No."

Her hands flapped as she searched for the right words. "I used a grip on your neck that renders a human unconscious for at least a half-hour. I haven't used it in—" She looked toward the ceiling and accessed the memory. "At least ten years."

He smiled, and the sight of that striking grin almost unraveled her on the spot. God, he was so gorgeous. So sexy. *Oh, I'm in serious trouble.*

Pain centered under her ribs, as if she had too much to say and didn't know where to start. The volcano of emotions threatened to explode.

"Are you all right, Grey?"

"I feel like I've come out of a damned deep sleep."

"The grip gives you a nice version of beauty sleep."

"That's what it's called? The grip?"

She nodded. "Actually, yes. Some people also call it the beauty sleep, like I said."

His grin turned wicked. "I should be fuckin' pissed. But if you tell me tying me up was just to initiate some kinky sex —"

"No." Dorky's cheeks heated, and an image of him tied to the bed, *naked*, ran through her head. That would be delicious.

Suddenly, she couldn't resist him. Her mouth watered as she watched the way his biceps flexed as he yanked at the ties. His sweater pulled upward and revealed his muscled belly, the rippling flesh under a smattering of hair. His hard thighs looked

strong, intriguing. Slipping her hands over his powerful flesh would be a heaven she wanted to explore with deeper attention. She licked her lips.

Without another thought, she made a decision. She wanted him. She had him prisoner. Wicked desires flared inside her that surpassed what she'd felt earlier in his arms. Even the mind-blowing orgasm she'd experienced couldn't wash away the needs bubbling to life inside her like a fountain.

She moved quickly, climbing onto the bed and straddling his thighs.

"Hell," he said, his eyes hot with growing hunger. "Sugar, you better have a damned good explanation for this."

She nodded. "I knocked you out. I have powers...things I can do that the average human can't do. An endless catalog of things."

He closed his eyes for a second. "Yeah, that's what you said. This whole situation is becoming weirder by the second."

She leaned forward and placed her palms on the bed, lowering her torso across his. Their chests didn't touch, but she liked the heat that poured off him.

"I'll tell you more," she said with sincerity, her heart starting to pound. "But you have to promise not to take revenge on me for knocking you out. Or I won't untie you."

She slipped a hand over the bulging muscle in one biceps and savored the feeling.

His entire body shivered, and he groaned. "God, don't do that."

"Why not?" She allowed her touch to drift to that patch of bare skin between his waistband and black turtleneck sweater.

As her fingers touched hard male belly and crisp hair, her whole body warmed with awareness. Hot, tight need coiled in her stomach and flowed down to pool richly between her legs.

His eyes flared, pupils dilating. "Sugar, that's not a good idea."

With a sense of power and anticipation she couldn't recall having before, she closed her eyes and explored. Her hands drifted under his shirt and touched his naked chest. As she enjoyed the crisp hair on his chest, pure pleasure sang through her veins.

He sucked in a breath. "Oh Jesus."

She opened her eyes and the intensity in his gaze blew her away. "I told you a little before you kissed me mindless. Now I'll tell you everything."

"Promise?" he asked, his voice rumbling deep in his chest. He clenched his fists.

"Of course." Her fingers traced his nipples, and he gasped as they turned hard under her touch.

"You'll tell me everything from the beginning?"

She scooted downward until she could easily see the firm, long, hard bulge behind his zipper. "Oh yes. Every bit."

"Dorky." His voice came hoarse, strained with desire. "Tell me after you let me loose."

She smiled as feminine power surged. "No, I don't think so. I want your full attention. There can't be any distractions."

"Oh hell," he said as she reached for his belt buckle. "Damn it, you don't think this is a distraction?"

She threw him another grin, triumph filling her as she noted his arousal growing more pronounced...in every way. "Oh, I think for a big, bad agent like you it's a minor thing."

His fists clenched, and he pulled at his ties once more. His carved lips curled in a frustrated growl. Yep, he was wild eyed and ready to devour.

Anticipation clenched in her body, her thoughts growing languid in her desire for him. It seemed she'd waited forever for this moment. She unbuckled his belt then reached for the zipper. She almost inched it downward. Almost.

He hissed in a sharp breath as her fingers brushed his cloth-clad erection. "What are you going to do now, Dorky?"

"You're enjoying this."

"Of course I'm fucking enjoying this. I want —"

"Yes?" She gave him another smile, this one laced with an impish feeling. She'd admit it. She liked playing a siren. Liked making him tremble, his cock becoming harder and thicker by the minute.

She sat back, her gaze latched for a second on his fly. She wouldn't undo him. Not yet. He deserved an explanation for all this madness. "Okay, I'll explain."

"About damned time. You tryin' to drive me nuts?"

"Maybe. Most likely."

He grinned, the change remarkable. He went from desperately horny to charming and horny in two seconds flat.

"This is complicated," she said.

"So you said before. I'm listening. I'm not going anywhere."

"Here goes." She climbed off him and slid onto her left side. She placed her hand on his stomach again, and his body twitched. Good. She liked the effect. The helplessness in his response sent a hot ripple of response over her. She breathed in his clean, male scent and shivered in pure female delight.

Grey watched her — she could feel his scrutiny. A heady feeling entered her, soft as a cloud and remarkable. Temporarily the sensation erased the last traces of depression lingering within. She took the plunge.

"As I started to tell you earlier, elves and fairies live in the aboveworld of the Shadow Realm, and mortal humans rarely come in contact with them. In the belowworld, the subterranean place, there are monsters such as Zurvan and weredemons."

"And this Zurvan is the ultimate evil that reveals itself to people as their greatest fears."

"Yes. Good, you remember that much." She smiled slyly. "There isn't brain damage."

He grunted. "That's comforting to know. Is the *grip* supposed to cause brain damage?"

"No."

He stared at her for a long time, and she almost started talking to fill in the gap. He grunted. "So you're saying elves and fairies live aboveground in the Shadow Realm, while bad-assed creatures live in the...what did you call it?"

"Belowworld. But it's not like a heaven and hell. There are also good creatures in the belowworld. The Marcanas are mistaken by humans in this realm to be angels, and much about them is moral and good." Uplifted by his calmness and clear understanding, she continued. "There's so much to know about the Shadow Realm, and so little time to tell you."

"Like I said, I'm not going anywhere right now." He wriggled his fingers.

"You know I wouldn't have tied you up, but it was totally necessary."

"Yeah. Right. How was it necessary?"

"You're determined to discover why Derek took off with classified documents."

"Of course I am. It's my job. It's what I do. Instead I'm stuck on this bed with you torturing me."

She couldn't help the soft giggle that left her throat. With a gentle sweep of her fingers, she allowed them to drift down low on his stomach. "This is torture? How so?"

When his penis surged and grew against his pants, she understood. She'd thought his cock was erect earlier, but obviously his erection could become even larger than she'd realized. Warmth flooded between her legs once more. Her breasts felt heavy, her nipples tightening into sensitive points.

When his gaze captured hers, she saw fire and lightning and impending explosion. "Come on, sugar. Don't just play with me. Take what you want."

"Take what I want?" She asked the question tentatively.

"Yeah. Unzip me the rest of the way."

*Tempting.*

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because you want to hear the rest of the story."

Before she could speak again, he sighed and asked, "When and why did you leave the Shadow Realm?"

Absently she caressed his chest. "Three hundred years ago. I left three hundred years ago."

Emotional pain seized her as she recalled the day she'd left the Shadow Realm.

"I'm having a hard time even imagining that."

"But you believe me."

"Yeah, I believe you. I have to. Nothing else makes sense."

"Sure it does. I could be nuttier than fruit compote."

He grinned. "I thought that was a fruit cake."

She caressed one of his already aroused nipples. "Picky, picky."

He sucked in a breath. "Dorky, if you don't stop teasing me —"

"You'll what?" The words left her mouth before she could arrest the allure in her voice, the pure seduction. "Punish me?"

She loved bringing him to this sword edge of excitement. Heavy desire pooled in her lower belly, demanding fulfillment, but she pushed it away. Not yet. Not quite yet. She wanted to draw this enjoyment out until it tortured them both, even though she now understood the sexual tension between them had boiled for years.

"If you aren't going to unzip me, then tell me more," he said dryly.

For the moment she stopped caressing and concentrated on the story. "It really goes back further than three hundred years. A thousand years ago I loved a Marcanas that dared venture from belowworld to aboveworld." She saw his gaze change, a greedy hunger to know more transforming to startled amazement and maybe, just maybe a smidgen of jealousy. "Marcanas are forbidden to mate with elves and fairies by ancient decree."

"Damn."

She felt the pain of that long ago memory threatening to tighten her throat in a miserable vice. "The Marcanas came aboveworld because he wanted to know more and see more than his part of the Shadow Realm allowed. Marcanas are beings of light, but they live in the darkness."

"This belowworld is in total darkness?"

"It would be if the Marcanas didn't have methods to illuminate it." She swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. "One day I was walking in a field. The sky was blue. The sun in my realm bright and warm. Everything was beautiful. Then I realized someone was watching me. It wasn't a good feeling either. I started back to my home, but a weredemon who'd escaped belowworld attacked me." She shivered at the memory. She glanced at Grey. His gaze caught hers, his brow creased in concentration. "I had some warning from my intuition that something wasn't right. But not much warning. I remember the fear to this day as the creature leapt from the bushes and grabbed me. The demon hadn't even cloaked himself to resemble human. He was...disgusting. Ugly. Like nothing I'd seen before. Red, flaming, scaly skin. Piercing red hellish eyes. A weredemon as they honestly appear, without the façade of a human body." A long shudder traversed her body as she recalled the horror. "The demon could have ended

my very long life right then and possessed my body, because I wasn't cloaked. I was defenseless."

"Cloaked?"

"I used the white protective light of the Goddess and the God to keep me safe. While I didn't leave my home without cloaking myself first, my barriers were apparently weak and the demon strong. He tore through them. The Marcanas was walking nearby and heard my cry. Marcanas are very powerful in their ability to protect life. He activated a particle sword and used it to spear the demon."

Dawning understanding played over his features. "I'd heard the particle sword came from the Shadow Realm and the SIA learned how it was made and how to use it."

She nodded. "That and so much more. Anyway, the Marcanas could have killed the weredemon with his bare hands if he'd chosen to."

Silence covered them for a few moments before he said, "Tell me more."

She toyed with the zipper on his pants again, but this time he didn't protest when she inched it downward again.

"Lyon was a wonderful man. I never would have imagined I could feel for a Marcanas what I felt for him." She didn't wait for his response. "He stabbed the weredemon with the particle sword, and because of that, I lived." She smoothed her fingers over his stomach in continuous movement, then back up to his biceps, his chest, anywhere she could absorb his strength, enjoy his male beauty. "Lyon and I met, in secret, for the next four weeks. Daily. We...fell in love."

Dorky dared look up at Grey and caught the flicker of something fiery in his eyes. Eyes that held so much passion, so much intrigue within them.

"As I mentioned before, Marcanas and elves and fairies aren't allowed to mingle in any way."

"Did you mingle with him?" His voice was hoarse.

"Over that four-week period we established a sexual relationship in all but...penetration. We gave each other a lot of pleasure, but we knew we couldn't be together in a complete way. The real reason why we couldn't be together was because a Marcanas and a fairy or elf isn't totally compatible physically. There's a chemical reaction that produces problems. We knew this and yet..."

His face drew tight, the apprehension there in his eyes. "You did anyway."

She nodded. "He vowed that if he couldn't be with me, if he couldn't make love to me fully, he didn't want to live anyway. And I didn't want to live without him. We made a decision that even if one of us died..." Her throat went tight, the grief rising up like a sickening, horrible wave. She almost couldn't press the words past her lips. "We made love. And after he climaxed, he gathered me into his arms, smiled, closed his eyes..."

"He died," Grey said softly.



She nodded. "I wanted to die too. When my parents found out, they tried to hide me, knowing the consequences for such action would be severe. His sister blamed me for his death and demanded action be taken."

So many centuries had passed, and Dorky always believed she could tell this story without choking up. Yet she'd never explained in full to anyone other than Derek what had happened. As tears rose in a tidal wave of repressed grief, the storm pounded her relentlessly. Her muscles tightened as tears trickled down her face. She didn't want to cry, but there it was. Hot. Ravaging. Coming out in soft sobs. She closed her eyes and surrendered to it.

"Dorky. Sugar, don't." His voice held a sweet tenderness she'd never heard in his tone before. Achingly gentle, he said, "Untie my wrists."

Something relentless and maybe a little mean entered her heart. "No."

"Honey, I can't hold you, and God, I really want to hold you right now."

Driven by a core of desire and a hurt so deep in her heart she couldn't stifle it, she said the words that ached to leave her throat. "I could have refused to make love to him and told him to return to the belowworld." She shuddered and closed her eyes. "I failed him, and I failed myself."

"No," he whispered. "No, sugar."

Her throat tightened, and she lay on her back next to Grey and rode out the pain, eyes closed, fingers clutching at the bedspread as she allowed the agony to take her. "I considered following him by killing myself."

"God," Grey said, his voice a horrified whisper. "What stopped you?"

She wiped at the tears and continued. "I don't know. I was devastated."

"You loved him."

"Yes. But it took a few months for me to realize how his death damaged me, and that I didn't deal with it as I should."

"What happened?"

"Three hundred years ago, I committed a major sin in the eyes of my people. I tried to exorcise my demons by helping other couples come together in love." She inhaled deeply to remove the tightness in her throat. "I was a matchmaker in my world. For many hundreds of years I was successful at it, but then I made the gravest error of all." She stopped, waiting for questions that didn't come. Then she continued, her eyes still closed and her fingers still grasping the bedspread. "All of my matches worked well. People considered me talented at understanding how to bring together couples who would fall in love. I understood couples so well." She smiled, tears returning to her eyes anyway. "The last match I made was between an elf and a Marcanas. Marcanas occasionally came to aboveworld, but it was still a rare occurrence. I saw them in a field together. They'd just met, even though they understood a relationship between them was forbidden. I walked up to them and I saw my Lyons and myself all those hundred of years ago. I tried to discourage them from coming together, but they wouldn't listen."

Finally I realized that I couldn't forbid them to love one another. I could have told someone about them and maybe stopped them. I didn't. They eloped and left the Shadow Realm. When it was discovered they'd eloped, and that he died soon after..."

She opened her eyes and propped up on one elbow. His eyes held curiosity and yet a strange, empathic sadness. Tough and tender, the man had no idea how he eroded her ability to think, to hold on to the pain. In his presence, she discovered, she could release the agony one second by one second until all she remembered was him.

"When they crossed into this realm, they made love and he died. The elf was destroyed. She came back to the Shadow Realm and vowed revenge on me," she said.

"On you? Why?"

"Because in her grief, she decided I was responsible even though I'd told the couple what could happen. My parents tried to keep me in the Shadow Realm, but the Council of elves and fairies banished me. I haven't heard from my parents or seen them in three hundred years...as long as I've been away from the Shadow Realm. Yet there are some Marcanas who have kept in touch with me. When the SIA was founded, I heard about the agency through Derek, who is from the Shadow Realm. He is also the result of an elf and fairy coupling."

He grinned. "Someday you'll have to tell me how that works. I mean...this whole thing is melting my brain."

"Now you understand why I didn't want to tell you. I'm glad you believe me, though."

Grey nodded. "Hard to disagree with you when I'm trussed up like an animal."

Her tears started to dry, and now she wanted more of him, more of the hot, animal hunger that compelled her to keep him in this position.

"There's a hell of a lot more to tell me, isn't there?" he asked.

"Much more."

She straddled him, lowering her hips over his and leaning forward on her palms. "Please, I don't want to talk about the past anymore. Not my past anyway. It still aches inside me like a wound."

Swirling emotions tossed her up as he appraised her. She'd never seen him look more serious, more determined. "Do you still think about the couple who died?"

Renewed sadness made her sigh, but she didn't move from her position. "At least once every day. There's a statue in my office of a couple entwined in an explicit embrace. It reminded me of what happened three hundred years ago, and a thousand years ago. So that I can never forget how I came to be in this realm."

"Are you still punishing yourself for what happened?"

Dorky couldn't deny it—knew if she tried it would somehow show. "I think I am."

"You loved this Marcanas." Suddenly he asked, his voice rich with emotion, his eyes haunted, "Do you still love him?"

Wary of his question and the feelings it produced, she kept her stance over him. "It was so long ago, Grey. The feelings are not that intense now because I don't let them be. I loved him. Yes."

"Loved?"

"Yes. Not now." His eyes cleared a bit, but his reaction made her wonder, made her ask, "Does it disturb you that I loved him?"

His hands clenched into fists. "Yes, damn it."

"Why?"

"It should be obvious. Because I'm fucking jealous, that's why."

To her horror, more tears filled her eyes. Goddess help her, she'd never felt so weak, so vulnerable before. Tears spilled onto her cheeks.

"Sugar, let me hold you."

She shook her head. "No."

"Let me go," he said. "Untie me."

Earlier, when she thought he wanted revenge, she didn't dare release him. Now she wondered what he'd do. Eager to stifle the hurt feelings and the misunderstandings, she also wanted to give him the ultimate pleasure.

"No more games then," she said.

She reached for his zipper and pulled it down inch by inch.

## Chapter Nine

Grey's hips arched upward as Dorky slipped her hand into the front placket of his black briefs and did the one thing she hadn't in so many years she'd almost forgotten the sensation. She drew his cock out until it stood upright, thick, long and hard.

"Oh," she said softly, unable to say another word.

Instead, she drew her hand upward over his cock, enjoying how his flesh broadened and grew within her palm. She wanted his hardness with an ache that wouldn't disappear, and she knew a moment like this might never come again. She needed his body as much as he needed hers, unable to forget the moments they'd kissed, what they'd already shared in such a short amount of time.

"It's a lifetime." She spread his pre-cum over the tip of his tumescence. "The short time we've known each other seems so much longer in my long, long life."

"Dorky." His voice rasped, harsh in an undeniable plea she couldn't ignore.

She forgot how to breathe as she encircled his length, the breadth of his maleness. He gasped, and she darted her gaze up to capture his. Heat burned steadily in his eyes, a testament to how close he came to losing control here and now. She wanted that, wanted to explore him from tip to base, to enjoy the sweet moments that lingered, that promised to bring meaningful pleasure both physical and mental. With a groan of impatience, she encircled the base of his penis and drew her hand upward with one stroke. He hissed in a breath as her fingers traced over his delicious symmetry. She wanted to understand what made him groan, what made his heart beat faster, what aroused Grey's soul in the deepest way.

"Do you like being tied up?" she asked.

"I didn't until you started this," he said quickly.

He licked his lips, and she saw the hunger build inside him like a hurricane, a whirlwind that wouldn't banish until she'd turned him inside out.

She stroked him, her lips close now to the tip of his cock. She palmed him from base to top once. Twice. Three times.

"Please." His voice, that warm, deep, husky sound she loved, purred in her ears like the strongest aphrodisiac. "Put me out of my misery. I've been hard for what seems like an age. I want you, and I know you want me. Come on...admit it."

She smiled, her lips nudging the very tip of his cock with one silky brush.

"Oh God." His breathy plea made her stomach clench. "Oh God."

His cock twitched in her hand, and she drew her fingers upward over the long, hard club, so hot and ready to service her. She hadn't known a man's cock within her body in decades...centuries. And only with Lyons. Her beautiful, dark angel. Now, here

with Grey, she knew a wilder, less innocent desire to make love. To fuck. Yes, to fuck with a difference that would leave a mark upon her body and soul she could never forget in a millennium. With the Marcanas, she'd know a brilliant, sweet love. With this SIA secret agent man extraordinaire, she wanted the complete experience to crash over her until it bled into her pores and overwhelmed.

She grinned in wicked enjoyment and watched his face as she licked the underside of his cock in one slow stroke.

"Ah Dorky." His eyes closed and his head went back. "Please."

"Please what?" She licked again then circled his entire cock in one quick swallow.

His guttural moan of pleasure echoed around the room. Nothing sounded better, and she continued the torture with pure enthusiasm and delight.

Grey thought he'd die. First he'd fall prey to the hot, wet heaven sucking him off. Second, if he had any luck at all tonight, he'd fuck her hard and deep.

Right now though, he'd never felt anything better than the wet swirl of her tongue, or the pressure of her hand sliding up and down his cock until he thought he'd come straight down her throat.

Though he'd burned with a desire to comfort her, to hold her when she'd cried, that desire disappeared under more primitive imperatives. "Dorky, please."

"Mmmm?"

He raised his head and so did she, looking down at him like a conquering beast. "I can't take this any longer. Untie me."

"Not yet."

Damn her. Oh hell. She'd revealed so much, had told him things he never thought he'd hear in a million years. The woman who set fire to his being was two thousand years old, had lived in the Shadow Realm for most of her life. God, he'd never have guessed her otherworldliness meant she was a fairy/elf.

He had to know one thing. "Tell me...are we compatible? If you're a fairy and an elf...can we—"

"Yes," she mumbled between long licks and tender sucking. "Fairies and elves are in some ways more evolved than humans, but we are still human in origin. We're compatible physically."

He gritted his teeth. "Thank God. Please, damn it. I'm gonna come straight down your throat if you don't stop."

"Maybe that's what I want."

*Oh hell, yeah.*

"Take off your clothes."

"No. Not yet."

"Please." He'd never begged for anything in his life, but he might start now. "Take off your sweater."

She stopped sucking him and swiftly removed her sweater and her pale pink bra. She tossed them carelessly aside. His gaze touched the most beautiful, peachy round breasts he'd ever seen. Large, rose-tinted nipples tightened into pinpoints. Her beautiful hair cascaded around her shoulders, across the full, small mounds of her breasts. Her skin was a milky white down her torso, so flawless and delicate he'd almost be afraid to touch. The long, champagne and golden-wheat hair fell down to just past her waist.

"Your pants. Take them off," he said.

She didn't kiss his cock again, but stared at him with a contemplation that told him he'd stepped over a line.

"I have control here, Mr. O'Toole."

He grinned, not sure what to say to her statement. "Yeah? What will you do with me?"

She crossed her arms. "Promise me something, and I'll release you."

"Maybe."

"Promise."

Damn it, she had him desperate. "All right. What is it?"

"If I let you go, don't spring on me. Give me time. I've...it's been centuries for me."

Oh man. "Was the Marcanas your only lover. Ever?"

"Yes."

"Shit. How did you stand it? The sexual frustration must be...hell...hard to take."

Her beautiful eyes twinkled with his attempt to remain delicate on the subject of her inexperience. "I never wanted to make love to another man after my Marcanas died. Until now."

He groaned. God he liked the sound of that. She'd gone years without sex, and he would be the recipient of all that pent-up need. Warmth blossomed inside him. Gratification, fear and excitement warred inside him for space along with a primitive desire to possess.

She continued. "When I first saw a picture of you and then saw you on a security camera...well...that was the first time in hundreds of years that sexual interest stirred inside me." Her gaze concentrated on his cock, still standing erect, aching and wanting. "I've wanted you from the first moment I saw you."

Heady with male power, he persisted. "You shouldn't tell a man something like that, sugar."

Worry and maybe a smidgen of panic flashed in her pretty eyes. "Why?"

"Because you've already told me my ego is too damned big."

Relief spread over her face, a grin so wide and genuine it made his heart pound and his body hunger.

"Oh," she said. "Good. For a minute, I thought maybe you meant you didn't want to know how I felt. You see, when I was talking with Derek awhile ago, he told me I should confess how I feel about you."

Jealousy stirred inside Grey. "You talked with him about this situation between us?"

"Yes. He's a father figure to me, I'll admit. His advice is usually solid."

He snorted. "Right. Father figure, my ass. Is he older than you?"

"By five hundred years."

"He still thinks of you as more than a daughter. I see it in his eyes."

"Don't be silly, Grey." Her fingers drifted along his thighs, brushing muscles already taut with tension. "He said if I didn't tell you the way I feel, I might lose you. But you see, I thought I would lose you if I did tell you." Panic inched across her face, her lips taut, her eyes wild with uncertainty. "Please tell me I won't lose you."

Suddenly he knew the answer he must provide to ease her discomfort and his. "You won't lose me. You can't. I guess I took for granted that you understood how much I care about you. Remember our last phone conversation where I said that I knew you had feelings for me?"

"Yes."

"I was bluffing. I was hoping to hell you had feelings for me. And when you begged me not to break into Van Doren's, I was damned happy." He laughed. "Fuckin' happy. A woman's never cared about me like that before."

She smiled, and the transformation stunned him. He never wanted to go without that beautiful grin again. He wanted it morning, noon and night. Whenever he could have it.

"I don't believe you," she said.

"It's true. And when have I ever lied to you?"

"Never."

"Wait a minute. Are you telepathic?"

"Sometimes. But that isn't my particular talent. Why?"

"Because I wanted to know if you could read my mind right now."

"No, I can't."

"Good. Because it would probably singe your ears and make you blush."

She blushed. He laughed.

"What will I do with you, Grey? I reveal a ton of things to you, but you're still a mystery to me."

"Me? How? You have access to my personnel files."

"What they tell me isn't everything. I know that."

"And you want me to spill my guts."

"It would be only fair."

"First, untie me."

She worried her bottom lip between her teeth. Fuck, how he wanted to kiss that mouth, that perfect, beautiful mouth and discover if she tasted as sweet as he recalled. Desperation twisted, writhed and ate at his soul. Christ, he was lying here tied up, his cock sticking up like a flagpole, with a beautiful, adorable woman confessing life-altering secrets to him. If he didn't know better, he'd think he found heaven.

"I won't lie to you, Dorky. I'd do about anything right now to make love to you."

Her gentle grin and the pink in her cheeks told him he'd hit the mark.

"I...I want it too."

"Then untie me."

"It's not as easy as that. Not for me."

Frustration knotted his gut.

An almost overwhelming thought came to him. "You're saying you have years of repressed sexual need buried inside you."

"Yes. And I want to find it with you. I want to make love to you."

Her words, so soft and tender, melted him inside where he'd never been melted before. "You know what you do to me? You drive me crazy."

She laughed. "I think I like that in a twisted sort of way."

"Yeah, I'll bet you do." Uncontrollably, his hips arched. "Dorky, if you don't fuck me soon, I'm going to come anyway."

She grinned. "Would that be so bad?"

He growled.

Another laugh, this one closer to a giggle, left her throat. She threw back her head. Watching her white, pretty throat arching—yeah, he wanted to kiss it. "So if you won't release me. If you won't put me out of my misery, what are you going to do?"

She considered him one more moment, her eyes clear with an intelligence he admired. "Wait and see."

*Oh shit. She's gonna kill me.*

She leaned forward, her bare breasts dangling over his face as she straddled him. His gaze latched onto those round globes and wouldn't budge. *Oh shit, yeah.*

Her fingers plucked at the ties around his wrists, but his attempts to free himself had made the knots tighter. He wanted to shout with joy that she'd decided to release him. *Yes, yes, yes.* It seemed to take eternity, but the ties started to loosen.

"What?" he asked. "No special secret powers? You can knock me out, but you can't untie knots?"

Amusement darted over her lips. "The effort required to untie the knots with special powers is more difficult than it's worth in this case. Just have patience."



He groaned. "Have patience, my ass."

The ties loosened and released. When his arms were free, he jerked them forward. She sprang back out of his immediate reach. He rubbed his wrists as they tingled, full circulation restored.

"Dorky." The word left his throat husky and filled with craving.

He held out his hand, half afraid he'd scare her away if he moved as fast as he wanted to move. She placed her hand in his, and her silky skin warmed him in a way he'd never experienced, as if she was filled with magic. Hell, she was a fairy and an elf. What could be more magical than that?

Her fingers and palm felt delicate within his grip, and when he placed his other hand over hers, she sighed. He lifted her hand and kissed it, keeping his touch gentle.

Dorky shivered as Grey caressed her hand with his lips, a light brush so exquisite. Fire flickered within her belly, tickled and teased.

"We could stop right here," he said.

"No. I don't want to stop."

His carnal smile made her crazy. "Didn't think so." He tilted his head to the side slightly. "Guide me, Dorky. Show me what you want."

Happiness drew another smile to her lips. Her senses went online, gathering information, readying for what would come. He smelled so good—male energy and masculine fortitude. Whatever came next, wonderful wouldn't describe it well enough.

"It's been so long, I don't know..." she said.

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

"Yes. More than anyone or anything."

"Take off your pants."

She left him long enough to remove her last garments, tossing her pants away then quickly removing the basic white briefs. Self-conscious, she stood by the bed and allowed his inspection. As his gaze traveled from her mouth to her breasts and lingered on the golden hairs at her pussy, a flush worked its way up her body into her throat and face.

"It's only fair that if you look at me that way, I should be able to do the same with you," she said in defense.

"Deal," he said.

He clasped the bottom of his turtleneck and pulled it over his head. While she'd seen his bare torso before, witnessing it now created hot, pulsating warmth in her pussy. Her nipples tightened and went hard. An ache high up in her pussy signaled to her that she wanted, needed his touch everywhere.

He climbed off the bed on the opposite side from her, as if he wanted to give her room and not frighten her. He leaned over and removed his boots, then hooked his

thumbs in his waistband and took his briefs and pants down with one smooth movement.

At last she saw his body in full. She savored the long, hard lines of his arms, the broad chest, the narrowness of his waist, defined abs, and strong thighs. Between those thighs, his cock jutted out in thick command, ready for her pleasure.

And she knew instinctively everything they did together would create pleasure. Inhibitions fell away.

He climbed on the bed and sat against the headboard. Grey held his hand out to her. "Come here, sugar."

Eagerly she returned to the bed and settled over his lap, straddling so the base of his cock nestled into the slick folds between her legs.

She placed her palms on his chest and delighted in the way his nipples hardened.

He reached up and cupped her face.

Slowly, with a promise in his eyes, he touched his mouth to hers. Heaven grew inside her as his lips glided with sensuous touches. He ate at her with tender attention, so unlike their earlier, hungrier embraces.

Their tongues tangled, soothed, caressed. Heady, hot sensations warmed her stomach, spiraled in her pussy as her hips moved in a driving desire to reach a pinnacle. Disoriented by the power of their intoxicating embrace, she marveled at the alarming depth of their passion. Each hot brand of his lips fueled her hunger. She squirmed in his hold, not really wanting to leave him, but dying to put an end to the torture building inside her. Dorky drew back from his kiss and plunged her fingers into his hair. Smooth and cool against her fingers, his hair teased her skin.

His hands went to her waist then glided down to her ass cheeks. He squeezed her bare flesh with a tentative touch. Maybe he worried she'd leave him and deny all they'd experienced together so far. No. She couldn't depart from the strength of his embrace or the comfort his arms afforded. His hands, so big and warm, drew circles on her back. Her flesh prickled, her nipples puckering harder and tighter. Pressing into his cock, she continued the rocking motion instinctively. Long years had faded her memories of physical love, but with Grey it expanded until nothing would do but the ultimate fulfillment. She felt as if she'd suffered through a long drought, and her hesitation, her concern that he would overwhelm her disappeared. Gossamer threads of caution vanished under the startling vividness of the moment. Her excited nerves danced, and she wanted him inside her with an ardent, painful honesty that stole her breath.

As her clit brushed and caressed his cock, she moaned into his mouth. He broke from the kiss, and his caressing gaze was feverish with an intense inner battle. She loved seeing him on the edge of losing control and it fired long buried instincts to couple, to turn feral and engage in sexual congress both animal and tender. Desire exploded to full life as she dove into his next sensuously urgent kiss. Their kisses escalated, his mouth twisting this way, then that over hers. His tongue fucked her mouth, probing and exploring with each deep stroke. His hands coasted everywhere

and searched her secrets until she ached and clamored for culmination. Grey's fingers skimmed her sides, caressing until she writhed under the stimulation. As he continued to kiss her, he palmed the sides of her breasts. She backed away from the kiss and cupped her fingers over his. She tipped her head back and rode the base of his cock, slick desire trickling from her and coating his hardness. The scent of their desire, musky and true, made her want more and more.

She felt shy and yet wicked, the sharp, volatile passion growing as she craved to be filled and devoured. His breathing increased, soft moans of appreciation leaving his throat. Seconds later, his tongue lashed over one of her nipples, and she cried out at the exquisite pleasure. She grabbed his shoulders and held on as his tongue lapped and soothed. Each lazy circle over her nipple made her gasp. His fingers plucked gently at her other aroused nipple.

"God," he breathed huskily against her breast.

Another gentle flicker of his tongue made her pant, and she pleaded. "Please. Please."

Grey increased the pressure, lips soft, then hard, tongue lingering, brushing with hot, wet persistence. Nothing in her experience prepared her for this physical bombardment of sensations. For her love with Lyons had never been this intense and overwhelming. Grey destroyed her, made her pliant and vulnerable at the same time he made her stronger.

Her already heightened senses flooded her with information. She heard her own panting breath, Grey's moans of pure masculine pleasure. The musk of their sex teased her nose and added to the frenzy building between them. Perspiration dampened their bodies.

Relentless, he teased her nipples until she whimpered and writhed in his arms. She didn't know how much more she could stand. Higher she coasted until orgasm held her on a towering precipice where she teetered on the brink. With a swift movement he turned and tipped her onto her back. She squealed in surprise and smiled. She cupped his face in her palm and a laugh of pure happiness filled her.

He brushed his fingers over her forehead and pushed aside her hair. "You're beautiful. So damned beautiful I ache."

His words, spoken tenderly and reverently, caused tears to return to her eyes. "Why thank you, kind sir." Her voice trembled as emotions rioted inside her and mixed with the arousal tossing her from side to side. "When I'm with you, I feel nothing can harm me. Like I can do anything."

He matched her smile, a genuine and loving expression entering his eyes. "Ditto." He traced her lower lip with his thumb. "Lookin' in your eyes, being with you here is one of the best things that's ever happened to me. It's me that feels safe."

His hair-roughened thighs wedged between her legs, and his cock brushed over the silken moisture between her legs. She gasped as the sweet pleasure of the intimate touch threatened to send her into climax with one more touch.

She grabbed his shoulders, jabbed her fingers into his hair. "Grey, please."

His breath hissed inward. "Easy, sugar. Let me love you."

She heard the sexual craving in his voice and echoed it with each beat of her heart. His mouth took possession of her nipple again, and his hips started a rhythm. His solid, big cock eased the liquid from her pussy across her clit.

"Oh." Her breathless excitement spiked and she arched upward.

Grey lifted his weight away. "Over on your stomach."

The soft command in his voice, so silky, husky and sexy, made her comply instantly. She nestled her face into the fresh, clean-scented sheets. His touch glided over her butt cheeks and she moaned in gentle pleasure. Her hips arched as she pressed her butt into his touch. She quivered as his lips brushed over her skin.

"So soft," he said.

The tenderness in his words overruled her furious need for completion, and she smiled. His fingers feathered over her back in a methodical massage. He cupped and palmed Dorky's flesh with circular motion, as if mapping her body, memorizing her. Trembling, filled with overwhelming need, she arched into his hands and felt them flow over her like silky water. Tormented by new sensations, she almost begged him to put her out of her misery. She'd come gently when he'd kissed her earlier, when they'd been completely clothed. Now she realized that sensation was a far cry from the overwhelming urges she experienced in this moment. Her fingers clutched at the pillow under her head, her breathing fast as the ache between her legs built steadily. He leaned over her, his breath touching her ear, then his lips caressing her nape. He lay down next to her and slipped his fingers between her legs. She parted her thighs wider to ease his exploration. He circled her moist opening with the lightest caress, his mouth pressing kisses to her back. With almost unconscious motion, her hips rose up and down in counter to his seductive teasing. Creamy wet with her juices, his fingers glided across sensitive surfaces. He inserted one finger deep, and she gasped at the exquisite invasion. He built her desires with one steady stroke then inserted two fingers up to their full length. Back and forth he worked his fingers into the wet, hot tunnel. Her body flexed, trembled around his embedded fingers. He pushed them deep, twisted them until the penetrating friction drove her mad.

"Please, Grey. I can't take this anymore."

"What do you need?" he asked, his voice deeper, huskier.

"You. Please."

He turned her over on her back, the fire in his eyes. She almost expected him to thrust inside her immediately. Instead, he kissed her breasts. His light, barely there strokes across her nipples made her moan. He plied her tender nipples again and again. Grey worked his way down to her stomach, painting a trail with his tongue.

When he reached the hair at the top of her sex, his gaze took her in hungrily. He separated the swollen, damp folds to bare her tender clit. "So damned pretty."

She closed her eyes and surrendered to whatever would come next.

His fingers played in her wetness, teasing a tender point just above her clit. Then she felt his tongue swirl through her folds and plunge into her body. She gasped, and her hands gripped the bedcovers. Pleasure uncoiled, leaping higher as he nuzzled deeper and deeper. Hot and wet, his tongue caressed inside her tender tissues. His thumb caressed her clit with stroke after stroke. He teased her skillfully, each lazy circle over her flesh, each movement of his tongue into her pussy threatening to tear her apart with rapture. Her lips moved, her pleas for mercy ignored as he drove her onward. When she squirmed uncontrollably in his grip, Grey released her.

"No." She sobbed the word.

"Shhh. It's all right."

She opened her eyes and witnessed the dark glitter in his gaze as he moved to rest on top of her. He levered up on his forearms and buried his fingers in her hair. His breath panted urgently between his lips, a flush high on his cheeks. His hips lowered between her thighs, and with one slow movement, he eased his hardness inside her pussy. As he possessed her, she groaned loudly, unable to contain the pressure. She twisted, her inner muscles flexing around his cock as he slowly took possession.

Her flesh quivered around him, and for a moment she felt like a virgin again, not knowing what to expect, finding the slight burning as he progressed a little uncomfortable. He drew back, taking his body from hers.

"You all right?" he asked softly. "You're so tight. Am I hurting you?"

She brushed her fingers over his cheek. "We'll just go slowly."

With a gentle smile, he eased an inch into her pussy and then withdrew. In and out he pulsed with a rhythm of advance and retreat, until she lifted her hips repeatedly in counterpoint. For an eternity the pleasure built, his exquisite tenderness growing in her heart, filling her up. Tears threatened her eyes as he refused to look away. Endless moments of pure pleasure bombarded her, her clit turning ultrasensitive, her pussy wanting deeper and deeper thrusts.

"Sugar...is it good?" he asked, worry and passion thick in his voice.

"Yes. Goddess yes." She smiled and laughed softly.

A cocky smile parted his lips, then he started to move faster. Her fingers clasped his hips, assisting the motion until with one plunge he thrust his entire cock up her pussy.

She groaned in delicious pleasure as his cock head touched her cervix. "Yes, yes."

He stretched her wide and deep, and the excitement within threatened to burst out of control. She closed her eyes, determined to ride the luxury of each beautiful sensation.

His lips demanded, parting hers for the sure thrust of his tongue. He fucked her with his mouth and his cock withdrew and surged hard. She moaned into his mouth as every inch of his wide cock caressed sensitive tissues. Dorky felt fractured, scattered by the force of his possession as he mated with her with every flex of his hips. High and

deep in her pussy her flesh started to throb. She made dark sounds in her throat as piercing delight swelled. He quickened the pace and his cock rooted deep with urgent strokes, his cock heavy and hot as he stroked her to a mindless, bright plateau. She arched, her hips moving in cadence with his, all concentration now centered on the way his cock caressed a point high up in her sheath. The quickening tightened and coiled deep in the fist of her womb until with a wordless gasp she climaxed. Scalding pleasure made her sob as she bucked upward. Shaking, panting, she rode the exquisite delight.

Grey knew triumph and happiness so strong he almost came in a blast of heady release. Instead, he savored the way her tight pussy clutched him with its depths. He seated his sex to the hilt with harder thrusts and watched the ecstasy flush in her cheeks, her arrested expression. She didn't relax in his arms and that's when he knew. She wanted more, needed more. Unable to stop the rhythm, he gave her everything. His breath hitched in his throat as he fucked her mindlessly. His hands slipped under her ass as he squeezed and held her hips steady for the insistent drive of his cock. Each plunge brought him closer to the edge as the tempo built into raw, fervent plunges.

She bucked, thrashed, her body demanding more. He thrust harder into her sheath, his hunger ravenous. Rocking hard, he drove into the mindless fever with everything he had. With a shout, he came with a feral growl and held tight within her body. A sound like pain left her throat as she screamed through another release, and he felt her wet heat spasm around his cock. Violent climax scalded him as he spilled endlessly inside her, his deep-throated growl loud and pitched with soul-shattering ecstasy.

## Chapter Ten

Grey woke to find his arms empty, and a shivery panic worked through his body. Had Dorky ventured from the compound without him? His eyes flipped open. He searched the room and saw Dorky standing by the large window on the opposite side of the room. Her beauty made his mouth curl into a smile. He put his hands behind his head and remained prone. Dorky's delicate sweetness made perfect sense to him now. He cataloged her physical virtues with pure enjoyment.

Shoulders that looked both strong and completely feminine. Arms toned with female ability and strength. A waving waterfall of hair gleaming with colors of champagne, mouthwatering caramel and sweet honey. He'd buried his face in those strands and drew in their intoxicating scent that reminded him of roses. The pale, lovely, smooth line of her back rolled down to a gorgeous ass. Like a diamond nestled in platinum, Dorky represented precious, mind-blowing desire. No woman he'd met before twisted him in knots like she did, or made his entire focus center to one irrefutable peak experience. Being with her was chaotic, incredible and wonderful. He never wanted to leave her, yet he didn't know what she wanted. He couldn't and wouldn't tell her what she must do. He'd never possess her in that way, no matter how much he desired a continuous relationship.

Relationship, hell.

He wanted hours, days, weeks of reality-bending, toe-curling sex with Dorky.

Yet reality threatened to interfere and he jammed it back. Instead, a fantasy arose. He imagined her opening the curtains. Way up here on the second floor, anyone who looked up from the gardens below would see her nakedness. A spike of possessiveness punctured him, but an equally wild response boiled up from deep inside his male needs. He wanted to take her in front of that window, wanted to show the entire world she belonged to him. No other man would have her from this day forward. He ran a shaky hand through his hair as his thoughts frightened him down to the core.

*Fuck.*

The revelation hit him like a thunderbolt. He couldn't...wouldn't act like a possessive shit. He dragged in a ragged breath. Shit. He'd never imagined fucking her would have this result. Any other time he'd fantasized about having her under him, slipping into her wet heat, he'd thought of it as temporary. A dazzling, gut-wrenching trip he'd wanted for years but never believed could occur. Now he'd experienced holding her, caressing her, fucking her to orgasm, he couldn't imagine being with any other woman. Ever again. He sighed and rubbed his fingers over his jaw.

"Damn, if that isn't the prettiest ass I've ever seen," he said as he left the bed.

Dorky started and turned toward him. Her crystalline eyes reminded him of calm waters, but deep within the depths he saw fear. The freckles across her nose stood out against her pale skin.

He strode toward her and clasped the delicate frame of her shoulders. "Dorky, what's wrong?"

She placed her hands on his chest, and her small hands caressing his pecs made him suck in a breath. "Tell me more about your life. I've told you a lot about me, and I want to understand you better and know what makes you tick."

He grimaced. "Shit. I should have expected this."

Those rosy, tantalizing lips formed a hint of a smile. "What?"

"That you'd want to grill me."

"Of course." She nestled closer, and he drew her fully into his arms. "We just connected in the most intimate way two people can know and understand. It was..."

"Awesome." He breathed the word, startled by his willingness to admit it. He speared his fingers into her soft hair, pressed her head to his chest and kissed the top of her head. "You blew me away."

She sighed and sounded wholly content. "Good."

He laughed, and right then he realized he couldn't remember a time when he was happier. He was in the middle of a major mess, had just slept with another agent, and he wanted to do it again.

Tenderness swelled inside Grey, and for a minute he wrestled the idea. He'd never felt this deeply for any woman before. Never craved to touch her inside and out with a clarity that would destroy boundaries. Earlier, before they'd arrived at Van Doren's house and made love, he might have refused to reveal more to Dorky.

Now...well, now she'd changed all that.

"I don't...tell people anything. My past is my past. I don't dwell on it."

She lifted her head from his chest. "Don't deal with it any more than I dealt with my baggage?"

He rocked her, the hug less sexual than comforting. He relented. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything, from the beginning."

He nuzzled her hair and breathed in her delicious scent once more. "Mmm, you smell so good."

She laughed softly. "Don't try to distract me from the point, Grey."

"Well, you're pretty damned distracting. You're naked." His palms coasted over back, savoring the soft smoothness. "You smell wonderful. I can't wait to fuck you again."

She squirmed a little in his arms. "God, Grey, don't say that."

He tightened his arms and whispered in her ear, "What? Too crude?"



"No. When you say it that way...well, it just does things to me."

"What sort of things?"

She looked up, capturing his gaze and holding it. The soft warmth in her expression burned through him, made him harden to a spike.

She sucked in a breath. "It turns me on. And now, when you're looking at me, your eyes are so hot. I never knew grey eyes could be hot until I met you."

He groaned, and couldn't resist her any longer. Savage desire grabbed him with claws that raked and drove deep. No matter what happened from this point forward, he'd never escape what she did to him. Tasting her, he drew her into a kiss that penetrated deep, his tongue plunging inside her ravenously. Suddenly, she took over the kiss, her mouth hungry. She thrust her tongue into his mouth and demanded. Her hand went between their bodies and found his cock. As her fingers brushed his swollen shaft, he gasped into her mouth. Dorky released him from the kiss and meandered with tantalizing brushes of her lips down his chest. When she reached his nipple, he gasped in heady pleasure. Her wet, warm tongue flicked and stroked while her hand worked his other nipple with exploratory fingers. He shivered under her attention, wondering if he'd died and found nirvana.

He cupped the back of her head. He wanted her long, beautiful hair brushing over his nakedness and falling over his cock. When they'd fucked earlier he'd loved the feeling of silky strands brushing his body. Watching her suck and stroke his nipples hardened his cock into granite. He throbbed, his sensitive cock head tingling. He closed his eyes and let his head fall back. Her tongue slid over him, then her mouth encompassed him. She gripped the base of his cock and stroked him with steady movements until all he could feel was her mouth, her tongue, her insistent touch. Nothing in his life ever felt this good, this freeing. He couldn't stop the moans that escaped his mouth. His fingers twined in her hair as she worked his cock without hesitation. She slipped downward until her mouth could tease his cock. Licking with small, tickling strokes, she tongued the underside of his cock. He shuddered, his fingers massaging her scalp involuntarily. When he tried to edge back, afraid he'd explode down her throat, she kept her hand around his cock.

"Let me give this to you." She licked the tip of his cock and teased the slit.

His breathing was rapid, his heartbeat frantic, desire to climax fast upon him. He closed his eyes. His cock sank into the silky, warm, wet chamber of her mouth. She stroked with mouth and hand, until the groans and grunts issuing from him escalated.

He couldn't stop the litany pouring from his mouth. "Sugar. Oh God."

His hips started to move as he fucked her mouth and she drove him toward ecstatic oblivion. A tidal wave of pleasure blasted Grey, a whirlwind of want and soul-storming pleasure. A feral growl escaped, harsh and undeniable. He spurted into her mouth again and again, and she drank him down.

When he stopped panting and could think halfway coherently, he lifted her to her feet and cupped her face. "That was incredible."

Dorky's eyes sparkled with satisfaction. "I could tell."

He kissed her slowly and deeply. "Lie down with me, and I'll tell you everything."

When he took her hand, she followed him. He drew her onto the four-poster and into his arms. Restraint didn't come easy—he wanted to give her equal pleasure. He couldn't believe what she did to him. Orgasm or not, he still wanted her. Slipping into her warmth would be easy and feel so damned good.

They snuggled, and he cleared his throat. "You have more to tell me too, don't you?"

She craned her neck to gaze up at him. "How did you know?"

"I'm not one hundred percent sure. I just know there's more to why you're staying away from the Shadow Realm. After three hundred years, wouldn't the elves and fairies let you return?"

She shook her head. "It's forbidden."

"Man, talk about unforgiving."

She nodded. "In that way, they are." She sighed. "But you know, in a way I'm not sorry."

He frowned and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Why? You've been separated from your family all this time. Not knowing how they are."

"Oh, I know how they are. I have a contact in the Marcanas that's kept in touch with me all this time. Her name is Nidia. She was...Lyon's sister."

Shock spilled through him. "Oh man."

"She didn't blame me for her brother's death."

"But she grieved for him?"

"Very much. Yet understood what was between Lyons and me and didn't think the Council of Fairies and Elves should have banished me. Against all rules, she's kept my parents informed about me and me about them. It's made life easier. At least I know they are alive and happy."

He caressed the side of her face in reverence, in sympathy for what she'd faced over the long years. "I always heard that in legend elves and fairies were so damned advanced and evolved. How could they treat one of their own like this?"

She sighed and closed her eyes. "Some of what you hear is just that. Legend. Based on truth, but not always one hundred percent accurate."

"Shit."

She laughed, and the sparkle he saw there made him want her more. It was terrifying, in a private, primal way, to realize how much she owned him.

"Tell me more. I want to know," he said.

She nuzzled until the top of her head was under his chin. "I think you should tell me something now. That was the deal."

"Yeah. It was." He waited, uncertain where to start. Finally, after he swallowed the colossal lump in his throat, he managed to speak. "It starts when I'm ten years old."

"What starts?"

"The end of my ideal life."

"Oh Grey."

Her soft, breathy words held a world of sympathy. He continued. "Mom and Dad had an ideal life. At least that's what everyone thought. What I believed. Dad was a native of New Orleans. I didn't know it when I was small, but he was one opportunistic and shady character. The import-export business he ran always skirted the edge of the law. I've never been quite sure how much Mom understood about his business. Mom was from Spain originally, but she met my father at a party and that was it. She married him and immigrated. Mom was from a wealthy family, and they really despised Dad."

"Did they come over from Spain for the wedding?"

"No. You see, she'd run away from her family to the United States, and they were hunting frantically for her. She married Dad less than two weeks after she met him."

"Oh."

"Exactly."

"My dad was twenty-eight when he married her. She was only eighteen, and then nineteen when she had me."

"Did they love each other?"

He smiled, but without real amusement. "You're asking if Mom just married him to escape her family? Good question. I've got my suspicions. Part of me remembers them being happy. Then I remember the yelling and fighting." That damned lump grew in his throat and threatened to strangle him. "I used to cringe when they fought."

Dorky stiffened in his embrace. "He didn't hit her?"

"No. Never that. I think they loved each other but didn't know how to argue. And maybe Mom did kind of marry him to escape Spain and her parents. It worked. They never spoke to her again."

"So you have relatives in Spain?"

"Yep. I tried contacting my grandparents years ago, but they didn't want a thing to do with me."

"How awful."

"I figured after all these years they'd look at their daughter's departure as water under the bridge. But they didn't."

She caressed his back, her touch soothing to his battered memories. He continued the tale. "When I was ten, Mom was murdered by a man Dad pissed off during a bad business deal."

She pulled back far enough to look up at Grey. "Oh Grey. I'm so sorry. That must have been horrible for a little boy."

He kept his attention pinned to a spot on the opposite wall. If he gazed into those sympathetic eyes one more time, he'd break down. And he couldn't do that. Couldn't admit right now, right this minute, that telling her his past hurt like a son-of-a-bitch.

"It was," he said. "In more ways than one." His voice trembled. "A drive-by shooting."

Before he could stop it, his throat tightened, and he took a shivering breath. He didn't expect it, or the tears that slammed him out of nowhere.

"Grey." Her voice whispered, filled with empathy for his aching sorrow. She brushed her fingers tenderly up and down his back, her lips soft and gentle along his shoulders.

"I was there," he said.

"What?" she asked, her voice horrified.

"We were coming back from the grocery store in New Orleans...heading back home. A black truck eased alongside us like it would pass." Again, he paused as memories flashed through him with startling realism. He clutched her tighter as he felt the terror for one agonizing moment.

She patted his back. "It's all right. You don't have to tell me if it upsets you too much."

Heaving a shuddering breath, he thought about clamming up. He couldn't stop now the purge had started, even if tears brimmed in his eyes and threatened to spill over. Then he couldn't stop, and the tears fell over his lower lids and rained down his face.

"Fuck me. I haven't cried like this since..."

"When?" came her soft question as she brushed away his tears.

"Since I realized Mom was dead and not coming back."

He dared look into her eyes and saw her tears threatening to overflow as well. "Oh Grey."

He brushed her cheek. "I don't want you to feel bad for me."

Her lips twitched, and humor replaced some of the ache in her eyes. "But I do. And you can't tell me how to feel, can you?"

Though she kept her voice soft, he heard the steel in it. "I'm sorry. I'm not...damn it. I just don't want you to hurt for me."

Her smile widened. "Thank you. Tell me more about what happened that day, if you want."

He heaved a shaky breath and the tears continued. "One bullet hit my mom in the head and killed her instantly. The other hit me in the right side. The pain was fucking excruciating. The bullet passed through and missed my lung by about an inch."

His side ached in remembrance, as it had on many occasions. He rolled over onto his back to stare at the ceiling. She propped on her elbow and placed her hand over his

right side. Her caresses gave solace despite his raw memories. With a sweetness that eased his soul, she traced her fingers across his ribs, up over his chest and to his cheek.

"The car hit a tree going about sixty. The amazing thing is that the crash alone didn't kill me. Several cars saw it all and stopped to help. That's probably the only thing that kept the hit men from stopping to make sure they'd finished the job. I woke up two days later in the hospital. My father was there. The nurses told me he hadn't left my side."

"The bullet didn't do permanent damage?"

"I have some scar tissue that acts up sometimes. The real trouble came after that."

He turned his head to the left to see her more closely, to fall into the gem-clear gaze that promised to keep him sane in the retelling of this story. "Dad had trouble controlling me from that point forward. I guess you could say I was royally fucked up. I went from content and bookish to full of anger."

"Bookish?"

One corner of his mouth quirked up, and he brushed away lingering tears. "I know that's hard to picture."

Her fingers drifted down to his ass and feathered lightly until he almost squirmed. His cock started to harden. "You're so masculine it's hard to imagine that bookish side."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Goodness, no. You're one of the most intelligent guys I know. I'm sorry...continue with your story."

He didn't mind the detour because it had started to dry his tears. "Dad tried to curb me. I managed to get passing grades, but nothing more. When I was sixteen, I became friends with a Cajun who was a friend of another guy I knew by the name of Renaldo. Pierre was rotten. He taught me the fine art of breaking and entering. Shortly after, my dad was arrested and charged with importing stolen goods. Renaldo's family adopted me legally. Renaldo's wife was a great lady, and I grew to love her. After skirting entanglements with the law, Pierre and I stepped into the line of fire at a warehouse where an SIA operation was going down. Pierre was killed by a weredemon. I was rescued by SIA agent Trader Jackson. Trader gave me his card and told me to call if I needed help. He told me my skills would be better used in the SIA than causing me to get arrested. I knew he was right, but I still had a lot of pain and anger and didn't know how to control it."

Her eyes held empathy, the sign of a woman feeling everything he told her in a deep, profound way. It touched him more than he could say and left his emotions raw as a wound.

"What did you do next?" she asked.

A few months later Renaldo died of liver disease."

He shrugged. "I was at loose ends and filled with restless rage. I knew that I'd do something stupid if I didn't find help. I called Trader, and that's when my life with the SIA began."

He closed his eyes, glad to have finished his tale.

Her heart swelled with empathy for his pain. "I'm so sorry you had to go through all that."

"Sometimes it feels like a damned long time ago and I can't feel the pain. Other times..."

Silence surrounded them for a long time before he continued. "But you know what? I'm not exactly sorry I had to feel all that...experience that pain. Because it made me tough. I'm not sure I could do this job now if I hadn't gone through hell and back."

She didn't seem convinced, her gaze pinned to his with disconcerting concentration. Her fingers glided in that maddening way over his chest and teased his nipples with an absentminded stroke that threatened to turn him into a wild man. She didn't understand how she turned him on, how she made him want to roll her over and sink deep into her body until he forgot even his own name.

He wanted her now.

Before she could react, he rolled her over on her back and straddled her hips. "Maybe I should give you a little of your own medicine, sugar."

She smiled. "What?" He reached for the ties at the top of the bed, and when he reached for one of her wrists, she squirmed under him. "What are you doing, Grey O'Toole?"

When he'd secured one of her slender wrists to the bed, she wriggled under him. "What does it feel like?"

Her smile turned into a kittenish expression he never expected to see on the almost innocent lines of her face. "I think you're getting revenge."

He reached for her other wrist and swiftly tied it to the other bedpost. "Yep."

Her eyebrows went up. "You're easy to read all of a sudden."

"I wasn't before?" His voice went deeper, laced with an almost comical overproduction of his own accent. "Sugar, you've made me transparent. I'm putty in your hands." He found his voice turning huskier, his meaning turning true. "You could ask anything of me, and I'd do it for you."

When he drew back, he witnessed the awe in her beautiful eyes, the way her lips parted. He wanted more of her surrender, more of her sweetness, until he was drunk on the taste of her.

"Tell me something, Grey. Something I've always wanted to know, from the first time you flirted with me."

His throat seized up, this time with pure male terror. *Oh shit.* She was in that female mood that made confession a requirement. But he'd vowed to do anything she wanted. "Sure. Shoot."

"Why are you here now? Is it duty to the SIA, or is it something more? Would you be here if the SIA didn't require you to bring in Derek and myself?"

*Double shit.* She had him there. But fuck it, he wouldn't relent, wouldn't allow reality to mangle up the one time in his life where time seemed to stand still and nothing could happen but spine-melting orgasm.

"I'd be here now even without the SIA directive. You're the best friend I ever had, Dorky." When his throat tightened this time, he couldn't hold back the hoarseness. "You mean the world to me. You're not just a person, you're a part of me." He placed his hand over his heart. "You're deep inside me, and I could never be rid of you, even if I wanted to be." He took a shuddering breath. "You amaze me. I'm in fuckin' awe of you. You've been alive thousands of years. I can only imagine what you've seen, the life you've led. Just what you've told me so far is enough to fill several lifetimes. Do you know what that does to me?"

She shook her head slowly. "Gives you an ulcer? Heartburn?"

He laughed, the sound bursting out of him in a choking, incredible need for release. "No, damn it. It makes me want to do this again."

All the time he'd given his small speech, she watched him hovering over her. Mouth parted in surprise or shock, he couldn't say. No, she remained vulnerable. Open to the plunder he planned for her.

He leaned over and kissed Dorky, feeling the exquisite pillow of her mouth as it accepted his touch, parted for the heated stroke of tongue against tongue. His body reacted fiercely, his cock rock-hard in almost an instant. The burning, pulsing need that clutched in his belly had nothing to do with an ailment, unless she counted an infatuation as deep as the Grand Canyon.

*Infatuation? Is that what I feel?*

Her smooth belly beckoned to him, so he slid down from his predatory crouch so he could slip his fingers over her flat stomach. She quivered, and he smiled. Good. Distract and then attack. If she expected him to start at her stomach, though, he had a surprise for her. He moved up to her neck, his tongue sliding along the sensitive curve. She sighed and turned her head to give him better access. When his lips nibbled and his tongue slid along her collarbone, she gasped and shivered. Her laugh came breathy and filled with a craving that echoed inside him as well.

He crawled between her legs. The sight of all that male hunger directed at her, his thick cock ready to make love, stirred incredible desire inside Dorky.

"You're so beautiful," he said softly as he leaned in and tasted one nipple with a gentle lick.

She gasped, the pleasure sweet and hot. He worked her nipples, his mouth warm, his tongue soothing and caressing. Her nipples went tight and hard as his fingers grasped her nipple and twisted gently. Dorky thought she'd lose her mind as she closed her eyes and savored sensations. His tongue painted the side of her breast and she

squirmed in delight. She panted, her heart beating against her ribs. She wanted to touch him, but the restraints on her wrists kept her in check. She ached to return the caresses, the insane touches. His hands skimmed over her ribs and cupped her breasts, holding them together as he teased both nipples with a relentless beat that made her pant with arousal.

Dorky tugged at the straps that held her secure. "So this is what it feels like."

He grinned. "You betcha. It's going to feel a lot better in a minute."

Sweet, hot need filled her as he slipped his hands up over her bare calves, swirling his fingers in gentle circles. She gasped and giggled, and his eyes narrowed.

A teasing grin came over his mouth. "Sugar, this isn't supposed to tickle."

"Well, it does."

"We'll see about that." The vow in his voice was husky and deep, flavored with a man's rough desire.

When he parted her thighs and eased her legs upward, she almost held her breath in anticipation. Wicked light danced in his eyes. Whatever he planned, she had a feeling it would be beyond delicious. Smoothing his fingers along the inside of her thighs, he didn't wait to ease her into lovemaking. He leaned in and tasted her between the legs. As his lips and tongue slid over her folds, she writhed and her breath caught in her throat.

Her hips wriggled as his tongue slid warmly over her folds, so delicate and gentle. Pleasure arched through her as she opened to him, heart and body. He didn't have to urge her legs to open wider—she parted further on her own and accepted the way he feasted upon her. He lay down on his stomach and buried his head between her legs. He held her thighs, caressing the skin, testing her muscles as he lingered, tasting her as slowly and languidly as a man enjoying the most delicious of meals. His lips and tongue explored thoroughly, always hovering close to her clit but never touching it. So close. She was so close.

"Please, Grey."

He laughed softly against her tissues. "What do you need? Tell me."

Heat rushed to her face. She watched as his tongue found delicate tissue, the tiny bud at the top of her sex that ached and tingled with need.

She couldn't stand it any longer. "Suck my clit."

His gaze came up and a wide grin spread across his face. "Yes, ma'am."

Without waiting, he flicked his tongue with a gentle sweep over her most sensitive area, and pleasure spilled inside her belly and sang through her clit. She quivered and moaned, delight dancing hot and pure in her veins. His tongue painted across her clit once more, and again, until she couldn't stand the buildup. She panted, she whimpered, wriggling in the hold of his hands and the bonds that kept her secure.

"Come on, sugar." Two big fingers dipped into her pussy and sank deep.



Exquisite need caused her to plead like she'd never done before. "Grey, do it. I can't...it's too...please...suck it."

His tongue fluttered over her clit rapidly, his fingers moving inside, caressing sex-swollen tissues so slick and needy. His lips closed over her clit, and he suckled gently.

Climax slammed her. She screamed, shivering in her bonds, her thighs parted wide. The beautiful climax shattered her sense of time, and she drifted in a delicious world she didn't wish to leave.

He slid upward, his smile gentle but satisfied. Without a word, he stretched out upon her, his hips lowering between her thighs. With tiny thrusts he tested her, dipping a little way inside, retreating, dipping. He made a primitive sound, deep in his throat, and his lips captured hers, hot and sudden. As his tongue sought hers he thrust firmly, and his cock plunged within, taking another sound of startled excitement from her throat. Her world folded into this unbelievable moment, this incredible urgency. She was completely vulnerable to him, unable to touch him with her hands. The idea sent a forbidden thrill straight to her clit.

He began a slow, gyrating circle, each stroke gentle. She tore her lips from his, gasping with her need for release. Her excitement had never charged forward so quickly, nor had her need been as potent.

"Oh God," Dorky whimpered, shuddering, burying her face in his shoulder. "Please. Please."

"Yes," he said, his tone hoarse and strained with passion. "Yes."

He thrust harder, spearing into her with jabs that released the animal in them both. Hearing his deep moans of satisfaction, she shook with pleasure.

"Fuck yes," he said, his breathing fast and heavy.

Behind her closed eyelids, a red fire sparked, and her world exploded. A scream rent her throat, but his lips sealed the sound. She worked her hips, enjoying the pounding thrusts of the iron-hard cock impaling her. Climax slammed through her and she shook and arched. He thrust deeper, harder.

He tore his mouth from hers as he buried his face in her neck, groaned and trembled as he poured into her.

\* \* \* \* \*

As Dorky absorbed beautiful contentment and happiness into her thoughts, she savored the way Grey's arms tightened around her as they lay naked among the bedcovers. The room smelled like lavender and sex. The steady sounds of their breaths moving in and out worked like a sedative. It would be so easy to fall asleep here and now. She knew they should rise and prepare for whatever they needed to face next. But she wanted these last few minutes to enjoy before the future came and reminded her why bliss only lasted so long.

A voice slipped into her mind, loud and clear.

*Domhnulla Difyr Ó Seanachain, my darling child. Can you hear me?*

Her mother's beloved voice filled her ears. Startled, Dorky couldn't reply at first. Hearing her Gaelic first and middle names startled her.

Mentally, she answered. *Mother? Ciarda Ó Seanachain?*

*Yes, darling. It's me.*

*Mommy? How are you...how are you communicating with me? It's forbidden.*

Grey's questioning voice entered Dorky's awareness. "Dorky, are you all right?"

She jerked out of her mental communication with her mother and stared at him, knowing her expression must convey delight, confusion and concern in one tangle of emotion.

Tears spilled over her eyelids, and she continued to communicate with her mother in a rush of startled emotion. *Mother, where are you?*

*In the Shadow Realm, as always. I have news I must impart. We need you here desperately. You must come back to the Shadow Realm immediately.*

"Dorky?" Grey's hands went to her naked shoulders. She half sensed his consternation mixed with fear at her near catatonic state.

But she couldn't lose contact with her mother now. *Mother, please tell me quickly. I don't know how long we can communicate.*

*Domhnulla, your father is at the edge of death. Her mother's voice, at once as light as fairy wings and as solid as the mountains, cracked with fear and desperation. She'd never heard such terror in her mother's voice before. The great King of Fairies and Elves, Faodhagan Ó Seanachain is gravely ill. Realm Guardians attacked him. They somehow burst through all our security, the barriers we created long ago to keep them out. Please, you must come. Your father is dying, and he begs to see you one last time. Only you can help us, darling child.*

*Mommy –*

Dorky felt the connection drop and knew her mother no longer could hear her.

"Dorky." Grey shook her gently. He kissed her forehead then looked into her eyes with an intensity that showed his fear. "Where did you go? You scared the shit out of me."

She shivered, slipped her arms around his neck and buried her face in his shoulder. "My father is in trouble. We must help him."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I need to use your doorway to the Shadow Realm."

As soon as she'd explained to Grey about her mother's plea, Dorky urged him to accompany her downstairs to face Derek. They'd dressed quickly – they had no time to waste.

Van Doren's brows knitted, his normally smooth face wrinkled at the forehead. He rubbed one hand over his chin. "I'm not certain that is wise."

Fueled by urgency, Dorky stepped closer and looked into his serious face. "Wise or not, I'm doing it."

Derek turned his attention to Grey. Grey stood near the fireplace, his eyes masked by a keen worry she recognized.

"Don't look at him," she said, not caring how rude she sounded. "I'm the one talking to you. And I don't need his permission to do anything."

To her surprise, Derek's gaze cleared into amusement. His eyes danced, his mouth twitching. "Easy now, Dorky. You're misreading my intentions. I'm not looking for his approval of what you want to do. Remember, I've known you two thousand years. I already understand if you want to leave, you will." His gaze traveled to Grey once more. "Believe me, she's unstoppable."

Grey's eyes flashed, their deep intensity burning through her. "We'll see about that."

Irritation cut through her like a knife. "Grey, you won't stop me." Anger trembled in her voice. "Besides, there are still far too many things you don't know about the Shadow Realm. It's too dangerous for you to come with me."

He shrugged and crossed his arms. "I can learn along the way."

She heaved an exasperated sigh. "Tell him, Derek. The reason why he can't is simple." She stalked toward Grey and when she came within inches, she shook her finger at him. "In the years you've been an agent, you've just done everything with a sense of nonchalance and as if you own the planet. That's what is wrong with you. You're always cocked in a loaded position regardless of danger or consequences."

Grey didn't appear one millimeter fazed. Damn his imperious sense of arrogance. Sure, she'd admired that quality on a deep, almost unconscious level. In this situation it irritated her.

"You didn't tell him the main core of the problem," Derek said to her as he settled into the chair behind his desk.

Dorky always thought he looked regal there—a man on his throne, a king in his complex.

"We didn't get that far," she said.

She sat in a beanbag chair while Grey leaned back against the fireplace mantle. God, she wished he didn't look so masculine, so gorgeous in those dark pants and turtleneck. Wished he didn't have the brooding, almost morose face. It made it hard to remember why she'd drawn back from him earlier. She'd seen Grey's controlled, almost icy front evolve when she'd left the bed quickly. Yet she couldn't take back the action. She needed space—ironic, she knew. Often men complained they needed distance from a woman's suffocating affections.

"What didn't you tell me?" Grey threw her a hard stare.

Derek glanced from her then to Grey with a speculative gleam in his gaze. She blushed. He probably knew what had happened between her and Grey. They'd holed up together for hours, and telling Derek they'd planned strategy all that time wouldn't fly as the truth. Better not even lie.

"Over Dorky's three hundred years in this realm, some of her elf and fairy abilities have actually faded. Her ears—you probably noticed—are no longer pointed at the top," Derek said.

A smile flashed over Grey's lips. "You're kidding. That elf tale is true?"

"Absolutely," Derek said with a confirming nod. "Also, elves and fairies have always been exceptionally long-lived. Hundreds of years. But the child of a mating between elves and fairies creates an immortal. The only way Dorky can be killed is if Zurvan finds her, or she is killed by a Realm Guardian or weredemon. And the blood of the highest born elf and fairy mating creates the highest being in the realm. There are few matings between elves and fairies. When they are combined, though, the results can be either spectacular or disastrous."

"How?"

Derek glanced at Dorky. *Do you want me to tell him?*

*Yes, she said in her mind. Tell him once and for all. The sooner he knows, the faster I can help my father.*

Derek cleared his throat. "Because of the powerful union between elf and fairy, the power can be used for either good or evil. In Dorky's case, we know the power is used for good. In the Shadow Realm she would use her power only for the welfare of others. There is one other elf and fairy union currently alive besides Dorky and me. His name is Kaelan and he was born two hundred years ago. Over those two hundred years, he's amassed incredible strength. He's quite evil."

Dorky almost snorted a laugh. "Quite evil is an understatement."

Derek grunted and continued. "Kaelan has stayed rather dormant over the years, pretending to be subservient to Dorky's father and mother. Unfortunately, there are whispers and rumblings. We've heard from sources within the Shadow Realm that Kaelan intends to take over when Dorky's father passes. If Realm Guardians attacked the king, chances are that Kaelan somehow made it easier. If the king and queen both die, then Kaelan can claim the throne because Dorky has been banished and there are no other heirs directly in the realm."

"But what about you?" Grey asked. "If you're the product of a mating between elf and fairy wouldn't you also be able to take over the throne?"

"The true heir is still Dorky. Kaelan's desire is to steal the throne. I have no desire to be in power. But...Kaelan probably would like to see me dead as well if he sees me as a threat. He would attempt to take the throne by force. But he might also fear that Dorky will return, and the fairies and elves would resurrect her status as heir to throne. They might forgive her."

"Shit," Grey said, his eyes worried. "If her father passed on, she'd be next in line for this Kaelan's wrath. Wait a minute." Grey's brows drew together. "That's why the Realm Guardians attacked me in the hallway outside her office. They didn't want me to reach her. They knew I'd protect her. They'd already planned to harm her father and knew she'd come for him. They want to harm her because they can remove the last barrier to Kaelan becoming king."

Derek leaned on his desk and steeped his fingers. "That would be my guess."

Dorky felt nervous, out of sorts, her whole body prickling with a need to stop talking and take action. "All this talk is fine, but I need to leave now."

Derek held up one hand. "Dorky, you need to prepare first."

All her muscles tensed. "Father may die without me there."

He nodded, his expression grave. "He might."

His very direct statement shook her. The cold, definitive way he stated the truth also gave her pause. God, what she wouldn't do to reverse what she'd done all those years ago—

No. She wouldn't have tried to keep the Marcanas and the elf away from each other. Matching couples was her life at one time. Matching them to create love had filled her heart with genuine purpose. Tears kept her silent. Quiet encompassed the room while she took in the enormity of her situation.

"What do you think I should do then, Derek?" she asked.

His hands clasped the arms of the chair. "If it were up to me, and I didn't think it would cause you undue anguish, I'd force you to stay here." His looked weary. "After all, the thought of losing you—"

He clammed up, and Dorky felt new tears threaten. She swallowed her emotions. "Thank you. As it is, I know it wouldn't be wise for us to work at cross-purposes. You'd fight me, and then we'd have a mess."

Despite the fact her powers had lessened over time as she stayed in this realm, she could resurrect them under extreme stress. Fighting to leave here when Derek didn't want it...well, that would take a significant chunk of energy from her that she needed to fight Kaelan.

"You're stronger than Van Doren?" Grey asked.

She nodded. "In a manner of speaking. Tell him, Derek."

"Well, you know most everything...except maybe this. Even though my powers are considerable, and my age gives me an advantage, I'm not as powerful as Dorky. No one knows why. Throughout history there hasn't been a study as to power differences between elf and fairy matings. Elves and fairies can live thousands of years, but they can be killed. Kaelan, Dorky and I are much more difficult to destroy. We are virtually immortal."

"You said Zurvan could kill immortals."

"As far as we know. Given everything put together, she is probably the most powerful elf/fairy individual alive."

At first Grey's silvery eyes burned with a special concentration. Then they flashed with pure recognition. He looked back and forth between Dorky and Derek.

He left the mantle and paced to the middle of the room. "She's in danger from Zurvan because she's the highest being in the other realm too? If she was in the other realm?"

"We confirmed that through Nidia. Zurvan would try to harm her because of its desire to overwhelm all in the Shadow Realm to its evil and then to move permanently to our world where it would find no barriers to destroying us all. It's possible that Kaelan is working independently of Zurvan. Therefore she is in danger from two areas."

"Shit," Grey said. "But this Zurvan has traveled to this realm before? Why didn't it wreck havoc and kill everyone then?"

Dorky broke in, "Because it likes to create bits of evil, to turn people against each other, to frighten them to death and then take their energy much the way a weredemon does. It thrives on evil, violence and hate."

"You see how important it is for Kaelan and the Zurvan to be stopped?" Derek asked with a plea in his eyes.

She glanced up at Grey. "Look, I'm very worried about my father. He needs me and I'm wasting time here."

Grey's head inclined, his relaxed stance transforming into an affirmation of her urgency. "What's the game plan?"

"This is not a game plan," Derek said in protest as he glanced at the door that would lead into the Shadow Realm.

Dorky had seen this doorway so many times, with its intricate carvings. She knew stepping through it would transform everything and might bring about her doom. But she would sacrifice for her mother and father, if she must.

"We'll be fine," Grey said, full of piss and vinegar the way an SIA agent would present himself.

Derek glanced at them skeptically. Dorky knew Derek referred to their lack of supplies.

"I've prepared," she said. "As much as I can." Dorky patted Derek's shoulder in genuine affection. "We have plenty of food for the journey."

"I'm taking your word for it since I haven't got a clue," Grey said.

Derek rose from his chair and came around to the front of his desk. "You should take a few moments to meditate. To prepare for the stress you'll encounter."

She nodded, knowing he was right. "We will."

Derek headed for the doorway. "I'll be back in less than an hour."

After Derek departed, Grey came close to her, his eyes filled with understanding and yet undeniable concern. When he said nothing, she allowed a fissure in her heart to crack wider. She didn't edge away, though she wished she had the strength. After all, if she did, maybe he wouldn't fall into danger even more terrible than he'd already encountered. Instead, she drank in his clean, male scent, allowed it to pour over her in a wave of comfort.

"Dorky?" He looked and sounded worried. "Something wrong?"

"You seem to think I have a game plan."

"Of course. You always do. The SIA didn't hire you for nothing."

She laughed, but without honest humor. "You're right. I usually do have a plan. But this time...this is different."

His frown deepened. "Shit. I'm sorry. It's different when it's someone you love." He paused, as if considering a critical point. "You miss them a lot, don't you?"

She shifted under his grip, but he didn't release her. "Of course. Don't you miss your loved ones?"

"Yeah. But it hasn't been three hundred years since I've seen them."

Fresh pain awakened, and tears shimmered on her eyelids. "I haven't done this much...this much blubbering in hundreds of years. Three hundred, to be exact." God, she hated feeling this weak. She inhaled a hard, almost choking breath. "I wish I could say I have a special game plan. I don't. I just know I need to return to the Shadow Realm and help my parents. It's the least I can do after what I did to them before."

He shook his head. "How many times do I have to tell you, you didn't do anything wrong?" He cupped her shoulders, his grip firm but reassuring. His eyes shone with sincerity, with a passionate belief. "Stop blaming yourself. You're a powerful woman with untold abilities. I can't wait to see everything you can do." He smiled. "Just the idea turns me on."

He winked, but she didn't take the bait.

"It is my fault. I started this hundreds of years ago. Somehow I must finish it," she said.

"Not without me."

Apprehension and stubborn pride bolted through her. "Yes, without you. I won't let you get hurt."

He held up his hands in a definitive gesture. "We're not doing this again, Dorky. I'm an SIA agent. Besides, we're considered fugitives from the law now."

"I know. They'll send in agents after us. But we have an advantage."

"How?"

"We're entering from Derek's house. The SIA agents will enter from my office. It'll take longer to reach us."

He blinked. "There's a portal to the Shadow Realm from your office?"

She grinned, amused by his dumbfounded expression. "Yes."

"I'll be a son of a bitch."

She managed a tiny smile, and when he caught her grin, he returned it with a much larger one. He released her, but he stayed near.

Relishing his strength, she felt it suffuse her with new motivation. "We'll head to my friend Nidia of the Marcanas. She'll supply us and give us information on what's happening. Earlier I tried contacting her telepathically but couldn't get an answer. It worries me."

"Has she ever not answered before?"

"No. She always answers, no matter her location or mine."

"Damn."

She shifted out from under his touch and wandered to the couch. She sank down on the edge.

He settled onto the couch next to her. "What's wrong? Tell me."

How could she? She allowed the tears to flow, and he made a soft noise in his throat. He slipped his arm around her shoulders. "Hey, hey. What is it?"

Misery walloped her, and now the tears wouldn't stop rolling. She hated it. "I can't...everything's twisted. I don't know which way is up anymore. The last thing I need to do is fall apart, and now I feel like everything is piling in on me."

Grey drew her full into his arms, and she drew some instant comfort from the warmth and strength of his embrace. He kissed her forehead, and she pressed her head against his shoulder.

"Tell me more," he said, his voice tender and husky, as if he might share her load.

His statement gave her pause. "You won't tell me not to cry?"

"Sugar, why would I do that?"

"Most men would."

His mouth twisted into a sarcastic smile. "I'm not most men."

A grin slipped through her misery. "No, you're not." She sighed. "I'm feeling...adrift. Like there are too many things to process at once." Tears poured in a fresh wash of heartache. Her body shivered, her soul seemed to ache under the weight of burden.

"I know what we'll face when I enter the Shadow Realm again. Or maybe I'm afraid that I don't know what I'll find. Will it be the same? Time moves so much more slowly in the Realm than it does here."

"In reality?"

"In perception. A day can seem like two days in the Shadow Realm."

"But that much time hasn't actually elapsed over here?"

"No."



She felt the exquisite brush of his lips on her forehead again, the contact featherlight but tender.

"Nothing happened to you over three hundred years that made you want to cry before? How is that possible?" he asked.

She sobbed, took a deep breath to regain some control. "I never had as much to lose until now."

The words hung out there, and she didn't know how he'd interpret them. But whatever he felt, she couldn't stop the words from coming. Her heart and soul seemed to ache physically.

"It's okay." He brushed one hand over her hair. "That's part of the problem, isn't it? You think you shouldn't fail. Shouldn't feel pain. Shouldn't be human. But under that extraordinary Fairy and Elf exterior, you're as human as I am." He cupped her face and looked deep into her eyes. "You've been trying to hide from that for three hundred years."

She sighed, hard and long as her body trembled through a wave of understanding and heart-rending pain. What he said made perfect sense. In fact, she couldn't believe how much sense it made.

"I've always been strong. I can't fail like this." She whispered the words, so afraid.

Understanding filled his eyes. "Is that what this is to you? Crying is failure?"

She nodded.

"Is that the Fairy/Elf way? To stifle feelings?"

"We aren't exactly like humans. We're emotionally tough. Hard-nosed despite our enlightenment. We feel everything humans do, but we're far more resilient."

"Maybe your culture isn't as enlightened as you think." His voice sounded unyielding. "Feel it now, sugar." He kissed her gently, his lips warm and reassuring. "Be human. Here and now."

Simple. And she knew he was right.

The dam broke and shredded the fear threatening to jam in her throat, wiped clean the accumulated sadness of three hundred years. She allowed his arms to hold her, to absorb some of the storm inside her threatening to rip her apart with guilt and shame. And with his comforting came relief, something she hadn't truly known in hundreds and hundreds of years.

## Chapter Eleven

Dorky sat in the small wicker chair on the veranda surrounding the back of the house. Wind rustled her hair, but gently as a lover's touch. A full moon shone in all its glory, the ghostly white light bathing her in its power.

The ache in her heart had banished somewhat after her tears. It lingered, but not with the full, threatening feeling she'd experienced earlier.

Blame it on her tender, wonderful Grey. She couldn't deny feelings as easily around him. No, not anymore.

To ready herself for what would come, she stood and closed her eyes. She lifted her arms and drew the moon down through her arms and allowed it to cover her body in protective white light.

"The God and Goddess, the Lord and Lady are with me. They surround me in the white light of their protective love. I am with them and they are with me. We are one always. Lord and Lady, Lady and Lord, give me the strength to endure all that may come. Surround me with your wisdom and protection."

Strength started to return to her battered spirit. At least now she had a fighting chance when she entered the Shadow Realm. She lowered her arms to her sides and closed her eyes to experience more of the silvery moonlight and its cleansing properties.

Soon she left the balcony, back to Grey and her upcoming journey.

\* \* \* \* \*

The phone rang, and Dorky's heart jumped, her nerves on hyperdrive. She didn't want to feel this confused, this out of her element and vulnerable. Leaving the SIA had stolen her defenses on the most fundamental level. Knowing Grey on intimate terms gave her hope and yet scared her profoundly.

Derek reached for the phone on his desk, his smile sardonic, his gaze dancing with good humor. "I wonder who this could be?"

When he answered, his expression turned serious. "Yes. Yes. We've heard that." He sighed and looked at the floor. "Yes, Quinton, we know."

Irritation lined Derek's voice, and she knew the game had begun in earnest. After all, she'd expected the SIA to go ballistic once they realized she'd left the complex. Once Grey didn't force her and Derek to return to the agency.

"We can't do that." Derek's voice held pure anger this time. "It's too dangerous. There's too much at stake."

Dorky frowned, surprise blindsiding her. What did she expect? Of course, Quinton would contact them at some point, but she didn't expect the heat in Derek's eyes or the vehemence in his tone.

"We can't turn the files over to you. If we do, everything is ruined," Derek said, his voice softening. "I understand. The SIA has an obligation to protect its property, but you don't understand. It's like I told you before. If we give up the paperwork, if it falls into the wrong hands, people will die." His gaze flicked up to Grey and Dorky, and he shook his head. "Quinton, this is national security. If it's let out of the bag, humankind won't recover. People won't be able to adjust. You know that. I took the paperwork and left SIA because I realized all my work studying immortality didn't make a damn bit of difference. I wasn't going to find a way to explain the Shadow Realm to humans on this side, nor could I explain immortality without completely unraveling the fabric of people's minds. Humans on this side simply aren't ready for the information."

Dorky's gaze snapped to Grey's. He ran his big hand through his tumble of hair, and the gentle lamplight sent red and gold glints dancing over the shiny strands. For a moment she almost forgot her surroundings and how important the conversation had become between Quinton and Derek.

She moved away from Derek's huge desk and to a window with an enchanting view of garden just beyond. Derek had created a fairy-tale world she remembered from long ago. She inhaled sharply as she absorbed the beautiful profusion of flowers he'd created against all reasonable expectations. After all, it was fall here...damned cold, as a matter of fact. Somehow, with his magick, he'd turned the harsh season into a Garden of Eden. At least, staring into a profusion of red and pink flowers, she could believe she had a chance. That Quinton and the rest of the SIA didn't think she'd committed some horrible crime. The sun shone as a huge furious yellow disk that didn't warm the frost on the glass or the cold in her heart. Yet more than that, she feared for Grey's reputation as a crack agent, for the support system he'd built in his years as an agent with SIA. This event she'd dragged him into could mean he would lose his job, be arrested, or worse...lose his life. The sadness she'd tried to repel so vigorously reappeared like a nightmare.

"Do you honestly believe, in a millennium, that Dorcas Shannigan and Grey O'Toole are a part of some international conspiracy against the SIA and subject to treason charges?" Derek asked.

Quinton wouldn't say that. He wouldn't even think it. Would he?

Derek paused for quite a while, his sighs impatient, his stance behind his desk rigid. "Please try to understand."

She turned away from the window, her attention seeking out Grey. Grey walked toward her, his eyes a swirling gray pool, mysterious and dark. She saw curiosity and worry within those eyes. Van Doren's conversation continued in the background, while Grey mesmerized her. When Grey reached her, his expression lay open for her to see. His mask, always on in the worst of times, had slipped the moorings. She saw worry and consternation mixed with genuine sadness. His career had come to this.

Derek held the phone out to Grey. "Quinton Maybrick. If you can talk some bloody English sense into him, be my guest."

Grey took the phone, and she sank onto the edge of Derek's desk.

"Quinton," Grey said. "Yeah, I know."

He didn't need to explain to Quinton what had happened, for he'd told him in an earlier conversation how Dorky had saved his life. Still, she felt as if the noose tightened, and even Quinton, whom she trusted, was somehow no longer a man she could rely upon to understand her part in this adventure. Grey's voice turned into a low rumble, a calm influence.

Derek waved for her to join him at the fireplace. He flipped the switch at the side and the gas logs fired into a warm glow.

In a low voice he said, "Quinton was warning me that Level Ten has put out a directive that we be stopped at all costs. We're number one enemy."

Her heart sank, her eyes filling with angry tears. "How dare they? How dare they?"

"Because they have to." His pale skin went paler. "Despite what we've told them, I suppose they have to treat us this way."

"They don't. I've worked with them from the beginning. They know me, Derek. They know I would never put the SIA in jeopardy. By leaving the complex I'm drawing the Realm Guardians away from the SIA. Why can't they see that?"

"Because there are agents there who don't see past the end of their thumbs. Thinking outside the box is too difficult for them. They were trained with SIA directives from the beginning. They don't have a real-world application from the 'outside' to use as an example."

"Of thinking outside the usual."

"Yes."

She closed her eyes and drew her fingers through her hair. Damn the SIA. Damn them if they could lose trust so quickly. If she'd been into cursing, she would have dumped a stream of expletives right then.

"In other words, we're in deep dip?" she said.

He sighed. "Quinton did say he didn't agree with the Level Ten directive. He believes you're innocent, Dorky, but he's not certain about me."

"He said that?"

Derek shrugged. "In not so many words. He said he claimed he couldn't help us unless we all came in. Level Ten gave us time while you recovered. Now he's saying we have no choice but to admit to wrongdoing and surrender." His eyes went thunderous, their pale depths devoid of the warmth she normally associated with him. "But we cannot and will not return to the SIA when they are ready to convict without so much as a by your leave. If I go back I'm already subject to punishment for taking government records offsite. You and Grey...well, he could claim he was here the whole time trying

to coerce us into returning. You could even say that's what you were trying to do—convince me to turn myself in to the authorities."

A niggling suspicion, one she didn't wish to acknowledge, sprang to life. "You never did explain why you took the papers. Is it because you think the Realm Guardians would steal them? Use the information to harm me?"

He didn't speak for a moment, and she heard Grey's voice soft and low in the background. She'd blocked out his conversation all together.

Derek said, "Realm Guardians have always known about your immortality. Yet they didn't understand why it occurred. My research is on the cusp of explaining it all, and I refuse for it to fall into their hands and destroy your life...to allow them to harm the royal family."

Royal family. Well, that was something she hadn't considered for a long, long time. "Thank you for protecting my parents."

"And you, my dear. You."

When she looked into his eyes, she had a momentary glimpse into a spontaneity she didn't know existed within him. And something else she'd refused to believe until that moment. She saw a fire in his eyes almost equal to Grey's. A fire for her.

No.

That couldn't be.

Grey hung up the phone and left the desk. "He's pissed. I couldn't talk him out of his stand. Yes, he believes we're innocent, but he doesn't approve of us staying here either. He's calling out the big guns."

"Who?" Derek asked.

"Sending in more agents." Grey crossed his arms.

"Damn it." Derek again appeared more aggressive and perturbed than she'd ever seen or imagined she'd see. "Why can't they understand?"

"They're human," Grey said. "Foibles and all."

She marveled at the unexpected turn in their personalities. It seemed Grey's piss and vinegar approach had calmed, whereas Derek had stolen some of Grey's fire.

"Then we have to make some decisions." Derek abandoned the warmth of the hearth and crossed to his desk. "If we stay here, we can hide away for weeks. More. Yet nothing will be solved. If you leave...if we leave...the SIA will hunt us down."

"That's for damned certain." Grey jammed his hands in his pants pockets. "They'll send their best agents. Ian Frasier will send Marcus, maybe even SIA soldiers like TJ Calhoun and Lucas Sloan." He grinned. "Or maybe that new agent Ryan Ahern. He's a tough bastard."

Dorky touched his shoulder. "You are one of their best agents. The very best."

He grunted but didn't respond to her praise. "Let's assume we're in deep shit and need to plan the best strategy."

"What would that be?" she asked.

"Find a place to hide you and Van Doren. I'll go back to the SIA and distract them. Be the sacrificial pig."

She grabbed his forearm. "No. If you leave here...if any of us leave here, the Realm Guardians will attack. You won't make it back to the SIA."

One of his brows tweaked up. "I made it through the ones that attacked me before."

"I know. But..." What could she say in refute? He stared at her in expectation. Finally she said, "You are one of the few humans I've ever known to even survive an attack by Realm Guardians."

Derek cleared his throat. "Perhaps he's right. He should go back. The distraction will assist us."

"To do what?" She threw her hands up and started to pace the room, her steps furious and her mind no longer the calm, assured one she usually maintained. "This is...what did they used to say in the old days...poppycock? We can't hole up in here forever. Grey can't leave this complex unprotected."

"I have a particle sword," Derek said. "He could take that."

"Good idea." Grey moved toward her with his strong, yet graceful walk. He took her hands in his big, warm grip. "I'll have one of the best weapons I could ask for."

Anxiety she hadn't experienced in a long time clogged her throat and filled her eyes with tears. "No. Come with me instead. At least I'll know where you are."

He inhaled deeply, keeping silent for just a few seconds. "All right."

Derek nodded. "Then I'll stay here while you two venture into the Shadow Realm. I can put up a few barriers and distractions to keep the SIA busy for quite a while."

\* \* \* \* \*

To Dorky the den seemed way too quiet. She'd returned to the den a few minutes earlier. Derek and Grey had put together two supply backpacks filled with essentials for the long trip.

Now they stood at the threshold of taking an important step. She'd been gone so long from the Shadow Realm, she didn't know how to feel or think about entering it now.

*Yes, you do. You're helping your father. Nothing else matters beyond that.*

After she'd taken the few minutes to calm her fears about Grey coming with her into danger, she realized she couldn't make him do anything he didn't want. No matter what she felt about him, she couldn't control him.

Derek crossed the room and they followed until they stood in front of the curtain over the panel that hid the Shadow Realm doorway. He drew back the curtain and then slid the pocket door into the wall with ease. The metal door in front of them looked utilitarian in comparison to the Shadow Realm door located in her office in the SIA.

Derek closed his eyes, and seconds later the door slid open without assistance. Just inside the doorway darkness yawned like the blackest night imaginable. Dorky's heart pounded with anticipation. Happiness and stark fear mixed together inside Dorky.

"Holy crap," Grey said. "How did you do that?"

Derek smiled. "Powers of the mind, dear boy. Powers of the mind."

Grey smiled weakly. "Should have known."

She hesitated to step forward, even though she'd slung the backpack over her shoulder and had a flashlight in hand.

Grey moved into position beside her. "Let's go in together."

She couldn't say for certain if his self-assured expression was genuine, and his eyes betrayed only determination.

"Let's," she said with a smile.

Dorky had opened the door in her office to the Shadow Realm hundreds of times over the decades, but when she stepped over this threshold, she shivered. This doorway, unlike the one in her office, stayed dark and cold.

"Be careful," Derek said, his voice filled with worry.

She glanced back at him. Concern etched his brow and haunted his eyes.

"Of course. Aren't I always?" she asked.

He smiled and his gaze swung to Grey standing alongside her. "Take care of her. She means a hell of a lot to so many of us."

She sniffed in haughty disdain then smiled. "Oh yeah. Now you guys recognize my genius."

Both men laughed. Good. She couldn't stand the gloom and doom in their eyes.

"Let's go," she said with a lilt in her voice. "We don't have all day."

As Derek waved at them and closed the door, the flashlights they held illuminated the area. Dorky shivered.

"You okay?" Grey asked as he slipped his arm around her.

"I'm stepping into a world that was once familiar to me, and now it feels...alien. It's been three hundred years. Even in my immortal life, that adds up. My memories are as fresh as yesterday, but as faded as an old tomb."

He nodded. "Does it feel like a dream? A bad dream?"

"I'll say. It could paralyze me if I let it. And I hate this vulnerability. It's not me, Grey. I've always been strong." She sighed. "Damn it! I'm whining again."

"Whine all you want. I'm right there with you. I've never done anything quite like this before."

"And?"

"I think you deserve to whine. My guess is you haven't done much of it in the last few years. Hell, the last three hundred years."

She wanted to kiss him, but she held back, a small demon on one shoulder telling her to wait.

She frowned and looked up at him, taking some comfort from his support. Grey's eyes softened, and within them she saw the strength she believed she'd lost in the last few days.

"Sugar, you're the strongest woman I know. I don't blame you for feeling uncertain." He tugged her close, so that her body pressed all along his. "Like I said earlier, give yourself some slack. Allow yourself to feel."

In that moment, standing on the edge of a new adventure that scared the crap out of her, she found renewed hope in his reassurance, in the deep feelings that grew within the longer she stayed near him.

She touched his stubbled jawline with a slow sweeping caress. "I'm so glad you're with me."

With a wicked grin, he leaned in and kissed her quickly, with a sweet affection and deep passion rolled into one. His warm breath brushed over her mouth when he drew back. "You're one hell of a woman, Dorky. I have faith in you, and whatever lies ahead, we'll weather it."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because we're both too damned stubborn."

She smiled, some of the frantic need to escape easing. "You're right about that." After a second she asked, "Why are you really here?"

He frowned. "To keep you safe."

His macho statement didn't surprise or bother her. She'd known him long enough to realize he meant it. With a finality that ground inside her with paralyzing fear, she knew he'd stare down any danger for her without a moment's hesitation.

Tears surged to her eyes. "That's what I fear the most."

"Being kept safe?"

She swallowed hard, took that step off the edge. "No. Losing you while you're trying to protect me. The thought of never seeing you again scares me worse than anything I've ever felt."

There. She'd said it and didn't know it would come out until it passed her lips. *Holy Mother Goddess. Holy, holy Goddess.*

His eyes held that stunned surprise she never thought she'd see in his expression. As if she'd made a pronouncement both amazing and perhaps scary.

"I don't know what to say."

Well, okay. That wasn't what she expected him to say at all. It wasn't what in her heart of hearts what she wanted him to say.



She took a heaving breath, a strange pain eating deep. No, she just wouldn't go there. She took the special flashlight she'd hooked to her utility-like belt and switched on the illumination. "Let's go. We have a lot of ground to cover before we reach Nidia."

He turned on his light as well. "How far?"

"A day of walking."

"Right. I forgot what you'd told me."

Ignoring the pain that threatened inside her, she continued down the long hallway.

He picked up the pace and stepped in front of her. "Let me go first."

Her humor a little restored, she smiled. "Okay."

He glanced back at her. "Okay? That's not what *I* expected to hear."

"I'll give you some slack this time."

He chuckled. "So tell me, how many doorways lead into this Shadow Realm?"

"Hundreds. All around the world. In every country."

"Damn."

\* \* \* \* \*

Grey's light illuminated the passage in front of him, which couldn't be much more than ten feet across. They'd passed through some areas Dorky called minor temples, and yet she assured him what they'd see ahead ventured into the more elaborate. As they walked, he worried. Her strength seemed drained, her uncertainty more than ever. She had dark circles under her eyes, her already pale skin enhanced by the almost bruised appearance. Somewhere along their trip, she'd anchored her thick hair in a sturdy tie-back. The waterfall, as he thought of her hair, slipped down her back in silky waves he wanted to touch, to feel around his naked body. Memories of the sex they'd shared seared into his memory. Making love to her would stay in his mind until he died. Which, if this adventure went wrong, might be sooner rather than later.

*Fuck. He couldn't think this way. I never give up, and Dorky needs me. Even if she's an immortal, she still needs me.*

They'd walked for a couple of hours when they came to a fork. "Which way?" he asked.

"To the right. Just around the corner we'll come to *Columbaria of Pomponius Hylas*."

That meant nothing to him, but he made the turn to the right and they continued. A small light brightened the end of the passage. When they reached it, he saw a narrow rock doorway wide enough for one person at a time to pass through.

Apprehension stopped him. He angled his light into the entrance. "I take it this is columbaria of Pomp – whatever you called it?"

"Yes. Go ahead. It's perfectly safe."

"How do you know?"

She sidled up next to him, and her waterfall of champagne hair fell across her right shoulder in a ripple. "Because I traveled this way before. Three hundred years ago."

When he glanced inside, he saw things he hadn't expected. Light streamed over a steep staircase that looked as weathered and ancient as any fortress lived in and used for years immemorial. Steps were worn in the middle by hundreds of feet over perhaps hundreds of years.

"Why didn't you teleport your way to where you needed to be? Didn't you say that you could do that?" he asked on a whim.

"Only in extreme emergencies. Such as when I came to find you at Dr. Van Doren's house. I can't use it indiscriminately for convenience."

"Ah."

Before he could stop her, she walked through the door. "Come on."

"Wait." He reached for her arm, but she'd disappeared through the portal. "Dorky, damn it—"

"Come on, scaredy-cat."

*Scaredy-cat. Why that little—*

"It's okay," she said. "We can go down the stairs. There's nothing to fear."

"Yeah, right."

"Really."

"What's that light down there?"

"All of the chambers protected by Marcanas have that glow. Sometimes it's so bright, it's hard on human eyes."

"Not on yours?"

"Never."

He didn't sense danger here, that odd sensation in his gut that normally warned him that things would go tits up in a heartbeat. He proceeded down the steep stairway, drawn toward the semi-darkness banished by the strange warm glow. He stepped through the opening, ready to berate her about safety and caution. What he saw took his breath away. The *columbaria* might be centuries old, but it remained beautiful and impressive. Amazed by what he saw in front of him, he didn't move. Everything within him stilled.

When he made the last step down, he saw a warning not to disturb this place. By the stairway, along the facing wall, stood two huge griffins about seven feet tall. Black and majestic, they stood without rival. Their wings gleamed with a silvery, almost metallic sheen. He stepped toward them with curiosity. Then he saw one of them blink.

"Holy shit." He stepped between them and Dorky, his stance defiant and protective. Adrenaline surged through his blood as he braced for attack. "What the fuck?"

She stepped out from behind him and held her hand up to the griffins as if she would pet them. "It's all right. We mean no harm. Remember me?"

"They'd remember you?" he asked, dumbfounded.

Both griffins blinked, then their wings unfolded and they released high-pitched squeaks. Grey braced, muscles tight.

She placed her hand on Grey's arm. "It's okay. They won't hurt us."

"Right. They don't look friendly."

She smiled and took a step toward them, palms up and open. "That's the idea. Any intruders from this side of the realm won't last long."

He eyeballed the griffins—they'd folded their wings and their intense yellow eyes appeared mild. "We're not intruders?"

"No. They recognize friendly people when they see them. They understand we mean no harm."

One griffin leaned forward slightly as she reached upward to pet his head.

"Dorky, don't," Grey said, still ready to defend if necessary.

"It's all right."

Her quiet voice and the humor in her eyes didn't reassure him one damn bit.

"Welcome," one griffin said, its voice clearly masculine, but with a somewhat rough, straining edge that resembled a bird.

"Fuck," Grey said in reaction. "Fucking talking animals."

The other griffin also spoke. "Animals?" Its expression remained birdlike, without human expression. "We are protectors of the innocent. Any who come here unwittingly but without intent to harm are escorted from here before danger befalls them."

"I'll be damned," Grey said in continual amazement.

"I think not," the first griffin said. "You seem quite alive and healthy. I see into your heart, and it is truly pure. You are a noble man."

Still flabbergasted, Grey didn't speak. If the griffins had morphed into some damn cartoon creatures, he would have considered checking into the nearest funny farm.

"Why are you amazed by what you already know?" the first creature asked as Dorky scratched its head continually. "Ah. That feels good."

Grey laughed softly. "Crap. This is amazing." He eyeballed the creatures. "I'm surprised because even though I've heard about you guys, I don't think I ever believed it."

"Ever the skeptic," the second griffin said with a rusty voice. "That can be advantageous in this realm."

When Dorky smoothed her fingers over the griffin's feathered head one more time, the griffin's lion-like tail rose and twitched.

"See? They're harmless to us. Pet the other one."

He kept close to her, but he shook his head and watched the creatures cautiously. "Hell no."

"What do you seek?" the griffin closest to Dorky asked.

"The way to Nidia. She still resides in the same area?" Dorky asked.

"She does," the second griffin said.

Dorky frowned. "Could you accompany us? For protection?"

"We would," said the first griffin, "but we're required to guard this place for eternity."

She sighed. "Still?" She crossed her arms, looking exasperated. "You've lived here how long?"

"Since Pomponius Hylas and his wife were laid to rest here," the second griffin said.

"Then how did their urns get stolen?" Grey asked.

The first griffin almost looked affronted. "Unfortunately, Zurvan's minions came through here decades ago and stole the ashes for their own purposes. We could not protect them from Zurvan. Nothing is safe from Zurvan."

"Nothing?" Dorky asked. "I don't think that's true. Others have escaped Zurvan's wrath. Personal friends of mine."

The second griffin squawked. "Few, my lady. Few. Take care and take heed. There are many dangers ahead."

"Of course," she said.

Though he didn't feel comfortable standing so near them, he realized if she did, he needed to ease up. The danger could come from any angle, but apparently not these odd animals. Umm...non-animals.

"The trial ahead is steady but severe. Watch yourselves," the second griffin said. "May the God and Goddess be with you."

"And with you," Dorky said softly.

Then, before their eyes, the griffins solidified into their original stony presences.

"Wild," Grey said. "Why do they turn solid?"

"Because unwary intruders are taken off guard and just think they are a couple of statues."

He nodded. "Makes sense."

Grey observed the room and noted the Latin inscription carved between the griffins.

"Step not into this place unless you have pureness of heart, for danger lurks beyond," Dorky said in a husky voice. "Or so says the inscription."

"Great. I'm not sure I qualify for pureness of heart."

She laughed softly. "You are pure enough."

He frowned. "Oh goody."

A sparkling arrangement of glass mosaic spelled two names in Latin.

"Pomponius Hylas and Pomponia Vitalinis owned this burial place," she said. "*Cnaei. Pomponi Hylae Et Pomponiae. Cnaei. Libertae Vitalinis.*"

A niche in the left wall of the columbarium held bright red and blue decoration along the trifoil pattern. He noted a stucco representation of a centaur.

"This is so beautiful." She walked toward the niche.

"It looks centuries old. Crumbling. Why don't the Marcanas take care of it?"

"Some of these old tombs are neglected because there are hundreds of miles of these things and only so many Marcanas to repair them. These ruins were here before the ancient Greeks and Romans, before the Etruscans. Where do you think those societies got their ideas?"

As she pointed to different areas in the tomb and remarked about the beautiful dark reds, earth colors and ultramarines, he watched her with fascination. He barely heard her explanation of the hows and whys. Alcoves resembling small temples divided the chamber. Time had been cruel and kind, leaving beauty behind and removing almost as much. Bit by bit he discerned details. Cupid struggling to unroll a scroll, another cupid tottering on a vine.

She continued through the chamber and examined the niches and decoration as if she'd seen it all yesterday. Her casualness in the face of this extraordinary world shouldn't surprise him, but it did. Realization rose inside him like a peak experience — one of those times when peace comes inside and assures that living in this moment, this sweet moment, is all there is. *Way to go, O'Toole. I'm as fuckin' mushy as a woman about this. Shit.*

Then he said her name softly. "Dorky."

She turned to him, and with a languid movement she reached up and brought his mouth down for a quick kiss. "Yes."

His body stirred, his stomach filled with a dance of nerves and pleasure. "Uh..."

Mischief danced in her gaze. "Made you forget, did I?"

He slipped his arms around her waist. "I'll make you forget. Do you suppose the griffins ever catch anyone making out in here?"

Color touched her cheeks. "Grey."

"Well?"

"I suppose it's possible —"

Before she could protest, he kissed her deeply. He held nothing back. As her lips parted for his tongue, he fell straight into a hot, drugging kiss. Her tongue met his, tangling and stroking until his cock turned spike hard. His hips moved against hers, and she moaned. He wanted, right now, to cup her ass, wrap her legs around his hips, and fuck her until neither of them could stand. His breath caught in his throat as she pushed back from him gently.

"Easy, cowboy."

He tossed her a smile as he released her from his embrace. "Cowboy? Sugar, I haven't even begun to show you my stirrups yet."

"Wait until we're safe and have a nice warm bed."

"Where's the fun in that?" He kissed her throat before she could step away. "I can't wait to have a full-on wall-banger with you."

Again her cheeks pinked. God she was gorgeous.

She cleared her throat, and then she smiled. "That sounds...delicious."

Pleased that she wasn't running away in prudish horror, he followed her as she headed for the narrow doorway on the east side of the room.

"Come on. Let's go," she said.

After less than ten minutes of walking through a maze of halls, Dorky stopped him at another glowing entrance.

"This is the entrance to the *Mithraeum* of S. Clemente," she said.

"Are there any strange animals here I should worry about?"

She smiled and pressed his shoulder. "I promise no more griffins."

Confident, he stepped into the glowing first chamber. Here he saw a strange altar in the center of a small room, the walls lined by symbols.

"This must be the Mithras legend I've heard so much about," he said.

"You know about it?" she asked.

"Some of it. What's your take on it? Sometimes what we learn at the SIA is the sterile version that doesn't always include the inside story."

Along the semi-dark corridor, lit only by their flashlights, she told him the legend of Mithras. His understanding of the story and the legend he'd acquired from readings at the SIA. But now he walked in this realm, it seemed more real to him.

He stopped in the middle of the room near the stone altar. As he placed his hand on the cold surface, feeling the rough texture, she started to talk. "Some Romans followed the Mithras religion before Christianity became the official religion of Rome. For the most part a lot of the rituals performed in the religion resemble Christianity."

"I heard the religion originated in Persia."

"It's from the Indian and Persian god Mithras. The religion flourished around the third century AD. By the time it reached Rome, it had altered so that you couldn't recognize it from the original religion."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?"

His own cynicism about organized religion came through, and he never tried to hide it. He listened intently as she talked, wanting to know more and more. She explained how the religion also held parts of astrology and astralism.

"Mithras was born and put on the banks of a river under a sacred tree. Shepherds witnessed his birth. He possessed a knife, a torch and a cap on his head. They provided shelter to him, gifts, and worshiped him."

She explained how Mithras captured a bull and took it to his cave. Obstacles were set in Mithras's path and the bull escaped. Mithras killed the bull with a knife, and from the bull came plants to inhabit the earth. From its spine was wheat, and from its blood the vine. Ahriman, god of evil, hated this sign of life and sent the scorpion and the snake to fight the spread of life. He failed, and the bull's seed created every species of animal. Mithras and the Sun had a feast. Mithras climbed into the heavens by way of the Sun's chariot and looks after the faithful. The cult chose caverns or manmade caves to worship to symbolize the cosmos.

She walked up to him and touched his chest, the warmth of her palm on one pec making him crazy. He slipped one arm around her and brought her up against him. He just managed not to pull her against him. "The soul goes through stages," she said. "Seven, to be exact. Each stage corresponds with a symbol. Raven, Occult, Soldier, Lion, Persian, Runner of the Sun and Father. There are seven doors, seven planetary spheres, seven days of the week and seven metals. The Moon is silver and assigned the first door, Mercury is iron and has the second door. Venus is tin and possesses the third door. The Sun is gold and is the fourth door, Mars is alloy and the fifth door. Jupiter is bronze and the sixth door and Saturn is lead with the seventh door."

As she paused, he shook his head. "God, this is complicated. Are you...did your family follow the Mithras religion at one time?"

"Not us. Fairies and elves follow their own beliefs. But the Marcanas follow Mithras to this day. There's even more, but I could go on all day."

He shook his head. "Never mind. I know you want to reach your father as quickly as possible."

He released her and they left the worship room and stepped into a much larger area. High arches gracing the two-story ceiling emphasized the huge room. The walls looked newer than the crypt they'd toured a short time ago. Warm, tan brickwork lined the walls.

Arch upon arch flowed through the room. He slipped the backpack off his shoulder and removed the water bottle from the side. After he offered her a drink, he then took a sip.

He wiped his mouth on his arm. "It's pretty in a crypt-like way."

A gentle laugh left her throat. "Umm. Yes. I guess you could say that."

"Where does this lead?" he asked as he reattached the water bottle to the backpack and then heaved the pack over his shoulder once more.

"If we continue straight through these arches," she pointed, "we'll come to the next ruined area. The *nymphaeum* of Egeria is the most damaged of the great ruins, but it's the prettiest. We'll find Nidia and the other Marcanas not far after that."

She took a step in front of him, and before he knew it, he followed like a man on a leash. Her hips swayed gracefully, her hair tumbling down her back until it reached her hips in a long, long ponytail. God, he wanted to bury his face in her sweet hair, feel her body around his cock. He didn't know when they'd be alone again, but the memory of making love to her would haunt him until he could slip deep into her hot, wet pussy and feed on her sweet lips.

She'd barely taken two steps when a strange sound whistled around his ears. A high-pitched, unearthly wail that ripped through his senses, his sinew and skin. He shivered convulsively. "What the fuck?"

She snapped around, eyes wide, her bow perfect lips open. "Manes."

"Who?" He drew his weapon from the shoulder holster. He tossed the backpack on the ground, determined to stay unhindered.

"Manes," she said again. "They're supernatural beings. Spirits of the dead."

"Fantastic. All we need."

Another wild wail streaked through his body, and it felt like his nerves had turned to fire. He gasped and almost doubled over. "Shit. Fuck. That hurts."

She caressed his back. "Oh no. Are you all right?"

He gasped as the pain disappeared. "Yeah. It hurt like hell for a second." The caress of her hand along his back brought a solid wave of relief. "Was that your touch that removed the pain?"

"Yes. You're sensitive to Manes. How interesting."

He glared at her. "Interesting? It doesn't hurt you?"

"I'm not totally human, remember? The Manes are the dead, but they are human dead. Usually dead Romans who came here to explore and never left."

"They died down here?"

Her fingers caressed his shoulder in a soothing touch he didn't want to leave.

"We are always more aware of and sensitive to our own kind," she said.

He felt about two hundred years old, his energy level sinking. He stiffed his arms so that his weapon pointed out in front of him.

She clutched at his arm. "Don't show aggression. If they see your weapon—"

Another terrific cry rang out. He took the safety off his handgun.

Again she urged him, "Don't. The only way we can ward them off is to pray."

His gaze wandered restlessly across the arched room. "As in get down on our knees?"

"No. As in this." She released his arm, but she stood slightly away and started a soft chant in Latin he didn't understand. Then she said, "The Romans adopted this belief as well. They were devoted in their ritual to banish the evil side of Manes. The lemurs or larvae as they were known."

"Larvae? Like bugs?"



"In a sense."

Another wail, this one shattering in its pitch, rolled over him. He shuddered and winced. "Let's get these prayers on the road. What do I need to do?"

"Nothing yet. I'll try the prayers and see if they work without your participation."

Before he could move, another cry lurched out of the shadows beyond the arches. Grinding pain spilled into his midsection, and weakness pulled his balance out from under him. The weapon fell from his fingers and hit the floor. His knees collapsed. He landed on his ass with a grunt.

Her eyes widened again, but she didn't move toward him. "Grey."

He put a hand up. "I'm okay. Just do what you need to do."

His plea did the trick. Dorky hurried to a pedestal basin against one wall. As she quickly immersed and then took her hands out of the water, another dark discomfort pierced his midsection. He couldn't hold back the groan. He fought his way through the slicing sensation. He gasped, and she turned toward him. Their gazes locked, and she ventured two halting steps his way before stopping. Her beautiful eyes held extreme worry, and he felt that concern deep down in his soul. He loved that she cared about him, but he didn't want her in danger because he couldn't protect her. Nausea wracked him as sweat broke out all over his body. Ah shit. All he needed now was to toss his cookies.

"Grey?"

"Go on, sugar. Don't worry about me."

Grey pressed one hand to his midsection in a desperate attempt to hold back another pitiful moan. Fuck this. He wouldn't act like a baby another minute. Just as he made the resolve, a screech echoed around the large room like a doomed bird trapped in a huge cage.

"I throw this water and save myself and my companion from harm." She repeated the strange chant in English nine times. "Spirits of the ancestors depart this realm." Nine times she chanted the request and with each rendition, his pain eased until it all but vanished. After her repetitions, she closed her eyes. "There. It is done. We are safe."

She walked toward him and knelt at his side. "How do you feel now?"

Now the pain had all but disappeared he felt like a dunce. "Like I've done a hell of a lot exercise."

Her fingers brushed over his back in a soothing caress. Tears brimmed in her pretty eyes. He cupped her cheek. "No, sugar. Don't cry. I'm not worth it."

She stood and walked a short distance away. When she turned back, she'd crossed her arms and her frown read solidly pissed. "Don't you ever say that again. You scared me. I was so worried."

Warmth filled him, but this time the feeling was welcome. He heaved to his feet. "I'm sorry. I just don't want you to be distracted by worry."

His gaze flicked around as he wondered if someone or something more odd than the griffins would materialize and insist they pay homage. He brought his weapon upward once more in anticipation of interference.

"They're gone." Her voice held steel. "Put the weapon down before someone or something else thinks you're an aggressor."

Lowering his weapon, he hoped they'd banished the Manes for the rest of the journey.

"What's next?" he asked as he walked toward her.

"We continue." With a walk more mechanical than he could remember she proceeded to the next archway and the next. "If they approach again, there is only one thing we can do."

He snatched up the backpack and followed, his steps quick to cover ground and keep up with her. "What?"

"Make love."

He almost stumbled, his astonishment solid. A slow grin parted his mouth, and as he came alongside her, he felt her scrutiny. "Oh yeah. Well, that's going to be a hardship."

He tucked the weapon back into the holster and turned his full grin onto her. She smiled back. "Of course, that's if we don't run into the nymphs."

"Nymphs? As in women who like to jump a man's bones?"

With a cynical smile, she shook her head. "That's a nymphomaniac. But in this case, they are rather...excitable when it comes to handsome men."

He wagged his eyebrows. "That would leave me out."

Her answering grin made his loins heat, and couldn't restrain the way his cock took notice.

Her glance dropped to his crotch for a split second, then her eyes flicked up to his. "The *nymphaeum* of Egeria is where it all started. Where the concept of nymphomania originated."

His eyebrows lifted in skepticism. "Another thing that I didn't expect."

"There are many things in this realm you won't expect."

Of all the things he feared the most in this realm, uncertainty topped the list. And all the planning in the world wouldn't help.

## Chapter Twelve

Dorky moved along the long corridor with Grey at her left side, her body too warm, her energy too low. Darkness swathed them as they walked, the light from their flashlights holding back the oppressive heaviness. The tunnel smelled of dampness and must, just as she remembered it smelling when she'd been here three hundred years ago.

The stench still bothered her. "I remember this place."

"That's something you didn't explain. Why weren't you...what do you call it...aboveworld when you left the realm?"

She sighed, the thought weighing heavily on her. "Because when I was banished, the Marcanas didn't want it to be in a well-inhabited place. They wanted to let me leave the realm in a primitive area. I opened the doorway belowworld and found myself in Colorado, basically where my office is now. Little did they realize that my teleportation skills are well developed. I teleported to Philadelphia. I knew I wouldn't have enough money or clothing or means and needed to find help right away. I stood in a dark alley and used mind communication to find any friendly former dweller of the Shadow Realm. I'd remembered that Lualla O'Dargh had been banished several years earlier. I'd hope to find her there."

"How long did you stay there?"

"Twenty years. It was difficult, because neither Lualla nor I aged. Finally, after her children had grown and expanded to have their own kids, she and I had to leave. We were in terrible danger and didn't realize it." She was on a roll, the words echoing in the narrow, darkened tunnel. Yet having him near assisted her in retaining sanity when worry about her father might have eaten her alive otherwise. "The time came when we had to tell her children who we were. Her son and daughter...well, their reaction wasn't good."

"What happened?"

"They disowned their mother. They called her a witch. They shunned her."

"Damn. That's awful."

"It was. Very painful. She'd given up everything for her children, so when they disowned her, it made her..." She couldn't say the words for a moment, the agony of recalling the moment withering her resolve.

"What happened?" His gaze held apprehension, his voice soft and deep.

"She went insane. Literally. She found a door to the Shadow Realm and entered, even though it was forbidden. I never heard from her again."

He stopped. "Wait."

"What is it?"

"Fuck me, I can't believe I didn't ask this question before." Self-disgust turned his expression thunder dark. "We're entering the Shadow Realm when you were forbidden to return. What if we're caught? What's the punishment?"

Her smile held irony rather than humor. "Nothing much. Other than them sending us back. Or...they might threaten to send me back, but keep you here."

Confusion rippled across his expressive features, then his lips thinned to an ornery line. "This is the weirdest damn fucking thing I've ever heard of. I can't even believe I'm having conversations with you about the Shadow Realm and there are fairies and elves and a freak of nature called Zurvan. It's too weird."

She took a step forward, and he followed alongside her. "I warned you."

"Yeah, you did. But I'm glad I came."

The deep resonance of his voice reassured her.

It didn't take long, perhaps four more minutes, before the tunnel widened by several feet, and the air became warmer. Soon they'd reach their next destination, and perhaps find Nidia nearby. *Please, let Nidia be nearby.* She'd try mental communication soon.

A wave of exhaustion settled on her shoulders, and she held back a moan. She couldn't recall experiencing this lethargy before, but feared she understood exactly what her problem must be. She couldn't afford for Grey to become suspicious. If he did, he'd put a stop to this mission. The last thing she needed was to add another impediment to this venture. She took a heaving breath and kept walking, even though her lower back ached, her throat had turned sore a few minutes ago, and her head started to throb with a dull, annoying ache. She needed to go the extra mile. Only a few more minutes.

Grey's reaction to their adventure so far gratified her—just as she'd always known, he qualified as one hell of a man. Confident, quick and ready to defend her, he made an asset to their team. But one part of her wished she ventured here alone. After all, if things went to hell, she didn't want worry for him to impede crucial judgment.

Before long the glow of a new aperture came into view ahead. "Good. The *nymphaeum* of Egeria."

When they reached the golden glow from the wide-open doorway, she stepped through without hesitation, Grey right behind.

"Wow." Grey's astonishment couldn't be hidden. "This is spectacular."

"Did I tell you that every place you see here has a corresponding ruin in your realm?" She cleared her throat. "I mean, our realm."

"You mentioned it. So there's a *nymphaeum* that looks exactly like this?"

"In Rome, Italy."

He clicked off his light, for even though this place was in a tunnel, there was one thing it didn't have. A ceiling. She gazed up at the huge hole covering the site, at the

wondrous area where few elves or fairies dared venture. They respected this open gate to the Shadow Realm's belowworld and wouldn't come near this opening. Somewhere the sound of running water trickling over rock teased her ears. She recalled the beautiful little creek nearby. Wisteria created cool shade from the unrelenting sun piercing down. Climbing plants and a gentle breeze added to the peaceful serenity.

"In Rome this place is reached by a maze of paths and woods. It's hard to find." She smiled wistfully. "As if the God and Goddess wanted to hide it from humans."

"Why is this open to the world above?" he asked, wandering further into the glorious ruin. "Is that aboveworld?"

"Yes, and yet why it's open is a question I've never heard adequately answered. I'm as curious as you."

"What's the rest of the story with this place?"

She walked up to him, basked in his nearness. "Let's rest here."

He put his pack down next to him, but didn't move. She slipped the backpack over her shoulder and placed it on the ground near his. It fell with dull thud on the flooring.

She looked for a place to sit and found a marble bench intact. Though chipped and worn, the bench gave support, and she welcomed the rest. A sigh escaped her lips as she sank down. He sat beside her.

"As you said, there's a story behind this grotto," she said. "Numa Pompilius met with nymph Egeria here. He dedicated the surrounding wood to the goddess Camenae. There used to be followers of Cybele rushing through here, crying out, their drums throbbing in the wilderness." She looked up. "They beckoned unwary travelers to the edge of the hole above. They performed the sacred ritual of *lavatio Matris deum*."

His brows drew down in obvious confusion and curiosity. "Which translates to what?"

"This is a sacred place where the river Almo flows into the Tiber in Italy. There are similar rivers in the aboveworld. It feels so peaceful because it is sacred." She waved one hand. "This was an enormous villa and once had porticoes, temples and sacred enclosures."

Walls with niches were now covered in mold. Nothing remained of the rich marble she knew once covered the walls or the serpentine pavements.

He nodded, then leaned forward so that his forearms propped on his thighs. He linked his fingers together. "I've been in some sacred places that didn't feel peaceful. Damned evil, in fact."

"You can rest easy here. Nothing can harm us as long as we stay here."

His shoulders held a rigid line, despite the deceptive slouch. "I hate to sound like the little kid riding in the backseat, but are we there yet?"

She couldn't help but laugh. "Almost. About another ten minutes of walking."

"So why did we stop here?"

Why indeed? "I thought a bit of peace would be nice before we jumped into the mayhem."

His gaze held concentration, as if he wanted to read her mind. "Do you think we'll find mayhem?"

Worry rose up inside her, despite her resolve not to sink into that morass again. "Yes. Yes, I do."

He straightened and slid closer, his arms slipping around her. She half expected Grey to make a platitude or two. Instead he remained quiet. Dorky appreciated the silence. Water trickling in the distance, birds chirping, a cool, fresh draft of air, all refreshed and relaxed. With his arms so strong and secure cocooning her, there was nothing else, and the peace surprised her. She wished it could last forever.

As Dorky glanced around the once beautiful *nymphaeum*, she said, "This is part of a villa. It was copied by a Herodes Atticus of Rome. He called it Triopion."

"Which stands for?"

She laughed. "Three-eye. Historians think it comes from the Thessalian hero Triopas, a violator of the temple of Demeter. It is sacred to the Manes and Annia Regilla's gods of the underworld."

"And does Triopion in Rome look as ruined as this place?" he asked.

"As much. Or more. In Rome the Triopion was built between the Via Appia and Asinaria. The man who built it was of great intelligence and influence. He built the villa with his wife's substantial dowry." She closed her eyes and remembered what this place looked like a thousand years ago, what it had looked like in Rome. "The villa was huge and decorated with everything prestigious—marble, porticoes, temples and sacred spaces." She opened her eyes and surveyed the decay, both tragic and romantic. "Here, as in Rome, nature has reclaimed this place."

He smiled and slipped his arm around her shoulders. He drew her close, and she absorbed the security of his warm, strong body. When his gaze held hers, she saw magic claim him. At one time she couldn't have imagined this hard agent looking so gently into her eyes. Yes, she'd fantasized, but never believed she could find herself in this time, in this place again with a man she admired so deeply. Grey's fingers caressed her upper shoulder, the touch light and somehow proprietary.

"You're brave, Dorky. Brave to come here."

"With you by my side, I feel I can do it. And I must help my parents."

A blush pinked his upper cheeks—endearing and yet unexpected. "A woman's never shown this much confidence in me before."

"No?"

"Nope. Sugar, as much as I loved my mom, she didn't praise me that often. Neither did Dad. I don't think they'd had a lot of praise when they were kids, so they didn't pass it on to me."

An ache built in her heart for the child he'd been. "Then let me flatter you all the time. Let me tell you how much you truly deserve."

Her fingers floated over his jawline, then to his cheek where she enjoyed the stubble brushing her skin. "I've never met a stronger, more gorgeous man. You're so handsome. So incredible. So noble."

"Damn. Much more of this BS, and I might start believing it. I'm running toward God knows what danger, running from the SIA, and yet I can't think of a time when I've been happier." He grinned wickedly. "Okay, I was happier making love to you."

His mouth hovered close, and she couldn't resist. Leaning in, she took a kiss. Her lips molded to his with intent—waiting, anticipating be damned. Suddenly an explosion of sexual need drew her nearer. Feeling upon feeling assailed, hot and explosive. Her fingers skipped across his biceps, up to his shoulder and then to explore his hard pecs. He moaned softly and plunged his tongue deep. Hungry kiss after hungry kiss consumed them. His touch traveled everywhere—her face, her neck, until that delicious touch feathered lightly over her breasts.

He tore his mouth from hers and whispered in her ear. "Mmm. You're delicious." His hands cupped her breasts, kneaded them gently, intently. "Your breasts are so pretty. I want to kiss them. Suck them."

She quivered under his erotic words and touch. She gasped as he used his forefingers and thumbs to lightly tease and pinch her already aroused nipples. His hand slipped beneath her shirt. He eased her bra straps downward, just enough that he could reach naked flesh. His hot skin touched, caressed, then zeroed in on her nipples. When his fingertips brushed, plucked the responsive flesh, she whimpered and wriggled. Oh, that felt way too good. Amazing. Everything worrisome dissolved as he released her lips and his mouth found her naked nipple. She gasped as sweet, arching pleasure pulsed outward from her captured nipple. His tongue rasped over tender flesh, then he suckled. Her fingers plunged into his hair. Repeatedly he aroused Dorky's senses, his fingers pulling, tugging, stroking her nipples relentlessly.

A high-pitched screeching drew her straight out of his arms and into standing position, her heart pounding.

"What is it?" he asked, leaping to his feet.

"That sound. It's the nymphs. If we don't make love now, they will claim you."

"Claim me?"

"Here there is both darkness and light. And the nymphs that inhabit this place are mischievous. They'll steal you away, and you'll live in their dark labyrinth of torture." She swallowed hard and licked her dry lips.

"Torture?" His eyes widened as he slipped his arms around her again.

"They can't be satiated. They will have sex with you until you are exhausted and die."

He winked. "Some men would say that sounds like a pretty fine way to go."

She smiled. "No, it's not. At least not by the hundredth time they've ridden your cock."

"Holy shit."

"Our protection is...sex."

"Here? Now?" Surprise flicked over his features.

"As I mentioned earlier." Once more the high-pitched cry threatened. "They're closer. Quickly. We have to do it now."

His hands swept up and down her back, and he surveyed the room. When his gaze returned to her, Dorky saw the fire inside motivating him, as well as humor at their situation. "A woman demanding I have sex with her right now. That's never happened before."

She couldn't stop the soft laugh leaving her throat.

He kissed her, and as his tongue tangled with hers, his hands explored with abandon, with a fierceness that spelled crazy passion, a freedom she wanted for them always. Seconds later his hands reached for her pants, and a few quick moves later he'd yanked her shoes off and her pants. He tossed her pants on the bench. She stood naked from the waist down. He'd left her socks on to protect her from the cold stone flooring and dirt. Before she could speak, he slipped his hands around to mold, cup and squeeze her ass cheeks. A million emotions twisted in her thoughts and heart. He reached between them and undid his pants. The hiss of the zipper sliding down sent quaking, feverish anticipation into her veins. When she encircled his cock with her grip, he was gloriously engorged. His breath hissed inward as she drew her hand upward from the wide base over the thick, hot stalk to the large head. In reciprocation, he touched between her legs. Pleasure soothed over her as his fingers caressed her wet folds and brushed upward over her clit. He strummed the little nubbin of pleasure again, and she wriggled.

"Please," she whispered. "Now."

He moaned. With one heave he cupped her ass and lifted her. As her legs went around his waist, she circled her arms about his neck. He walked until they came up against a smooth wall covered with an erotic scene still visible and stark after all these hundreds of years. A woman stood with legs apart, a penis with wings flying straight for her pussy. Dorky smiled. How appropriate.

Nymphs wailed, but she ignored them. They might even come out to watch, but she didn't care. "I won't give you up to the nymphs."

Seconds later, his hands still clasping her ass, he propped her against the wall. Slowly he lowered her over his cock. Down, down until the tip inserted. With amazing strength he held her there, his chest heaving up and down, breath coming heavy between parted lips. Power seemed to radiate from Grey's body, his eyes saying he wanted this with everything in his soul.



Soft sobs of despair reached her ears as the nymphs mourned the loss. *No, no, you won't have him. He is mine to hold. To protect.* And she did feel protective and willing to endure any fire for Grey. She hadn't felt that way since Lyons.

She squirmed upon his cock, the gentle back-and-forth motion of his hips driving her mad. "Now."

As he lowered her down, down, she closed her eyes and enjoyed the sensation of thick, steel-hard cock plowing to the end of her depths. When he bottomed out, she loved the thickness stretching her wide and deep to her cervix. He held her there, balanced on the ecstasy that threatened to explode. Then he kissed her again, and she fell into their rhythm.

He withdrew, then thrust hard. She groaned, the pleasure sharp. The nymphs groaned along with them, the sounds reaching another wave of misery.

"Is this how we should do it?" he asked between panting breaths. "To keep them away?"

"Any sex will keep them away. This is for us." Another hard thrust. Her eyes widened. "Yes. Please, yes."

"Do you want to be fucked hard?"

"Yes," she whimpered, impaled, enjoying the screaming pleasure as her pussy fluttered, her wet channel clenching around his cock, accepting and throbbing. He started a teasing gyration, and she groaned, wanting it hard. Fast. Quick. Just as he promised.

She whimpered again. "Grey, please. Hard. Fast."

"Yes, ma'am."

He growled low and then thrust. She moaned loudly as he did more than make love. He pushed. Plowed through her tight, wet, swollen walls until the continual friction drove her quickly to the culmination.

"Oh," she gasped as orgasm slammed her. "Oh!"

She zoomed to the heights, held aloft for an eternity in a bare moment before falling back into the world of his sheltering arms.

Wailing rose and fell in the air as the nymphs despaired their loss. They so, so wanted him. *But they won't. I vow it.*

Grey didn't relent, never stopped thrusting, and pleasure twisted inside her. Her continual panting, writhing, trembling body seemed to drive him wild. Excruciatingly hot thrusts pounded her core. Deep in her pussy a throbbing, tingling pleasure burgeoned, and she concentrated on the exciting buildup. Oh Goddess. She would come again.

He tore his lips from her and threw his head back. "Ah Jesus. Ah fuck. You are so wet. So sweet."

His words fired her libido to greater heights, and the orgasm dancing around the edges demanded more.

She'd never experienced sex this raw, and it drove her mad, drove her higher and hotter and faster than she'd ever known. Orgasm built, beckoned, catapulted upward until she hit the plateau and screamed in bliss. But if she thought he'd take his pleasure, she was wrong. He hefted her higher in his grip, tilting her hips so that his cock head rubbed against a spot so sensitive she writhed in his grip and moaned loudly. She moved her hips, aiding every ramming thrust. His wide cock head pleased her G-spot, rubbing over it again and again and again until she went mindless with the ecstasy it caused.

She couldn't stand it, couldn't take the renewed, escalating excitement. "Oh please. Oh Goddess!"

"Yes. Come on, sugar. Take it. Fuck me."

His guttural request sent her over, and the building pleasure deep in her pussy rose like a firestorm. She cried out, smothering her voice by biting her lip. Waves of blistering hot ecstasy exploded.

Panting, growling, he picked up speed until his hips jackhammered. Another second and he groaned loudly, shuddering, shivering, his hips pressing deep between her legs as he spurted deep inside her. She felt the warmth of his seed filling her in a flood, then again as he came and came and came.

A last scream came from the nymphs until silence ensued a few seconds later.

He lowered her feet slowly to the floor and withdrew. "It sounded like the nymphs were getting fucked outta their minds too. Don't tell me it was a vicarious thrill for them?"

"No. It drives them wild to lose a hunky male to another woman."

He barked a laugh.

Grey pressed tender kisses to her forehead, her nose, her cheeks. When he drew back, she saw raw lust barely spent.

She smiled. "That was..."

"Damn good sex."

"Undoubtedly."

It took them a few moments to rearrange clothing, and for her to put on her pants and shoes. When they were ready, he held her tight, his arms a stalwart protection from imagined terror and possible harm. She loved holding him as well, and when his fingers swept over her back, she enjoyed a peace more profound than she expected.

"Tell me all the dangers ahead can be faced down with sex," Grey said with a smile.

"I wish. Don't I wish. Come on. We have to go. Nidia awaits."

## Chapter Thirteen

Dorky saw the bright light ahead and welcomed it. The tunnel widened, and she hoped they'd find refuge. She'd tried to contact Nidia by telepathy but found a sickening, disturbing void. She didn't say anything to Grey, but she didn't know why. Her reticence disturbed her.

*Why don't you tell him?*

Probably because she wanted to shelter Grey? Ridiculous. He didn't need shelter from anything. After all, she didn't know a stronger man, both emotionally and physically. Except, well...Derek. But that's what thousands of years of living could do. Turn a man strong, or turn him to dust.

"You're thinking hard," Grey said as he walked next to her.

"That's a strange way of putting it."

"Tracker always says that when a person is trying to work things out. He told me to look for lines of concentration between their eyebrows. You have that look."

"And here I was trying for a poker face."

"Ain't workin', sugar."

His husky tone sent threads of desire stirring in her body, despite the seriousness of the situation. Goddess, she must be in trouble if the man could turn her on at a time like this.

*I've turned into a sex maniac.*

Well, that little grotto experience had revved her engine and made her want more. So much more.

As Grey trudged down the path ahead, Dorky supplying directions here and there, he marveled at how things had changed in a few hours. He didn't think he'd ever recover from that world-class fuck. Fuck. Yeah. He had to call it that—what they'd done outweighed any sweet, gentle joining. It had been more substantial than his earlier couplings with Dorky. Substantial in force. In intent. She'd saved his life with sex, by God. He grinned. Never in an eternity did he expect sex to save his life. From nymphs, no less. *I'll never need to worry about missing a fuck ever again. Not as long as Dorky is with me forever.*

*Ah hell. Where did that come from?* There was no guarantee in a million years that she'd be with him forever. And when did he start thinking in those types of absolutes? He shouldn't. Couldn't. He could keep her safe while they traveled this subterranean area, but other than that, he couldn't promise anything beyond.

"What's so funny up there?" she asked.

He slowed his pace and turned to throw a grin. "I was thinking how fucking good our fuck was."

She laughed. "Well, keep your concentration on business, wise guy. We're almost to Nidia's."

As soon as the words left her mouth, he heard a strange whistling. He stopped abruptly, and she ran into the backend of him. All his muscles tightened as if in preparation for a fight.

"Marcanas," she said in a quiet tone. "They're here."

"Is that a welcome, or a 'get the hell off our property'?"

"They've seen us and probably told Nidia we've arrived. She'll decide whether we're friendly or not."

"But she knows you."

Her eyes, her slow walking pace spoke volumes. Damned if she didn't seem depressed. "I haven't been able to get through to her, have I?"

What could he say? He didn't sense danger, but that didn't mean it didn't lurk around the corner. "Stay close."

Darkness hovered beyond the illumination offered by their flashlights, but he could see light ahead.

"There," she said. "Nidia's place is up there."

Good. Though they'd taken time to eat and drink before they headed this way, he needed rest and so did she. A long few hours had passed.

"Let me go ahead for now." She stepped in front of him.

He wanted to protest, but held back. If Nidia's followers...or whatever they were, showed up, he didn't want a fight. If they saw Dorky first, he figured they'd react personably. At least he could hope. Still, he drew the long particle sword out of the scabbard attached to the backpack and held it at the ready.

Before he could do more than blink, two men clad in white togas and dark sandals appeared in front of them in the passage. Huge white wings unfolded behind the men, filling the passageway from side to side.

"What the —" Grey started to say.

"It's all right. They're Marcanas."

That statement didn't reassure him. Both men looked the same—chiseled jaws, around six feet, six inches tall, and with close-cropped dark brown hair. Hell, they could be brothers. They fixated on the particle sword he held, and Grey kept it at the ready.

"Stow your weapon," the tallest winged man said, his voice deep and smooth.

Grey tensed. "Hell if I will. Who are you?"

Dorky touched Grey's shoulder and pressed lightly. "Put away the weapon, Grey. They mean us no harm."

"Right. I'll believe it when I see it."

Irritation flashed in her eyes. "Grey."

He frowned, his whole body tight in anticipation. "How do you know they're friendly?"

"Because I recognize them."

She started to walk slowly toward the winged men, but Grey reached out and caught her arm. "No."

"It's all right." She tugged against his hold for only a second. "They're friends as I said. Ademís, Victorís. It's me. Dohmnulla Dífyr Ó Seanachain. I go by Dorky Shannigan now."

The slightly more muscular winged man on the right stepped forward with a guarded smile. "We remember and are honored to see you here, Domhnulla. Your companion, however, is another thing altogether."

The winged men had strange accents that sounded like a mix of Irish and Scottish.

Grey almost told the winged guy where he could stick it, but held back.

"He's harmless," she said.

His ego stung. "Harmless, my ass."

She ignored him. "It's good to see you, Victorís, Ademís."

A broad smile cracked their faces, and he wondered if they were twins until he observed a little closer and realized one was indeed a little shorter than the other and their facial features were somewhat different. Still, they could be brothers or cousins.

She nodded and took another step forward, and this time Grey let her. "Ademís, how is your family?"

"My wife is with child again and my oldest son is now a hundred years old."

Grey's eyes widened. Christ. To have a son one hundred and still look the way this guy did? Hell. Another child on the way? Wow.

Dorky gestured at Grey. "This is my companion, Grey O'Toole. He's from the SIA, just like me."

Victorís and Ademís nodded and smiled but didn't come forward to shake hands. Maybe Marcanas didn't follow that human gesture.

Dorky stepped forward yet again, and this time Grey accompanied her. He didn't want her too much closer to them.

"We heard you were coming," Victorís said, folding his wings behind him.

"How did you know?" Grey asked, suspicious.

"Nidia told us," Victorís said.

Dorky smiled. "Oh, I can't wait to see her."

Ademis also folded his wings. "And we have grave news. Nidia was attacked by Realm Guardians some weeks back."

"Oh my God." Dorky's soft voice, painfully strained and filled with worry, whispered the words. She twisted her hands together. She allowed her backpack to sag to the ground, as if the weight had suddenly become too heavy. "That's why I couldn't contact her by mind communication."

"It is," Ademis said.

Dorky's face fell. Grey hated seeing her unhappy, her eyes clouded by worry. He slipped the particle weapon back into the scabbard. He stepped forward and slipped his arm around her waist and brought her closer.

Ademis answered, "She ventured there to see the King and Queen without protection of any kind, and none of us understands why."

"Where is she?" Dorky's voice trembled, and tears sparkled on her lashes. Grey felt his gut clench.

"Aboveworld with the King's physicians," Ademis said.

"Is she..." Dorky's throat worked, but nothing more escaped.

"They aren't certain. Her condition is very grave. That's why we didn't try to move her back to belowworld. She is just as safe and well cared for there as she would be here," Victoris said.

"Come into Nidia's home. You will want food and sleep before you go aboveworld," Ademis said and then gestured back down the tunnel from which they'd appeared.

As the winged men started through the bright white opening beyond, Grey helped Dorky retrieve her backpack. He had a feeling that this story would become a lot more complicated.

Dorky had shut off her flashlight and stowed it away. He turned off his light and hooked it on his belt. Once his eyes adjusted to the brightness of the room, he marveled at the beauty.

"The *Via degli Annibaldi*," Victoris said with an accent on the words that sounded Italian to Grey.

Their accents changed from moment to moment, and he stared at them in fascination.

They passed through a short room into a garden resplendent with huge flowers and towering trees that reached through a gaping hole to the blue sky above.

"God," Grey said. "Would you look at that?"

Dorky's woebegone expression disappeared and was replaced with peace. "Nidia loves green things. This is her garden."

The Marcanas kept moving. Next they stepped into a huge room. Delicate stuccoes, smooth-colored plaster and glass mosaics decorated the walls. He'd studied enough

Roman history to know what he saw before him. They passed through a few more chambers, all of them brightly lit and decorated.

They followed the Marcanas to a stone spiral staircase that led down into the depths of a cave-like interior. Shields and cuirasses marked the passage, as well as niches empty of effigies. Once through that passage, it opened into a large room illuminated by that apparently phantom light. A central fountain spurted a huge cascade of water from the center. Sculptures of Venus and Apollo, or at least what he thought might be Venus and Apollo, decorated the fountain. Browns and earth tones of pumice and stucco dominated the room. Grey released Dorky long enough to turn full circle. He observed everything, every possible exit. He wouldn't be caught with his pants down while they stayed here. He felt no genuine threat from these odd men, but he sensed their power and their ability to kick ass if given provocation. They could be allies in the right circumstances.

Benches and tables lined one wall and all of a sudden weariness hit Grey. Damn, what he wouldn't give to sit down for a few minutes.

Victoris turned to Dorky and said, "Sit here and refresh yourself. We'll bring water and Massico wine."

Grey didn't have a clue what Massico wine was, but he didn't plan to drink anything put in front of him. He couldn't take chances.

When the winged men left, he sat on a bench and tried to relax his muscles for once. "Can we really trust them?"

Her grin was lopsided. "Of course. Take off the guards for a while. We don't need it here. Ademis and Victoris are totally trustworthy. Nidia trusts them with her life."

Skepticism refused to leave him. When she slipped off her backpack and placed it on the bench next to him, he said, "Why do you think she went to your mother and father without any protection?"

She shrugged and sank onto the bench with a sigh. "I don't know. I haven't had any luck trying to contact my mother by telepathy either. I'd hoped to get some information that way."

"Come here," he said softly, sliding aside to give her room.

When she sat beside him, he drew into his arms and held her lightly. He rubbed her arm, brushed his fingers over her hair. "It'll be all right. We'll go aboveworld soon and get to the bottom of it."

She looked up into his eyes, and he saw trust brimming inside her. While he knew she trusted him to start with, this new show of faith filled his heart with peace and deep affection. God, yes. He had to admit it. This woman meant so much to him.

He kissed her forehead. "You think Nidia being hurt has something to do with the attack on your father."

"Most probably," Dorky said, the fingers of hand squeezing his thigh.

"Hey, no more of that. I won't be able to control myself."

Instead of smiling, her seriousness returned in spades. "We'll eat and drink and maybe catch a bath. After that, we'll be on the way to aboveworld."

He saw her determination and knew she wouldn't relent.

"Whatever you want." He kissed her again, this time tasting her mouth with hunger.

She responded, clutching at his shoulders almost desperately. When she pulled back from the kiss, she said, "Whatever happens to me, don't forget this one thing. You can always rely on the Marcanas to help you escape the Shadow Realm. They'll bring you to safety."

"Whatever happens to you? Nothing will happen to you. I swear on my life—"

She placed two fingers over his mouth. "Nothing is guaranteed. Since we came on this adventure, we've been in grave danger. Even right here, in this place that should be shelter, I can feel the evil."

Fear, unlike anything he'd experienced before, poured through his psyche. His arms tightened around her. "What do you mean?"

"We have nothing to fear from the Marcanas. But something is off. I feel..." Her eyes went hard with worry. "I feel as if a great disturbance is spilling through this world, both above and below. I've never experienced anything more frightening, more unsettling in my life. Something that was supposed to be sacred has been destroyed irrevocably."

Seeing the terrified belief in her eyes sent a ripple of white-hot reaction, of bone-deep worry straight through him. And any confidence he'd felt in the last few minutes started to diminish.

\* \* \* \* \*

Grey sat in the huge tub of water, his muscles barely relaxing. Two beautiful female Marcanas had dumped warm water into the tubs and left several minutes ago. It had felt so freakin' good to undress and sink naked as sin straight into the clean water.

Yet nothing could reassure him. Not after Dorky's earlier disturbing words.

Something sacred had been destroyed.

Christ, he didn't want to think too closely about what that might mean.

When they'd first entered this new world, he expected everything ruined and ancient, but this place proved differently. Now he understood how naïveté led him to assume. These people were beyond his general understanding, and he doubted he'd reside here long enough to discover every secret they hid.

Now he'd loosened his tight muscles somewhat, he didn't want to let down his guard completely. Nor did he allow Dorky out of his sight. She sat in another tub of water, her gaze centered on one elaborately decorated wall across from her. All around him were bright colored frescos, friezes and niches. Like the *Nymphaeum* of Egeria, this place held a grandeur he didn't expect. Unlike Egeria, Nidia's home held the



atmosphere of ancient secrets, but it was not ruined. With its many rooms, quiet spaces and bustling central court with dozens of winged men and women for servants...well, this must have been what Roman life resembled for the rich. Dorky insisted money meant nothing in the Marcanas world. They all lived like this—even the Marcanas who appeared as servants to Nidia. All around him he felt peace, consideration, a utopian society. But he also remembered Dorky's story about her lover, the Marcanas, and the heartache that etched on her soul. Nothing was safe or perfect anywhere, except maybe in small, quiet moments like this one.

Utopia was in the mind, in the ecstasy found in a lover's arms.

He understood that now in a way he'd never comprehended before. He heaved a huge breath, emotion filling his soul.

He drew in another breath to clear the moistness that invaded his eyes and concentrated on other things. He'd be damned if he'd cry like a baby right here in front of her or anyone else. A strange shame crept into his soul and stayed there. He didn't like it. Not one damned bit.

He didn't feel the evil she said permeated this place, and that disturbed him a hell of a lot. He didn't like this vulnerability. He was in her world now—a world replete with ancient rituals and fantastical powers and creatures he'd thought once resided only in dreams. Perhaps only in nightmares.

A splash to his right broke him from contemplation. Dorky slipped from the bath and stood on the thick rug. Water sluiced in droplets over her neck, trailing in rivulets down over her breasts. His gaze fixated on one droplet hanging enticingly from one nipple. When the droplet fell away, his attention stayed on her breast, caressing it hungrily.

Her nipples, so large and pretty, had tightened into delicious buds. His cock sprang into attention, hardening almost instantly. Damn, what she did to him. He had no control. Little wench.

She towed off but didn't look his way, her unselfconsciousness revealed in her woebegone expression. He shivered. This cave-like existence wasn't the warmest, and he wondered if her nipples stood up because of the cold or because that towel brushed over the sweet tips. He licked his lips.

"Hey," he said. "You okay?"

"Yes. But we can't linger here any longer. We must get aboveworld quickly. My mother and father need me."

He stood, and her gaze riveted on his body. Her glance dropped to his cock, and his cock tightened and lifted to full attention. He gritted his teeth. He willed his body to forget sex. They didn't have time for this. *If* he had time, he'd make sure she forgot whatever worried her the most—he'd taste her, lick her, fuck her into a mindless state of pure ecstasy. God, he wanted her happy, healthy and feeling no pain. He didn't care if she had two thousand years on him and a wealth of knowledge he couldn't compete with.

He reached for a towel on the stone bench near him, and when he wrapped it around his waist and stepped from the tub, the ultrasoft white fabric caressed his cock with teasing fingers.

"Shit," he said in reaction.

Her eyes stayed on his cock. "Um, Grey, as much as I'd like it...we don't have time to make love."

His eyebrows went up, and he smiled at the barely veiled interest brightening her pretty eyes. "What makes you think I'm interested right now?" He walked toward her, feeling his skin cooling as droplets of water ran down his chest and shoulders. "Do I look horny to you?"

She smirked and reached for him. He brought her up against him in a fierce hug, but he didn't kiss her. Just held her face to his shoulder and didn't grip her too tightly.

When her small hands slipped under his towel to cup his ass, he jerked in surprise and pleasure. "What are you doing?"

She caressed his ass cheeks, adding a squeeze. "What it feels like. Touching you. Loving you."

Overwhelmed by her almost innocent touch, his body reacted. Every muscle tightened. He couldn't resist her. He swooped in for a kiss, and he found his senses overtaken by swirling, hot lust. Damn plans and preoccupations. He had some sweet business to discover. Grey plunged his tongue deep, consuming her flavors, teasing her nimble tongue. God, he wanted her.

Dorky palmed his ass cheeks, loving the power beneath his rippling muscles and the reaction she could pull from him with a simple touch. His mouth consumed hers, and all statements about temporary chastity diminished to a mere memory. Yes, she wanted to get on with it, to reach her mother and father. At the same time, she soaked in his delicious heat, the power, the awesome intensity of his character. No one, not even Lyons, had affected her the way Grey did. She would never forget Grey no matter how far he ran from her. And he would run eventually, from the strangeness of her world, from the isolation required. Even if she made certain people didn't discover her immortality, Grey would always know. Could he live with it from this point forward? She couldn't say for certain, and not knowing pulled her in conflicting directions. Goddess, she wanted him. As his mouth devoured hers, he touched her everywhere. His hands moved through her hair, to her shoulders, skin warm and caressing. Fire licked her veins as Grey teased her waist through the towel. His light touch and persuasive kisses drove her to the edge of begging.

No. She wouldn't plead.

She drew his hands up to her breasts, and his fingers fluttered lightly over her towel-covered nipples. She gasped into his mouth as liquid pooled low. She knew she was wet and aching.

Fierce desire punched her so hard she tore away. He stared down at her with fiery passion. Without thinking, she led him to a bench.

She pressed on his shoulders. "Lie down."

"Yes, ma'am." He winked. "Why?"

"You'll see."

"Bossy. I like that." He laughed.

She couldn't resist returning his smile. Feeling downright feral, consumed by a raging desire to stamp ownership on his sexual energy, she hurried to consummate the heat building between them. She didn't wait for subtleness. She drew his towel aside and freed his erection.

"Damn, sugar."

She didn't answer. Instead, she allowed her towel to fall to the floor. She straddled him, instantly fitting the swollen labia to his cock head. She didn't want to slow down, eager to drive him straight to where she needed him most. Slowly, so slowly, she eased his cock into her passage.

He clasped her at the hips and held her gaze with his own. "I thought we didn't have time for sex."

"I was wrong."

Inch by inch he slid along her sensitive channel, every delicious centimeter spreading her wide. It was slow going. Though she was aroused, it was a little too much too soon. Still, she persisted. Keeping her gaze pinned to his, she watched his lips part, his chest heave up and down as she tortured him with her slow possession. Her breath caught in her throat as she advanced until he could reach no further. *Oh sweet Goddess, that felt good.* Gently, she drew upward then down, allowing his cock to caress her inner walls with deliberate slowness, deliberate gentleness. Her channel lubricated, became wetter with her desire. Each slow, sexy thrust and withdrawal heated her channel until she thought she'd come unglued any minute. Soon her movements quickened. Then, with a wildness she understood all the way through her bones, she rode him hard. Pumping, humping faster, she fucked him at a furious pace. Their breaths panted between their lips, and she hurried toward the ultimate culmination. His breath panted, groans of satisfaction building. She bounced upon him until orgasm couldn't be denied. She cried out, her wail soft, gentle and vibrating with overwhelming ecstasy. As her pussy quickened around him, a low growl left his throat.

As his eyes closed, his body shivered, quaked, overwhelmed by waves of climax.

Grey lay beneath Dorky, her muscles still contracting around him. He shivered as the exciting feeling of her hot pussy kept his cock rock-hard. Jesus, that didn't happen every day. Mindless with a need to continue, he lifted his hips and watched her eyes widen as his erection caressed her super sensitive passage.

"I'm not finished with you," he said, his voice rough with anticipation of more.

He didn't release Dorky, and within seconds Grey's hips moved. Their movements escalated. He gasped for breath as her slick heat tightened and pulsed around him. *Yes, God yes. More. More.*

Nothing in his life prepared him for the explosiveness of response, the need to stamp male ownership, to fill her with his seed. He fucked hard, without remorse, without holding back an ounce. Again and again his hips surged between her thighs, and she bounced on his cock with every quickening beat. Ruthlessly he pounded, bucking and straining as he stroked deep into her. Their hips slapped together, the sound of wet, hard sex driving him toward completion. He gasped, straining, panting, groaning.

*Oh. Fuck. Yeah.*

He gave her everything in one startling, streaming rush of orgasm. He cried out, and right then he felt Dorky stiffen, her eyes widening as pleasure rocked her. Then her eyes closed, and little pleasure-filled groans parted her lips. She whimpered and fell boneless into his arms.

After they'd dressed in the bathroom and gathered supplies, Grey decided to broach a subject he'd avoided since the winged men had insisted they have a meal and sleep before leaving. After their sexual antics in the bath, they'd skipped napping and ate a strange soup the Marcanas claimed would supply enough energy for ten hours.

"Do the Marcanas have any weapons we could use?" he asked as he drew his backpack over his shoulders.

Her brows knitted together. "Why?"

"The particle sword isn't enough, from what I've heard about this Zurvan. Do you think they'd let us borrow something?"

"Maybe. They use particle energy also. It's a part of what illuminates all these rooms and keeps them safe from Realm Guardians and Zurvan."

"Why didn't Realm Guardians or Zurvan try to hurt us before we reached this place?"

"I don't know. Maybe they're preoccupied with my father and Nidia. They realize that Nidia is one of the most powerful Marcanas of all."

"Marcanas have royalty too?"

"No. They are more democratic." Her smile was winsome. "They are looser with their rules, their entire structure, than the Fairy/Elf world."

Despite what she'd told him about the Shadow Realm, despite what the SIA claimed to understand about this place, he didn't know jack when it came down to it.

"Let's ask Victoris and Ademis," she said as they left the baths.

They located the winged men a few moments later in the large dining area where Marcanas sometimes gathered for special events. Ademis stood by a table filled with laughing and talking winged men and women. They all turned to inspect the

interlopers. Her head throbbed—maybe from picking up on the general curiosity and apprehension Marcanas would feel around strangers. Ademís left the table, and Victorís strode away from a beautiful blonde. Both men sported worried expressions, especially Victorís. Ademís carried a short sword with him, the business end pointed downward. The hilt was plain wood, but she guessed it was a particle knife.

Victorís' gaze cleared into a grin when he reached them. "So, you had a comforting bath?"

Grey smirked. "You could say that."

She darted a nervous gaze in his direction. The man was incorrigible. Yet the sparkle in his eyes, the hunger as he looked at Dorky sent an unprecedented sensation of comfort, of acceptance straight through her.

"Perhaps you should wait here until Zurvan has been captured," Ademís said. "It's truly not safe to go aboveworld." He handed Grey the knife. "Particle knife. You will need it more than once, I fear."

Dorky frowned as she took in Ademís' words. "Why would I try to capture Zurvan? It's not possible."

Ademís nodded. "It is if Zurvan has taken on a human form."

"What?" she asked, shocked.

Grey attached the knife and sheath to his belt. Puzzlement twisted his lips. Before he could make a sound, Victorís said, "Nidia has investigated for several months who might be susceptible to possession."

"It never occurred to me." When she checked, no one at the table full of winged men and women appeared to be listening. They'd gone back to their chatter. "It should have, though."

"Why?" Grey asked.

"Because weredemons can possess people, take over their bodies. Zurvan is the ultimate evil power. Since Zurvan can take on the form of anything it wants, I don't know why a human form wouldn't work as well." Pain assaulted her—emotional pain. She didn't want to think about anyone she knew overtaken by evil.

Victorís slipped his arm around her shoulder. "You wouldn't think of it. It's difficult for Zurvan to possess someone. They must be vulnerable...or they must want that evil and its power more than anything else. Beyond love. Beyond redemption. Once possessed by Zurvan, there is no way out."

"Damned freaky thought," she heard Grey say under his breath.

Grey's attention stayed on Victorís, and she saw the hard-ass in Grey's tight-lipped expression. Maybe he didn't care for Victorís' arm around her. She didn't feel as if Victorís meant anything sexual, but Grey couldn't know that.

"We'd accompany you," Ademís said, "but we're needed here."

She nodded. "We'd better leave soon. It will be dark aboveworld, and easier for the evil to find us." She didn't like saying it out loud, but at this point a reality check meant

more than pretending everything would turn out all right. "Thank you both for everything you've done for us."

Victoris and Ademís smiled in chorus, then bowed at the waist.

"We salute you, princess," Ademís said.

To her surprise, the entire table of Marcanas, all thirty of them, rose and took a bow. Their smiles and murmurs of "good luck, princess" surprised the hell out of her. She couldn't believe it. "Please, don't call me princess. I haven't been a princess for hundreds of years."

When they smiled and additional murmurings of praise came from several of the people at the table, tears stung her eyes.

"As you can see, you are well thought of here," Ademís said. "And always will be."

"But..." She couldn't choke out the words. "When I left..."

"Not everything here changes," Ademís said, "but in this we have. We've learned to forgive. Will you forgive the Marcanas for what they did to you all those years ago?"

Tears slipped down her cheeks and her throat tightened unbearably. She nodded quickly. "Of course. Of course."

Grey slipped his arm around her shoulders, much like Victorís had not long ago. "You all right?"

His voice, so soft and concerned, made it worse. She couldn't recall feeling this sensitive before, this reactionary to every gesture of kindness and love. "Yes. I'm fine. We should be going."

He nodded and released her, though she could have used the strength of his body next to hers a little longer. Victorís and Ademís bowed at the waist to both Grey and Dorky, then led them toward a tunnel. The wide tunnel, finished with an almost golden sand color, glowed with healing power and a magick she'd only felt once.

"It's Nidia's magick here," she said.

"It is," Victorís said as they came to a huge metal doorway at least fifteen feet high and ten feet wide. "She left her essence around us for protection."

Grey stepped in front of her when the other men started to open the door. She decided not to display feminine anger over his protectiveness. "Ever the watchdog."

He didn't look at her, his attention pinned to the door as the men unlocked and pushed the huge door to the side. The area beyond, bright with light from aboveworld, smelled like sweet flowers and golden opportunity.

The light had a silvery quality – or at least he thought it did. Time slowed down.

Literally.

All around him he thought people stopped, their breaths suspended, their hearts. Panic threatened at the edge of his psyche. His breath suspended, and for a wild-assed second he felt strangled. Within two seconds, maybe three, the light cleared to the

normal glow of day, and his throat no longer squeezed in a vice. He swallowed hard around the dryness. Shit.

"Did just happen what I thought just happened?" he asked.

Dorky's gaze held pure humor. "There's a temporary shift. Although you're in the Shadow Realm, the aboveworld and belowworld are offset from each other."

"This just keeps getting better and better. Like a slight time continuum shift?"

"That's right."

He turned to the Marcanas. "Is this ladder safe? Looks scary as hell."

Ademis cocked his head to the side. "Absolutely safe. It's Abyssi wood."

"Abyssi?" Grey asked.

"The hardest wood from aboveworld," Ademis said.

"Will wonders never cease?" Grey grinned at the winged men and Dorky.

She smiled and gestured at the ladder. "No more stalling. Let's go."

Her no-nonsense attitude shouldn't surprise him. *She's used to this shit. Okay, she used to be used to this shit.* He followed her up the ladder.

When they reached the top, he surveyed the area with growing fascination. She immediately headed into the field before them.

"I expected something...else," he said as he followed her rapid footsteps.

He easily pulled up alongside her, and she glanced over. "What did you expect? Purple trees, a red sky?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, something like that."

The soft, liquid tones of her laugh sent a spiral of hot awareness to his gut. Damn it, no matter what the situation, half the time he couldn't think of anything but sex. Spine-melting, heart-pounding, down-and-dirty sex with Dorky Shannigan. He almost groaned.

He stifled sexual thoughts long enough to notice his surroundings. Unlike belowworld, this place appeared mostly like the world he'd known all his life. Even so, it didn't feel the same. Hell no. From the moment he stepped foot into aboveworld, he understood why this place must represent paradise to Dorky's people. She understood more than he ever could. He saw her eyelids flicker, a sheen of tears bubbling in her eyes.

Before he could pay more attention to aboveworld, he couldn't neglect Dorky's wellbeing. "Sugar, what's wrong?"

She stopped and turned toward him. "Let's get one thing straight, Grey O'Toole." Her tone sent a cold wave over him. "We're not going to do this."

He didn't speak for a minute, confused as hell by her vehemence. "Do what?"

"This emotionalism. This probing my feelings." She stepped close to him, her eyes blazing with ferocity. "I need you to do something for me right now."

The word slipped out of him before he could think. "Anything."

Her eyes did sparkle with tears, damn it. "No more stalling with feelings, or asking me if I'm okay. We have to move quickly. I can't afford to look around and think about this beautiful world and how I miss it every single day. If I do, I'll lose whatever edge I have."

He almost remained silent. Anger filtered through. "If that's the way you want it."

She walked through the ankle-high grass. The golden orbs of two suns sent subdued but beautiful light blazing down on him. The last thing he wanted was to ignore her and his feelings. For the first time in his life, he didn't own confidence, didn't know what would happen in the next few minutes or the next hour. Life had fallen out of balance, just as he experienced the most gut-wrenching realization of his life.

Without a doubt, this woman twisted him up and controlled his heart...whether he wanted it or not.

Grey walked alongside Dorky and took in the scenery of this new world, this ancient world inhabited by creatures he'd never taken into much consideration. A large dog, black and resembling a German shepherd, trotted alongside them for some time. Dorky smiled at the creature but didn't attempt more contact.

"Shinalin. One of the servants in my parents' home owns the dog."

"Dogs are immortal here too?"

"Shinalin is special. He's one of a rare breed belonging to elves and fairies. They live hundreds of years but aren't immortal."

"Did you ever have a dog?"

He thought he caught amusement or maybe happy memories in her eyes. "Two. Rinty, who was a little lap dog, and Barny, a big ole sheepdog-like creature. They each lived five hundred years."

"Shit."

She frowned. "I wish I could own a dog again. It wouldn't be fair to have one at the SIA, closed up and unable to go out. It just wouldn't work."

Longing filled her voice. He cleared his throat. "Maybe you can again one day."

"If I stay here?"

The thought stopped him in his tracks. "You're planning on staying in the Shadow Realm?"

She turned back to him. "Think about it. I may not have a home anymore at SIA. How can I? They'll think I've betrayed them."

With that pronouncement, she continued walking. How could he argue with her logic?

"Then maybe you can have one here."

His gut twisted at the thought of returning to the SIA without her – no, he wouldn't think about it now.



As they progressed, he watched Shinalin dive into the tall grass, then into a hedge bordering a road that looked Roman. They didn't take the road.

"Are we going east?" he asked.

"Very good guess. Most people are hopelessly lost here...most humans, anyway."

Humans. He didn't believe she meant it to sound despairing or derogatory, but somehow it did. Maybe now that she'd entered the Shadow Realm she'd start to think of him as alien?

A bird screeched, and a dozen feathered creatures flew from the bushes and into the sky. He drew in a deep breath and noticed the gentle flower scent, the air as clean as anything he'd smelled before. Like a fresh breath of cold air from a Colorado mountain. Despite the beauty around him, God, he missed the hell out of Colorado right about now. Missed the peaks surrounding the SIA complex, the seclusion that didn't necessarily hide danger around every corner.

Wind tossed subtly through the tall trees that half surrounded them, golden and green leaves whispering secrets. He surveyed the area, tension tightening the muscles in his shoulder and back. He could reach his particle weapon quickly, but hoped to hell he never had to use it. If things went right, this last part of the adventure would turn out dull and boring. He could only hope.

He shivered. His SWAT-type gear didn't cut it in this damp climate. He guessed the temperature stood around forty degrees.

"Are you cold?" she asked.

"Well, I could cowboy up and claim I'm not, but...hell yeah."

She laughed again, and he decided he needed to keep humor flowing between them from now on. God, he loved her laugh.

"I wish I could offer you warmer clothing. We'll have some when we reach the castle."

"Are you warm enough?"

"Of course. But then my blood runs hotter than a regular human's."

His lips quirked. "You can say that again."

She made a tsk, tsk noise. "I wasn't talking about sex. Aboveworld is always somewhere between forty degrees fahrenheit and seventy-five fahrenheit. Those temperature ranges never bother me."

"What about colder or hotter?"

"Then I might have a problem."

Exhaustion nipped at his heels. Fuck. He needed a good long sleep, uninterrupted by even the sweet prospect of sex with Dorky.

They came over a ridge and there it stood. Ahead, in the horizon, a huge structure launched from the surface with cold and merciless determination.

He stopped in his tracks. Dropped his backpack to the ground. It hit the red-hued soil with a thud. "Holy shit."

She also halted, her delicate eyebrows lifted in question. "What is it?"

"A freakin' bizarre sight. Is that a mirage?"

"That's Ipsawittle Castle. Where I lived before I was banished into normal Earth realm."

She continued forward, and he had no choice but to follow. Tall grass swished around his ankles as they walked, the air seemed colder, even fresher as they came closer to the castle. His attention stayed on the fortress before him. None of the frescos, friezes, or triumphant arches he'd seen belowworld prepared him for this structure.

"It's a fairy tale."

Turrets rose into the sky—four of them at different levels. Walls of tan and gray stone, like a mismatched couple, stood in the midst of a rocky, mountainous background. The giant mountain behind the enchanted castle stood fierce and proud, its jagged peaks reaching with mastery into the sky. The massive castle stood in front of the mountain like a small stalactite in a colossal cave. Dwarfed. Insignificant in majesty and presence. Yet, taken alone, the castle was larger and more awe-inspiring than any fortress he'd seen in all his travels through Europe and the Middle East. He had a feeling he would never see anything like it again.

*Mad Fuckin' Ludwig's castle Newshaunstien had nothin' on this place.*

"Surprising?" she asked.

"Hell yes. It's not every day I get to see Mount Everest."

"Actually, Drogheda Mountain is higher than Everest. Even more dangerous. Not even elves or fairies are insane or powerful enough to climb it."

He smirked. "Let me guess. There's a monster up there like a Yeti that eats people."

It was her time to come to a complete stop. She placed her hands on her hips and stared at him warily. "How did you know?"

"One of our agents...Ryan Ahern. He encountered one. Remember? Only in his case it was Bigfoot. Or Zurvan pretending to be an innocent Bigfoot." He gestured toward the mountain then reached for his water bottle clipped on his belt loop. Between one big swallow and another, he said, "It stands to reason the Bigfoot up there would be Yeti, doesn't it?"

Amusement returned to her gaze, along with a special warmth that reheated his body and heart. "You're right. Has anyone ever told you how funny you are and how annoying?"

He shrugged and played along. "No one's ever said I was funny, but you pinpointed the annoying head on."

She laughed so hard she bent at the waist. He joined up with her, uncertain why they laughed so hard when they didn't have much to be amused about. Grey considered closing in on her for a kiss, but he decided to leave well enough alone. She

might be laughing with him, but he didn't feel that warm sexual energy pulsing from her right now – didn't believe for one damned minute she'd allow him to back her to a tree and have wanton sex.

An hour later, they still walked. "Is this high altitude?"

"Why? Are you out of breath? It's ten thousand feet right here."

"I thought it felt thin. I've trained for this climate, so I'm okay." He felt fine, but that didn't mean he couldn't feel the difference between five thousand and ten thousand feet. "Might as well be in the Andes."

Soon the Ipswittle rose in front of them, and Grey could take in little details he couldn't see before. The smoothness of the castle's symmetry, and the rose hues in the stone. Gargantuan, highly carved dark wood doors rose twenty feet into the air.

"What? No moat?" he asked.

Her cool glance flicked over to him. "Are you being facetious?"

"Yes. Shouldn't we wave a white flag before we get any closer?"

She frowned. "Well, I suppose we could."

Before she say more, bolts shot back from inside and doors creaked ominously on giant hinges. When Dorky started forward, he caught her arm.

He pulled his particle knife from its sheath. "Wait."

"Drop your weapon."

The voice sounded too familiar.

He stiffened, his heart picking up speed and a nameless dread arising. He turned slowly at the same time Dorky did. His fingers tightened on the knife.

## Chapter Fourteen

Flanked by two tall, blond Marcanas bearing long particle swords, Dr. Derek Van Doren smiled. But this smile didn't match anything Grey remembered seeing before on Van Doren's face. The man's eyes held a bizarre light, and in the center, where his black pupil should be, a red light burned. Grey didn't take his eyes off the man to see Dorky's reaction. She'd gone still and silent as a mausoleum at night.

And Grey kicked himself all to hell for not acting on the feelings of distrust he'd harbored for Van Doren all along.

"Son of a bitch," Grey said. "What the fuck—?"

Van Doren's low laugh curled with sinister intent, rasping on the air. Not even his laugh sounded human. "Son of the devil, as you humans would no doubt say."

Oddly enough, the guy still wore a lab coat. White. Clinically crisp. Weird.

"Drop the weapon," one of the Marcanas said.

"What happens if I don't?" Grey said.

"Grey..." Dorky's soft voice held caution. He didn't look at her. He couldn't afford to take his full attention away from the three men.

"Take the weapon from him," Van Doren said.

"You fuckin' try it," Grey said, keeping his tone even, as if he was talking about the weather.

Van Doren sighed. "It's going to be that way?" He glanced at Dorky and smiled. "Welcome, Dorky, my dear. Surprised to see me?"

"It was you all along. You're..." Her voice sounded rough, on the edge of overwhelming anger and betrayal.

"Yes. It was I. I am Zurvan."

Dorky shivered, her heartbeat throbbing in her chest and disbelief mingling with a distress she couldn't fight back.

She took a step forward. "We're going inside to see my mother and father."

Derek's face creased with another smile, those eyes malignant. "Afraid not. We can't have you disrupting the plan."

"What plan?" she asked. "What are you trying to do?"

"Change the course of history once more. You see, Zurvan showed me the true light and way."

She wanted to kick and cry and scream to the gods and goddesses that none of this was fair.

"How could you? How could you?" Her voice sounded tight, angry to her own ears. And she was. So angry her body went rigid with a desire to punish Derek within an inch of his life.

*Dohmnulla, see deep into your heart. You want to join us. You want to join with Kaelan and be his bride.*

"What?" she gasped out the question. "No! I won't marry Kaelan."

Derek's voice turned harsh as he spoke out loud. "You will obey or die."

She trembled. "Who is 'us'?"

"Dominion. We are Zurvan's Dominion."

"You snake." She hissed the words, a reptilian and feral hatred finding root in her soul.

Derek's absurd guffaw filled the air, and the grating sound made her want to cringe and hide. But no. She wouldn't run or hide. If he wanted a fight, she would give him one.

She sensed movement to her left and realized Grey reached to pull her away from Derek. His hand snatched thin air.

Derek moved with lightning speed, grabbing her arm and slinging her into his much bigger form. Steel hard arms imprisoned her back to his front, one hand around her throat, one around her waist. Pain encircled her throat and waist until she shuddered, immobilized and gasping for breath. Fear shook her frame and wriggled inside her stomach like worms.

Tears leaked from her eyes. Goddess, this man wasn't her dear friend anymore. Hard, cold dread threatened to override her senses. She tried to speak but couldn't—agony settled with a steady burn into her veins. If she could only break his concentration, his painful grip would disappear. She struggled to draw air into her lungs, and the pain made it impossible to conjure enough strength to break free.

Grey stepped forward, his eyes blazing with a murderous rage. "Let her go, Van Doren, or I swear—"

"You'll what? Do you honestly think I couldn't kill you in a heartbeat?"

Grey's eyes narrowed, and she could almost feel him deciding his next move. Goddess, help them. What did she do now? Grey's rock-solid stance as he held the particle sword told her he would spring to her defense—die for her without a moment's hesitation.

She couldn't let the building rage coursing through her system distract her from the dangerous situation in front of them.

"You scum-sucking bastard," Grey said. "Whatever you have up your fucking lab coat, you aren't getting away with it."

"Really, O'Toole, I always knew you weren't sophisticated. Fuck? Scum-sucking? Haven't you heard that a person who curses frequently isn't very intelligent? That your vocabulary is that limited?"

"Fuck you," Grey said woodenly.

Her gaze darted back and forth between the men. She didn't know the two blond Marcanas, and the fact they participated in Derek's evil machinations sickened her almost as much as it did Derek's betrayal. She trembled with pure adrenaline. Under his painful grip, she couldn't budge.

"I know what you're thinking, my dear Dorky." Derek shifted, bringing her with him toward Grey. "That I betrayed you. But you don't understand. I had no choice. This isn't a game. I have to do Zurvan's bidding and place Kaelan on the throne. The Dominion will reign."

"You'd give up thousands of years of friendship with Dorky and her family and betray your own people?" Grey asked.

Derek shrugged. "You think this was all sudden, don't you? That I was overtaken by the great evil Zurvan against my will? It wasn't like that. I've always wanted more power. More money. There has to be more. I'll admit it. I'm never satisfied. Where is the advantage in being lily white? None at all. When Zurvan approached me, I knew that this was the only way I'd find fulfillment. Find what I've missed all these thousands of years with these...these weaklings."

The pressure on her throat eased, and she gasped out, "You've made a travesty of two thousand years. You were like a brother to me." Her voice trembled with anger. "You're a disgrace."

More words wouldn't come, her thoughts whirling insanely around in her head. Pretending this wasn't happening...well, for once in her long life, she couldn't pretend all would be well in the morning. Not this time, if ever again. Her world staggered, crumbling into nasty pieces around her.

Then she thought she heard her mother's voice in the back of her mind. *Domnhulla, darling. Do as he says.*

*Mother?*

*I'm here, sweet one.*

*Mother, what do I do?*

*Do as he says until you are inside the castle.*

Under her mother's calm voice, her panic eased somewhat. She drew in as deep a breath as she could. She trusted her mother's wisdom more than anyone's.

"Stop talking to your mother, Dorky. It won't do any good," Derek said.

Grey's stance never changed. "Ease up on her."

The Marcanas moved toward Grey, and she tensed.

"Relax, Dorky. They won't hurt you or Grey. Unless I ask them to, of course," Van Doren said.

A new emotion breathed to life inside her that she hadn't experienced, even in her ancient existence. Hatred. She would take revenge on Derek no matter how long it took.

Derek released her, but her knees collapsed, and she dropped to the ground.

"Dorky!" Grey's urgent cry reached her just as he did. He dropped his particle weapon and came to her side as she sat up. Anxiety darkened his gaze. "Are you hurt?"

Her ribs throbbed and so did her throat, but she couldn't acknowledge it to Grey, or he just might act rashly.

"No." Her voice croaked.

He touched her jaw, stroked over it with great tenderness, his eyes a mixture of pure concern and boiling need for retribution. In a weird twist of realization, she thought he looked more handsome now than he ever had before.

Before she could test her legs, Grey lifted her in his arms. She slipped her arms around his neck and didn't protest the he-man treatment. If Derek thought she'd weakened, it might actually help their situation and throw him off guard enough to give them the edge.

Stepping into the castle for the first time in three hundred years brought back a fresh flood of memories. She couldn't believe how nothing had changed. When they marched through the courtyard, she saw the flowers faded and dying. Perhaps Zurvan's touch destroyed life that normally grew year-round.

"Oh no," she whispered.

"What?" Grey asked.

"The tree in the middle. The huge one. It's destroyed." Tears filled her eyes for the old tree. No leaves grew and branches reached out from the huge circumference like the naked fingers of an old skeleton. The oak had lived here as long as the castle existed, a symbol of Fairy and Elf reverence for life. Damn Derek and his evilness. Evil was the only thing that could have killed it. The Marcanas nudged Grey in the back and he moved forward into the great foyer, a two-story room many feet wide and deep.

Things—objects like furniture—hadn't changed except for small things here and there. The ethereal quality of the beautiful dark wood pieces gave her a sense of comfort despite the circumstances. Grey's strong arms tightened around her.

"Put her down," Derek said. "She's coming with me."

"The hell she is." Grey's voice stayed steady.

Derek nodded to the Marcanas. Before she could scream a warning, she heard the zapping noise and Grey's body jerked.

"No!" The protest ripped from her throat.

Grey's eyes widened only a second, then closed before his arms released her and they both collapsed to the floor. Her head hit something hard, and the lights blinked out.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Domhnulla? Can you hear me, sweet one? I'm here. Wake."

Her mother's lovely voice filled her senses with hope. She must be dreaming. She sounded so close, as if she could open her eyes, and her mother would be standing there. She felt lethargic, and when she opened her eyes, she saw a milky outline of a woman. Despite her watery vision, she felt the remarkable essence of a queen.

"Mother?"

A warm hand stroked her forehead. "It's me, sweet one. Take it slowly. You'll be fine in a few seconds. Breathe deeply."

Joy mixed with other emotions too deep to name. She closed her eyes and fell into the tide sweeping through her every sinew. She whimpered in mental pain, tears releasing down her face.

"Shhh. You're fine now. You're home."

Dorky allowed her mother to draw her into her arms, where she could soak in the silvery-white beauty that surrounded the queen. Tingling raced through Dorky's body, healing and strengthening. While her own body could heal itself, her mother poured light into Dorky's body. She could feel the heat, the collecting deep within her body of nutrients and vitamins removed not long ago by Derek's embrace and attack. Her head wound was instantly fixed. When the repair was finished and Dorky's tears left her cleansed from accumulated stress, she released her mother.

Miraculously beautiful, her mother's thick silvery-blond hair fell about her shoulders in waves. Her face had not changed in three hundred years, her alabaster skin porcelain-smooth, her classic features divine and carved like a masterpiece. Her slim body was wrapped in a plain oversheath of white cotton so unlike the sumptuous velvet royal garments Dorky expected.

"What do we do?" Dorky asked, her voice rough and dry.

"Shhh...you need sleep. When Derekan brought you inside the castle, I knew he'd done something harsh to you. But you are well now."

Her mother used this realm's name for Derek...Derekan. Derekan Vandurian. Dorky had spent so many years using his other name, she couldn't think of him as handsome and noble Derekan.

And now, she couldn't think of him as noble.

Ciarda's blue gaze held love and excitement and sadness all at once. Though her tears dried, Dorky couldn't wait long to soak in the beauty of her mother's presence. Sharp worry made Dorky snap to attention.

"Grey," Dorky said urgently. "Where is he?"

Her mother shook her head. "I don't know." She stood and walked from the soft bed to a flask of water on a near table. "When they brought you to me, I was so happy to have you here, no matter the circumstances."



Dorky didn't care for the lightness in her mother's tone, the lack of seriousness. She hoped Derek hadn't used his awful powers to harm her mother mentally. Unless the power of what happened to her father had torn her mother into jagged, destroyed pieces. Dorky watched her graceful mother walk toward her, water glass in hand.

"Drink. You've been lying there for two hours."

"Where are we in the castle? I don't recognize it."

"That is because you've never seen it so nicely appointed. We're in the dungeon."

Dorky took the water glass and managed one sip. She almost choked. "What?"

"Many years ago, after you left the area, we decided to change the dungeon into rooms for visitors. We have no prisoners anymore, so there was no need for a dark and horrible dungeon." She smiled. "For my part, I'm glad we changed the place. I've been locked away from your father for a week now. I'm not..." Her mother's face crumbled, tears now flowing down her face. "He was in the garden. The courtyard in front to be exact when the Realm Guardians overtook him." She stood near the bed, her hands clasped in front of her in uncharacteristic submission. "He stepped in front of the Realm Guardians to protect me."

A sharp recognition of what her mother must have witnessed curled through Dorky. She clasped her mother's hands. "Father would do that. He'd do anything for you."

"As I think your young man would." Her mother's brilliant smile returned, and she squeezed Dorky's finger. "Grey O'Toole is a wonderful man."

Dorky managed a lopsided smile as she released her mother's hands. "How do you know?"

"Because any man who would follow you here, put himself in front of danger for you is honorable and obviously much in love."

Dorky shook her head, wonderment spreading from her heart. "You don't know him. Besides, I thought you'd say he's a rogue at the very least."

"Well, he could be all of that and still be a great man." Her mother sighed and sat on the bed. "Human men are fragile in this world. Only the most courageous, the strongest could survive."

"How is Father?" Dorky asked, eager for an answer.

Her mother's gaze dropped. "He weakens. When the Realm Guardians attacked they were extraordinarily powerful."

Dorky swallowed the bitter taste of hate for Derek as it rose up inside.

"How did you know he was with me?"

Her eyes saddened. "Because Derekan told me." She noted the plush accommodations, her hand smoothing over the crushed green velvet bed coverlet.

"Mother?" Dread stole around Dorky's heart. "Is Grey truly all right?"

Clear truth shone in Mother's eyes, and stark fear arose inside Dorky.

Ciarda's face showed solid apprehension, a worry Dorky knew her mother couldn't hide. Dorky disengaged herself from her mother's tender embrace and sat fully upright on the pallet. Sunlight from a skylight spilled into what would normally be a hideously dark room. Thank the Goddess fairies and elves didn't believe in cruelty, even to one who might be considered an enemy.

"Mother, tell me. Is he all right?"

Her mother shrugged. "In truth I'm not certain. You see, they dragged him away when you both fell unconscious. At the time I was far more concerned what they planned to do with you. I think he might be in the antechamber upstairs. In that small, awful room I wish I'd taken time to decorate." Her mother smiled, despite the desperateness of the moment. "At least there's a comfortable bed in there."

Dorky tried to find equilibrium. She didn't know what she wanted to do next or what she should do next.

She threw up her hands. "You said *them*. Derek and the two Marcanas?"

Her mother shook her head. "Realm Guardians. Derekan, or Derek as you know him best now, appeared at our castle doorstep with the Marcanas apparently after the Realm Guardians harmed Nidia."

"Nidia was trying to warn you, wasn't she...that Derek had turned?"

"Yes." She sighed. "She sensed his treachery. When she was harmed right outside the castle, we took her in. When your father was attacked and the Marcanas took over with Derekan, they put Nidia somewhere and we haven't seen her since. We are prisoners in every way."

Dorky shook her head, then stood and went to the single ray of outside illumination that shone down from the skylight. She bathed in its warmth, gathering additional strength and a clear head from its power.

"The staff didn't try to protect you?" she asked.

"You know how it is with us...we haven't had an enemy in so many hundreds of years. None of the staff are trained in warfare. None of them know how to protect."

A shiver of ultimate dread pierced Dorky. "Oh Goddess, I never understood until now."

"What, my darling?"

Dorky covered her forehead with her palm, as if that would help her remove the confusion. "Over three hundred years, more has changed in the Shadow Realm than I realized. More so in the aboveworld than the belowworld. Fairies and elves...Goddess, I used to revere our peaceful ways, our enlightened ways so much. But now I see. Three hundred years of complacency has allowed an evil force like Zurvan and Kaelan to overwhelm what should be the greatest power of all. Our arrogance has turned us away from realizing we can't close our eyes, to prepare for the worst, while knowing we can never protect ourselves from all of it."

When Dorky opened her eyes and looked at her mother, she saw truth dawning in the older woman's eyes. Truth and sadness.

"Your father and I are to blame for that, Dohmnulla. We allowed it to happen. Now all the elves and fairies in the land are in peril because we didn't prepare. We didn't have a force guard around us at the castle. Nidia tried to warn us. She understood. Our wisdom didn't save us."

The queen shivered, and for the first time in her long life, Dorky saw despair clouding her mother's expression. She joined her mother in that hollow, dark place, her world enclosed by a heartfelt desire to retreat. To give into the malingering desire to acknowledge defeat. Then she thought of Grey.

He would never give up. He wouldn't, as he often said to her in the past, let the bastards get him down. And then, as if Grey's strength became her own, she knew what she had to do.

Her head came up and she pinned her mother with a hard stare. "No. We won't do this, Mother. We won't. Is there a way to get a message to Derek?"

## Chapter Fifteen

Dorky walked the corridor, two tall, dark-haired fairies trailing behind her. When they'd released her from the dungeon with word that she could see Grey, her joy at the idea was almost eliminated by the realization that fairies were complicit in this dreadful situation.

"I hope you realize what sort of hell you're consigning yourself to for joining with Derekan," she said casually.

One of the dark-haired fairies, his long purple robes indicating he represented a high court, smirked at her. "We serve Kaelan, who will be the true and rightful heir to the throne once your father passes."

Overwhelming anger stopped her in her tracks. She glared at the fairy, her gaze dancing ruthlessly over his long, tousled locks and bored expression. "If my father passes, my mother is the rightful ruler of this country."

"Not if she is destroyed and you are taken as Kaelan's consort after we put him on the throne," the other fairy said. "The man always rules over the queen."

"That is wrong. The rightful rule would be my mother as his wife and queen."irate, Dorky shot back, "Besides, I would never marry Kaelan."

The bored-looking fairy shrugged. "You will comply with whatever Kaelan wishes, or die."

Dorky fought off a desire to swing at the much larger fairy and curse him to the Goddess. His karma would be fulfilled, one way or the other. The thought of her mother being murdered sent icy fear and anger through her blood. "May the Goddess have mercy on your soul."

The bored fairy's face twisted into a sudden mask of hatred. He drew his hand back. Before she could dodge, pain lashed through her right cheek as he landed an open-handed blow. She staggered but didn't fall.

"There is no Goddess under Kaelan's rule. Only the sacred male energy. The feminine is low, is not fit for rule or for power. Get moving!" The bored fairy shoved her along.

The light illuminating the corridor gave the hallway an ethereal glow. When they reached the end of the hallway and a set of huge double doors, she reached for the antique door handle and entered.

They swung wide open to reveal one of the plusher rooms in the castle. A huge bedroom decorated in a late Victorian emerald green and paisley designs, it looked masculine enough for Grey. To her surprise, Grey stood near the small windows watching outside, his hand planted on his hips and his gaze as far away as a captain on

a sailing vessel commanding the waters. He didn't wear the SWAT-type gear anymore. Someone had provided him the more medieval-looking flowing white shirt, bottle-green velvet vest and soft black breeches with boots. She stopped just inside the doorway, her thoughts arrested by how gorgeous he was. His hair tumbled in a mess about his head, as if he'd run his fingers through it continuously.

He swung around, and his eyes widened. "Dorky."

The fairies who'd escorted her left the room and closed the door. She heard the lock engage. She started forward at the same time Grey did, and before she knew it, his powerful arms enveloped her. His heat, his strength sent wild pulsations of both relief and desire racing through her body.

"God, are you all right?" He pulled back to cup her face, his eyes wide with worry. "Did they hurt you?" His fingers caressed her chin. "Fuck! There's a bruise here." His eyes blazed with emotion. "The fuckers hurt you."

"I'm fine. One of the fairies took exception to something I said a few moments ago. But it doesn't even hurt. He could have done far worse."

"Son of a bitch," he muttered, then he pressed a tender kiss to her forehead.

"It's all right. I'm fine. I woke up in the dungeon with my mother." Her hands skipped over his shoulders, his chest, as if she couldn't get enough of touching him. "What about you? How are you?"

"I woke up a few hours ago with a raging headache. I guess that's what a low-grade jolt from a particle sword can do to a man."

"You were lucky they didn't kill you on the spot." Tears rose in her eyes, but she fought them back. Now was not the time to go soft.

He kissed her nose. "I thought you'd given up on being emotional."

Shamed, she sighed. "Okay, I'll admit it. When we were making our way to the castle, I was trying to keep back my emotions. It just hurts too much to feel what I do for you."

"What do you feel?"

She swallowed hard. "Can we talk about this later? Right now we have plans to make."

To her surprise, his gaze didn't cloud over, and he didn't demand any more answers about emotions, thank goodness.

"Can we make plans?" he asked. "Can Van Doren hear us?"

"No. Each of these rooms were sealed long ago specifically to prevent thought transfer. I've tried it already and Derek either hasn't removed it or doesn't realize it's in place to start with." She sighed. "Can we refer to him as Derekan from this point forward? His true name in this realm is Derekan Vandurian. Like me, when he left this realm, he took another name...Derek Van Doren."

Grey kept her in his grip, his fingers soothing over her shoulders. "Of course. I'll call him anything you want. But for now, forget everything just for a moment," he whispered in her ear. "Feel me."

He tilted her chin up so that she couldn't escape his gaze. His lips trailed a delicious path from her nose to her mouth to her chin, then around to her ear.

She quivered a little as a thrill shot straight to her pussy. She ached to find escape, some reasonable relief from the stresses they'd encountered.

As he drew her closer to him, tighter to his taut, delicious body, she drowned in his musk scent, the texture of his velvet vest along her face. He rubbed her back, pushed his fingers through her hair. Gazing into his pewter eyes gave her strength, and was guaranteed to make her heart flutter with sexual awareness. His fingers continued the sensual journey, petting her body with long, caressing touches along her shoulders, her back, down to her ass. He cupped her there and brought her hips against his rock-solid erection. The garments she'd been given were like those she'd worn three hundred years ago—gossamer white and floaty, light and airy. The flowing robes lifted easily as he reached under the ankle-sweeping folds and bunched it around her hips.

"Christ," he said softly when he encountered naked flesh. "Sugar, you're gonna drive me to an early grave."

She pressed her fingers over his mouth. "Don't say that. Please."

He kissed her fingers before she could remove them. "Don't worry. We'll find a way out of this situation."

His husky tone sent renewed desire and hope through her. When he kissed her, she fell into the moment, refusing to remember where they were or what could occur in the future. All they had was now. His lips caressed and cherished as his hands returned to explore her naked ass.

Overtaken by her hunger for him, she kissed Grey with everything she had. She needed his taste, his strength. He slipped his fingers between them to touch her swollen, wet folds. She gasped when he found her ready and willing.

Swelling desire drove her to reach for the waistband of his pants, but he was there before she could touch him. He worked open the breeches until she could reach Grey's long, thick column of male heat. Under his steady, unrelenting gaze, she caught fire. She couldn't look away from him as she palmed his sex from root to tip.

He gasped. "No more."

She stopped, surprised. "What?"

"This...I need this," was his guttural answer.

Grasping her buttocks in his strong hands, he lifted her upward. Her legs came around to embrace his hips. He lowered her, and his cock found quick entrance deep between her folds. He pushed upward, a stabbing thrust that pushed the air from her lungs.

"Grey!"

He was big and hard inside her, and she throbbed along every inch of his steel-hard erection.

He panted, his muscles straining as he took her weight. Stretched to the limit, her pussy squeezed tightly around the broad pillar of male flesh. God, he was so sinfully good, so incredible inside her. Grey propped Dorky against a wall, his hands firm as his fingers dug into her flesh. He tilted her hips...oh, his cock head touched her cervix, hit just right where she needed it. She squirmed, impaled and taken to a depth she didn't realize was possible before now. He stared into her eyes, as if he wanted to read every secret she'd ever had or ever would have.

"Take me," he said.

His hips drew back with slow precision, iron-hard flesh caressing her sensitive core. She tried moving, but he held her firmly so that she took each silken, slow thrust.

He shook, his breath catching. "I can't...I can't wait. Sugar...God."

With a growl he thrust harder, grinding his cock deep. She gasped, out of her mind as he bucked against her, his rhythm quickening under escalating pleasure. He pumped steadily, and the friction built under the firm movements of his hips. Her moans grew in pitch, and she tightened her thighs around his hips. Tension coiled deep inside her. The sensation of his cock spearing her was so exquisite, orgasm built and threatened to burst any second. She gasped, a high-pitched moan parting her lips as she came with bone-melting delight. Muscles compressed as she climaxed with fast pulsations around his hard flesh.

Grey didn't think about the next moment or even the next second. If ever he'd lived in the present, it was now, buried inside the tight, hot flesh squeezing and contracting around him. His body shivered, his heartbeat pounding in his chest. Feeling her come around him almost blew his head off, the pleasure was so damned exquisite. He panted, on fire for the woman he held so tightly.

He buried his face in her hair and let go, his body taking control, his mind splintering into a thousand pieces where nothing mattered but the sensation of her honey-sweet core caressing his aching cock. As she orgasmed again, she moaned out his name. His restraint disappeared as he pounded into her with thrust after hard thrust. Sweating, panting, he gave Dorky everything, wanting her to come around him again. Her whimpers, her pleas increased.

"Grey. Oh please. Grey."

He whispered into her ear, "That's it, sugar. Come on. Let me hear it."

She couldn't stop the sobs, the cries that spilled from her throat with every thrust. His body plunged into hers with a pace so intensely carnal she ignited. Her pussy contracted and released over his cock with sharp spasms, the bliss raging and fulfilling.

She stiffened, cries of ecstasy escaping. As her pussy clenched over his cock, he couldn't hold on. With a deep roar he climaxed, thrusting hard once, twice, three times, spilling inside her heat.

Slowly he allowed her to slide down his body, and Dorky enjoyed the boneless, floating sensation. His arms stayed round her, his warmth and power pure bliss to her.

She knew they had work to do and plans to make. This beautiful time was short-lived. She moved away from him long enough to wash up in the connecting bathroom. He did the same, and when he returned to the room, she sat on the opulent red velvet couch.

"Grey, I can't believe they gave you this room. My mother was certain they'd hurt you. Torture you perhaps."

He shrugged. "Well, there's always later."

His sardonic expression worried her. "You're not giving up on what we're doing here, are you?"

He folded his arms. "Of course not. Your father needs you. Hell, your people need you."

She shook her head. "Just my father and mother." She told him how the Marcanas had said Kaelan would marry her once her father and mother were dead. "That can't happen. I can't let it happen."

She shivered, and he sat down next to her and slipped his arm around Dorky. "It won't. I promise you. Remember what I said. We're going to get out of here. Now tell me, why didn't the other fairies and elves start an uprising against Kaelan? Why didn't Kaelan also try to kill your mother?"

She shook her head. "Perhaps because having them both killed would look too contrived. The way Kaelan's arranged it now makes it look as if my father was attacked entirely at random. Kaelan has swooped in to save the day and guide a grieving nation worried about their king. Those who understand what is really happening are probably concerned that if they approach right now my father would be killed outright."

Exhaustion wore at her, and she sank down onto a chaise. He sat along next to her, his strong hand running along her spine in a comforting stroke. "You okay?" he asked.

"Tired. Even immortal elf and fairy hybrids become worn down sometime."

She shivered, suddenly cold. He drew her close, his powerful arms a comfort. He kissed her forehead. "God, I'm sorry."

She put her head on his shoulder. "No. You have nothing to be sorry for."

"Yeah, I do. For not getting you out of this mess in the first place."

She winced and lifted her head to watch him. "Goddess, no. It isn't your fault. None of this is. It's the choices we've made. We're moving toward a conclusion I don't seem to have any control over. It's moving too fast."

She hated the words as soon as they spilled from her throat. Before she could speak again, the door swung open on smooth hinges. As they both stood, Grey moved in front of her. She peered over his shoulder.



The two Faeries who'd brought her to this room walked in ahead of a tall, thin man. Although she didn't recognize him, she guessed his identity. His hair gleamed shiny white, hanging straight and curly about his shoulders. She supposed he qualified as handsome in a cold, sharp way with his long classical nose and defined jawline. But his green eyes held a distinctive coldness, a harshness she recognized. This man was completely without conscience. Without caring.

"Kaelan," she said almost too quietly for the ear.

He smiled, and if he'd been a moral man, Dorky would have welcomed the grin. Instead it froze her blood. His robes befitted his station as a fairy and elf hybrid. With flowing red and blue velvet, he'd represent everything royal and regal, despite the fact he had no royal connection. In fact, his lofty height surpassed Grey by a couple of inches, but his body mass was thin and lanky. His right bejeweled hand clenched a silver and gold staff. She doubted he needed the staff for walking. His ego dictated amenities and possessions guaranteed to show his status.

"Indeed." His voice was clear and deep, with a gravel and sand quality that irritated Dorky. "You have an excellent instinct, my dear. Welcome home."

"This is not my home," she bit out with anger she couldn't fight back. She stepped around Grey and snarled just as he nabbed her arm, "You've destroyed my home. My family."

"Destroyed. Oh come on now. Hardly. I've given this stale kingdom life."

She snorted. "Life? By hurting my father?"

His wicked smile grew wider. "Your father annoyed Zurvan, and I am a servant of Zurvan. The Realm Guardians are protecting this kingdom, and they'll continue to protect it." He pointed at her. "You and your kind have betrayed Zurvan's people for far too long."

"That's ridiculous. I don't know what you're talking about."

"That's because you're ignorant. This realm should have stayed like it was in the beginning, when elves and fairies came here."

"What are you talking about?" Irritated with his obtuse statement, she growled out her next question. "Are you one of those people who thinks Marcanas and humans from the other side shouldn't mingle?"

He laughed, and she saw the truth in his eyes. "Very good. Amazing. You figured it out rather more quickly than I would imagine."

Anger tortured her, and she almost took another step toward the creep. Grey kept his grip firm on her arm. A quivering built inside that she couldn't control, her hatred for this hybrid at an all-time high.

Kaelan smiled. "Your family's reign is at an end, and it's not any too soon. Because your family has reigned during these many hundreds—*thousands*—of years, our realm had deteriorated. You allowed the Marcanas to mingle with elves and fairies. You

started the trend yourself when you had that scandalous affair with Lyon. Everything started from the point you dared venture beyond the rules, my sweet Dohmnulla."

"You fucker." Grey's voice went low and dangerous.

Dorky turned to face Grey, and she witnessed the boiling disturbance in his eyes. She realized her own anger could cause him trouble, and she moved back to his side. With caution, Dorky clasped his arm, and his grip never released her.

"If that's so, then you can let my parents go. They can't do anything to harm you. Somehow you've taken over this kingdom without effort. Let them leave. I'll take them to the other side."

He chuckled. "You honestly think I'm that deranged? That I wouldn't understand what you're doing? Of course they can't leave. Neither can you. Once your parents are dead and I marry you, you will be subject to my rules. Rules that say any Marcanas fraternizing with an Elf or Fairy will be destroyed on sight. No exceptions."

"If you're so eager for the throne, why not kill me too? Then you can rule alone."

Kaelan chuckled. "Because I've always wanted you. Under me. In every way both subjugated and sexually submissive. I want to punish you for the sins you've committed, my dear Domhnulla."

Dorky was tempted to strike out, to use her formidable powers to prove how wrong he was about keeping her under his fist. And for assuming he could impose rules and regulations, unnatural limitations on female fairies and elves that had never existed in the first place.

"Is that why you attacked Nidia?" she asked, her heart heavy. "Because you don't want anyone to know what you really are? Because she tried to expose you?"

"Why, my dear, I didn't attack her. She came after me."

Part of her wanted to scream good riddance, and she hoped Nidia had done some harm. But whatever hurt the Marcanas might have done to Kaelan didn't show.

"I don't believe you," she said with contempt.

He shrugged. "Believe it or not. It doesn't matter to me. It is a shame you can't see her."

"If you have such control, why is it so important that I don't see my father or Nidia? You've let me see my mother."

He sighed and started to pace the room. Grey steered Dorky so that their backs weren't toward Kaelan or the Marcanas on guard.

"This is tiresome questioning," Kaelan said. "Very tiresome. But I suppose you deserve that much, as you will soon be my wife."

Her stomach lurched with nausea. "Never."

One corner of his lush mouth turned upward. She fixated on his red lips, thinking how they didn't match with his pale, narrowly carved face. His nose, in particular, reminded her of a sharp blade. His cascade of white hair, thick and long, reminded her of a waterfall she'd once viewed in Ireland so many hundreds of years ago. There

beauty ruled in the green valleys, the plentiful and almost soothing scent of a peat fire. On this man it was a rushing, evil pit of water that would drown her or anyone who neared. She would stay as far away as possible.

Her heart thumped, anxiety whirling in her mind like a terrible tornado. "How did my father annoy Zurvan?"

"You know the answer to that. Simply by being who he is. Let us cut to the chase, shall we? Zurvan takes what needs molding and makes it his own. And I revel in that every day. Once your father and mother passes, this kingdom will have the true leadership it deserves."

"Deserves." She grunted in contempt. "Your greed and evil are the only things that will spread if you take over."

"If I take over? Why, my child, I already have."

"Child? I'm older than you!"

He laughed, the sound deep, cackling from his dark throat.

Grey squeezed her shoulder again. "Dorky..."

"No. He's a little boy who was never disciplined when he was young, and now he's allowed Zurvan to take over his sense and decency."

Kaelan's white eyebrows winged upward. "My, my. You're the cocky one. I think you are in no position to be this self-assured. Your father is gravely ill, and your parents will soon be dead. Why are you resisting the inevitable?"

"I'll never surrender to you." Her heart started to pound.

"Oh you will." He chuckled. "You will. Because if you don't, your lover here will die."

## Chapter Sixteen

Dorky thought her throat would close and never open. "What?"

Kaelan's gaze landed on Grey's angry face. "It's as simple as that. Marry me or he dies. But then he'll die anyway when he is thrust into the gladiator ring."

"What gladiator ring?" she asked.

"The one I've created. The first opening act will be Grey fighting one of the Marcanas. Should be an amusing spectacle for your wedding day."

Nausea rose in her throat. "What's the incentive for me to marry you if you guarantee Grey will be killed anyway?"

"I might spare your mother. Though she will be locked away in a dungeon forever. No need for the public to know she's alive because that would create a problem of who sits on the throne."

Dorky blinked. In one horrible moment her life was laid out for her by this loathsome evil. Marry him or her mother would die. Marry him or not, and Grey would die no matter what she did.

What choice did she have?

Sparing her mother was her only choice. She could pray to the God and Goddess that Grey could survive the gladiator ring.

The immortal walked toward them, and Grey slipped his arm around her shoulders and pressed her close as if to warn her against considering a rash move. Something inside her demanded retribution, to take a stand.

"What's your point in being here?" Grey asked calmly, almost like a man talking about the weather.

Considering Kaelan's threats, Grey seemed unusually chilled and receptive.

"To gloat, of course," Kaelan said as he turned toward the Marcanas. "Bring in her mother." Kaelan turned back to gaze upon Dorky and Grey with contempt. "You will fail at any attempt you make to escape or to influence your mother."

Kaelan left the room as the door opened, and seconds later, her mother stepped into the room.

She'd changed into a silvery robe, this one longer as it dragged on the floor. A smile exploded across her face as she approached Dorky.

"Mother." Dorky barely squeaked the words past her lips. She hurried to her mother and embraced her. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you. You know that, right?"

Her mother's eternal, youthful face broke into a sad smile. "You will do whatever you have to. Even if it means marrying him." She reached for one of Dorky's hands and squeezed it. "Even if it is the only way this realm can survive."

"Survive under a cloak of evil?" Dorky knew her voice rose with irritation.

As the Marcanas followed Kaelan and the door closed and locked behind her mother, Dorky's heart raced. She didn't understand any of this.

"Dohmnulla, I didn't tell you because I didn't feel you'd be able to handle it right away. But it must be this way."

Grey stepped forward, his gaze equally filled with disbelief. "I won't let Dorky marry that bastard. He isn't laying one hand on her."

Dorky looked closer into her mother's eyes. They stood about the same height—she could see straight into her mother's eyes. Then she saw it—the truth. Her mother's gaze shimmered with tears beyond the false smile.

"It's too late, Dorky. Your father...he is so close to death and they won't allow me to see him. When he's gone, they'll kill me too. I don't care so much about dying, but I do care that you survive and that you have some influence on how this realm will be run. Maybe, if you marry Kaelan, you can have influence indirectly."

Dorky understood then what she hadn't understood before. Evil had taken over. Totally. And it was up to her to stop it. But how? If she married Kaelan she was doomed to a horrible life. But her mother would live.

If she married Kaelan or if she didn't, Grey would still die.

She shook inside with the darkest, most horrible despair she'd ever encountered.

Grey saw the hopelessness in the queen's eyes, and recognition in Dorky's gaze. He also knew that if he allowed this to continue, he'd be a part of the problem.

"Dorky, can you try to communicate again mentally with Nidia or any other Marcanas?"

"Possibly. I might have better luck with other elves or fairies."

"I tried that once," Ciarda said. "It was intercepted by Kaelan. He's very powerful. He'd be on the lookout for anything."

Grey grunted. "Here's a wild idea. What if there was a diversion?"

Dorky frowned, suspicion in her eyes. "What kind of diversion?"

"Me."

Dorky smiled, and God, he loved the genuine amusement dancing in her eyes. "Oh, you're a diversion all right."

Ciarda grinned as well. "What are you thinking, Grey?"

"Doing something damned foolish. But it just might get us out of this mess all the way around."

Dorky walked toward him, and she looked so damned delicious he wanted to lick her, taste her until she cried out in orgasm. But right now, they didn't have time for sex games.

"Grey, tell me," she said.

"Can Kaelan read minds?" he asked.

Ciarda nodded. "Most certainly. He's even better at it than..." she glanced at Dorky, "than Dorky used to be."

His eyebrows went up. "I remember asking you about that awhile back. You said you didn't have many powers left."

Dorky reached him, stood close, but she didn't look him in the eyes. "No, I said I did have some powers, but nothing like I could if I lived in this realm."

"I dunno," he said. "That mind meld thing you did with me packed a punch."

"You didn't," Ciarda said, looking shocked.

Dorky shrugged, annoyance flashing in her eyes. "Yes, I did. I'll admit it. At the time I thought it was the right thing to do."

"Then maybe it's better if you don't know the distraction I'm planning."

"Grey —"

"Nope. This one is on me."

Dorky looked hurt. "Why wouldn't you tell me what you planned?"

He couldn't resist touching her. He slipped his arms around her and pressed Dorky close for a hug. She burrowed her head against his shoulder, and her arms slipped around his waist. He sighed, enjoying her firm body and the way she sighed.

"Because maybe if I don't tell you, then I can keep you safe."

"But —"

"He's more likely to think you're the one who'll stir up trouble."

"True."

"If I distract him, that might give you a chance to do real damage, or escape."

Dorky stiffened in his arms. She looked up. "Escape? Without you?"

He brushed that concern aside. "I'd find a way out."

"But you're not familiar with this realm."

"I know. But you know I can fight my way out of anything. I've done this sort of thing for a lot of years. Trust me."

"I do trust you...I just..." Her eyes moistened, and her teary-eyed expression tore at his heart.

"Here's what I'm thinking..."

\* \* \* \* \*

Grey sat in the castle throne room, taking in the entire place with a surreal sense of awe. On top of that, he felt wired for sound, as if some billy bad ass had promised to cut his dick off.

Well, if this whole plan went to hell, Kaelan would probably cut off both his heads.

“Fuck,” he said out loud, hyperaware.

The tiny chair under his ass felt like it might collapse under his weight any minute. A frigid breeze from the ice age flowed through the room. So much for idyllic fairy-tale weather. At first he thought he’d imagined the weather becoming colder. It wasn’t because night approached. Daylight lasted close to twenty hours here. But then night would last fifteen hours. Dorky said he’d have trouble adjusting to the strange days. He’d decided they wouldn’t stay in this realm long enough to adjust. Still, he sensed the temperature dropping. He shrugged it off. They had other worries more pressing. Like how the fuck he would pull off this crazier-than-shit idea of his. He’d told Dorky he planned to talk to Kaelan, but he didn’t tell her everything. And for that reason he would surely pass straight to hell. She’d want to kick his ass when she realized what he wanted to do. If he lived through his plan. His daring, brave, kick-ass plan. Yeah, right.

He could tell himself that, but he could fail and then Dorky and her mother would be left alone to fight Kaelan. Caution held back his enthusiasm.

After the Marcanas returned to the room, they took Dorky and her mother back to the dungeon rooms. At least being alone gave him time to plot. Not long after, the Marcanas returned and he told them he must speak with their soon-to-be king.

Here he sat, waiting for a good twenty minutes, for himself to show. Asshole.

In the meantime, Grey studied the room again, well aware escape wouldn’t be easy. The throne room looked like every other fairy-tale coronation event. Drapes of heavy red velvet fell in folds along gilded walls. A throne sat in the middle, finery framing the majestic furniture. Six steps lead up to the platform where the blue velvet and silver gilded chair sat. Grey stone floors and walls couldn’t dim the majesty inherent in the decoration.

Several doors led out of the room, but Marcanas and a few fairies and elves loyal to Kaelan would be on guard for any escape. To his surprise, Kaelan’s followers numbered smaller than he expected—around twenty. Again, he didn’t understand the sway Kaelan held until they’d led him toward this room. Dozens of fairies and elves bowed to him in the hallway, but their eyes were stone-cold hard. He saw defiance there, but not enough.

Another cold breeze floated into the room, and he shivered. Two double doors on the east side of the room opened wide and Kaelan walked in alone. This time he didn’t have a cane, and with his brisk stride appeared fit. Despite all the strength Kaelan supposedly owned, Grey didn’t believe it. He didn’t understand how he knew the man hid a weakness, but Grey sensed it. When the time came, he could capitalize on Kaelan’s weakness.

Kaelan stopped when he saw Grey sitting there. "Speak. Tell me why I should even bother talking to you."

Grey folded his hands and left his legs sprawled open. "Your little Marcanas friends neglected to tell you? Hmm."

Grey left the insinuation hanging out there, and satisfaction almost swamped him. After all, maybe the Marcanas weren't as loyal to the hybrid dictator as Kaelan imagined.

Kaelan's thin lips turned into a sneer. "I'm prepared for all eventualities. Don't think you can get the upper hand on me. Besides, the Marcanas understand what will happen if they defy me. I will kill Nidia."

Grey winced internally thinking about Dorky's friend in this much danger, but at this point danger lingered all around them, everywhere a malaise. "Then I suppose you want me to get to the point."

Kaelan didn't move, his stand wary. "That would be nice."

"Then I put my hat in the ring. I throw down the gauntlet. Whatever you call it in this dumbass fairy land I'm in right now. This place is a joke. But I think I know what you want, Kaelan. You should fight me in the gladiatorial competition."

Kaelan looked dumbstruck, then his face cleared of expression. "Why would I lower myself to that level?"

Grey shrugged. "Because you need to show the people you have the prowess to be king. Just killing their current rulers isn't enough to get their respect. I imagine these people respect physical strength. Show it to them by kicking my ass."

Again Kaelan looked a little dubious. "And you want something in return? Domhnulla's release?"

Grey shrugged again. "She's nothing to me. She thinks she's in love with me. But she doesn't have a clue what it means, and I don't want to be tied down. But I know you aren't letting me out of here alive. So if I have to die, I want it to be with a clear enemy. A man who is worthy as an opponent." Grey crossed his arms and speared Kaelan with his iciest glare. "I'd love putting some fucking dents in you before I die."

Grey wondered if his own ego hadn't overwhelmed him. After all, he had no idea what powers Kaelan possessed. Taking him on in the ring couldn't be easy. But if it meant giving Dorky any kind of chance to escape, he would. The thought of her marrying that scum-sucking bastard turned Grey's stomach. Even now, the fight ahead of him couldn't destroy his assurance that Dorky could and would escape.

More surprise evolved in Kaelan's eyes, and this time Grey felt the satisfaction of a direct hit. Grey went for the jugular. He may not have seen a man as evil as this one in person, but he'd encountered enough evil that he recognized chinks in armor when he saw it.

Kaelan didn't smile. "There is only one way you can leave this kingdom alive. And that is to kill me or be killed."



Grey smiled in triumph. Damn, this felt way too good. *Don't get cocky.* "I imagined they were my two alternatives."

"There is no deal you could make with me. And you cannot kill me. I am immortal."

"I'd heard that." Grey leaned forward, his words pitched like a salesman waving a delicious chocolate under someone's nose. "I also know you want the kingdom under your full and permanent command. And I want an honorable death. Since you're the supreme ruler for all intents and purposes, I take it you can change the rules whenever it suits you. Are there rules against you fighting?"

Kaelan moved forward, his curiosity obviously aroused. His gaze gleamed with avarice, with a barely restrained vileness and cruelty Grey couldn't recall ever seeing on another man's face with such intensity.

*Fuck, let's hope I can pull this off, or my ass is grass.*

"It is an interesting idea, but not one that has been entertained in this kingdom before."

Grey kept his gaze steady, challenging on the tall hybrid. "If you want true power in your new kingdom, you have to show the people who is boss. And you can't just punish them. You have to give them advantages...things that make them want to stay under your rule."

Kaelan's cold gaze sharpened with suspicion. "Such as?"

"You show the pansy-assed men, who are the physical power, a way to control the women here. I guarantee you'll rule easier then. I've seen how powerful women are in this place. Show them dominance. Show them what a powerful ruler you are. Stir up the men's need to show women their superiority."

Instead of bringing on wrath, as Grey half expected, the asshole jumped right for the bait. Kaelan's eyes widened at the idea, the tantalizing proposal he could show the realm his imperial strength and unbeatable masculinity. Kaelan's eyes gleamed, and Grey could see him thinking, plotting, wondering how this spectacle could be used to his advantage.

*Bingo, asshole. I've got you now.*

"I think you're on to something. I've never believed in women's equality—fairy or elf. Over the years Dorky's mother and father have continued the long-held tradition that females are equal. Revered, as it stands now. Respected. I think that is a very good point, O'Toole. Now...why would you tell me this? What is in it for you?"

"Like I told you. An honorable death."

"I'm surprised, O'Toole. You honestly are a cold bastard. I thought you had some attachment to Dorky, as you call her."

Grey shrugged. "I have a sexual thing for her. No more. You know how it is."

Kaelan chuckled, the sound beyond icy, beyond a dark evil that spilled over Grey in contempt. Kaelan's gaze coasted over Grey, an icy wind from the arctic regions of the hybrid's soul. "What duel do you propose?"

"Something fair." Grey forced his greatest acting talents to the forefront. The ones that had extracted him from the hairiest situations he'd encountered in his undercover work. "I understand you have powers I don't. Either we fight hand-to-hand combat, or with swords. Your choice."

Kaelan still hadn't moved, his body as rigid as a pole. He appeared much older, a man no longer caught in his immortality.

Slowly, Grey rose from his chair and walked toward the hybrid, keeping his body posture unthreatening. He held out his hand, knowing all along he took the biggest risk in his life right this moment. "You get Dorky and the Realm. I get an honorable death."

Kaelan's smile didn't look trustworthy, but Grey knew the only way to secure this deal was to walk into the fire. The other man's thin, chalk-colored hand reached for his. Grey almost held his breath, but kept his eyes locked in internal battle with Kaelan. When the other man's hand clasped his own, Grey jerked in surprise at the wintry grasp.

"Jesus, Kaelan," he said, "your hands are fuckin' cold."

Kaelan threw back his head and laughed, his handshake amazingly brief and without strength. He released Grey's hand. "You know what they say back on your side of the fence, O'Toole. Cold hands, warm heart."

"Right," Grey said dryly.

"You have a deal. Prepare to fight this evening."

"That soon?"

The hybrid walked away, his gait confident and secure of victory. "Why wait? I will send for you when I'm ready. In the meantime, the Marcanas will return you to your room. You won't see Dorky again, O'Toole. Never again."

Dorky sat with her mother in the dungeon, her heart and soul withering at the thought of Grey's mad plan. When he'd given her the details, she almost begged him not to do it. He was mad.

Then she'd seen the fierce pride, the self-assurance that attracted her to him. The power of a man so willing to save her he'd do anything. Even die.

Dorky hurt deep in her heart, but she also knew that if she didn't take this step, this plan, nothing else would work. No other escape was possible.

As she sat with rigid spine on the settee near her mother, Dorky sighed. She glanced over at the clock on the far south wall of this opulent dungeon.

"Two hours," Ciarda said.

"All we have left until the plan."

Her mother's eyes filled with pain that looked equal to the one eroding Dorky's soul. "Do you think it will work, my dear?"

"It has to work. If he fails..." She couldn't force the horrible thoughts to her lips. If Grey lost his fight with Kaelan, her world would diminish, wrinkle into a ball of misery so acute she couldn't begin to imagine it. "I can't stand the idea of marrying a loathsome evil like Kaelan. It would cripple my soul. I couldn't endure it."

"No. You must endure it, no matter what happens. Do you hear me, you must endure for the sake of your people." Her mother stood then came to crouch in front of her. The older woman took Dorky's hands in her warm clasp. "You do love Grey. With all your heart. That will sustain you. It will make this all possible."

When Dorky saw the reanimation in her mother's eyes, she quickly understood that she'd taken this entire situation and allowed it to defeat her. She needed to turn her own attitude.

"I've worried and tried to keep my feelings out of this. I tried to pretend that loving Grey would be my downfall. But it's not loving him that would destroy me. Perhaps destroy us all." She squeezed her mother's hands as happy tears burned her eyes and blurred her vision. "Thank you, Mother. Thank you for reminding both you and me that there isn't a power more sacred, more invincible than love itself. How could we have forgotten that?"

"You reminded me, dear. You and Grey. Seeing you together. My fear for your father has blinded me. But it's only my love too, that can save him." Her mother rose to her full height, no longer the timid woman, but the queen Dorky recalled. "We can do this, Domhnalla. Let's prepare."

"Wait." Dorky closed her eyes and sent a message to Grey, hoping he'd receive it.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Fuckin' hell," Grey snapped the words out, his body hungry for action, but also strung so tight he couldn't contain the desire to pace his room.

Marcanas had entered his room and offered him traditional dueling wear, but Grey left the garb on the bed. Draped in silks and velvets, he'd feel like a damned pussy. No, he'd keep on the defensive wear—his SWAT-type clothing, by God. Anything else was a fuckin' mistake. He needed swiftness, strength, and to have all his channels on-line to kill Kaelan.

Kill him for real.

He stopped dead cold as Dorky's voice whispered, brimming with heartbreaking emotion, and filled his head.

*I love you. I love you, Grey O'Toole, with all my heart. Be safe and come back to me.*

His heart drummed in his chest, and he looked around the room, as if he might find her watching him with mischief in her eyes. But no. He was alone. He smiled, his soul swelling with happiness as he took her telepathic statement for what it was. The truth.

God, he couldn't believe it and yet he wanted to believe it more than anything he'd experienced in his life.

He closed his eyes and tried her method, unconvinced she'd hear him.

*Dorky, I love you too. I am coming back to you. Depend on that.*

## Chapter Seventeen

Brisk, chilling wind tossed through Grey's hair as he walked toward the great arena. The fairy or elf, or whatever the hell, led him down a beautiful rock pathway surrounded by massive trees with both green and purple leaves. Nearby, stone buildings with Tuscan features rose high into the pristine dark blue sky. In this world, he noticed, stars sometimes sparkled against the velvet sky during the day, giving the lush landscape an unearthly, yet strangely beautiful glow. He'd learned from the fairy that they headed for the arena. In the distance, the coliseum rose into the atmosphere several stories, a somewhat smaller version of the same structure in Rome. Perhaps the Romans of his realm had found their inspiration from this colossal building. It burned under the benevolent sun, a combination of red and golden hues that warmed under the start of a new day.

Soon he'd enter this building and begin a competition of hand-to-hand combat with an immortal. To some it would seem one of the stupidest things they could imagine a mortal man trying. Yet Grey knew he had no choice. Not if he wanted Dorky to survive. And God, the desire to send her to safety roiled in his gut with an almost painful intensity. He couldn't imagine any world without her in it, and if Kaelan accomplished his goal, that's exactly what would happen. Someday Kaelan would kill her.

And the thought of that bastard forcing her to have sex with him curdled Grey's blood.

"You go to your certain death," the fairy said as he walked alongside Grey.

"Why do you say that?" was Grey's immediate question.

The fairy stopped, and Grey did the same. "You've made a foolish decision."

Grey shrugged. "Maybe."

The huge fairy stared down at him with lapis eyes, as expressionless and cool as a polar bear stalking a seal snack.

The fairy was hulking, with wide shoulders, broad chest and almost seven feet tall. His features were hawkish, his blond hair straight and long. The man wore medieval clothing similar to what Grey had worn since he'd arrived at the castle. Other than directing Grey where to follow him, the fairy didn't seem to have any weapons on him—Grey didn't want to test the guy. Doing anything cocky now could harm Dorky and her family's chance for survival.

"My name is Diorderus. I must tell you this before we reach the arena."

Before he could blink, the fairy grabbed Grey's arm and yanked him with staggering power toward some bushes. Grey resisted and practically flew off his feet as he stumbled.

"Fuck!" Grey stood in the bushes, his arm stinging and aching. "What the hell are you doing?"

"You must know," Diorderus said as he blinked. "My life was ruined when Kaelan stormed into the palace. I tried to resist his power, but it is awesome. I did resist until he killed my intended in cold blood right in front of me. For that, I would take revenge the way a fae should not. But even if my soul goes black, I will have my revenge."

Grey admitted to himself that he understood Diorderus. If Kaelan had done anything to Dorky, Grey would be hell bent on revenge.

The fairy nodded toward the path. "Quickly. We'll pretend nothing is amiss. I will send you my telekinetic power while you're in the arena. I know that you're fighting Kaelan to save your woman, the princess. To save the King and Queen of all Fairies and Elves. For that I honor you and your kind. Know there are other fairies that will do the same, even as they stand and watch Kaelan attempt to destroy you."

Before Grey could do more than blink, Diorderus grabbed his arm again and Grey stumbled onto the path. "Easy, buddy. I appreciate you helping me, but why are you jerking me around like a rag doll?"

"Because anyone watching will think I'm doing as Kaelan instructed. To keep you in line."

Made sense. "Okay. But how will this telekinetic power help me fight Kaelan?"

Diorderus shook his head. "I cannot speak of it. Wait and see the results."

Grey nodded, even though curiosity burned a hole in him. When they'd reached the coliseum, the hulking fairy took his arm again and shoved him with unexpected force toward a side archway.

Grey landed on his knees and palms with a painful jarring. "Fuck you!"

Diorderus laughed, the sound full and throaty. "I think not. My interest runs only to the female essence."

"Play along," Grey said in a low hiss. The fairy grinned, but didn't say anything more as he snatched Grey's biceps and tugged him to upward so fast he almost lifted off his feet.

Diorderus pushed Grey in front of him, putting authenticity into each shove.

Grey hoped he could make this work. If he couldn't, he'd find his ass in a heap of excrement fast.

As if he'd conjured the traitor from thin air, Derekan appeared from an arched doorway to Grey's left.

"Stop," Derekan said, his voice booming.

The fairy ceased shoving Grey, but Grey witnessed a glare flash through the big fairy's eyes. "As you wish."

Derekan's eyes filled with solid evil, and Grey wondered how he could have even given the asshole the benefit of the doubt. On the other hand, Dorky had trusted this douche bag one hundred percent.

"Here to watch the show?" Grey asked Derekan.

The other man's thick eyebrows winged upward like a bird of prey. "Of course. Wouldn't miss it."

Grey threw Derekan a withering glance. "Hope you enjoy the slaughter."

"Definitely."

"I also hope you fuckin' rot in hell after what you've done to Dorky. She trusted you." Grey gritted each word out. "You're a bastard of the first degree."

"Only a bastard?" Derekan asked. "You've reduced your venom, Grey. I'm surprised."

"Don't be." Grey tossed a contemptuous look at the fairy. "I'm saving all my hate for this creep."

So quickly he didn't have time to blink. The fairy bashed him upside the head with his bare fist.

The world dimmed as Grey struggled to maintain balance. His knees collapsed, and he landed on his ass with a jolt that sent his teeth clacking together. A moan rolled from his throat as his body ached and throbbed. He caught his head between his hands as shame worked to override any chance of clear thinking. Great. Diorderus must be under the impression that giving Grey a concussion would help.

Derekan's laugh echoed over Grey's head. "You've done a fine thing. Dorky would be proud of you."

Grey got to his feet with effort—that bastard Diorderus had performed too well. He didn't say a word to Derekan's taunt.

"Come," Diorderus said, clasping Grey's shoulder and sending him down the hall at a fast clip. "You have a meeting with the lion."

"Lion?" Grey asked in disbelief. "Kaelan's feeding me to the fuckin' lions?"

"No. *The* lion. Kaelan is now named The Lion. Not King. Not Prince of the Realm. Lion."

"Uh-huh." Grey didn't give a shit.

"You should learn the lesson of the lion. Dance quickly, bare your fangs and expect the unexpected. Such a lesson would go far in the challenges ahead."

"Right."

They turned a corner and there the coliseum opened up, a huge circular arena. Grey could see the crowds, see their undulating movement like a wave. Despite his disorientation from the bell-ringing shot to the head, he felt oddly energetic. From somewhere far below, a lion's roar echoed upward like a nasty beast from a horror novel. Whatever happened next, it couldn't be too fuckin' pleasant.

"What do you get out of this bullshit?" Grey asked as they stood at the doorway, his heart thumping like cymbals in his ears.

The fairy frowned, his eyes sad. "Retribution. Absolution."

"If your intended was killed, why do you need absolution?"

Diorderus's gargantuan hand tightened painfully on Grey's right shoulder. "For allowing this. For not dying when my intended died. If I fail and go to the great beyond, then I know I'll at least be with her. My spirit will be free and with her. I love and need her more than anything in my life, but I am trapped here with my pain."

Grey experienced a wealth of respect for the fairy. He knew the feeling—the crippling need to be with Dorky. To see her unharmed and to hold her in passion again.

"Into the arena with you," Diorderus said as he pushed Grey into the huge circular area.

Grey's attention slid from one side of the packed arena to the other, surprised by the sheer number of people populating the stone seating. More astonishing, they didn't cheer when he stepped into full view. A steady hum filled his ears, the accumulated noise of thousands of voices talking at once but not shouting. Maybe fairies and elves kept dignified when they witnessed a sporting event. How many of these otherworldly people wanted him dead?

Grey felt Diorderus's attention riveted on him and knew if nothing else he'd helped the fairy regain some hope for the kingdom.

The fairy walked back into the shadowy hallway, leaving Grey exposed. With no weapons. No armor other than the SWAT-type gear.

Grey sighed. "O'Toole, you are so fuckin' screwed."

\* \* \* \* \*

Dorky's eyes stung under the bright sun and unusual heat stifling the air as she walked in the huge coliseum. Despite voices murmuring in a low hum, and the scent of food available from carts nearby, her heart went heavy with apprehension. Two Realm Guardians had come to the dungeon and taken her away, and she'd almost screamed and run as tension drew her tight and angry. Her mother had stayed silent as they took Dorky—the older woman had looked beaten and tired no matter the vigorous plan they'd started. No, with one Shadow Guardian in front of her and behind, she didn't stand much chance of escape. Not without sealing her mother's fate and causing Grey's death. The only way Grey and her family would survive was if she cooperated.

At the very least she could save her mother and could see her again.

After what seemed an eternity of climbing stairs and walking down long corridors, she arrived at the opening to a large booth area. Wine, exotic fruits and breads were laid out in trays on a long table. Her stomach tossed.

Dorky followed the Realm Guardian into the booth and that's when she saw Kaelan sitting with Derekan.

She stopped with a jolt of surprise. When Kaelan saw Dorky, he gestured for her to approach. She did. Reluctantly. Both men sat among a plethora of velvet-strewn chairs, their asses protected against the cold stone everyone else endured.



When she approached, Derekan stood and walked away. She watched him until he disappeared down a stairway. Displeasure grew and seethed within, threatening to destroy the calm she struggled to keep firmly in place.

Kaelan's cold smile sent proverbial chills up her spine. When he spoke, her body reacted with primitive distaste, a prickling of skin so disturbing she realized he held evil within. She'd suspected it before, but now she understood with perfect clarity how deep that evil went.

"Kaelan," she said simply.

"Domhnulla."

"Dorky."

"I like your real name better. I suppose that low-bred SIA agent gave that imbecilic name to you."

She bristled. "No. Derakan did."

Kaelan's head went back, laughter breaking from his throat. "How ironic. The one man you thought you could trust."

She braced herself, fighting back the desire to cram his words down his skinny throat. "What are you doing here? You're supposed to be down in that ring ready to fight Grey."

"Supposed to. But I'm not."

"What kind of game are you playing?"

"The right one. You underestimated my power, just as Grey O'Toole has. There are two of me, my dear. At least there will be in a few moments. Grey will fight one."

Her heart seemed to tremble, and she swallowed hard. She understood in a flash and her body went cold. "You aren't going down there. You won't fight him."

"Well, one of me will."

She could have argued, asked him to explain, but she knew he wouldn't give her the details. Things would have to play out as they would. Instead, she decided on another tack, one that would help Grey when the time came.

"When did you turn Derekan? When did Zurvan turn you?" she asked.

"Turn us?" He tilted his head to the side. "I see. You think we started as good men, but Zurvan snuck into our hearts and souls." He sighed and sat back in his chair. His hair gleamed with strong white highlights mixed with the blond. "Perhaps it was that way for Derekan. I don't know when or why he transformed into who he is now. For my part, I was born with this black heart. And I plan to keep it. Zurvan didn't need to corrupt me. I accepted him gladly."

Once more her stomach turned and flopped.

She started away. One of the Realm Guardians stepped in front of her.

"You'll sit with me as is common for a betrothed," Kaelan said.

She returned slowly and walked toward the chair he pointed to, her footsteps heavy. She sank into the chair. She hated this. But what choice did she have other than to play along until the time came?

She heard a murmuring rise in the crowd, and from her balcony seat she saw a man step out into the arena and proceed with steady, slow steps.

She recognized him immediately. "Grey."

Kaelan's hard stare landed on her as she murmured the word – she could feel it. She ignored his scathing look. No matter what he did to her, ensuring Grey's safety came first. No matter what.

She drew in a deep breath as Grey continued to walk until he reached the middle of the arena. Then, before she could take her next breath, Kaelan's figure – or what looked like him, walked into the arena opposite Grey.

Grey's heartbeat raced. Kaelan's steady walk toward him brought sweat out on Grey's forehead. Something felt wrong. Off. He didn't know why. He drew in a breath, steadied his senses and continued until he stood solidly in the middle of the arena. He felt all eyes upon him, watching and waiting. Ah hell. This wasn't fuckin' good.

Grey searched for Dorky's form in the crowd. He spied her sitting in the royal balcony with – holy fuck.

Kaelan.

Right. This was messed up.

Grey, Dorky's voice whispered in his head. *Look at the figure. See him for what he really is.*

He had two seconds to look back at the figure walking toward him. He blinked. Saw Derekan in Kaelan's place. With the next blink, he saw Kaelan's figure once more.

*See him,* Dorky's voice said again.

*I see him,* Grey said.

*I love you,* Dorky's dear voice filled his ears.

His heart expanded, made stronger by her love.

"I love you, Dorky," he whispered out loud.

Seconds jumped ahead and Kaelan's figure sprang at him full blast.

He dove to the left then right as the figure slashed at him with razor-sharp claws at the end of long-fingered hands.

Grey side-stepped, his muscles protesting the gargantuan leap. When the first blow came across his temple, it sent a stunning rocket of brilliant white pain spiking through his skull.

Dorky sprang up from her seat as Derekan swung at Grey and landed a blow to Grey's head. "No!"

Kaelan grabbed Dorky's arm and jerked her roughly back into the seat. "Sit down!"

Breathing hard, she regained control. Grey needed her steady. But as Grey reeled under the blow, she gathered every strength within and pushed energy straight out toward Derekan. Immediately strength pulsed hot and hard from the stands all around her. Yes. It was working. Fairies and elves joined together in one tremendous wave of mind energy and will. Kaelan and Derekan may have thought they had the upper hand – the bastards were dead wrong.

As the figure attacking Grey drew back his arm for another blow, Grey jumped to his feet and rose off the ground several inches. He pushed out, a hard kick landed straight into the Derekan figure's chest.

She added to Grey's power, gathering more strength to his blow. Derekan flew backward several feet and landed in the sandy dirt with a cry so loud it echoed around the arena. She clapped her hands over her ears at the horrible sound.

Then she felt the one thing she expected, but hoped could be avoided.

"Bitch!" Kaelan screamed as he grabbed her arm and hissed into her face. "Bitch!"

Kaelan's icy eyes penetrated and held hers before she could rip away from his painful grip. His mind power prevailed, sending a hot blast straight into her mind and shutting out the lights.

Grey's strength blasted through his body, surges pushing him to rush Derekan with everything he possessed. He didn't give a shit what happened now except pushing this rat-fucker straight into the next world. Nothing in this realm would stop him from succeeding. Whether Kaelan hid behind this lie – he would kill Derekan and come after Kaelan. One punch landed on Derekan's head, then another and another as Grey charged, pushed forward, charged again. A huge roar came from the crowd. More power rushed and poured like a great wave from an ocean, filtering and clinging, washing until he knew nothing else.

Derekan swung his clawed hand and a hot burn slashed Grey's chest. Fuck, the asshole landed one. Grey bounced away, swung, ducked, trading blows one after the other after the other with a furious round of flying fists and kicks. Additional power scrambled his nerves, pulsing, and Grey landed a heavy punch to the man's midsection. His hand went straight through Derekan and the man let out a scream so ear-piercing it threw Grey backward onto his ass. Derekan's façade evaporated until he no longer looked like Kaelan. He shrieked again as his entire body arched into a curve. He twitched, writhed and, to Grey's amazement, dissolved into dust that floated to the arena floor.

Grey heard accompanying cries from outside the arena, then another howl that sounded different from the others. He jumped to his feet and looked toward where the new, undulating sound originated.

From the balcony box.

He didn't see the real Kaelan or Dorky. Without thinking how he'd reach the balcony, he charged headlong toward the exit. When he plunged into the opening, Diorderus stood in his way.

"Get outta my way." Grey pushed at the huge man's chest.

"I'll help you. Follow me."

Together they ran up flights of spiral stairs until Grey thought his lungs would burst. They came upon the balcony a few moments later, and what Grey saw there practically made his heart stop.

Dorky lay on the flooring, a Marcanas kneeling at her side, concern etched on his ugly face.

"Dorky!" Grey dashed to her, shoving the Marcanas aside. "Get the fuck away from her!"

Diorderus knelt at her other side, his expression grave.

"Where is Kaelan?" Grey asked.

Diorderus nodded at the pile of ashes near Dorky. "That's him. The energy from our combined efforts worked to kill him."

"Good fuckin' riddance," Grey hissed, checking for her pulse. "Come on, baby." His heart slammed in his chest, pulse racing. "Come on." When he found a pulse, a sob tore from his chest. "Thank God." He lifted her into his arms and cradled her, burying his face in her hair. "Thank God."

Diorderus frowned. "She's been touched by the evil."

Grey glared at Diorderus. "I should kill you —"

"The energy bolt she took from Kaelan when he tried to stop her was very powerful. She could yet..."

Grey's throat tightened so much he could barely speak. "What?"

"All the fairies and elves came together with their combined power. Kaelan thought his power was enough to keep them at bay. But it was her power interfering with his that made it possible for the others to give you enough strength to destroy Derekan and eventually Kaelan himself."

"Shit," Grey murmured.

Diorderus sighed. "Her power resisted Kaelan's. Fought it. And no doubt, when he tried to fight her, she prevailed and that's why he lies here in dust."

"She's going to be all right," Grey said.

Diorderus shook his head. "Perhaps not."

Dorky's head felt heavy, as if it might drop into the pillow and never rise. Her body drifted, somehow separate and yet connected. She ached in every inch, her skin, her hair, her muscles. Goddess. She wanted sleep again. Something brought her

consciousness closer to the surface. She drifted on a blissful plane, self-aware but not. Happy but not. Where was she?

"Domhnulla?"

The whispery female voice sounded familiar. She frowned.

"Domhnulla, please come back to us," a male voice said quietly.

Both voices sounded familiar, but she couldn't place them.

"She won't wake up." This time she recognized the voice as her father's. "What do we do?"

"We can only wait," came another female voice.

"Mother? Nidia?" Dorky manage to rasp the words just as her eyes opened.

"Oh my Goddess!" Her mother's happy smile greeted Dorky.

Nidia hovered at her other side, an ecstatic smile breaking across her face. "Dorky darling."

"What—?" Dorky started to say, but her tongue felt thick.

"Don't speak." Her father, with his long white beard and long white hair, came to stand at the foot of her bed. "Rest yourself. All will be well."

"Father." Happiness surged inside her. "You're alive."

He nodded. "When Kaelan dissolved, his grip on me was banished."

She glanced at Nidia. "And you're all right?"

Nidia winked and patted her arm. "Never better. All because of you, my dear. You're a heroine of the realm."

Dorky's eyebrows lifted. "Really? Now that is laughable." Memory flooded back to her, and she sat bolt upright. "Grey? Where is Grey? Is he—"

"Calm yourself, sweetie," her mother said. "He is right outside. He's been by your bedside for four days. He's out on his feet." Her mother nodded to her father. "Get him."

Joy filled her, and as the others stood and filed from the room, Grey came in. His gaze locked with hers, and at the same time Dorky's happiness swelled within. Grey's smile exploded across his face as he came to her side.

"Grey," she whispered as he sat on the edge of her bed and enveloped her in his arms.

Grey held her tightly. She delighted, savored his touch, his scent. His delicious warmth. He felt so solid and strong.

"Grey," she said softly once more.

He stroked her hair and said into her ear, "God, I thought I'd lost you."

His voice sounded so broken, so lost, she drew back and saw the devastation mixed with happiness in his eyes. His hair was a tousled mess, a few days' growth of beard on

his face. Dark circles marred his eyes. But despite that, he was still the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen.

"Oh no." She cupped his face. "You could never lose me. I'm yours for eternity. We've destroyed Kaelan."

"Forever?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Not forever. As long as Zurvan walks this realm others can be influenced by his evil. As long as my mother and father and the rest of the realm can stay strong we have a chance of keeping Zurvan at bay." Then she frowned. "Wait. What's happened to Derekan?"

"I killed him."

Sadness mixed with her relief. "He wasn't pure evil at first, Grey. I know that now."

"Yeah. But he was weak."

Silence engulfed them as she took in the implications of what they'd experienced.

Grey cupped her face and then brought her close for a smoldering kiss. When he released her, she felt better.

"You think the SIA would object to two agents hooking up?" he asked.

She smiled. "I think we already have. What can they do to us?"

His fingers tangled in her hair. "We'll return to the other realm as soon as you're strong enough." He frowned. "Unless you don't want to return. Unless you want to stay here and rule with your mother and father."

She shook her head. "I've spent three hundred years in the other realm. It's my life. I want to continue my work with the SIA, if they'll have me."

He grinned. "Are you kidding? They'd have to be dumber than a box of rocks not to want you back. But if they don't, I'll resign, and we can do or go wherever you want."

Her soul filled with staggering happiness. "You'd do that for me?"

His eyes shimmered with moisture. "Don't you know by now? I'd do anything for you."

She never believed she could be this fortunate or this much in love.

"This life we'll have won't be easy. I still can't venture into the real world often. I'll have to stay in the SIA in my office where you first met me," she said.

"I don't care. I'd live in a fuckin' box on a street corner as long as I could be with you."

She smiled, but that quickly faded. "Grey, you'll have to make another decision."

"What is it?"

"You know I'm immortal. But you're not."

He nodded. "Yeah. But I don't care. If I can have the next fifty years with you..." His voice faded off as his gaze turned somber.

"There's something we can do, but only if you agree. If you go through a bonding ceremony with me here in the realm, you can have a long life just like any fairy and elf."

A smile broke over his expression. "Thousands of years?"

She nodded. "Would you change your life that much to be with me?"

"Yes."

She laughed. "I love you, Grey O'Toole."

"Marry me. Bond with me," he whispered against her lips.

"Yes. A thousand times yes."

She drew him into another powerful kiss, one laden with all the love they could give for an eternity.

*The End*

## About the Author

Suspenseful, erotic, edgy, thrilling, romantic, adventurous. All these words are used to describe award-winning, best-selling novelist Denise A. Agnew's novels. Romantic Times Magazine called her romantic suspense novels *Dangerous Intentions* and *Treacherous Wishes* "top-notch romantic suspense." With paranormal, time travel, romantic comedy, contemporary, historical, erotica, and romantic suspense novels under her belt, she proves her gift for writing about a diverse range of subjects. (Writing tales that scare the reader is her ultimate thrill.)

Denise's inspiration for her novels comes from innumerable sources, but the fact she has lived in Colorado, Hawaii, and the United Kingdom has given her a lifetime of ideas. Her experiences with archaeology have crept into her work, as well as numerous travels throughout England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Denise currently lives in Arizona with her real life hero, her husband.

Denise welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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