



Midnight Showcase

Erotic-ahh Digest Vol. 06-21 1555-5496

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Dragon's Wish by Mae Powers
Seth's Seduction by Emery LaRue
Serpentine Magick by Ravyn Reccio
Snakes And Ladders by Anna Fallon

Jaded Beasts 3, Dragon-Snake

MIDNIGHT SHOWCASE

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Jaded Beasts III
Dragon & Snake

MIDNIGHT SHOWCASE
www.midnightshowcase.com

Jaded Beasts 3, Dragon-Snake

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Jaded Beasts – Dragon & Snake Erotic-aah Digest

The Jaded Beasts Collection

Ancient and mystical symbols, like that of the Chinese astrology, have been around for centuries. According to various sources, twelve animals presented themselves before the ancient deities and heavens, and these are: the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog and pig, coming in that particular order. The jade gemstone became useful for different things in oriental cultures; like money, symbols of power, jewelry, and so on. Many of the astrology symbols were made from jade pieces. Each sign and animal represented has its own unique abilities, individuality and characteristics.

In six digests, Midnight Showcase proudly presents two symbols and four novellas per digest with four authors giving their unique spin on these tales. However, as mystical as most of the stories are in some aspect, “jaded” and “beasts” have many meanings. Read them all to find out.

Jaded Beasts III, Dragon & Snake

Erotic-ahh Digest ISSN 1555-5496 Vol. 06-21

Dragon – These mystical beings know they are intellectually talented, and can find treasures in places and people. Though gentle, yet forceful in their attitudes towards life and people, they are well liked and quite passionate about all things.

Snake – Of a passionately intense nature, this perceptive being can sometimes procrastinate too much. They are a wealth of knowledge, charismatic, and strong-hearted in both their relationships and the things they accomplish in life.

Dragon's Wish – Mae Powers

Can a tormented dragon shifter and a battered princess' growing passions withstand a tyrant and a curse that could kill or free them both?

Seth's Seduction – Emery LaRue

On the battle fields of Drodan, a shifter dragon saves a life for his own. Eiandra knows her savior Seth could be a dangerous seduction.

Serpentine Magick– Ravyn Reccio

The Serpent Lord thought he could conquer any woman, until he came across the mysterious beauty known as the Dark Witch.

Snakes And Ladders – Anna Fallon

Lily Marchant loves her fire-fighting job. She loves pythons. Volunteering in India combines these and adds a double helping of danger, and mystical passion.

Dragon's Wish
by
Mae Powers

Can a tormented dragon shifter and a battered princess' growing passions withstand a tyrant and a curse that could kill or free them?

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Dragon's Wish

by

Mae Powers

Chapter One

Laora dreamed of a large man, other than her husband.
She also dreamt of dragons.

One, in particular, shifted from man-beast to full glorious dragon. Oddly enough, the dragon reminded her of the precious statue her husband, Kragus, had given to her on the day they became engaged to be married. In her dreams, she watched him change from a small statuette to a man-dragon and then into a huge dragon beast.

The dreams hadn't started right away. Occasionally, the thoughts entered her mind, but those first ones were foggy. Then she'd seen a face. Handsome with hard jaw lines and slightly weathered by wind and time, she'd assumed. As the dreams got more vivid, a man, slightly taller and bigger than her husband, appeared in her nightly imaginations. Where her warrior husband stood dark and tall, the dragon-man had glorious golden hair, spreading thick and long around his broad shoulders, giving him a wickedly enchanting appearance that appealed to her feminine senses.

Her senses overloaded during her visions. His teal-colored eyes seemed to vibrate with knowledge, and she wanted to melt into their mysterious depths—eyes that promised her freedom, salvation and oh so much more. Just as his body offered a salvation of freedom to her distraught emotional and physical senses.

Her last dream of him, a few days ago, filtered through her mind. In it, he'd promised to cherish her, to give her all the passion she'd always longed for, in any way she wanted. His man body was hulking, towering over her average height, yet part of her was not afraid of him.

However, her shaky loyalty to her husband, Kragus, made her afraid of where her mind wanted to escape to—into the arms of her dreamy man-beast. In the beginning, before the dragon lord invaded her dreams, she'd been happy with Kragus. At least, she thought she had.

Barely a month after they wed, his attitude toward her changed drastically. He took her more roughly in their bed, no longer caring if her own desires were fulfilled. He left the castle more often. And, each time he thrust into her without care, she'd felt a little more drained. That had been nearly a year ago. She did not know how much more she could endure.

She'd been a priestess of the Sherenzade religion, but a princess to this very kingdom as well. Her father sent her to be raised at the monastery when her mother died during Laora's eleventh year. Then she'd learned that, upon his deathbed, her inconsiderate father had given her hand in marriage to his favorite warlord, Kragus.

Still, in the beginning, he'd wooed her gently. He'd even been considerate and loving as he taught her earthly delights. Then the changes started. Kragus told her it was her fault. When she dared to back-talk him, he'd slapped her. Laora no longer had anyone to turn to. Kragus seeped insidiously into her people's hearts, making them think he could do no wrong. What was she then, but a figurehead he married for the power she brought him?

There was much she still didn't understand about Kragus, or herself, for that matter. Her mother had been a sorceress princess for Sherenzade, too, but retained powers on the day her father married her. Laora's mother told her the powers did not come to their line always, and that, sometimes, it skipped a generation. Some females of their birth-heritage had only small amounts of magic. Mostly they did not come into them until they mated, which was another reason she'd married Kragus, if she was truthful.

The other reasons being, duty and the law said she must marry.

Kragus frightened her at first, but she had found him handsome and, when he went out of his way to woo her, she thought herself in love with him. Now she was uncertain where her loyalties, or her heart, lay anymore. Perhaps her naivety did her in. She was at a loss as to what to do now. She wanted to stand up to Kragus, to tell him he could not rule her kingdom or her body and mind like he had of late.

What was a princess to do when no one would listen? Even her childhood friends cared little about her any more. She had no one to

confide in or to talk with. She thought long and hard but could not come up with any answer, except to try and please Kragus. Constantly, he tormented her, but there were times when he seemed to mellow.

It was on the days that he was ruthless, and then left her, that she often picked up the statuette, the first present he'd given her. He had listened to her in those early days. She'd told him how much she liked the legends and myths about dragons. Felt they were real. But she'd never seen a real one. So he'd gotten her the small glorious statue on one of his travels, he'd told her—travels she often wished she could go on with him.

Unless it was a required event, Kragus didn't allow her much freedom outside her own suites. She felt like a prisoner in her home, most of the time. Still, there were times she'd snuck out when Kragus was out of town. She'd learned how to accomplish this over the last few months.

She had discovered something about herself. And it had come from a dream, one in which her dragon appeared one night. He'd told her she still possessed a bit of power; some Kragus had not totally drained. She could make herself disappear for a few minutes at a time, a slight-of-body where no one could detect her moving around.

It was long enough to enable her to move around the castle at will. In the beginning, that's all she did. Then she found a disguise, like a city dweller wore, and had gone about in the town. She didn't stay away for long, so that she wouldn't be missed. If she didn't strain herself too much, she learned she could slight-shift out of anyone's view long enough to leave the castle. Then she could handle the power long enough to return home when she'd done her visit in the town.

Disappearing seemed to drain her though, leaving her exhausted, so she was careful not to do it often. Yet, it gave her something to look forward to. She'd been doing it only for the last couple of months and still didn't know to what lengths she could use it. She stayed in the comfortable confidence of what she'd recently learned until she could test her new ability and do more.

She came back to the dragon dreams, for it was because of those visions she'd learn of her power. She recalled it vividly, and what her man-beast looked like in his fully-shifted dragon form.

As a dragon, his scales were a teal-and-jade blend in color, with the shinier scales getting thicker towards his long tail, whereas they

were fine-shelled toward his long neck. Though much larger in dragon physique, his muscular, elegant body, with its short tail and long neck, was magnificent to behold. Like his dragon-man form, he had five clawed hands, and his powerful limbs splayed five digits on each large foot that ended in long-toed claws. His huge wingspan, with its sparkling gold, jade and teal gossamer-like wings, was graceful and beautiful, running from the edge of his shoulders to the middle of his back. A membranous frill ran from the base of his neck, continuing smoothly, like silken tendrils flying in the wind, down his long spine, also ending near his buttocks.

His large, thick-lipped mouth displayed jaggedly-sharp teeth, almost looking like a lopsided smile. Gold-flamed tendrils, like his hair when a humanoid male, flew like wisps of wild wonder around the strong face and jaws. His short snout, with its round nostrils, twitched, as he looked her over with those luminous, almond-shaped eyes that sparkled with a myriad of greens and blues in their deep depths. The two horns, etched above its thick eyebrows, extended like coruscating bones of gold ivory, menacing yet alluring, much like the single row of small hard-boned spikes, which protected his long neck. He was ominous, and yet dangerously beautiful, to behold.

And in that particular dream, the dragon had embraced her with his huge wings and arms, promising to be there for her, should she ever wish it. She glanced now over to her side table near the big ornate bed she shared with Kragus. There her small dragon statue sat, glittering like a small ray of hope, its eyes luminous and curiously, it seemed, watching her every movement.

She sighed and almost went to it. She looked at the sundial standing ornately on the open balcony of her bedroom. Soon, Kragus would be home. She needed to prepare for him; otherwise, he might get angry with her again. He was due back any time from town where, she knew, he caroused with his warrior friends.

She hated war and wished Kragus was not planning to invade other countries. His need for dominance and power bordered on cruelty and tyranny. How he kept the people of the kingdom under his control she had yet to figure out but was determined to one day, if at also possible. Sighing again, she went over to her vanity to prepare for her husband's return.

Chapter Two

For a long while, Hellfestus felt trapped in a deep stupor, as if he'd been dreaming for a long time, and couldn't wake up from his dream state. Various images fluttered through that dreamy void, where nothing made sense for a long time. Then he felt something stroke his back, and a light hand of an angel, he thought, brought his mind back to the light.

Still, it wasn't clear at first, the light or the images filtering through in his mind's eye. Then the warmth came, and the dreams started; dreams of her, whom he wasn't sure of at first. She reminded him of a dainty fairy; that is, if he could recall what a fairy looked like. He could see his image reflected in her midnight blue eyes and how she appeared awed by him, in the beginning.

Such fleeting, sweet dreams at first. A smile from tempting lips, a bright sparkle from alluring eyes and a gentle caress from dainty hands. Though shorter than him, she wasn't slight of build and seemed to fit nicely when he hugged her in man-beast or dragon form. Slowly things, like his shifting, changed. He felt her near when she opened her mind to him; felt her invade his dreams more frequently. Perhaps though, it was he that invaded—no—*caressed* her mind. She seemed further pleased the more they dreamt of each other.

And each time she drifted out, he felt a loss. It was as if she was meant to be with him. But why, he wasn't sure.

Then the dreams changed again when she stroked him more. His mind opened to what was really going on. He learned he could not move outside the dreams but stayed trapped inside them. As time passed, he remembered why he'd been asleep for so long and why he remained trapped—encased in the form of a statue.

Naileed. The name angered him. Naileed, a dark witch—a hag who put an allure spell on him, to make him think her a beautiful she-dragon. But her rotten scent of evil awoke him in time, before he'd consummated a union with her. When he was about to strike her for her insolence and deception, her hand quickly waved another spell

over him. Then he'd become the statue. And soon the sleep came over him, imprisoning his mind and body, until the day Laora awoke him to the present.

Their dreams were shared ones, and he'd learned to read Laora's mind and body language. Eventually, he was able to differentiate between dreams and reality. However, she still thought they were dreams, for she often made light of that in their mind-talks. Then his mind's eye opened to where he was in the world, and he recalled, after a time, what had become of him.

Months went by before he figured out what would release him from his curse and that fate had sent him to Laora. If only she could be all that he hoped for, perhaps the two of them might be able to help each other. Whatever it took, Hellfestus wanted to try, for both their sakes.

He sat silent, on the stand beside the large canopied bed, and watched his mistress as she performed her nighttime toiletries and preparations, yet again, in hopes that her master, her husband, would be pleased with her that night. She deserved better, he thought. Sweet, but feisty, Laora was a lovely young woman in love with a man who did not deserve her. Hellfestus wished he wasn't under a spell then he'd show Kragus the harm he'd done her. He would beat the warlord, as he had often beat Laora.

But all Hellfestus could do was sit there—silent, stiff, and shiny—and dream about what he would do to the ungrateful bastard, Kragus. If only he were not a dragon statue, but the real dragon he once was. He would make Kragus pay for the torment the warlord inflicted on Laora, both mental and physical.

He hadn't been a statue that long, at least in dragon years. Nearly half a century ago, the Naileed witch had cursed him into this statue because he refused to have sex with her. He hated temperamental old hags. He'd been more powerful than her, but her hand was quicker that day. Now he could only be free from his hex-state if some deserving soul wished for his help and met the demands of the curse.

Would Laora be that person?

He'd grown fond of the princess, night after night, watching her young slender body prepare for her husband's coming. Kragus didn't deserve the dark-haired beauty. Hellfestus loved her deep blue eyes, especially when they lit up with joy. Lately, Laora didn't smile much.

Even when she didn't cry, Hellfestus' dragon empathy could pick up her emotional distress. She was too sweet for Kragus, but the

bastard had swept the naïve princess off her feet. He'd seen her content and carefree through her dreams and had learned, during the first month of her marriage, that she'd been happy. But after that, the sparkle in her eyes dulled slowly. Hellfestus felt her unhappiness with every iota of his accursed being—which was why, he was certain, the dream had grown stronger between them.

He'd tried to talk to Laora in those dreams and offer comfort, to let her know that she was so much more capable of things and magic. Magic, which he learned, Kragus was sapping from her. He heard things in the magical ethereal void sometimes, and that lead him to knowing about Kragus and Laora.

Also, when the princess and he talked, he learned about her background, and he told her about his knowledge of certain kinds of magic. Within a few weeks, he thought for sure he was getting through to her. He'd told her she had real magic inside her and that their dreams were meant to benefit them both. She hadn't believed him nor had she believed in herself at first. Soon, she saw the wisdom of his words.

He'd sensed it in her and was sure her husband knew about it long before Laora did. He wanted to help her, show her that she had special qualities inside that she could use to free herself from the oppression in which Kragus trapped her.

He'd taught her how to develop a gift, one that Kragus had not sapped out of her—the slight of disappearance. She'd eagerly learned how to use this, though afterwards she felt drained and utterly exhausted. Then, when she slept at night, she'd tell him what she'd done and where she had been. It had been a secret the two shared. Thankfully, neither Kragus, nor anyone else, had found out about it.

Now, through his mind's eye, Hellfestus watched her brush out her long black hair, which glittered with demure sparkles of silver as she stoked the ornate brush through its thickness. Her arms were pale and slender, ending with elegant but dainty hands. Hellfestus wondered what they would feel like, stroking his real form.

He silently vibrated every time she stroked his bejeweled, porcelain body. If only he could feel those warm sensitive hands on his male flesh, he'd know divine ecstasy, he was sure, as never before. But alas, it wasn't meant to be – right now anyway, if she indeed was meant to be the one to break his curse.

She stopped brushing her hair and undid the top bow of her silken robe. The gentle fabric fell open, revealing her creamy breasts. If his

eyes could have widened, Hellfestus knew his mouth would open as well. Her breasts were small, high and tempting. If only he could feel her, touch her, both with his hands and tongue. He'd definitely be in heaven.

Yet, it was for her husband she primped, in hopes of pleasing the ungrateful bastard. Hellfestus didn't believe Kragus appreciated Laora one bit. However, he could do nothing about it. If he could, he wasn't sure what. Would Laora ever want to leave her husband? Would Hellfestus have the power to make that happen should Laora ever wish it? Inwardly, he wanted to sigh. So much power, so little he could do. No, there was nothing he could do right now to save the young princess. Not unless she wished it. She had thought of such but only in her mind. He needed to hear her say it aloud. Hellfestus wasn't sure that she ever would.

Were it to even happen, would she be scared of him? He felt she had some strength in her, but would she totally go against a husband who didn't deserve her? Some women could be like that. He wanted to believe she wasn't one of them. That her few tastes of freedom had started her on the road in the right direction. On a path, perhaps, that might even lead to his salvation.

That's if she could believe her dreams—no, *their* dreams—had some reality to them. But that would only happen if she orally wished for it. Hellfestus wanted to sigh. Instead, he closed his mind's eye and slept, almost giving up that his curse would ever be lifted.

Chapter Three

Laora stifled her tears as Kragus finally rolled over and immediately passed out from his drunken state. It was long hours later before she fell into a fitful sleep. Other than her tenuous jaunts of freedom from him, her dreams were her only other escape. She actually looked forward to them, especially the ones where Hellfestus came to visit and comfort her. His arms seemed so real, as did his warm breath and heated body.

It wasn't long before she felt his presence. They were in a small meadow, near a stream of water, and it was in springtime when all was in lovely bloom. Life sparkled with hope. It was a relaxing place and all their own.

He waited for her in his mixed form, not quite man, not quite dragon. Yet, he was magnificent to behold, even in this man-beast state. He half sat on the bank of the gentle roving stream, and his lips curved upwards at the sight of her. It made her feel wanted and safe all at once.

She was no longer tentative and scared around him, but still a little shy. He patted the ground next to him, and she joyfully went to sit beside him. His smile widened, and she felt as if the world became brighter. A true home beckoned, making her feel more alive in her dreams than in her real life.

"You are more beautiful each time I see you, Laora."

She tried not to blush under those intense myriad-colored eyes, eyes that seemed to see into the very depths of her troubled soul.

"I'm glad to see you again, Hellfestus."

"My reality brightens each time you enter this dream world of ours." His wings raised and then lowered once she edged near him. Then one folded around her as if embracing her. "Tell me what ails you this night."

He knew her so well. There was nothing she could hide from him as she could Kragus. "I'd rather not talk about my troubles with my husband. This is our place, my dear friend. Tell me more about

you. Are all dragons, or dragon men, as elegant looking as you? What's it like being a dragon shifter? Where do you come from, besides my dreams?"

"I'm as real as you let me." He let out a small sigh, and his eyes searched her face. And still, she could not fathom what he wanted. "But, ask me what you will, and I will try to answer. Do you really want to know about me and my kind?"

She nodded. "I do not think it was pure coincidence that Kragus gave you to me. He said he found you in a bazaar in a nearby kingdom. I often wondered how you came to be. Tell me of your life. Of you."

"I shall try to make it simple for you then."

She shifted, and his wing tightened around her. "I would like as long a version as you give."

"I'm near a hundred years old. Young for a dragon—even a shifter dragon. There are not many like me. I'm the product of a sorceress shifter and a dragon. When I left my parents nest, er home, I went out into the world to learn about humans and magical creatures, of all kinds. In my travels, I came across a she-dragon who said she could shift. She was alluring. I almost married her until I realized she was but a wicked witch, in disguise, who wanted to mate and take my powers. Much like Kragus does with you. She cursed me into the statue form before I could stop her. I belong to you now, Laora."

She gave him a quick hug. "Here, you are as free as you wish to be. No one should own another being. Nor use or spite them."

"Such as you and I have been?"

She nodded, knowing he referred to her situation with Kragus. "I know I am a coward. I do not know what to do sometimes, Helf. How do I regain what I never knew I had? If it weren't for you, I would not even know I could shift into invisibility for short periods. I know you must possess great magic in this realm of dreams. I should have your strength of mind, but I am weak."

"Lately, you have gained courage. Do not fret, Laora. It takes time to find a way out of our adversities. I have faith you will."

"With you, I feel I can do anything. I just wish there was a way to break the curse for us."

His arm slackened, and he turned around, his eyes wide in surprise. "Then you are starting to believe it is more than a dream?"

“Part of me does. In the beginning, that’s all I thought it was. Well, more fanciful imagination on my part. Yet, every time we are together, it seems more real.”

“It could be real, if you really want it to be. No, do not ask. That is something you have to convince yourself of. Some things, even magic, can not find a cure though it often helps aid in our own release from self-torments.”

“You are wise beyond your dragon years. Had I the power Kragus stole from me, I would truly find a way to unhex you.”

He smiled at her and stretched out a taloned finger to softly stroke her cheek. “I believe that, beautiful Laora.”

When he looked at her, so sweetly, she felt every bone in her body melt. Laora leaned further into his wing. She wondered what it would be like to feel him against her in the real world. Could it be any better than this? What would his lips be like pressed against hers?

She tilted her head back against his thick shoulder. “I find you magnificent, Helf. You are more wondrous to behold than any man I’ve known. Is it wrong of me to think that though I am married?”

“You are married to a man who does not appreciate you. I would, if you would just let me. There is nothing more I’d like than to kiss you right now. It is what I see in your eyes and sense in your mind. Do you wish me to kiss you?”

“More than anything.”

She leaned her head back slightly as his head lowered. Yes, that’s exactly what she wanted; to feel those luscious lips of his brushing against hers, giving her a taste of divine heaven. She was sure his mouth would fit deliciously against her trembling lips.

Then he lowered his head and tentatively touched his lips to her mouth. Streaks of white-hot passion zinged down her spine as his slight touch deepened. She groaned against his mouth and opened for his exploring tongue. His kiss became bolder, and their tongues met in sweet-hot exploration. His tongue was long and thick and moist against hers. It ran over her bottom lip then along her upper lip before he claimed her mouth again, but with the deepest, most erotic kiss she had ever felt.

Then he pulled his head back, and she felt bereft. Her eyes studied him. She saw constrained hunger, a man’s hunger for passion, and his blue-jade eyes welled to a smoky tint. He wanted her. She trembled as she realized his needs awakened a passion in her she’d never felt with Kragus. And it scared her. Laora pulled back, and, at

the same time, his wings folded flat behind his back. He pulled his arms from around her and moved a few inches away.

His head turned towards the stream as he spoke. "I do not want to press myself on you, Laora. It must be your choice alone. Some things even magic cannot fix."

There was some cryptic message in his words. Yet, she could not bring herself to ask him what. Part of her knew she must figure out the puzzle he just posed. She slowly got to her feet. He did not look up. A chill filled the air around her, and then a mist slowly enveloped her. Hellfestus, and the beautiful serenity of their place, disappeared from her view.

She did not awake though she knew her dream time with the dragon had ended. Her mind clouded to darkness, and she once more fell into a deep, troubled sleep. She tossed in the bed until she felt a thick arm clamping down on her. Briefly, her eyes fluttered open into the shadows of reality. She turned her head and saw her husband, lying next to her.

His loud snore and possessive arm, gripping her middle, felt like a chain around her entire being. Would she ever be free from the mistake she had made in marrying Kragus? Within her last dream, with Hellfestus, lay an answer. If only she could figure it out. What was it she needed to do, to be able to make her dragon savior part of her true reality? She groaned, closed her eyes and once more fell into a troubled sleep.

After Kragus left her the next morning, she slowly got out of bed, her heart heavy with uneasy emotions. She sadly went through the motions of bathing and dressing, before facing what she must do. Glancing around the room, her eyes landed on the statue of her dream friend. She slowly walked over and picked up the statue. It felt cold this morning to her touch.

Last night, he'd filled her with warmth. She wanted that again. She wanted to feel those strong wings around her, comforting her. To feel his large arms embracing her. To once again have his lips locked in heat against hers.

She sighed. What could she do to make that a reality? He'd said she had to achieve something and that it had to be her choice. She knew now, in her heart and mind, that the statue was no ordinary one. That some how, the fates saw to it that Hellfestus was sent to aid her in some way. Something deep down told her she also needed to do something, in return, for her precious dragon.

Would freeing him from his own curse aid in taking her out of the hell she'd made of her life? Could he be freed and, in doing so, would Kragus's hold on her be forever quelled? That had to be the reason destiny had thrown her and Hellfestus together and why their dreams were so entwined lately. Was it her beloved dragon's desire to have his dreams become a reality? Surely, he wanted his freedom as much as she wanted hers.

Yes, her mind told her. That's exactly what Hellfestus desired more than anything else. It was, truly, what she wanted also, to help him attain his freedom even more than her own. So, what did she have to do in order to free him from his imprisonment within the statue?

She sat down on the bed, holding Hellfestus in her hands. Curiously, she turned him slowly in her palms. He was heavy for such a small statuette. She liked the way his gold and emerald body shone and flickered magically in the light of the dancing candle on the stand by her bed. His mouth showed an odd, almost knowing, smile.

It was as if those dreams they shared were real, at times. No, she knew them to be real now. Within both their minds, yes, but they had been as real to her as Kragus sharing her bed. Perhaps her loneliness got her to believing that. Yet, it was more than a manifested desire to escape Kragus. Somehow, she and the dragon met on another plane of existence.

Hellfestus must have seen what went on during the nights when Kragus came home? Did the dragon, the halfling man, feel pity for her then? Or was there more he emotionally hid from her? What did she expect from the magic creature cursed within the porcelain statue? What did he expect from her? Her heart, her body, perhaps even her life? No, not her life. But what then would he want in return if she asked him to help free her from Kragus's hold?

It didn't matter to her any longer. Whatever price Hellfestus desired of her to make his dreams, and her own, come true, she would willingly pay. Suddenly it dawned on her what she had to do. She needed to wish aloud that she wanted Hellfestus to be a real dragon.

"I'd give anything of myself, to see you alive, Hellfestus," Laora sighed, saying it softly. "I truly wish you were real and could help me."

The statue suddenly vibrated.

Chapter Four

Laora startled in surprise, and the statue fell from her hands and onto the bed. Within moments, it rolled away from her. To her startled eyes, she saw it begin to enlarge. Soon the dragon statue became as big as Kragus, but it was no longer quite a dragon, but part man, looking almost like a gargoyle. The god-being/dragon-man was emerald, with dark gold-flowing hair and a physique that would rival Kragus's. She had only seen a few naked men, but never a man-dragon built quite like Hellfestus.

Her eyes widened further as he stood up, towering over her. "You wished me alive to help you. First, you must prove your worthiness and show me how much you wish my help, Laora."

She slid back on the bed, stunned but not afraid, yet, apprehensive that she'd managed to summon her dragon-statue-pet-friend to life somehow. "How did you come to be? I have no powerful magic that can conjure up a dragon...man. What..."

Hellfestus held up an elegantly-fingered hand, shaped like a man's but with pointed, long nails. "You do have magic that Kragus uses to his advantage. You were the daughter of a high priestess of Sherenzade—the goddess of the hearth and body. You possess body magic, and Kragus keeps that from you. It is the only reason he beds you. To suck out your magic and use it for his own means. I told you this in our dreams. Now you must believe me."

Laora's jaw gaped. "Wishful thinking manifested you. There has to be some reasonable answer."

Hellfestus sat gently on the bed, and she was thankful he didn't reach out for her with his powerful arms. "Our dreams became very real, Laora. We've learned each other's innermost thoughts. Are you not tired of crying yourself to sleep? Open your mind and heart. You'll know I'm real."

Laora closed her eyes, and images surfaced in her mind, images of her and Hellfestus. She'd wished for him to be real. Her slight trepidation fell away as she became acclimated to the reality of the

situation. So much she'd hidden from herself and perhaps from Kragus, and even Hellfestus, in their dream sharing.

She opened her eyes, seeing him still there. She shifted on the bed as he looked down at her expectantly. "I've been so foolish, letting him steal my birthright from me. I wanted to believe it might be my fault, and I clouded my own judgment and abilities. You've made me see that I don't have to do that anymore, Hellfestus. Was it true then what you told me in our dreams, how you were hexed? Tell me what I must do to set us both free from our personal curses."

"It's true that I was put under a spell by the witch, Naileed, and the only thing that can free me is the body magic of a willing sorceress. I can sense magic in people and feel you yet have magic within you. Kragus has not sapped it all; otherwise, you wouldn't be able to invisa-shift. I will help you increase your powers. And I will grant your wish if you can make my own dream come true."

She asked what he wanted.

"You must let me make love to you for three nights within a fortnight, and be more willing than you are with Kragus. I want your true heartfelt responses, passion and fire. Only this will bring me back to full life and magic. And once my desires have been fulfilled, I will keep my end of the bargain and help you obtain your freedom and get back your magic. I am a shifter-dragon and can take any form, even Kragus. But, at least thrice, you must take me as I am now, half-man, half-dragon."

She looked up at him, and her face turned red. "You are larger than Kragus."

"You are slight and delicately framed, but I've watched you let Kragus fill you night after night. You but need to be slick, with desire and willingness, to let me fill you. Kragus just takes whether you are ready or not. I can show you passion like you've never known before. Fulfill my dreams and desires, and all yours will come true before we part. Do we have a deal?"

"I want to be free from the imprisonment I've put myself in, to know if I am capable of more. Yet, I'm too weak sometimes to do what I must. Does that make me such a bad person?"

"We all have our faults and weaknesses. You just need to learn to overcome some of yours, to figure out what it is you really seek, Laora."

She knew he was right. She needed to become stronger, and see if she still cared for Kragus. Part of her still wanted to believe there was

a decent being inside the harsh person her husband had become. Was there hope for him, and for herself and Hellfestus? Could she sleep with this dragon-man and heal them in order to right their lives?

She wanly smiled, studying his intent, handsome face. "I will need time to decide. I know I should have already, and perhaps part of me is ready for it. But to suddenly have the answers, and means to remove the horrors in my life, is truly a big step for me."

His eyes gleamed, and his hand started to reach for hers, but he stopped, and part of her was glad. Secretly, however, she wanted to feel his hand on hers. Even that small gesture would let her messed-up mind know that he was real, that she had found a way to be with her dragon, whose eyes told her he wanted that and so much more.

"Take some time to do that, Laora, but do not wait too long. Neither of us really knows how powerful Kragus has become, and we need to make plans. You have but to wish it a second time and I'll return to you. Until then, Laora, I shall sleep again in my statue form."

Within moments, his body dwindled into a myriad of shifting colors then, once more, he was her small dragon statue. It shook a bit then rolled over towards her hand. Laora blinked and automatically reached out for the statue. She tentatively picked it up and held it within her palms.

"I promise, Helf. I will make the right decision. Thank you."

Laora thought long and hard about what Hellfestus said. She finally knew what she must do but had to watch her husband closely. Kragus had hurt her, yes, but was he truly evil? Had this life been her fault, or did he indeed use her? She knew she must talk to him, or, at least, try. A year ago, she felt she loved him, admired him even.

Things had changed between them. She used to think his eyes sparkled whenever she came into a room he occupied. Was that just the mead he drank, making him lustful for her body? What did the warrior want from her then? Had he married her for her body, her powers? What?

She'd been so naïve. Hard though it was, she needed to find out for herself. She wasn't sure where to start. Could she keep from Kragus the fact that she knew he might not love her? Would Hellfestus be her answer indeed? How could she sleep with the dragon-man when it hurt her emotionally to even let her husband touch her now?

She was mixed up. In her own mind, she felt weak and insipid while others controlled her destiny and her choices. It was past time for her to become her own woman, to decide what she knew to be right for her life. Once she came back into her own powers, or strengthened the ones she'd learn to control in her dream haven with Hellfestus, she would feel more fully equipped to take charge of her life. Yet, her mother had always told her that strength, to overcome adversity, was more powerful from within, the magic of self.

No matter that she did have some magic, or even if Hellfestus could help to strengthen what lay within her, she knew she had to make choices for herself and quit running from her own failures and fears. Hellfestus just manifested, in many ways, what she must do to right her life. To feel whole and in control of her own destiny.

The fates must have sent her the statue for a reason. If it meant sleeping with a dragon-man to obtain the physical and magical strength she needed to right her life, she had to consider doing just that. Yet, would it be so bad? She still reeled with fond memories of the kiss they had shared in the dream haven. Could it be so much more with Hellfestus in his man-form?

Kragus had been the only man she knew physically and in her heart. Still, her heart wavered with warring emotions. She knew, deep within the recesses of her mind, that Kragus did not truly love her any more. He wasn't as attentive and caring as when they first married. It was her fault. She should have seen it coming, but her need to be cherished perhaps blinded her to the dark, cruel depths of which Kragus was capable.

She had to, at least, try and talk to him once more. To see if what they used to have could be theirs again. The problem, foremost for her, was to figure out if that was really what she wanted. Did she still love her husband?

She bit her bottom lip nervously, the answer surfacing to the front of her mind. She had to talk to Kragus. Where would he be right now? Did she dare leave the confines of her apartments and instigate his wrath? Her first choice came here and now. In order to put her life right, and take back what was rightfully hers, she needed to confront the man who held a big hold on that life and liberty.

Would he be in the war room, planning strategies? He mentioned he'd be leaving on maneuvers soon, to see how he could add yet another small kingdom to this one. Her father had always maintained peace, yet Kragus had worked his way up her father's ranks of

military advisors and eventually connived his way into her father's admiration. Then her father took ill, and she was pulled away from the monastery to take her place beside him, and do as he wished—marry Kragus.

When she turned twenty-one summers, her coronation would take place, and she would be crowned Queen, Kragus her king. Her birthday was in less than two weeks. Yet, Kragus would not let her oversee any ceremonies leading up to the celebrations. With this, too, she must not be weak. She must learn to rule with, or without, him. Most women followed their husband's thoughts and rules, but there were a few strong women left. At least, there was before her mother died, and Kragus wormed his way into her father's graces. Women should not be used as pawns.

When she regained her throne, she would see to that. But the first thing she had to do, in order to become the ruler of Dynestra, was to talk to Kragus and learn his weaknesses. She tried to recall what they were, but nothing came to mind. Soon she would do so. With Hellfestus to guide her, she could overcome her adversities and her husband's cruelties. Her first endeavor, then, was to leave the confines of her apartments and find her husband.

He would be furious, but it had to be done. Kragus had never hit her in the few times he allowed her out of the suites, months after his dominance over her began. She might attract his wrath once they were alone, but she hoped he would not make a scene. She hoped even more, that he wouldn't or strike her in public. Especially, in front of her father's oldest advisors and other wealthy lords of the land whom she knew supported Kragus's views.

She realized the warrior lord still had need of some power; otherwise, he might have subjugated her more. The more she thought about it, the more she realized that indeed she had allowed herself to become his subservient wife. A slave to his cruel ways and unemotional lovemaking. She needed a man, like he used to be, like Hellfestus had come to be in her life.

The realization of where her thoughts were going made her jump off the bed. How could she contemplate sleeping with a different powerful male, after what she'd been through with one already? Would she be whoring herself, in order to gain back her freedom and kingdom? Or would it be an affectionate trade-off of need and desire from both of them? She wanted to believe it would be the latter. That

the fates had sent Hellfestus to not only help her free herself from Kragus and her own foibles but to heal a broken heart.

She paced the room as she thought of these last words. Kragus had indeed broken her heart, and she had let him. She once admired him. Foolish, foolish her.

Then he'd taken her heart and stomped on it. He'd taken her body and used it cruelly, not caring if his rough, twisted ways hurt her. She'd blinded herself to these facts, blaming her own inadequacies for what he thrust upon her.

She could not let him rule her any longer. Still, she'd become so used to letting him have his way, to avoid confrontations, that she now feared fighting him. Now she must figure out how to overcome her fear of Kragus, a man she no longer loved, one who had no moral right to share her heart or bed.

She felt a sudden uplifting, an enlightenment, even to her soul. She would give it one last try, for her own peace of mind. Try to make some kind of amends to her marriage. But, with some conditions of her own. She wouldn't trade one kind of dependency or subjugation for another.

Deep in the recesses of her heart and mind, she knew that Hellfestus would not subjugate her but would want her willing, no matter if his wishes and dreams ever came true. Were she to ever allow another man into her heart, she knew it would be someone like Hellfestus.

Laora took a deep breath, steadied her nerves and resolved to do what needed to be done. She determined to find a way out of her lonely imprisonment and break the chains around her heart and body. In a sense, no matter how she accomplished the fact, she wanted her magic, her freedom, her kingdom and love back again.

Knowing what she must do now, she became determined to make Kragus see reason. Was there something left inside the man that still cared for her? Though only married a year, she needed to know if he had ever cared. Or was the magic and power he'd derived from their bed and her birthrights the only reason for marriage? They had to come to an understanding, or an annulment. Kragus would either be a fair and caring husband, or he would leave.

She had to handle everything correctly though. She didn't want him angry with her again. Laora shied away from where Kragus's anger might lead. She had to stay strong and use her wiles and craftiness to make him see reason, or push him out of her life. One

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way or another, she'd find the right way to do just that. So thinking, she opened the door of the bedroom, stepped out into the hallway, and a new beginning in her life.

Chapter Five

Kragus sat on the throne, once occupied by King Merkef, Laora's father. He had coveted the throne for a long time. And he'd worked hard to get where he was this day. Soon, he would be crowned King, and, on that day, he'd sap the last of naïve Laora's powers, as the witch Naileed had taught him. The witch seductively showed him the pleasures of flesh and how to slowly sap his wife's sex magic.

With it, he learned to win the people over with his magically-enhanced charms. He subdued Laora, as was his plan all along. After the coronation, he would dispense with her. Accidentally, of course. The naïve little bitch wouldn't know what hit her. She didn't even realize her own powers, so she didn't deserve them. He did, and so had Naileed.

A year before he'd had hopes of tricking Merkef into allowing him to wed Laora. He'd met Naileed in another town, far from the capital. He'd bedded the seductress in hopes of her helping him obtain magical powers, or objects that would make him more powerful. It had worked. He'd promised Naileed to make her his wife. He knew the witch wanted power, and not just magical power, either. She wanted to rule kingdoms, as he did. So, he lied.

Kragus saw through her, so he used her. He'd even pilfered some magic objects from her small, but richly furnished, home, in the hopes one of them would be what he sought. One of those was a trinket he gave Laora, in order to win the princess's heart long enough to marry her and get her under his rule. It had worked, and Naileed never realized he stole from her home. Of course, he'd poisoned the bitch, so she'd never come after him. Just in case. He didn't need her in his life once he'd learned what he had wanted.

He knew about Laora's powers and how to drain them for his own use. Those sexual techniques he'd learned from the dark witch, too. Now he had the means to completely rule this kingdom and the ability to get what he wanted, namely more kingdoms, subjects, and wealth. He'd have it all soon. Laora was the only thing standing in his

way. Only, she didn't know it. Nor would he ever tell her that she would come into her powers fully on her twenty-first birthday.

He would not bed her on that day. According to Naileed, he couldn't kill her before then, or he'd lose the powers he'd slowly drained from her. He'd have to touch the wench again, unfortunately a few times within the next few weeks, in order to drain the rest of her powers during their sexual acts.

She didn't know how to please a man like him. He liked wicked, wild women, and she was just too damned gentle. He liked it rough in bed with raw fierce sex. Laora didn't have enough meat on her for his heated pleasures, but he'd made do. He'd even tried to teach her, but she didn't learn quickly enough to please him. So, he took her as roughly as he could, without killing her too soon. She bored him, but he held on to the fact that within a few weeks, she'd be dead, and the kingdom would totally be his.

He'd already used some of the power he'd stolen from her to put a dominance and allure spell over the kingdom. Those who once were loyal to his late father-in-law, and friends of Laora, were now under his submission. More would follow each day as his powers grew. Once Laora was dead, he'd see the full might of what he sapped from her detestable body.

He smiled as he thought about the other women who were more than willing to be his future queen, should anything happen to the princess. In fact, in a close-by kingdom that had allied itself with him, so that he wouldn't invade them, lived a tall husky beauty, a devilish wanton, who knew all the ways to please him. She was the middle daughter of the ruling monarch and perhaps, some day, he would make her his queen.

Someone, entering the throne room, made him shift his stance. He took a half step down from the throne as a small group of his war-generals and officers approached. He smiled, knowing some feared him, and some tolerated him, mostly due to the spell he'd laid over them. As long as he kept Laora alive until the coronation, they'd follow him.

He went over the day's itinerary with them, the possible kingdoms they'd invade or subjugate as soon as he had more powers to use and ruthless soldiers in his armies. For now, they served his purposes. Some were as power hungry as he but smart enough not to back stab him. He knew all their weaknesses and strengths and always

watched his back. Some wished him dead, but he knew quite a few were loyal to him, as long as he held the riches and might.

He was glad he'd finally dominated Laora, this way she never came out of her suites unless he called for her, or allowed her occasional freedom in the escort of many guards and ladies-in-waiting. He didn't want the princess to know what he was up to right now. She asked question of late, and he didn't like that she might be waking up and guessing his plans. He didn't want to kill her before the coronation. He needed her, long enough, to be the rightful ruler. Though most of the people temporarily followed him, he still played to their minds. When they saw their princess crowned with him, and he became the figurehead with her, then he could put them completely under his dominance.

They thought he had the princess's blessings to go on his power hunt and invasions. With him keeping her close at hand and under guard, no one, but him, talked to her to see what she wanted. She would cause no trouble, and he'd have everything he wanted. Soon, indeed, it would all be his.

* * * *

Laora waited by open the door until the servant brought in her food. It would also mean the change of guards, so the others could eat or take care of nature's call. She slipped through the door, invisible in form, while the change was made, and they were not watching. She quickly made her way through the castle to the main throne room. There she saw Kragus, as she'd hoped, talking with his entourage.

She listened closely. Before, when she'd slipped out long enough to see what he was up to, she'd either missed the meetings, or they talked of nothing important. Today, she finally timed it right, and the other warlords were there. At a nearby table, they rolled out plans to show him their strategies. From their words, she learned that Kragus wanted to build his empire.

Or would it be theirs to share? She did not think so. She only caught fragments of the conversations as it passed by quickly, but it was enough to know her husband's plans. He waited for them to leave before a horrid smile spread across his eerily handsome face. What was he thinking?

"Soon, my dear wife, all this will be mine. You've indeed served your purpose." His voice was low, so she knew no one, but her, heard

him. However, his cruel laughter frightened her, as he spoke his thoughts aloud. Laora turned quickly and ran from the throne room.

She went through a passageway that led onto her private balcony. There, she climbed over the waist-high railing that encompassed the patio. She grew tired quickly. She made it to her bed, just as the invisibility ability wore off. She panted from the exertion, knowing she must strengthen her ability. It lasted longer and longer the more she practiced. She'd sustained the magic for a few minutes, in the beginning, but was now able to keep it up for half an hour, sometimes.

She had not expected to hear such awful words from Kragus. He was always quiet, around her and others, about his plans and true thoughts. Oh, he liked to boast, but he watched what he boasted about, unless he was very drunk. She had to find out what he intended to do. Did he want her out of his way? Surely, it wouldn't be before the coronation, which would occur in a few weeks, on her birthday. Even if most of her people were under some sort of spell, from what she knew about magic effects, he couldn't keep them under completely. Unless he had a continuing source of magic.

Kragus had not been magically inclined before. Even after imbibing, he hadn't said a lot, but she'd pieced together some things about him. Now, with what she saw earlier, and his words, she knew Kragus meant to harm her. With her people seeing him as their soon-to-be king, she might not be able to stop him once he was indeed proclaimed King.

Before her grandfather's days, women could rule. Then her horrid grandfather had passed a law that women could not rule the kingdom without a consort. Once she was queen, she'd change that law back to the old ones that benefited her people. Her father had never usurped her grandfather's tyranny until the man died. Then he had ruled with some fairness, but the old ways were in him, and he did not surround himself with just advisors.

That's how Kragus wound up in his positions over the years, finagling and coercing people like her father. He now controlled her kingdom, but that would change. She swore it would. She had help now. She glanced at the statue of Hellfestus. Her mind and heart told her he would help in any way she needed.

She took a deep breath and walked to the main door of her suites. She asked her guards if Kragus was about. When they got back to her with a reply that he'd gone into the city, she knew she would be left

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alone for a while. Time enough for her to call up Helf. Whatever she needed to do now, in order to free herself and her people from Kragus' hold, she would do. She closed the door behind her. She wanted to lock it, but, last time she tried that, Kragus opened it forcefully. She'd not done so again because he took his anger out on her.

Yet, she could always feel when he came home or was about to come into the suites. He was not a light stepper, and her inner senses vibrated, with alarms, when he was nearby. She had time to do what she must then. Call upon Hellfestus, and see if he would still help her.

Chapter Six

Hellfestus' mind opened, and he saw Laora pacing the bedroom floor. She was thinking hard and clear. His inner dragon empathy told him this. He could sense a distress within her. Yet, he also sensed she had made up her mind about something. Was she thinking about what he said to her? He wanted his freedom, of course, but he needed her willing and not just because of a bargain.

For some reason, that fact was very important to him. He could not take her, nor make love to her, unless she wanted him to claim her. The thought of being that close to her delectable body made him shiver. He could almost feel the outer statue self of him shake.

Her lovely face turned toward him. He noticed the intent expression on her face. Her midnight blue eyes darkened to almost black as she viewed him. Then slowly, she came his way, sitting on the edge of the bed near the table where he sat. She did not reach out for him, at first. To him, that was a good sign.

It meant she had really thought things over, deeply and carefully. She had seemed agitated earlier during her pacing. Had she seen something that changed her mind or made her firm her resolve to go against her husband? He felt something had done just that. Her hands were clasped as she looked at him, nibbling on her bottom lip only for a few seconds, before she reached out and held him to the swell of her breasts.

She stroked him, and he felt like purring, wishing he could snuggle his heat against hers, in much the same way a cat did to its owner. She held him in her warm hands, gently stroking his back, her head tilted down as she surveyed him. He knew she wanted to talk to him, to see him again. And all she had to do was wish this a second time.

It felt like an eternity before she spoke the words. "I wish you were here again, Hellfestus. I need you."

She held him over the bed and dropped him upon it. Hellfestus felt himself shiver, almost uncontrollably, as he rolled within a white-

gray cloud of mists until his body shed the confinements of the statue, and he slowly, almost agonizingly, formed into his man-dragon physique again.

He took a deep breath as he righted and sat on the bed near her. She looked up at him expectantly, so he smiled, hoping to reassure her. He wanted to please Laora. Her eyes brightened to a lighter hue of blue, allowing him to see how pleased she was to see him.

“You’ve decided then?” he asked.

She nodded, holding one of her hands out to him. “I want to help end your curse and free myself and my people, Helf. Tell me how we can accomplish this and thwart Kragus.”

He raised her hand and bent to caress it with his lips before speaking. “I need to reenergize my powers in this realm, the real world, before I can magically help you. And it must be by a magical person. I only know of you that I sense a magic power source within. Are you willing to do that?”

He didn’t blush as she scrutinized him. In fact, the small, delicious smile, forming at her tasty lips, made his groin stir with long, overdue needs. She reached up with both hands and touched his face, studying his reactions, he was sure, as she slowly caressed his cheeks.

“I want to know more, but I’m afraid I won’t please you.”

He bent his head toward hers. “Then, let’s start slow. Let me ease you into being comfortable with me.”

She nodded, scooting closer to him. “I would like you to show me what you are capable of. Teach me what you like, Helf. I want to please you.”

He raised his hand and stroked her face, glad she did not shy away. “Then you are willing, wanting this, even if I do not regain my powers?”

She nodded. “I’m willing to try. I do not know if I have enough power in me to help you, but I will share with you.”

“Do you find me distasteful, Laora?”

“No. You are quite magnificent to behold. Kiss me. I’ve wanted to taste your lips in the here and now, not just in our dream haven.” She leaned her head back.

Helf lowered his head over hers until their lips touched. Then the sweetness of her mouth released a long dormant feeling of need within him. He explored her tender lips, reddening them slightly with

a thorough kiss. She opened her mouth further, allowing him entrance. His tongue teased hers, exploring the savory flavor.

His head swam, his body shook, and his cock swelled with need. He'd never known how good a simple kiss could be. With her, it made him believe in a taste of divinity. Her hands came up around his back, caressing his muscles gently at first, and when he pressed his chest harder against hers, she explored his lower torso.

As a dragon male, he loved having his tail stroked during sex; as a man, it made his passions soar. He tilted himself and Laora toward the bed. Soon he was kissing her neck and lower. He felt his shaft swell as she shivered with need beneath him. Soon he began caressing her, exploring her body with his hands and tongue. The more his desire soared, the longer his tongue grew. His dragon form ached to be released, but he knew he could only couple with Laora in human form for now.

Perhaps, he dared to think, when she regained her powers under his guidance, she might be able to shift into a dragon. A dragon being could only hope. For now though, her body kept his attention and heated up his desires. Her warmth rose to match his own, and soon she vibrated even more to his sensual onslaught.

He slowly made his way down her body, licking and kissing, delighting in her responses. She purred beneath him. He knew she forgot her troubles now, as she splayed her hands over his shoulders and urged him, with her hips, to do even more. He did not hesitate to taste and touch her delicious body—everywhere. Suckling on her breasts, he thought of silken honey as his lips and tongue ran over her small orbs. She was small against him, but her desires were as big as his.

Laora opened her thighs for him, and he needed no urging. She brought her hips up to his face, and Hellfestus didn't hesitate about exploring her mound with his tongue, mouth and hands. He parted her feminine lips with his clawed hands, careful with her delicate folds. He sniffed in her essence. She smelled like a sensual aphrodisiac of honey-scented blooms of fresh flowers and earthy scents. It heightened his senses and his tongue wet with the anticipation of tasting her every nuance.

He delved his tongue slowly, at first, into her. She bucked against him. His thumb pads caressed her outer labia lips while he slid his long tongue in and out of her. Her hips thrust up and down with his

rhythm. She released a loud moan, tossing her head back and forth, kneading her hands in his long mane.

His head bobbed up and down over her as frenzy shot through him, feeling her desires mount. His own heat soared as warm liquid flowed from her. She sucked in her bottom lip, stifling her loud cries of pleasure. This was so that anyone, beyond the door, would not hear their lovemaking noises. Soon, he replaced his tongue with two of his fingers and slid them deeply in and out of her wetness.

She thrust up and down on them until he knew she reached a small orgasm. Then she took hold of his shoulders, urging him upwards. He lathered her body with kisses and caresses as he made his way back up. She parted her legs even further. He entered her slowly, and, when she pushed up against him, he shoved into her in one hard stroke.

She gasped, but he sensed, not from pain but desire and hunger for more. She met him thrust for thrust. His body shook. He held back from shoving too hard into her, but her legs and hands wrapped around his buttocks, and she began to knead him with her hot hands. He went over the edge and pumped harder and faster. His mouth covered hers as she started to cry out her release.

Explosions of desire shook them both as their senses went into overload. He could feel energy from her, seeping into him. It slowly strengthened more than his sexual prowess, but was forgotten for awhile as their needs soared, and they satiated themselves in each other's arms. He half lay over her, half knelt, looking down into her beaming face as they climaxed together.

Chapter Seven

“I never knew it could be that fantastic.” Her lips widened into a very big and satisfied smile. Her eyes shone with satiated pleasure. “But you’ve tired me out. I could sleep for days quite contentedly.”

He smiled softly at her. “I will return again, when you wish it. For now, we both need our rest.”

Before she could voice her distress, Hellfestus made himself a puff of smoke and returned to his statue form. He hoped it would not be much longer before he could once more fully be himself. Though they’d enjoyed a mutual satisfaction, there was more to come. He hoped no adversities stood in their way. Yet, a cloud of worry bothered him as he fell into dark slumber.

She dreamed of Hellfestus as she lay in a state of half sleep and half awareness. She drifted deeper as she went to the beautiful place where she’d often gone to be with her deliciously wonderful dragon. He was lying peacefully along the banks of the river, his long tail shaking sporadically and his eyes closed, as if in a deep slumber. She stood watching him, content to do just that.

She wondered what it would be like to have sex with a dragon if she could shift into one. She felt an unusual energy around her suddenly, as if something magical had come home to her and filled her with its essence. It felt like being wrapped in Hellfestus’s magically beautiful wings. What could be a more powerful inducement than that for a feeling of beauty and wonderment?

Big and fantastically beautiful, his wings spread around him like an iridescent, sparkling cloud of emerald and teal. His snore sounded deep, almost musical in its melancholy tone. It made her feel good, inside and out, that he’d made love to her. Both her heart and body somehow felt as if a dark cloud had been lifted from it, and she was on her way into the light of a whole new life.

Kragus never made her feel that way. She dropped slowly to the ground, sitting but a few spaces away from her slumbering dragon. She did not want to wake him, but rather sit and admire his beauty.

Bask in the contentment he brought to every fiber in her being. Something else Kragus had never done for her. With Hellfestus, everything felt right, as if she were meant to be with the dragon.

Not so with Kragus. She knew now that she never really loved him, that she'd only been fascinated with the dark warrior's attentions at the time. She knew, too, that he'd only used her, never wanting her to be truly happy. He only took from her what he could, like her powers. Magic she had never known she possessed, but he had. How, she had no idea.

Now she must find a way to regain her powers, help free Hellfestus from being an accursed statute and make sure Kragus didn't hurt anyone else. She felt certain that Helf would help, but she also needed to find a way to help him and her kingdom. She had to break Kragus's spell over her people.

She should have paid more attention to what went on, but she was used to her father and his council members doing that. Now, with her approaching coronation, she had to learn more and quickly. When she awoke, she'd do just that, as long as Kragus wasn't around. She lay closer to Hellfestus, curling against him as she joined him in full slumber.

* * * *

Kragus staggered toward the big bed. Tonight he hadn't been so lucky with any of the tavern wenches and wanted to lay with a woman. He knew if he couldn't find another, at least, his damned wife waited for him. She'd do. Occasionally, he did find her depths hot enough to handle his needs. He started taking off his clothing as he edged nearer to the bed. At the end of it, he stopped and, with befuddled mind and bleary eyes, stared at the woman lying curled up in the sheets.

She looked peaceful. The thought astonished him somehow. Then he scrunched his eyes and glanced closer. She was licking her lips as if she tasted something delectable. His cock hardened. Then she moved in her sleep and touched herself with her dainty hands. His erection got even harder. She tossed a little, pushing the covers off her body, moving her legs.

He put a knee on the bed, edging toward her open legs. She lay mostly naked before him except where one of her legs was partially covered by the bed sheets. Her hips bucked upwards as if in invitation. He chuckled. She had to be thinking of getting fucked by him. Maybe his wife wasn't so bad, after all, if she thought of him.

He intended to sate himself, and her, if she kept up those enticing moves. He slithered the rest of the way toward her, reaching out to stroke her thighs. He then slid a finger in her, letting it rest a moment in her folds. She was wet. He moved his finger in and out of her. Laora responded and moved her legs further open.

Asleep or not, he needed to get in between her legs. He thrust another finger into her, and she moaned though her eyes didn't open. With his other hand, he started massaging her breasts. The nipples were hard, as if she'd been touched already. Indeed, his foggy mind thought, she needed his cock inside her.

He positioned himself and then thrust into her wet depths with hard strokes. Her arms went behind his back. Whether she was doing this in her sleep or not, he liked that she moaned in response. He shoved more powerfully into her cunt, his mind and body filling with hot pleasure he hadn't felt for her in a long time. With a loud cry, he went over into the edge of darkness just as his orgasm hit him.

* * * *

Laora was pulled from her dream state of making love with Hellfestus. Things were going so well, and she'd been so close to an orgasm. Then she felt the real, physical world around her. Her eyes were sleepy, but she recognized the man above her. She'd groaned as her body automatically responded then Kragus had climaxed and slumped down on top of her.

She fluttered her eyes open, blowing his hair out of her face. Weakly, she tried to push him off her body. He was too heavy. She groaned, closed her eyes and slumped back on the pillow for a moment. How typical of him to take what he needed, whether she was willing or ready.

She'd had a taste of wonderful lovemaking with Hellfestus. "I wish it were Hellfestus who lay atop me instead," she muttered softly.

Kragus shifted above her. A wisp of smoke soon enveloped his body and hers. When it cleared, the form of Hellfestus in his dragon-man body lay above her, grinning down at her with those luscious full lips of his. His teal eyes sparkled with a golden glow in the center.

"Ah, Laora, I waited for you to do that," he said then leaned over to kiss her open mouth.

She threw her arms around him, tilting her face up to him. Her tongue ran over his bottom lip just before he deepened his kiss. No longer in their dream void, this incredible being started making love to her in reality. She touched him, delighted to have him with her

instead of Kragus. Where Kragus was at the moment, she didn't care, as Hellfestus' touch grew bolder and more heated.

His long elegant hands roved over her body, cupping her breasts with aplomb. He treated her like the queen she would soon become, as he trailed kisses down her body and laved her sweating skin with his long dragon's tongue. She thrilled to his heated passion, her whole system feeling exquisitely touched with his ecstatic caresses.

Within minutes, he lay between her thighs, tonguing and caressing her wet folds. Deeply he thrust his tongue in and out of her while his warm hands gently caressed her thighs and buttocks. He soon made his way back up to her, and at her urgency, he thrust his shaft deeply into her with one hard stroke, but without the pain she'd known from Kragus.

Chapter Eight

Their bodies moved in perfect rhythm. The heat between them sweltered into volcanic proportions. She bucked beneath his large body, wrapping her legs around his buttocks for support. Laora reached around to stroke his buttocks, thrilling to his loud groans and growls as she caressed his greenish-gold skin. He moved faster above her, giving her long throaty kisses in between.

The hot passions rose within her to meet his heated movements. He cried out her name at the same time she mewled out his. Together, they were swept up into a realm of ecstasy that was all their own. Gently, they came down together to the real world, both sated and happy.

Hellfestus eased off her, lying to one side then looking down upon her. He stroked her face. "Thank you for the beauty of your passions and wishing me here."

"I could no longer tolerate his touch. I wanted you here with me, sweet Hellfestus. If only it could be that way always for us."

"In time, my love, it can be." After his cryptic words, his body started to change.

She pulled back as sparks of glittering light sporadically encompassed him. Then they darkened to black spots of vapor. Within a short time, her lover was gone, and Kragus lay back in his place, none the wiser and snoring deeply. She groaned and peeled herself away from her husband's sleeping body. Laora moved off the bed to go bathe. When she returned, Kragus still lay on the bed.

She glanced upon the night stand, seeing the glowing statue of Hellfestus. "I truly wish you could stay with me always, Hellfestus. Soon, I vow to find a way to remove your curse."

For a brief moment, the statue glowed as if in understanding. Then once more it dulled, and the porcelain dragon sat there quietly, its cryptic smile revealing nothing. Why did she have him for just a brief moment of ecstasy before he vanished? She was sure it had something to do with his curse, but she had to figure it out. Perhaps

tomorrow she would come up with the answer. She lay back on the bed, hoping that she would find sleep and in her dreams, perhaps find some answer to help remove the hex from Hellfestus.

* * * *

The city bustled with life as Kragus, with entourage and guards in tow, escorted Laora around the merchant and bazaar. He surprised her, upon awakening, telling her that her performance last night pleased him. She deserved a trip into the city.

She said nothing and was actually glad to get out of the castle, without having to use her stealth ability. He even planned a meal with her at a fine eating establishment that catered to the wealthy. She meant to stay on his good side this day and keep her eyes and ears open as to what actually went on in the city. What were the feelings of her people toward Kragus?

She was allowed to shop for new clothing, and Kragus did not tell her what she could or couldn't buy, like he had the last time, months ago, when he deigned to escort her shopping. She smiled at him as if his every word pleased her. She watched him closely, and he actually stayed nice to her during their outing. He looked down his long nose at people, a dark smile on his face, as he nodded to the peasants passing by. His eyes did not reflect the smile on his lips.

She could empathically sense and see that he did not really care for the people in her kingdom. They were but subjects whom he expected to do his bidding and approve his warlike ways. Though they bowed to her out of necessity, their eyes glazed over when they looked upon Kragus. She noted how his eyes gleamed brightly when anyone looked upon him. They shivered and scurried away when he looked elsewhere.

He had an aura about him today that she hadn't noticed before. A sweet and kind aspect he deliberately played and washed the people's minds with. Her magic senses came alive within her, and she knew he used magic upon her people to get them to do his every bidding. She stole glances at them as they passed by and, when Kragus was not looking, they seemed to come out of some stupor and then quickly leave his vicinity, frightened.

Her people were hexed by his evil. She would find a way to free them and regain her kingdom. Right now, she had to play along with him since his warriors and entourage guarded him so closely. Soon they entered the establishment to partake of a late afternoon meal and drink.

Kragus ordered lots of wine, cheese, meats and bread. He held a drink in his hand as the two of them sat at a table that had been prepared for them. The guards and entourage sat at other tables, a few spaces away, leaving them alone to converse.

"I am pleased with you, Laora. Did you dream of me last night?"

She held her wine cup up to salute him. "I dreamt of only you. I have been hoping to please you, my king."

He sat up straight, his eyes studying her. "You want me to be your king, don't you? At her miniscule nod, he asked, "Why?"

She beamed in response, hoping he didn't see through her. "I never understood power before, but you have it. I want to be your queen and enhance that power even more. Only you can do that, my lord. I have never known, as you personally know, a man more magnificent than you. You will lead this kingdom and others into greatness."

Her words further pleased him. His eyes glowed appreciatively, and his chest heaved with gloated pride. "Then you are not sorry you married me?"

"No. I could think of none other to be my lord and master, my king."

He reached over and stroked her cheek. She kept looking him straight in the face and didn't shiver but smiled. He could not know that she intended to dethrone his arrogant self from her life. She smiled, hoping she conveyed unquestionable warmth.

"Good because I'd kill any other man that got near you."

She shivered, and his smile widened. She said, "I could not bear another after the marvelous night we shared."

He cocked his head to one side, and she almost thought he saw through her sweet ploys. "Keep pleasing me as you did last night, and we shall get along quite well, Laora."

She nodded, knowing full well what he implied. "I intend to, Kragus." *Please take him right to death's door and into hell!*

They finished their meal. Kragus sank back in his chair in a leisurely fashion. Laora drank sparingly, keeping his glass filled to the brim. Soon he belched loudly and swayed in his chair. She coerced him into accompanying her back to the palace. He growled in protest, but she used all her wiles until he finally acquiesced. Near the palace, he started stumbling more and more. His guards kept close watch on him. Upon entering the royal bedroom, he fell flat on his face.

She instructed the guards to pick him up and put him on the bed. Laora waited until the doors were closed before she plopped down on the seat in front of her vanity. She sat there for a few minutes, staring hard at Kragus's drunken, unconscious body. Quietly, she thought about how she could get her marriage annulled and her husband permanently removed from the palace.

She wasn't a killer, but she had to dispose of him somehow. She could not stoop to his level nor be brutal. Yet, she had to do something to get out of her awful predicament and free her people from his influence. She thought and thought, unsure what to do to accomplish her goal. She could call on Hellfestus, but, for some reason, she knew she had to handle this in her own way.

Were she more in control of the magics Kragus stole from her, perhaps she could defeat the warlord. Somewhere in her heritage, her birthright had to be the answer. She'd felt more energetic the last few days since lying with Hellfestus. What powers she'd gained seemed to have come from body magic. Had the dragon somehow infused her with revived energies? Were not dragons creatures with powerful magics from all walks of nature and life? Then Hellfestus'abilities could also derive from body magic!

Yet, she had the feeling that more was at stake. That something else was necessary to pull him from his statue imprisonment, and allow her to regain her powers. What then could she do that would free both of them and remove Kragus from authority? She tapped her fingers to her chin for a few minutes as she watched him toss upon the bed. What was her husband thinking?

"Mine," he mumbled in his sleep. "All mine soon."

Her kingdom, she was sure he thought about, and her powers. All would be his completely if she didn't do something today. Would she have the strength of mind and body to do anything if she waited any longer? She could drive a knife easily through his demonic heart, but it wasn't her way.

But she could use Kragus's devices against him. Take him as he took her. Sap his strength as he had sapped hers. Would it work? Now that she knew more about what she had, could she regain and retain it? She glanced past her husband to the statue. It glowed slightly. Somehow, she felt Hellfestus there, with her, in the room. She needed his guidance, but knew she had to do this herself. She must fight her own battle and take back what was rightfully hers.

Jaded Beasts 3, Dragon-Snake

She got up and moved toward the statue. Once near the table, she picked it up and stroked its small length. “Give me courage, dear Hellfestus.” She sat down on the edge of the bed, letting out a sigh. “I will set you free soon.”

She felt movement behind her on the bed. Swinging around partially, she saw Kragus stirring. He blinked his eyes, it seemed, to get his bearings. His face turned toward her. Again, he blinked, just before a scowl marred his once handsome features.

“I think you prefer dragons to your husband, perhaps.” He leaned up slowly on one elbow. “Put it down and come here, Laora.”

Chapter Nine

She gently put the statue on the pillow behind her and turned to her husband. “I prefer you, Kragus. Do I not please you any more?”

Cautiously, she removed her shoes and got up on the bed, twisting into a sitting position where she could fully keep an eye on his movements. His dark eyes narrowed, and then he shifted to lean back on his elbows. She almost shivered under his hard stare. He shook his head, waking further, she realized.

“Pleasure me now. I want your head bobbing over my cock, princess.”

Her eyes widened. He’d been rough with her before when he wanted her to suckle his manhood. Suddenly, she knew what she had to do. Drain his seed, drain his powers and pull them back into her. She had to do it, to regain what was rightfully hers and make the magics flow back into her body. It was the only way to right the wrongs he had done.

She scooted toward him, removing her clothing as she did. “I want to taste you, my husband. Tell me what you want of me, and I will pleasure you as never before. You deserve that and more.”

His eyes were glassy, but wary, she could tell. Still, he didn’t attack her. “Undress me and suckle my body. Taste me with your wine sweet lips, and let me fill you there.”

She’d fill him, all right—with her magic. She quickly removed his clothing and began kissing his chest first then suckling on his nipples. She knew he enjoyed it. His hands went to her head, and he pushed her down. She would kiss him with magic kisses. She felt an inner glow and magical energy, soaring through her body, before thrusting outwards.

Her mother had told her about the energy and how, one day, she’d be able to use it when she really needed to. This day, she’d make her husband drunk with need for her. She licked his large cock. She felt her body vibrating with furious sparks of energy. Energy she unleashed slowly, like love magic oozing out of her system. His big

hands suddenly gripped her shoulders, and he pulled her up on top of him.

“Fuck me now, wench. Ride me!”

The body allure had worked. Her spirits soared. She would ride him again and again to gain her magic back! She wasted no time in pulling his engorged shaft into her moistened depths. Moistened, she knew, by the heat of impending victory.

* * * *

Voices awoke him from his sleep. His eyes slid open to his void, his imprisonment.

Hellfestus stirred within his realm. He'd felt Laora's hands holding his outer shell and felt connected to her real warmth. Then a soft wind forced him away. He was sure she had been about to call on him, to bring him forth. Then something happened. He concentrated, using his mind's eye to see into her realm of reality.

He shivered to see her naked and atop Kragus. He felt the statue vibrate around him with his own sudden anger and astonishment. She looked to be enjoying herself. She humped him of her own will, and Kragus didn't look upset with her. No, the warlord seemed enthralled with Laora! She hated her husband, so why would she be so amenable to him? Had Laora changed her mind?

Had he lost her? Had she given in to Kragus? Did she no longer believe in the beauty of what they had shared, in and out of both realms? Hellfestus' disbelief almost got the better of his sanity. No, she would not do that to him. She wanted him here, even wished he were here instead of Kragus. Laora had not used him; she cared for him. Suddenly, he sighed. He knew why now she couldn't completely free him. Yet, it had to be her choice. Her unbound will could set him free completely. He could not tell her how to free him, even if he wanted to.

It must be her desire. He had to believe in the fact that's what she wanted, too, for both of them. Their own choices made a difference in the aide of magic, especially empathy and body magic, which both of them possessed to some degree and in various forms. He vibrated with different thoughts.

Was Laora only responding to Kragus to get her powers back? Had she figured out that was what she had to do before both could be freed? He hoped, like hell, she had! He believed her to be a very intelligent woman should she so choose. Neither Kragus nor anyone

ever would sway her heart and mind again. Nor her body, his subconscious taunted him.

Hellfestus had never really loved before, but now he did. Laora was everything to him. He knew she cared for him, but did she truly love him? His mind and body ached for her, as did his heart. He wanted to be with her forever, but only she could make that happen. He widened his mind's eye further while inwardly he flushed at watching Laora and Kragus together.

Then suddenly, things changed. Laora dug her fingernails into Kragus' chest and said some words Hellfestus strained to hear. "I take back what is mine!"

Then he saw an eerie glow form around Laora and Kragus. He screamed out, and then his flaying hands shot toward Laora's throat.

"No, bitch, your powers will stay in me! I knew that dragon statue was hexed the minute I stole it from Naileed's hut. It's accursed, same as that witch. But you'll soon die at my hands, just as she did!"

Laora screamed. Hellfestus wished he could come out of his statue form. She tried to remove Kragus' hands from her throat. The two tossed upon the bed, their lower limbs entwined until Kragus had Laora beneath him, holding her down by her throat as he thrust his hips against hers.

"Maybe I'll fuck you and kill you at the same time, you devious witch. You don't deserve your powers. I do. Then I'll break that blasted statue over your dead body!"

"No!" Laora shrieked, trying to shake Kragus off. "I wish...it...were you...imprisoned there... Help me, Hellfestus!"

Kragus took one of his hands off her throat and struck her. "No one can help you. Tonight, I'll drain your powers completely."

Laora choked out her wish again. "You bastard. I wish my true love to be my husband."

"So you love a statue deity. You will not bask in your unnatural desires, Laora. Now, die as I finish this last time within you."

Both of his hands were at her throat again, but not before she screamed out Hellfestus' name. "Love you...Helf..."

His statue form rolled toward Laora's head. Kragus suddenly stopped strangling her. She glanced over to where he looked with wide eyes.

Hellfestus felt himself changing, growing, until he was his full dragon form again.

“You won’t harm her any more, Kragus. Take what’s rightfully yours, Laora. Now!”

Then his large claws entered Kragus chest and back. Laora didn’t falter, making him proud. She clawed Kragus with her nails. With their wills combined, the magic that he’d stolen from her raced out of Kragus. Iridescent wisps of glittering smoke formed around the three bodies while sparks shot out of the warlord and into Laora and Hellfestus. The more sparks that flew out of him, the more he dwindled.

He screamed as Hellfestus shot a jolt of dragon magic into his body. “I will take from you as you took from Laora.”

“May you rot in statue form as Hellfestus had done for so many years. I wish he were my husband, not you!”

Dark clouds warred with lighter ones, swirling around the three forms. Hellfestus could not see her face, nor Kragus’, any longer. Nor could he feel their bodies close by. All of them had been covered up by the rampant magics. He felt himself changing within the clouds of surreal power. He could sense something happening to both Laora and Kragus, too. Then his mind swam and spun like the clouds around him.

Just as suddenly as they came, the clouds evaporated. His jaw nearly dropped open when he saw just him and Laora in the room. He glanced around then his view fell down between Laora’s open thighs. A black statue of a man-demon sat on haunches, ready to spring. Its cruel mouth was open, with fangs bared. Its eyes were wide, onyx and eerie to behold. It looked like pure evil captured—no—imprisoned in porcelain.

Hellfestus’ eyes met Laora’s. Her lips trembled. Both once more looked down at the statue as it vibrated. The princess grasped it quickly then rolled off the bed. Before he could stop her, she ran to the balcony. Without looking back, she threw the black statue over the railing. Hellfestus got off the bed, as she turned around, and heard a crashing sound. The statue broke in pieces, Hellfestus suspected. Kragus’ evil had been killed.

He sat back on his haunches as she stared at him, not moving, but trembling, as if waiting for him to say something. He slowly stood to his full height and opened his arms and wings wide. Her face shone, like a bright sunny day, and her lips and eyes bore smiles of wonderment. Then, without hesitation, she ran to him, flinging herself into his arms. Hellfestus lowered his head over hers and enveloped

her in his wings. Everything was as it should be now. Within each other's arms, they were home, together, forever.

* * * *

Laora rubbed her swollen tummy, propped herself up on her elbow and glanced at the golden-haired man lying beside her. Her husband, her love. Hellfestus, king of her heart and her kingdom. Their realm, in which both ruled equally. Since the day they'd defeated Kragus, their lives had changed and intermingled—two hearts and souls now one.

She'd known fear and found strength. She'd known heartache and found love.

She loved the sleeping giant beside her. His heart belonged to her. Together, after that fateful day when she'd thrown the statue of Kragus over the railing, both of their curses, their miseries, had died, and each found freedom. She also found her magic, and he recovered his own. Together, they taught each other many things, including how to care and cherish and to explore life in all its many glorious nuances.

She never tired of loving him nor had the people of her kingdom. They had been released from Kragus' darkness. None questioned that she had a new husband or that Kragus had disappeared, for only beauty and contentment now lay within her people. She and Hellfestus saw that none wanted for anything. And on their days together, away from ruling, he took her on his great wings and soared through the skies, showing her many wonders around the world.

Yet, no more wondrous thing ever captured her mind or heart than the beauty and love of the man-beast who lay next to her now. Her Hellfestus, her dragon-lord, her husband. She reached over and caressed his cheek, knowing that in saving him and freeing his soul, she had also freed herself. It was the best wish she'd ever made in her life. With his love enveloping her, and hers surrounding him, their dreams, their desires, would always be fulfilled.

The End

Seth's Seduction
By
Emery LaRue

On the battle fields of Drodan, a shifter dragon saves a life for his own. Eiandra knows her savior Seth could be a dangerous seduction.

<http://www.authoremerylarue.com/>

Seth's Seduction

**By
Emery LaRue**

The scent of death lay heavy in the air. The two warring kingdoms left many dead or wounded, and the acrid smoke was thick in his nostrils. He snorted and suppressed the groan that movement evoked. He flew lower to the ground, and another scent drew his attention. He followed that path, hoping to find the one with the special blood to heal him.

As a shifter dragon, Seth had been on his mating pursuit and was caught up in a battle he knew nothing of. The damn humans had wounded him, and, had his body not been in full desire, he would have realized the danger. Now, he would have to locate the precious blood that would heal him and expend more energy. He would have to be in his human form for him to heal.

He circled the body on the ground. It lay covered in rags, flags and blood. He breathed deeply of the essence and cringed again as his wound tore and pain shot through him. He knew the man under the cloth to be alive; the human's blood still smelled of life. A twitch confirmed it. Before Seth could make any decisions, it was made for him.

The sounds of soldiers, approaching to finish their kills, spurred him into action. Seth gathered the bloody mess in his mighty clawed feet and took flight. He flew high enough to be out of range of the men on their horses.

A moan drew his eyes to the bundle he carried. The wind shifted the rags, and he realized he carried a woman. A young woman. The mixture of mingled blood and smoke had hidden that fact from him.

Regardless, she carried what he needed to survive. He would take her to Castle Bestore and keep her alive long enough to heal. If she

died, so be it. He wondered briefly how she carried the blood of the dragon inside of her and just what had brought her to that field of death.

* * * *

Eiandra woke slowly, her movements slight as she tested the aches and pains she knew would be there. Surprised, she felt little discomfort as another thought hit her. She was no longer on a field of death. The bedding under her was soft and warm. She could smell the scent of sage, not blood and gore. No screams in the night, only the crackle of a fire.

She opened her eyes just enough to look around, but not give away she was alert. Had he found her? Would she have to fight for her freedom, yet again? Her fear eased as she looked around the room. She was alone, but Mortimer did not have her. This wasn't his home. It looked too fine, and she did not *feel* his presence.

Still, she felt a presence close by. Had she been rescued and healed? Eiandra recalled being struck down by a sword. She remembered the look in the soldier's eyes, knowing he hadn't meant to harm her. His hesitation with her cost him his life. His blood had mingled with her own.

Sitting up in the bed, she examined her clothing. A gown of the softest material graced her body. She slowly lifted the hem and noticed the wound on her belly began already healing. She always recovered quickly, thanks to the blood of her great grandfather, but never this fast. How long had she been asleep?

Footsteps outside the door drew her attention, and she swiftly lay back, drawing the covers over her body. The door opened, and she fought to control her fear as whoever entered drew near. A finger caressed her cheek and pulled the cover away from her body. She tried not to flinch as hands lifted her gown, examining her wound. Again, she was covered, but the intruder did not move.

"I know you are awake."

The voice was deep, and she couldn't control the shiver that raced over her body. Slowly, she opened her eyes and faced her captor. He was very tall, and shadows from the screen on the bed partially covered his face. Wide shoulders narrowed into lean hips. His leggings fit him like a second skin.

"Who are you?"

"So, you are awake, and you speak." A smile warmed his voice. "I am Seth, and you are in my home."

She scooted as far up the bed as she could, holding the covers to her like a shield. He sat on the edge of the bed and faced her. She could not swallow the gasp that left her in a rush. His hair was black as the darkest of nights, but his eyes were the color of brilliant sapphire. She found him the handsomest man she'd ever seen. And he was a dragon. She could sense it. She could always sense these things. It lay in her blood.

"You have no reason to fear me."

"Why am I here?"

"I have healed you and have taken very little from you."

"Taken from me?" Had he taken her virtue while she healed?
"What have you taken from me?"

His eyes narrowed, and she knew he had guessed her thoughts. Apparently, her rescuer was an honorable dragon.

"You are still intact." His eyes softened slightly. "Your blood is powerful. I only require small amounts to heal."

"My blood?"

"I know you are not simple, woman. So, stop questioning everything I say."

She flinched, but he never raised his voice.

"I am sorry, sir. But it is not every day I get carried off by a shifter dragon and am told he has been drinking my blood."

He watched her with eyes that seemed to see right into her soul. A strange heat began to work its way through her body, settling between her thighs.

"My name is Seth. I told you that, so please address me as such. You have the dragon's blood in you."

"Yes, thanks to my grandfather."

"Yet, you are not shifter."

"No, I only carry the blood."

He nodded, and his eyes grew brighter. She began to relax. Had he wanted to hurt her, she would have known by now.

"What is your name?"

"I am Eiandra. Thank you, Seth, for saving my life."

He nodded again and stood. As he walked to the window, she couldn't help but admire his body. Who would have ever guessed that a huge, powerful dragon lurked underneath? Again, the heat settled in her belly. What it was, she felt unsure about.

* * * *

Seth stood with his back to the woman on the bed, his teeth clamped tightly together. She had the dragon's blood in her, but he reacted to her as if she were a shifter. From the moment he tasted her sweet, innocent blood, he had been hard and wanting. He needed a mate; he was too old to ignore the need any longer. But why would he feel such desire for her?

He could smell her desire, and he fought to hold onto his control. She was an innocent, and he wanted her badly. But she would never survive him. He didn't know if he could be gentle with her; his needs were so great.

She carried what he needed to survive, and he had no doubt she would give him her blood willingly. Now that she was aware, he sensed her gratitude in him for saving her. But could he place his mouth to her body, knowing her heat would rise, and not take her?

"Why were you on that field?" He knew his voice sounded loud, but it was the desire in him, not anger. "Surely you did not expect to fight."

"No. I did not." Her soft voice flowed over him, and he closed his eyes, relishing the soothing feeling. "I was running away. Once I am healed, I will continue to run."

Curious, he returned to the bed and rested upon it. He told himself it was to hear her better, but he knew that for the lie it was. He wanted to be closer to her. Smell her heat and feel her warmth.

"What or who caused you to run?"

Her eyes widened at his suddenly soft tone. It felt more like a caress than a question.

"A wizard. I was running from a wizard."

"Why?"

"He was to be my teacher." She looked away, and he guessed the rest.

"Would I be right to guess that he wanted to teach you more than magic?"

"Yes." Her face flamed. "I would sooner die."

He was surprised at the venom in her voice. She would rather face death than allow this man's touch?

"You almost did, Eiandra. Who is this wizard?"

"I do not wish to speak his name."

"If I am to protect you, I must know."

"Why would you?"

“As long as you remain here, you are under my protection. Now, name him.”

“Mortimer.” She shivered. “The Great Mortimer.”

Seth’s eyes narrowed at the name. He knew of whom she spoke, and she did well to fear him. Even as a younger man, Mortimer had been cruel. Eiandra was indeed beautiful, but Seth would guess it was her innocence Mortimer sought.

“Did he profess his love for you?”

“No. I know what he wants, and I refuse. I would sooner take my own life.”

“There will be no need.” Again he stood. “You will find clothing in the closet. Please dress and join me for dinner.”

“When is dinner?”

“As soon as you present yourself downstairs.”

He left the room quietly, and Eiandra pondered her situation. Mortimer wanted her virgin’s blood, but he really desired the power he would get from her dragon’s blood. It seemed, all her life it had been more a curse than blessing. She was so tired of running. But what could she do?

Seth was being very kind to her. He had saved her life. Yet, he too needed the blood she carried. Only he wouldn’t ravish her for its power.

Suddenly her eyes widened. That’s it. She could give herself to the shifter and end Mortimer’s chase. Seth was handsome enough. Well, he was as beautiful as a man could get. Her brows drew together as another thought struck her.

What if the shifter didn’t want her? She had no idea how to go about seducing a man, much less one that was half dragon.

Sighing, she left the bed and opened the closet. Gowns of the finest silks and brightest colors awaited her. Well, at least she would get something from all of this. She may die, but at least she would be well dressed.

* * * *

Seth sat at his table, the night food spread out before him. The chair to his right awaited the woman upstairs. He had dismissed the few servants he employed.

All he could see, at the moment, was Eiandra and her long golden hair spread across his bed. He wanted to make those crystal green eyes shine with passion and heat. She was small and slender. He would likely hurt her if he lost control. But damn, he wanted to wrap

that hair around them while he brought her pleasure over and over again.

A few more sips would be all he would need to heal completely. The thought of letting her go disturbed him. The thought of that bastard Mortimer touching her made him want to kill the man. Her blood had affected him from the first sampling. But until he looked into those eyes, he had no idea it was the woman herself he desired so badly.

She appeared and slowly walked into the dining room then, her body draped in the blue sapphire he had hoped she would wear. Her blonde locks fell like waves, settling around her hips. Seth rose, walked to her and took her hand, guiding her to the chair that was reserved for her alone.

“You look lovely, Eiandra.”

“Thank you.”

Her blush intrigued him, and he breathed deeply of her scent. She smelled of meadow flowers and desire. He closed his eyes, fighting the urge to place her on the table and devour her. When she sat, he circled away and took his own chair.

Eiandra’s eyes bulged at the amount of food before her. Roasted game, nuts and wild berries were in abundance. She looked to Seth, wondering if he ate this well every night.

“How much food could two people possibly eat?”

“I was not sure of what you might like.”

Her smile caused a tingle in his skin that spread throughout his body. How he could desire this small woman so much, he would never understand. He shifted in his chair and looked away.

Eiandra was not sure what changed, but the smile in his eyes had faded. Perhaps he just did not care for her being here so long.

“Thank you again, Seth. For saving my life. Once I am healed, I will be moving on.”

“That will not be for a few more days yet.”

“I am sorry to be a bother. And I know you need my blood to heal.” She placed her hand on his. “I will gladly give you what you need. It is the least I can do.”

He stared at her hand, frowning at the sensations. He realized she’d read him wrong when she quickly pulled it away.

“That is very generous of you.”

She said nothing and began to pick at her food. It all looked so delicious, but she could taste nothing. How had it all come to this?

She was said to hold a great power. Her family had sent her to Mortimer in hopes she might one day be a great sorceress. She had hoped and dreamed to use her abilities to heal. But, once she caught on to Mortimer's plans for her, she had fled. He always found her though. Tears gathered in her eyes as she thought of the poor warrior who had perished. The man had wounded her, but then he had tried to save her. Had she been well, she would have saved him.

"What troubles you?" His deep voice drew her attention. "I see the tears in your eyes."

"I am sorry, Seth. I am but thinking of the battle. I should not have been there, but I ran right into it."

"Why?"

"I had hoped to save a life or two."

"Yet, it was you who needed to be saved."

"Perhaps, it would have been best if I had not."

Seth's features changed then. From disbelief to something close to outrage. His fist hit the table, and Eiandra jumped from her chair, preparing to run away.

"Why would you even say such a thing?" He stood slowly, watching her. "Do you have any idea how special you are?"

"What? Special? I am nothing special. I hold a great power, but Mortimer would use it for something I dare not think on."

"You are a healer, Eiandra. Not only to mankind but to my kind."

"Why do you think he wants me so bad?" she spat, her fear disappearing in her anger. "Do you believe he would allow me to heal? The man is so evil, his bones are rotted."

She stalked from the dinning hall, not sure where she was going. Seth followed her into the library. She threw open the balcony doors, stepping into the dying light.

He watched her face as she took in the scene. Castle Bestore sat high on the rocky slopes over the land of Drodan. From where she stood, it was nothing but rolling hills of green, sharp rocky inclines and a perfect view of the waterfalls. To him, it was the most beautiful place on earth.

"Do you know that to reach most parts of my castle, one must fly?"

"It's lovely, this view. But, how will I leave here?" She glanced over the edge. "That's definitely not the way out."

Seth had to smile. It was the last thing he expected her to say.

"I guess it will be up to me to see you safely to the ground."

She turned his way then, and he could see she was trying to control her emotions.

“When will that be, Seth?”

“Are you in such a hurry to leave?”

Again, she turned, and her small hands gripped the railing. She tilted her head back, her eyes seeking the stars above. He had to hold onto his control, watching that lovely hair caress her hips and the back of her legs.

“You will have no need of me here once you are fully healed.” Her eyes closed, and she took a deep breath through her nose, taking in the scents around her. “Besides, Mortimer will come for me. He always does.”

“He would have to kill me first.”

The venom in his voice caused her head to snap around to him, and he could read the question in her eyes.

“Why?”

“I would not see you harmed or mistreated. As I said, you are special.”

As she looked at him, his eyes flashed a brilliant blue, and she knew he needed her blood for a little while longer. She had also seen the tiny marks above her heart. It was the place where the power would be the strongest. There, he would nip her and drink from her.

Heat settled low in her belly, and she felt shocked to discover she wanted him to take from her. The marks began to tingle, and her hand absently rubbed over the area.

Seth’s eyes followed that movement, and he licked his lips in anticipation. He had started to crave her, but he refused to acknowledge what that meant.

“You need it right now, don’t you?” She didn’t recognize her own voice.

“Yes.”

Though her fingers trembled, she slowly untied the sash of the gown. The material fell, revealing a soft, white shoulder. Eiandra allowed it to slip enough to bare the marks.

“Then, as you have saved my life, I offer to save yours.” She leaned against the railing behind her. “I am unafraid. Please, take what you need.”

Seth slowly approached her, hoping he could control the lust pounding through his body. His cock throbbed, demanding a taste of

her, as well. But he knew, if he took her, he could hurt her. So, he would take what he could.

She watched him as his hand slowly caressed her. He started at her shoulder, and, when his hand moved over the marks, she could not contain the gasp that escaped. She could feel her nipples tightening, aching for something she did not understand. Her breathing increased though she tried and failed to control it.

“What is happening to me?”

Seth looked into her eyes, and what he saw was not fear. It was arousal. She was so innocent; she did not even realize her body ached for his touch.

“What do you feel, Eiandra?” he asked, letting his hand follow the same path it had taken when he had first touched her.

“It is hard to catch my breath, and I feel incredibly hot,” she panted, biting her lip when his hand traveled lower toward her breast, only to retreat once again. “I feel achy, as though I am in need of something just out of my reach.”

Again, his hand traveled across her shoulder, down her chest, and over the marks. When he would retreat, she arched toward his touch. He could feel the hardened pebble of her nipple, and allowed his hand to caress it.

Again, she gasped, her head falling back to rest on her shoulders. A sigh of pleasure escaped her lips.

“Does this ease the ache?” He rubbed her a little harder.

“Yes.”

She wanted him. Her mind might not realize it, but her body did. He could give her release and ease the ache in her body. It would kill him, to touch her yet not take her. But He so wanted to be the man to show her passion for the first time.

He placed an arm around her waist and pulled her with him into the shadowed alcove of the balcony. There he sat and pulled her to into his lap. The feel of her soft flesh against his hard cock was torture. But, as she looked into his eyes, he placed his lips to hers, kissing her gently while his hand caressed her breast. First one and then the other.

“Open your mouth, Eiandra. Let me taste you.” Just a small taste, he told himself.

Slowly, she complied, and he dipped his tongue inside. She was like a sweet wine on his tongue, and, when she moaned into his mouth, he deepened the kiss. She caught his rhythm and returned the

kiss, with a growing hunger that surprised him. He tasted her innocence, and it thrilled him that she came so alive in his arms.

Seth slowly slid his hand down her chest, across her belly and gathered the dress in his fist, inching it up her thighs. She gave no protest, and, in his mind, he was at war with himself. He could take her right now, under the stars, and she would let him. But no, he could not bring himself to hurt her. She would receive nothing but pleasure from his touch.

His hand slid under the fabric, and he sucked in a breath when he found her bare. She willingly shifted her thighs, arching into his hand as he cupped her heated sex. While he gently rubbed her, his mouth left hers, licking a path down her throat, across his marks above her heart, and took a nipple deep into his mouth. Her cry echoed off the walls of rock surrounding them.

“Please, Seth, make this end.”

“Are you in pain, Eiandra?”

“I am not sure.”

His eyes flashed, and he returned to torture her breast while running his fingers through the damp curls between her thighs. She was so hot, and her arousal strong. Gently, he pushed one finger inside of her, careful not to go too deep. Her breath turned to hot little pants in his ear. Slowly, he stroked her, his thumb resting on the hard nub of her pleasure. The inner walls of her sex gripped him tight, and he could imagine how she would feel wrapped around his cock.

Moving to the other breast, he took it into his mouth, pulling hard on the nipple, now swollen from his play. Moisture coated his hand, and she began to move her hips against his hand. It was time to give her the release she needed.

Still stroking her clit, his finger moving gently in and out of her, he licked the marks on her chest. Her body tightened, waiting for him to give her what she needed. Two small pin-like teeth extended and sank into the spot over her heart.

She shattered in his arms. Her arms circled his head, holding him close, and urging him to take all he needed. Her taste had been sweet before, but now she soothed him, easing the fire in his blood with the beauty of her passionate response.

As her body slowly began to settle, he removed his hand from her heat and lifted his head to look into her eyes. Her lips trembled as he placed a kiss on her mouth. Then her arms went around his neck, and she held him tightly.

“Did I hurt you?”

“No.”

She shook her head, and he groaned as the slight movement had her ass moving against his painfully aroused body.

“Try not to move too much.” He knew his voice was rough, but, damn, he was on fire.

“What is it?” She shifted again, watching as the discomfort moved across his face. “You are in pain.”

“It will pass, Eiandra.”

“I want to help you.”

“You have given me what I need.”

“Please, tell me what hurts.”

He frowned, wondering how she could be that innocent. But, if Mortimer had plans for her, he would want to keep all knowledge from her.

“Eiandra, I was able to ease your ache and bring you pleasure.”

She blushed but nodded.

“My body still craves your body.” He stroked her hair. “But I know I would not be able to take you gently.”

He could see when the meaning of his words reached understanding. Her eyes widened, but there was no fear.

“You want to lay with me.”

“Yes.”

”But you do not want to hurt me.”

“No.”

Her dress had fallen around her hips, and it was all he could do to look her in the eyes. Her breasts were perfectly rounded and fit his hands like they were made to be there. She slid from his lap, kneeling on the floor at his feet.

“Can my hands do for you, what your hands did for me?”

His stomach tightened, and he had to remember to breathe. She was offering him the same pleasure. Would it be enough? His selfish side answered for him.

“Yes.”

“Show me how, Seth. I want to ease your ache.”

He leaned back against the wall, unlaced his leggings and released his cock. Her eyes widened at her first look at what made a man. He watched her face for signs of fear, waited for the panic to set in. He was a large man, and it would take a lot of time and patience for a woman, of her size, to take all of him. She had held his finger,

within her, tighter than a glove. He groaned again, thinking of her wrapped around him.

Slowly, her hand reached out, her fingers lightly running along his length. Seth closed his eyes, letting her explore him at her leisure. As with their first kiss, her touch grew bolder. He gently wrapped his fingers around her own and showed her how to stroke him. Again, he leaned back into the wall, letting her touch soothe, as well as please.

When she brought her other hand into play, he had to bite his lip to keep from shouting. Her innocent touches were building him higher with each stroke.

Eiandra was fascinated with him. Every touch she gave, each stroke of her hand caused his muscles to tighten and his breathing to change. She knew he was feeling what he had given her. It made the woman in her feel powerful. A tiny pearl of moisture beaded on the tip, and she licked her lips, wondering at his taste. She had heard of women doing that for their lovers, but never dreamed she would feel the need to do so herself. So, she gathered the bead on her palm and smoothed it over his hot flesh.

She was innocent, never had she known a man's touch until tonight. But there was something inside of her, guiding her. Like she knew what she needed and wanted to do though she had never known it until this night. Again, she licked her lips.

She heard him gasp and looked into his eyes. How long had he watched her? Did he know her thoughts? More of the pearly substance gathered, and, as she looked into his eyes, she licked her lips again. His blue eyes glowed for an instant, and she gave into temptation. Slowly, her eyes never leaving his, she leaned forward and gathered the pearl on her tongue.

Seth could not contain the shout that escaped him, and she hesitated, wondering if she had done something wrong. But his hand rose, threading his fingers into her hair, bringing her mouth back to him.

Bolder now, she wrapped her lips around the large crown. Gently, she drew on him, loving the way his hand tightened in her hair, and his hips rocked gently.

"A little more, Eiandra. Just take a little more."

She took more of him into her mouth, her tongue sliding against him. His hand left her hair, tightly gripping the bench he sat on. Eiandra continued to take more of him until she could take no more. Instinct guided her, and, as she had done with her hands, she caressed

him with her mouth. With each pull, she was rewarded with more of his unique flavor.

“Stop, Eiandra. No more.”

Releasing him, she frowned. Had he not enjoyed it?

“Why?”

“Because, if you continue, you will get more than you are ready for.” His breathing was heavy, and his voice strained.

“I want to ease you.”

“Then just use your hands on me.”

“You did not like what I was doing?”

He smiled and rested his head against the wall, looking at the stars and, for once, really seeing just how bright they were.

“I liked it very much.”

Eiandra watched him as he scanned the night sky. He liked it, but he wanted her to stop? Something told her he was doing it for her benefit. She had liked what she was doing and did not want to stop. She licked her lips, tasting him there.

Seth thought he had himself under control until he felt that hot mouth take him again.

“Eiandra, don’t...”

His words went unheeded. When he tried to pull away, she gripped him with her teeth. His body ceased to fight as the fire spread throughout his body.

“I will warn you only once more, Eiandra. I am about to spill my seed into your mouth.” Her eyes clashed with his, and he knew he was lost. “Is that what you want?”

His answer was a low hum in her throat that rocked him to his soul. He could not, and would not, fight it now. She may wish differently later, but, for now, she offered him the purest, sweetest satisfaction.

His hips moved, in time, with her mouth, and then he came. He chanced a look at her and watched as she drank him in. There was no revulsion, only a look of pure female satisfaction.

When she released him, she laid her head in his lap. He stroked her hair, wondering at what just happened. He hadn’t taken her virginity, but she was no longer an innocent. He could not bring himself to have a single regret.

“Do you still ache?” she asked, her voice sleepy.

“No.”

“Can we do that again, later?”

He could not help it, and could not believe it, but Seth, the mighty pissed-off dragon, laughed. She looked up at him and smiled into his eyes.

“I think you need your rest.” He stood and pulled her to her feet. He lifted the gown back over her shoulders.

“Seth?”

“Yes?”

“Will you stay with me?”

“If that is your wish.”

“Please, stay with me.”

He did not know why, but her request touched him in ways he had never known before. Seth lifted her into his arms, carried her up the stairs and stood her next to his bed. He undressed her and laid her across the soft bedding before removing his own clothes and lay beside her.

As one, they turned and faced each other. He pulled her against his chest, her head pillowed on his arm, resting his other hand on her hip. She drifted off to sleep with the feel of his fingers in her hair.

* * * *

The sun was high in the sky when Seth opened his eyes. He couldn't remember the last time he had slept so late, so soundly. The warm body next to him reminded him of another pleasure he could not remember indulging in recently.

Eiandra lay with her back to his chest, her breathing deep and even. His body was very aware of this woman. Seth slowly removed the cover from her until it settled around her waist. She stirred but snuggled deep into the bed and to him. His hand caressed her hip, and, when she stretched, he pulled her thigh over his leg, opening her to his touch.

Even in her sleep, she responded to his touch. In this position, his painfully aroused cock was nestled between her legs. If he moved, her heat would embrace him. He groaned, wishing he could thrust into her and relieve the ache and the longing. His lips settled on her neck, as his hand reached around to stroke her into wakefulness.

Seth was taking a risk; he knew he was. When her arm circled his neck, her reach causing her back to arch and bringing her breasts into full view, he wanted nothing more than to roll her over and bury himself deep inside her. She turned her face to his, and he kissed her with all the passion he could feel coursing through his body.

Eiandra was on fire, aching in a place deep within herself. This feeling was so much more intense than the previous night. His hand, stroking her, built that fire higher, and, when she felt the gentle intrusion of his finger, she welcomed the touch. But, it was not enough.

“More.” She gasped into his mouth. “I need more of you.”

Their kiss grew until she felt she was breathing him in. The feel of him, stretching her, intensified as he gently worked another finger into her tight heat.

Seth shifted and rolled her to her back, his mouth working its way down to her breast. She was so sensitive, she gasped as the rough pad of his tongue scraped her nipple, before moving lower to play at her belly. He was fascinated, watching her muscles quiver with the caress of his warm breath. He caught the scent of her arousal and moved lower.

She tensed, unsure of what to expect, but knowing she wanted his touch, his every caress. When his tongue slowly separated her folds, she cried out at the new sensations. But when he latched onto her swollen bud, her body arched almost painfully. His arm held her in place as his mouth worked her in time with his fingers. He was very careful, not wanting to cause her pain, but it was killing him. The sight of her, flushed, hair like a wild halo as she tossed her head from side to side, made his discomfort dim.

Eiandra felt as if she would go up in flames. What she needed to ease the ache seemed to remain out of reach. She needed him to fill her, complete her. It seemed as natural as breathing to know she wanted his body joined with hers.

“Please, Seth, no more.”

He raised his head, looking into her eyes.

“I know you enjoy what I am doing, Eiandra.” His tongue licked at his lips, gathering more of her sweetness. “If you say you do not, I will have to prove you wrong.”

“It is not enough, Seth. I want all of you.”

He stiffened, her words hitting him like a blow.

“I could hurt you. This is the only way I know that I will not cause you pain.”

She sat forward and took his face into her hands, kissing him softly, tasting her essence on his lips. His beautiful sapphire eyes glowed in his state of need.

“You are hurting me, Seth. You are denying me, and my body, what it desperately wants and needs.” She licked his lips, running her tongue along the lower one. “I want to experience all with you.”

Looking into her eyes, he saw the truth. He was strong, and it would take all of his strength, and more, to be gentle with her. Eiandra wanted him to make love to her, and damn if he wasn’t a selfish bastard for giving in.

Seth kissed her deeply, using his body to press her into the bedding, bringing his body over hers. Her thighs spread wide, and she cradled him between. He pulled his mouth from hers, watching her face as he placed the head of his cock to her opening. She was very wet and very tight.

“This first time may be painful, Eiandra.”

“I am not afraid.”

He pushed gently, watching her eyes flare as he came into her. He had no more than the head inside, and she tightened around him like a vice, climaxing at the slight intrusion. He watched her as her body jerked under him. And, as she peaked, he lunged forward, taking her innocence with his body, and taking her cry into his mouth.

After a time, she relaxed, smiling into his eyes.

“We are really one.”

“Almost, my sweet Eiandra.”

“Almost?”

“Just relax, and let your body accept the rest of me.”

“How much more of you could there be, Seth?”

It was all he could do not to laugh, knowing she would not find her words as amusing as he. She was so small and had only accepted a little over half of him. Enough to break her maidenhead but not enough for a full joining.

Reaching between their bodies, he gently rubbed her sensitive bud. His mouth lowered until he loved her nipple with his mouth. With each tug on it, he entered her a little deeper. Her desire overrode her pain, and he could feel her hips begin to move.

Then, just when he thought he might die from the pleasure, her nails raked his back, and her body arched. They were fully joined now. He leaned away, enough to look between them at where they were joined. She was stretched so tight around him, that, for a moment, he really felt like a bastard. That feeling changed to something more as she pulled his mouth to hers and kissed him deeply.

“Do not stop now, Seth. Complete me.”

“Wrap your legs around my waist.”

He thrust into her slowly, still giving her the time she needed to adjust. But Eiandra began to thrust herself against him, her body coming alive under him. When she leaned forward and nipped his chest, he lost all control.

Seth began to move within her powerfully, thrusting hard. She wrapped her arms around him, holding onto him like a lifeline. A bead of sweat made a trail across her chest, and he followed it with his tongue, swirling around his mark on her chest. He felt her hand in his hair, pressing his lips closer. His teeth extended, and, as he bit down to drink her in, she climaxed. Still he moved, taking her essence into him. The power of her blood fueled his desire, and, as he joined her in that blissful release, he knew something had changed.

He collapsed against her, and she held him tight to her body. Her hands caressed him, soothed him, as her body throbbed and pulsed around him. Lifting his face, he looked into her eyes, and watched the change in her eyes. The once-crystal green was now deep and bright, full of life. He started to move away from her, but she held him to her.

“No, not just yet.”

“How do you feel?” he asked, stroking her damp hair from her face.

“I feel wonderful. Like I have truly lived.”

After a time, he gently pulled away and lay beside her. Wrapping his arms around her, he stroked her back and thought on the change between them. She was powerful and, her powerful blood had healed him quickly. But, when she offered it to him just now, it had been more potent, causing his body to all but ignite.

Seth had never been one for pretty words and gentle touches, but, with Eiandra, gentle was all he wanted to be. Could she be the one he had searched for all his life? The thought of her ever leaving left a bitter taste behind.

“What are you thinking?” she asked, her chin resting on his chest.

“I am thinking of many things.” He sighed, twirling a length of her hair around his finger. “I think I would like for you to stay with me.”

“I am staying with you.”

“You still plan to leave.”

“As long as Mortimer is out there, I will be in danger. You, as well, if I remain.”

“Let me worry about the wizard.”

“You know him?”

Seth was silent for so long, she wondered if he would even answer. His thoughts seemed far away until he turned to her once more.

“Yes. I do know Mortimer. He is a vile man and has no good intentions.”

“How do you know him?”

Seth adjusted against the bed, looking down into her face.

“I was very young when my family met Mortimer’s family. He had such a good heart then.” He sighed, remembering. “When he realized what I was, and my family was, he had been thrilled. I would shift for him, fly with him. He had expressed his wishes of wanting to be like I was.”

“You were his friend.”

“I thought of him as a brother, but I refused to share my blood with him. He believed it would give him my gift.”

“What happened?”

“Well, it was many years later when he had grown tired of asking. So, he let his parents in on my secret. My mother and father were killed. I learned later that Mortimer had joined in the kill, collecting the blood and drinking it.”

“I am sorry, Seth.”

“But all he accomplished was a level of power. He is strong, but the gift for shifting is not shared that way.”

“How is it done?”

“One must be of the dragon lineage and hold a pure heart.”

Eiandra shivered. She knew all too well that Mortimer was anything but pure. He was wicked and vile, thriving on the pain of others.

She moved closer to Seth, letting his body warm her and chase the demons away.

“I am glad it was you.”

He knew what she meant and held her closer to him. He was glad that he found her and not Mortimer. He had discovered something in Eiandra, and he would be damn if he would lose it. To Mortimer, or any other.

* * * *

Eiandra paced the room she had shared with Seth for the past two weeks—two wonderful weeks of passion and talks of the past and the

present. A bond had formed between them and, they both knew it. But he refused to speak of it, and she did not push the issue. She had fallen in love with a shifter dragon, and now she must leave him.

Mortimer was coming; she could feel it in her bones. That aching cold that settled around her when he drew near. If he found her, and he would, Seth would be in danger. Once he realized she is no longer a virgin, he will go into a rage. The only way to protect Seth was to leave him. But, how would she tell him?

The one thing he had made clear was the fact he wanted her with him. She knew he cared for her. He didn't have to say it. He tried to be so hard and unyielding, at times. But, when he touched her, loved her, he was so incredibly gentle. Even when he lost his control, he was careful with her, like she was something to be cherished.

Since the first time he had loved her, there had been a change within her. Her ability to heal was advanced. She had cut her finger on a rough stone and, before she could acknowledge it had actually hurt, it had healed. Her vision was something else. Everything around her looked brighter, more alive. The color of her eyes had turned to a vivid green. Before she could leave, she needed to speak with Seth on these changes.

Eiandra found him in the library. He sat at the massive table, a journal before him. But his eyes were gazed out the window. Seth looked to be deep in thought, as if troubled. She approached him, trying hard not to sigh at the handsome picture he presented. He turned those amazing blue eyes on her, and her knees went weak.

"Eiandra? Is everything alright?"

"May I speak with you, Seth?"

"Please, sit. Tell me what troubles you."

Seth indicated the chair beside him, and she sat, grateful she had made it without falling on her face. He had a way of making her entire body flame.

"My body is changing."

Seth looked from her to the journal and back again. He had his suspicions on what was causing the changes. Until today, he had been unsure. But now he knew and wondered just how she might take his explanation.

"Tell me of these changes."

"My healing abilities are rapid. My eye color, and even my vision, have become more acute."

"And your magic? Has that changed?"

“Yes.”

“How has it changed?”

Eiandra stood and walked to the large window. Just outside was the balcony where Seth had first introduced her to passions she had never imagined. The caress of the yellow silk she chose to wear that day caused her body to ache. Just thinking of him set her on fire.

“At one time, it took me several minutes of concentration to call upon the earth’s elements. But this morning, I asked for a gentle breeze, and it instantly came to me.” She sighed and wrapped her arms around her. “Another gift I carry is the gift of absolute instinct.”

“What does this gift tell you?”

“First, I need to understand these changes. I know you have guessed what the cause is, Seth. Please, tell me.”

He walked up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her close to him.

“Are you happy here, Eiandra? Are you happy with me?”

“Well, yes, of course.”

“You know of your dragon blood, but do you know what could happen should you mate with a shifter?”

“What are you saying, Seth?”

“We are mated, Eiandra. You were always meant to be mine.”

“I do not understand.”

“You are mine. Mine to love, protect.” He turned her in his arms. “All life in this world has a destiny. Shifter, sorceress’s, wizards and human.”

“What does all of this mean?”

“You are my destiny, Eiandra. You are changing because of our combined gifts.”

“So, I will become a shifter?”

“You hold that power; you have all along.” He kissed her gently. “You are my mate. You are meant to be with me in this life and in the next. You will bear my children.”

Tears filled her eyes, and she leaned into his chest. At once, she was both very happy and very sad. She felt him stiffen at her tears.

“This makes you unhappy?” His voice was difficult to read. “You lay with me every night, share your body but not your heart?”

“No. Seth, my heart belongs to you. It has from the moment you lifted me from that battlefield.”

“Then why the tears?”

“Mortimer comes for me.”

Seth drew away from her to search her face. His eyes gleamed, and his features hardened.

“How do you know this?”

“My instinct says he is coming.” She reached to touch his face. “Do not doubt my love for you, Seth. It is because I *do* love you that I must leave.”

“Leave?”

“He will kill you, Seth. That is something I could not bear.”

Seth pulled her into his arms and kissed her deeply. The heat that he always created inside of her built to such an inferno, she cried out as it settled in her belly. He was relentless, not pulling away until she was panting in her need.

“Do you feel that power between us, Eiandra?”

“Yes.”

“Do you believe in me and in that power?”

“I do.”

“Then believe in it enough to trust in it. Mortimer will not have you. You belong to me, Eiandra. The only woman I will ever again know.” He gently returned his lips to hers. “Should you leave, I will only follow.”

Eiandra heard his whispered vow before he took her lips again, and the fires ignited. No, she could not leave him. She belonged to him as he belonged to her. Without the other, they would each be lost.

“I do not want you to die.”

Seth pulled away to open the balcony doors. Stepping out into the sun, he pulled her with him. This was becoming his favored way to hold her. She stood before him, and he turned her, pulling her back to his chest. Their fingers entwined, resting across her belly. They stood there, taking in the land surrounding Castle Bestore.

“This is my world, Eiandra. I have survived so long, that the years did not seem to matter. Nothing mattered until you were brought into it.” His lips caressed her hair. “Mortimer is powerful, but so am I. Together, we are mighty. Do not run from this, or us. I will only follow. We will stand together, and we will best Mortimer.”

“Should you die, Seth, I will follow.”

“I vow the same.”

Eiandra turned in his arms, and she saw the truth, the love and above all, the understanding in his eyes.

“I am afraid. Mortimer will be ruthless.”

“I can be very ruthless, my love.” He lifted her into his arms, walking swiftly through the library and up the stairs to their shared room.

“What do you think you are doing, my dragon? We must prepare.”

“Trust me,” His smile was wicked. “I plan to be well-prepared.”

Though he undressed her and himself, he made no move to make love to her. He faced her on the great bed. She rested on her knees, as he did.

“Is it your wish to be my mate?”

“Yes, Seth.”

“You must be positive.”

“I have no doubts.”

“Then this day, as you have shared your gift with me, I will share mine with you.”

“How?”

“You carry the blood of the dragon. I carry a more potent form.” He lifted his hand, and one sharp talon extended. “I leave it up to you.”

Eiandra watched as he opened a small wound just above his heart. The blood beaded and rolled down his chest, causing Eiandra to lick her lips, wanting to taste. She knew what he was offering, and, once the potent blood entered her body, she would share with him in all ways. Looking into his eyes, She saw no judgment. This was her choice. Eiandra leaned forward, taking his gift into her mouth and body.

Seth hardened like stone, watching her take from him as he had from her. This was a true exchange. The one Mortimer had wanted, but, what he failed to realize was, the receiver must be from a dragon line. Eiandra was from a powerful line. Her abilities to heal had told Seth that. Mortimer had wanted her for one reason only. If he had taken her innocence, he would have received a piece of that power. Now, she was much more powerful. When the time came, she would know just how much power she possessed.

He held her to him. With each pull of her lips, the desire grew until he thought it would crush him. But his Eiandra was so aware of his body. She licked his chest one last time, pushed him to his back and mounted him swiftly.

It was a fast loving. Her body was so ready for his that she took him deep, without hesitation. Seth was surprised by the strength she

had shown already, but he was so caught up in her hot body moving over him that all he could do was hold on and ride out the storm.

Eiandra cried out, moving her hips against him, driving him closer and closer to that peak of pure bliss. When he felt her tighten around him, his cry drowned out her own as he shouted his pleasure, hearing it echo throughout the castle.

She collapsed against him, her breathing hard and fast. Seth soothed her, knowing it was the power that coursed through her body that caused such a reaction. His pleasure had been so great, he was sure he had bruised his soul with his release. As her breathing slowed, he gently lifted her from him, laying her at his side. Leaning on one arm, he looked down into her flushed face.

“How do you feel?”

“Give me a minute, and I will show you.”

“Is that good or bad?” His brow lifted, a smile hovering.

“How did you feel a little while ago?”

“I felt very, very, good.”

She smiled, ran her finger down his chest, across his belly until she could caress his already interested cock.

“That will never do. I think I should keep trying until I, at least, get an amazing answer.”

He laughed as she again pushed him back and rose above him. Eiandra was full of power right now, and this was her outlet. Before the day turned to night, Seth was begging his little mate to end his torment. Her mouth and body played him until, at last, she felt in control of herself. Seth slept soundly for the first time in many years.

* * * *

Mortimer glanced around the village at the foot of the Drodan cliffs. She was close. He could feel her near. Something had changed about her, but he would not dwell on it. This would be the last time she escaped him.

The little witch carried what he needed to obtain the power. Somehow, she had managed to cloak herself. But he was powerful, and he knew she was close at hand once again. He would find her, and he would take what he needed before he left the village. She would be bound to him then. She would survive his wrath but only because he needed her alive.

“Where is the golden-haired witch?”

Mortimer looked to his man who was questioning the villagers. The battle had taken place not far from here, so one of these simple people must have seen her.

“I swear sir, I do not know.”

“You just claimed to have seen her on the field.”

“Yes sir, she had fallen. When the battle ended, we set out to find the survivors, but she was no longer there.”

“Well, where could she have gone, man? She was wounded.”

The man paled, and Mortimer narrowed his eyes. He was hiding something. Walking slowly closer, Mortimer faced him.

“Speak.” His voice boomed, and those around him trembled.

“The blue-eyed one, sir. He flew away with the woman, wrapped in bloody rags.”

“Flew away? The blue eyed one?”

“Yes, Sir. To Castle Bestore.”

“You know of this blue-eyed one who flies?”

“He is the shifter.”

Mortimer seethed inside. Seth. That damned dragon still lived. He was the reason for all of this trouble. Had his one-time friend just simply given him what he needed, none of this would be necessary. If he had Eiandra then he knew of her blood. The bastard had better have left her intact.

“Where is this shifter’s castle?”

“On the highest peaks of Drodan. Almost impossible to reach on foot.”

“We shall see.” He leaned into the man’s face. “Should you be lying to me, I will return and geld you as your family watches.”

Mortimer sneered as the man fainted at his feet.

“Gather all the horses, remove the packs. We will travel on foot from the mountain’s base.” His eyes searched until he could see the rocky cliffs. Getting there was the easy part. Getting Eiandra might prove a challenge. That damn dragon would die this time. He would see to that.

* * * *

“He’s coming.”

Seth placed the book aside he had been reading, a book that explained more of the bonding history between shifters and humans who possess the blood and magic. Eiandra would not realize her full potential until the time was right. With her own unique gifts,

combined with his blood, she would be more than Mortimer could handle.

“It will take him some time to reach the castle.”

“Do not misjudge how powerful he has become, Seth. He gathers his strength now.”

“Eiandra, how can you read so easily what he does?”

Eiandra stared out the window of the library. Mortimer was twisted, sick and dangerous.

“He had asked for a small drop of my blood, for a potion. It wasn’t until I could read and feel his every move that I realized her had made a potion for himself.” She looked back to Seth, her fear evident in her eyes. “I have left many times, hoping to get away, to break whatever spell he placed over me. I knew what he intended for me, and, when I ran this time, I wonder if I didn’t walk into that battle, hoping for death.”

Seth pulled her close, sharing his strength.

“Whatever paths you took to get to me, I care only that you are here.” He kissed her brow. “Together, we can overcome.”

“Mortimer will want me dead when he realizes I gave myself to you.”

“You know his moves, but he does not know yours?”

“No. He took my blood into him, but I never took his. But he will know. When he sees his goal has been met by another, he will be a nightmare come to life.”

They stood for some time, looking out at the mountains and the village far below. He was down there. She could feel it in her bones.

“He is not alone, Seth. I sense many men with him.”

“It will take much power to get them all on top of my mountain. Let them come, Eiandra. We will deal with this threat and then move on with our lifetime together.”

After a time of silence, the sky began to darken. Seth could feel her tense against him, and he calmed her with his soothing words and touch. Lightening arched across the sky, but there was something more to it than a threat of rain. The clouds went from a dull gray to a black that rolled like a threatening wave across the sky. The wind blew, subtle at first, then building in its strength until it carried to the top of the mountain. His sense of smell could detect many things, but one stood out from the rest.

“Do you smell that?” he asked, holding her closer as the wind blew around them.

“Yes. But I can not identify it.”

“It is earth. It smells of raw earth.”

Suddenly, like giant hands made from the wind and the clouds, a mist formed around them, swirling and separating Eiandra from Seth’s hold. Like he never had even held her, she was plucked from his arms and lifted into the air before him. He could see her, through the whirlwind that held her, but, as he moved to pull her from it, the bones in her arm felt as if they had shattered.

“Eiandra? What magic is this?”

“I did not foresee this, Seth.” She rose higher. “I am sorry.”

“What can I do?” He moved to grab her again and was thrown to the floor.

“Seth, do not try to touch me again. He is using the elements to bring me down the mountain.” She was being drawn to the window. “It looks as if I must fight on level ground.”

“I will be there. You will not face him alone.”

Then she was gone. Seth remained on the floor, fighting the empty ache he felt in his chest. Somehow, he knew she would not be at the mountain base. Mortimer was no fool. But he would find her. He had to, before Mortimer decided to act on what he would see as her treachery.

Seth rushed to the front of the castle. It took him little time to shift, his powerful dragon side ready to battle for its mate. As he flew high over the trees, he sensed her near. The villagers had long accepted his presence. Seth had never caused harm to any of them, and, when he continued to refuse what they would consider the sacrifice they offered, they realized all he wanted was to live and let live.

But he knew she was not in the village though she was very close. For what seemed like hours, he expended much needed energy. The drive to find her overrode his sense of self-preservation.

Then he felt it, like a tug on his heart strings. All along, he had missed her, but he would bet Mortimer held a cloak around them, shielding him from her emotions. But the wizard misjudged how strong their bond truly was.

Seth shifted quickly as he landed, slowly making his way through the trees on silent feet. As usual, the only clothing left to him after a shift was his leather leggings. He could hear Eiandra shouting at the wizard and the snarls of contempt coming from Mortimer, as well. The threats caused his blood to boil.

He knelt, close enough now to see the encampment and its surroundings. Eiandra was in the center, her ankle chained to a stake. Though he saw the danger of the situation, he could not help but admire her beauty as she stood tall and proud before Mortimer. Her long golden hair was braided, and her eyes flashed a deep green. Those eyes landed on him for a moment, and he knew she sensed his presence. He could feel her relief, but she gave nothing away as she continued her tirade.

“You have no rights to me, Mortimer. It is all in your twisted mind.”

“Twisted?” His eyes flashed to her, and, for once, he truly observed her. “Your eyes—the color has changed.”

“So it has.”

He approached her, and Seth had to lock his limbs to keep from allowing his presence to be known.

“You gave yourself to him?” Mortimer twisted a fist in her hair, tipping her head back and looking into her eyes. “Or did he take your innocence?”

“You will not have that comfort, wizard. I gave myself to the shifter, willingly. I gave him my all and accepted him in return.”

“You lay with the dragon, and you say I am twisted?”

Mortimer slapped her, and, as her knees hit the ground, she looked directly into Seth’s eyes. Licking the blood from her lip, she slowly shook her head. She knew he wanted to attack. Eiandra rose to her feet, eyeing Mortimer with all the disdain she truly felt. Already, the wound was healing, and the wizard’s eyes hardened at the sight. The rage could be felt, as if the wind carried it.

“You are angry? This from the mighty Mortimer, who murdered a mother and a father to bathe and drink the powerful blood? You want to be him, yet you are angry only because I hold a power you can not touch.”

“The power would have been mine, had you not spread yourself for him.” His anger was building, and Eiandra braced herself. “You heal so quickly now. But what of a more mortal wound?”

The energy bolt hit her hard. He had moved so quickly, she had no time to protect herself. Pain laced through her middle, and a quick glance told her his aim was true. The front of her dress was slowly turning crimson. Such a wound she could slow, but, without being able to lay motionless, she was in trouble.

The roar of outrage was heard by all, and Mortimer's men gathered around him. A blue light flashed, and Seth rose before them. A large and very powerful pissed-off dragon. His wings spread wide in his anger. Mortimer calmly walked to the head of his men.

"Seth, my old friend. Somehow, I thought you would be dead by now. Imagine my surprise, hearing of the blue-eyed one." Mortimer stood over Eiandra, his hand poised over her, as she knelt in obvious pain. "Shift now, and I will spare her."

"No, Seth. Do not." Eiandra gasped from her position at Mortimer's feet.

"Shut up, you treacherous little witch." He made a move to strike her, but Seth lunged forward.

Two men moved in on him, but they were no match for the powerful dragon. With a mighty swipe, they were dead before they hit the ground.

Taking advantage of Mortimer's distraction, Seth looked to Eiandra. She had used what strength she had to unlock the shackle. Just that small amount of magic and she was weak as a babe. He needed to keep the men and Mortimer busy. No time to kill the wizard. Eiandra needed help and fast.

He spotted the boiling pot then, and his sense of smell picked up the scent of the earth again. Whatever Mortimer had brewed, it was important. Most of his men guarded it well. With one mighty jump and using his wing, Seth tipped the pot and its contents, spilling it over the earth's floor. As Mortimer and his men rushed to the fire, Seth settled next to his mate. Gently, he enfolded her in his large, dragon feet and began to lift himself into the air. He ignored the outraged cry of Mortimer and the sting of the energy bolt that slammed into his thigh.

Just as they cleared the trees, Seth looked back to see the spot where the contents had spilled across the earth's floor. The ground had turned black, and it was dying. He tried not to think about Eiandra and whatever was in that pot.

* * * *

"I am fine, Seth. I have healed very well."

"Had I not got you here in time, I would have been carrying your body back, your dead one."

Eiandra lay back with a sigh. It was early evening, the day after the confrontation with Mortimer, and Seth was still angry. He was not angry with her, she knew. It was the fact that Mortimer had hit them

with a surprise neither knew how to fight. Eiandra had been powerless against the magic, and Seth had barely escaped with her. His thigh had been gashed, but nothing more than a minor wound. Eiandra cringed, remembering her own wound.

It ran the entire length of her lower belly, and it had been deep. If not for her dragon blood, and Seth's combined, she would have died instantly. Mortimer would return this night; she felt certain about that. He'd have to use his magic to come to the castle. Once he used the spell of the winds, she knew how to protect herself. Shields were already in place.

"Seth, you knew this was coming. Now it is too late for me to run."

He turned to her then, and she flinched at the anger in his eyes. He had never truly been angry with her—until now, and she had his wrath. He strode toward her, his eyes glinting with barely leashed fury.

"Run, you silly little witch? If we had more time, I would take my hand to your delectable little ass." Then he sat beside her, the anger gone as quickly as it came. "I have never been so angry and afraid in the same breath."

She sat up and touched his hand. When he looked at her, she saw the truth in his eyes.

"But I am here, and we live to fight another day."

His hand twined with hers, and, for a long time, he just stared at the connection.

"He will come tonight."

"Yes," she confirmed and closed her eyes again against the fear.

"Tonight, it will end, Eiandra. He dies, or I do."

"Seth, do not speak of your death."

"It ends tonight." He pulled her against him. "Mortimer can not be a threat to you any longer. As long as he lives, there will be no peace."

"Then I fight with you."

"I know if I tell you to stay away, you will only ignore me."

"Damned right, I would."

"So, we will fight together. Should I fall, you will flee."

"No."

"Eiandra, you may even now be carrying my child."

"All the more reason we will not fail." She leaned forward and kissed him. "I can feel a power inside me, trying to get out."

“You have no idea what you are capable of, Eiandra. When it is unleashed, just remember, you are still you. Only you can control it.”

Before she could ask what he meant, he kissed her in that way that was both loving and desperate. Eiandra clung to him, taking whatever time they had and letting the magic, that was their own, sooth her worry.

Seth laid her against the pillows, touching her in ways that he knew would drive her crazy with need. He was both rough yet gentle, pulling her clothes from her body with clear purpose. Eiandra helped to remove his clothing though Seth ripped most of his away in a hurry to have her as close to him as possible. This could very well be their last time together.

No words were needed as he knelt between her thighs, loving her with his mouth and hands. Eiandra wanted to give him the same pleasure, and she shifted against him, turning her body until she hovered over his cock. When her tongue slowly stroked him, he stilled against her for a moment. Then it was all she could do to hold her own pleasure at bay until he was in as much need as she.

She followed his lead, returning the pleasure he was giving her. She felt closer to him now than she had in the weeks they had been together. Like they were truly one, and completed the bond between them. With the way they were draped across the bed, Eiandra was able to shift, pull herself away from his mouth and straddle his body with her back still to him. Slowly, she took him into her, loving the way he filled her so completely.

Seth allowed her the freedom to take control. His hands stroked her back and her hips as she slowly moved on him. He liked this position. His hands were free to roam her body while she brought them both to pleasure.

He had known she was destined for him, but, in the end, it had been beautiful Eiandra who had seduced the dragon. He would die for her, and it scared the hell out of him to know she would do the same for him. Mortimer would try to kill them both this time, and Seth hoped they lived another day to explore all they had found with one another.

He forgot his fear when Eiandra's soft hand reached down and caressed his thighs as she leaned forward, placing her hands on the bed. His palms cupped her ass, pulling her down on him harder as he thrust his hips up off the bed. He could feel her tighten on him, and he wanted to bring her to release again and again before taking his own.

As she climaxed around him, he brought his knees under him and began to thrust into her from behind. Over and over she came, begging him for mercy, yet begging him for more.

When Seth joined her in that release, something more passed between them. He lowered his body over hers, still joined together and in no hurry to break that connection. Even after such powerful lovemaking, they were both feeling the energy that flowed between them.

Tears rolled from her eyes, and the bed was wet beneath her cheek.

“Damn him and his evil ways.”

“I know he is coming, Eiandra. We will prepare and be ready for him.”

He rolled from her, and she laid her head on his chest, the strong beat of his heart soothing her, letting her know they were still alive.

“How do we prepare, Seth?”

“Our strength has returned, and our wounds are healed. He must come to us. We will meet him.”

“Meet him?”

“I have my doubts he will expect us to be waiting for him so openly. I believe it will make him wonder. Mortimer’s worst weakness is himself. He believes he is all powerful.”

Though she was not sure she liked the strategy, Seth made a good point. Mortimer would not be expecting them to be waiting for him as if they had no fear.

“What of this feeling I have inside? I feel as if something is working its way to the surface.”

“When the time is right, you will know what it is and just what to do.”

He stood, pulling her to her feet and kissing her once again. She was brave, and that scared Seth most of all.

“He is close now. Listen to the wind.”

“He uses the same magic as before, but this time he uses it to bring him to the mountain top.”

They dressed in silence. Seth would use no weapons. There was not one made that could match the wizard. It would take cunning and Eiandra. He knew that the men with Mortimer would have to be the first to be dealt with. That would be easy enough. But he knew the wizard was counting on them to strip him of his strength. The men would be expendable, and Mortimer would be sly.

Hand in hand, they left the castle, standing on the flat battlements. In days before, this had been a training field. But after one mighty battle, and one very evil wizard who had died in the aftermath, it was as if the land had fallen away. It was perfect for a shifter dragon that would rather live in peace. Seth had many rooms to store his prized antiques, and it was close to impossible to enter his realm. Now he had it all to share with Eiandra. Castle Bestore was the ideal place for a shifter to protect his family.

All of that was threatened now. Again, from the work and ideas of a wizard set on more power. Seth hoped once again this castle and the rocks it sat upon would prove strong.

He glanced at Eiandra, and, when she smiled, he felt hope bloom in his chest. He could see her true power just under the surface. She felt it, was unsure of it, but it was there. Her smile faded as the wind lifted, picking up in its strength.

Her hand tightened in his, and he picked up a subtle scent. He looked down and inhaled deeply. He knew that scent, and it was rolling off of her. It was not an overpowering smell, but, to a shifter, it was very telling. A mixture of fear, determination and her special power. But something more than the wizard would bring out this particular power. It was impossible for a male. Only another female would raise this in Eiandra. She might not even be aware of the why, but it was there.

“Mortimer comes, but he is not alone, Seth. I know he has his men, but there is something more.”

Then, like a shot, it hit Seth. Back at the camp, he had seen the wagon-type box, with the bars. It was more of a cage. He stiffened at his suspicions. Was it possible? He would keep it to himself for now, and pray he was wrong.

“Yes, and we will know just what his plans are soon.”

As if his words were all that the winds needed, the twirling mist that had taken Eiandra was making its way before them. Seth held her hand tighter, not about to make the same mistake twice. Even though Eiandra had told him, it would not work a second time.

Dust and leaves whirled with enough power to almost knock them backwards. When the dust settled, it was what stood before them that amazed them. Not only Mortimer and his men but also a woman. She stood naked in the wooden cage. Mortimer had grown very powerful to carry all this up the mountain.

Eiandra eyed the woman, wondering why she felt so threatened. She had the urge to grab hold of her and scratch her eyes out. From the looks she was sending Eiandra, the woman felt the same about her.

“Seth?”

“Just relax. She is not here by choice.”

“Who is she? Why do I feel so threatened?”

“She is a female shifter.”

“And?”

“It is your natural reaction, as my mate, and hers; it being the season for shifters to find their other half.”

Eiandra swallowed, not understanding this emotion. Her eyes landed on Mortimer, and she directed the hate towards the one who brought this on her. She would fight the woman, if necessary, but her real desire was to bring the wizard to his knees.

“What are you about, Mortimer?” Eiandra was proud her voice showed nothing of her tension.

“I brought you one of your own, Eiandra. You chose to be a shifters mate, let’s see if you can hold him.”

With a flick of his wrist, the door to the wooden cage opened. The woman stepped out, her seductive body moving with a grace that would cause any man to sit up and take notice. She looked from side-to-side, but when her eyes settled on Seth, something in Eiandra rose to the surface.

Sweat broke out on her body as she watched the woman walk slowly towards Seth. Her raven hair lay in locks down her back. Her body was well-toned and showed off her strength. When she stood before Seth, she placed her face close and licked her lips, her tongue touching lightly against his neck. Then she turned and pinned Eiandra with her eyes. They were a deep violet color, and the woman was quite beautiful.

“I am Indigo. I challenge you for this shifter.”

Eiandra tried not to react. She could feel Seth’s hand tighten on hers. The woman did not tempt him, but what could she do? Seth tried to intervene.

“There will be no challenge. I am already bonded.”

“So you say.” Indigo looked to Eiandra. “What if she is to die this day?”

“She will not die. But if she should, I will follow.”

“We shall see.”

Seth eyed Indigo as she returned to Mortimer's side. He had corrupted her mind, he was sure of it. Though the female might not like losing a possible mate, she usually accepted the decision of the male.

"Destroy her, Indigo, and the shifter will be yours," Mortimer said, obviously enjoying the possibilities. "What are you waiting for?"

Indigo looked confused for a moment, as if fighting something inside of her.

"He lies to you, Indigo," Eiandra said. "Mortimer only wants my mate dead. He is using you, as he wishes, for my death as well."

"Not true, lady shifter. Yes, I want the woman dead. But he is my gift to you, should she die by your hand." Mortimer bowed to Indigo.

Eiandra stepped away from Seth, hoping the distance would help the situation. In doing so, she left herself open to attack. The men with Mortimer rushed forward, but Seth met them. In human form, he was just as powerful, and they never made it to Eiandra. As they had rushed forward, one by one, Seth cut them down with his bare hands and extended talons. A few men left held back, awaiting orders. But Mortimer smiled wickedly at Seth's actions in defending Eiandra.

In doing so, he showed his dedication to his mate, and the jealousy and envy erupted inside Indigo. It was inevitable, with the wizard poisoning her mind. When Seth turned, it was to see the two women in a face-off.

"Please, Indigo, do not make me fight you, for fight you I will." Eiandra was shaking, holding back something inside. "Mortimer has lied to you. Do not let him turn you into something vile."

"Vile is one of my male brethren mated to a sorceress who is only powerful because of her blood ties."

Seth could smell the anger, disbelief and the jealousy from both women. Indigo began to shift, and Mortimer smiled in delight at what he had caused.

"They will fight to the death." Mortimer turned an evil smile on Seth. "Fitting, do you not agree?"

"You do not understand, you evil, twisted bastard. Eiandra will recognize her power. You may be the one who parishes this day and not by my hand."

"It would not have come to this, had she refused you," the wizard spat. "She carried what I needed most, and again I was denied."

"You were denied what never belonged to you, Mortimer."

As if the reminder was too much for Mortimer, he attacked. His rage built, in a form of energy that shot from his hand, and hit Seth in the chest. Seth flew through the air, landing with a thud on his back.

A scream followed the silence, and, as Seth sat up, intending to rush to Eiandra's side, he saw there was no need.

Indigo had shifted; her brilliant purple wings and her subtle color was something to behold. However, it was Eiandra that was the most stunning. Though her eyes were still the vibrant green, her wings and dragon's body were white. Not a pale white, but a white that would put the winter's snow to shame. Seth had never seen such a pure hue, and he knew that she was one of the legends' daughters. If the legends were, in fact, true, Indigo stood no chance against the power that Eiandra possessed. He had heard the rumors of her grandfather, a great white dragon shifter, who fought for peace and used his power for the greater good. He had died in his sleep, killed by a trusted friend. Eiandra's father had evidently never used his shifter side, hiding from the world in ignorance. That would explain why she did not understand what was happening to her.

Indigo must have known this and recognized what stood before her. Her body immediately shifted, and she backed away.

"What are you doing, woman? You were brought here for a purpose," Mortimer snapped.

"Not even you could persuade me to do such a thing, wizard." Indigo turned to face him. "She is the last of the legends. She must live, if we are to survive."

Eiandra had returned to her human form and stood shaking. Her naked body shivered, and Seth moved to her side, picking up the scrapes of her dress and draping it over her bare shoulders.

"What nonsense." Mortimer hissed, pulling a dagger from his robes. "You are as useless to me as she."

Before Seth realized his intent, still in awe at his mate, Mortimer plunged the blade into Indigo's chest. It all happened so quickly. He watched her drop to her knees, a look of disbelief on her face.

"I will see to it myself." Mortimer used his foot to kick the woman away though the dagger remained in place. "Enough of the games. Had you only given me what I wanted, she would live. You hold the great power, Eiandra. To bathe in your blood would mean an eternity for me."

Eiandra knew what was happening around her, but she was so weak. Why had she never known what she truly was? Why had she lived so long, wondering what made her so special?

When she looked at Indigo, lying crumpled on the ground, the anger had fled to be replaced with the need to heal. While Mortimer was focused on Seth, she slowly made her way to the woman. Her hands covered the wound, and, what energy she had left, she sent into the injury and the shifter in need.

The stories she had heard of her grandfather all came back to her now. Human and shifter alike had come to him with their needs and hurts. He had done his best to ease the suffering and heal the sick. Only to be cut down later in life by the one man who he had trusted. Much like what she was dealing with now.

Mortimer needed to die. That was the only truth she could really focus on now, and not questions. Never mind her hands were to be healing Indigo, or that she seemed to be a legend reborn. Even the fact that moment's ago, her body had contorted and turned into something she would never have believed. Mortimer must die. As that knowledge set in, so did another truth; he could have her blood, but its effect would be nothing he desired it to be.

"I am sorry, Eiandra. The power of the wizard was great."

"Rest easy, Indigo. For if you die, he wins. That is not a satisfaction he will have this day."

"Then you can forgive me?"

"There is nothing to forgive. Your wound is healing, but your blood loss is great." Eiandra smiled, hoping to reassure her. "All will be as it should be. After tonight, there will be nothing to fear again."

Eiandra rose and gathered her tattered clothing round her. On weakened knees, she stood as proud as she hoped her grandfather had once. This man would never cause another to fear life nor would he gain from another's life. She was ready to die, but she would take this wizard with her.

She watched as Seth, in his dragon form, fought against Mortimer. He was wounded but brave, his powerful body taking blow after blow of energy. But he had hit Mortimer several times, and the wizard was becoming desperate. Still, it would not be enough, and she could not stand by and watch it a second longer.

"Enough, Mortimer," she said calmly as Seth sat still, waiting and watching. He was gathering strength. "You want my blood, so I will give you what you desire."

“What?” Mortimer asked, a stunned look on his face. “You will *give* it to me?”

“Yes. All I ask is for you to tell me why.”

“Why I want your blood?”

“Yes.”

Seth had moved in behind her, ready for anything.

“I want what it will give me, Eiandra. The ultimate power. With your blood, I will be invincible.”

“If I give you the amount you need, will you still require my death?”

By now, Seth had shifted, ready to argue, but Eiandra held up her hand to stop his words. Her eyes looked into his, and he knew she was asking him to trust her. He could do nothing, but stand aside, and hope she knew what she was doing. Her death would mean his own, but not before he ripped Mortimer to pieces. He would do it slowly. He never ate people, but he would devour the wizard.

“No, I may allow you to live, as long as you come with me as a part of the deal.”

“So, I give you what you need, my blood, and, in order to live, I must leave Seth?”

“I will break your bond to him, and you will belong to me.”

Eiandra swallowed hard, hoping she was right. Instinct was guiding her, and it told her she could do this. But would Seth understand? If it meant his life, and her own, to live that life with him, she would have no choice. She had to make Seth believe, or the trickery would not work.

“I agree.”

“Eiandra, what are you saying?”

“I am keeping you alive, Seth. That is all that matters now.”

“I won’t allow it.”

“You have no choice.” She turned back to Mortimer. “I need a chalice.”

She dared not look at Seth while she watched Mortimer conjure up a cup, which she accepted from him, placing it at her feet. He must believe she was going to give up everything. She could not allow any relief to settle in his mind, for Mortimer would sense it. With one elegant talon, she opened her palm and watched as the blood ran into the cup. Eiandra did not allow the wound to heal until the chalice was full.

“Here is the blood you crave so badly.” She watched as Mortimer lifted it, sniffing the liquid as if he could smell the power. “Drink it, and you will see and feel just how powerful the blood will make you.”

“You are a fool, Eiandra.” Mortimer sneered then glanced to Seth. “Once I consume her blood, nothing can stop me. You will both die. But I will let you watch me take your beautiful mate before I kill her.”

“You promised, Mortimer!” Eiandra made a move for the cup.

“They are made to be broken, as I will break the both of you.”

Eiandra smiled to herself as he lifted the cup and drained it. He would soon see who the fool was.

“Eiandra, why?”

She turned to see Seth, a look of hurt and betrayal on his handsome face. She could not blame him, but she could ease his fears. She rushed to him, wrapping her arms around his neck, her mouth close to his ear.

“He will not live to carry out his threat, love.”

Mortimer raised his arms in the air, as if what he was feeling was the power invading his body. Power, indeed, was doing just that, and he was starting to realize he had made a mistake.

“What did you do to me, witch?”

“I gave you what you wanted.” She faced Mortimer. “I am a healer, and as I cure the sick, I can also ease suffering.”

“What?”

“My blood is my magic, Mortimer. It heals only if I choose. You do not deserve to live, so I choose to allow it to destroy you.”

“No.” He staggered, his knees growing weak. “It was not to work this way.”

“Your power is dead, wizard.”

Eiandra looked to where Indigo had lain just moments before. She was gone, having healed and fled. It was for the best. Eiandra was still learning, and did not want to cause the poor woman any more pain.

Seth stood, amazed. In all his journals, he had not heard of this. But Eiandra had known. She had followed her instinct and accepted her power. And she had known just what needed to be done.

“Seth?”

He turned to face her, wondering how fate had decided she should be his.

“I am sorry I doubted you.”

“No, I had to make you believe.” She looked again at Mortimer. “He will die slowly, but he will no longer be a threat. I am yours. That is, if you still want me.”

“Never—if you ever have any doubt— never let that be one.”

They embraced, and she relished his kiss. As always, the fire between them flared, and she lost touch with reality until she gasped and fell at his feet.

Seth looked down to see Mortimer on his knees and a dagger in Eiandra’s back. He knocked the wizard aside, kneeling beside her. She still breathed, but he could see she was mortally wounded. His talons extended as he rose to stand over the wizard.

“I will take her soul with me and have her still in the next life.”

“You will not have her. Now or ever,” Seth bellowed.

The mighty dragon ended it quickly, plunging his sharp claws into the wizard and tossing his heart onto the ground. Mortimer only smiled, as a magical red flame consumed him.

Hurrying back to Eiandra, Seth removed the dagger and lifted her into his arms. He ran fast, carrying her into the castle and up to the room where they had loved so many nights. She would not die. She could not die.

* * * *

Seth waited, watching as she slept and healed. He hoped it had been enough. Once Indigo had spread the word of the legend returning, many shifters had made their way to Castle Bestore. When they had seen her condition, and all the blood he had lost hoping to save her, each and every one had offered their own healing blood for her, even Indigo, who openly wept.

The dagger Mortimer had used had been coated in poison, the kind that was made from the blood of a dragon. Seth could only stand by now and hope she would awaken.

Eiandra was a special addition to their race. Shifter dragons were known to be ruthless, but, more so, to be kind. The white dragon was the most cherished yet the most feared. She was powerful, and he hoped she would not perish with every breath she took.

This was the woman who would be mother to his children. The one woman in the world who could make many wrongs right. And she was his mate. He needed her.

A soft moan brought him to her side, and he lifted her hand, kissing each knuckle in turn. He felt dampness on his cheeks, but he ignored it. He prayed she would not be waking, only to say goodbye.

“Seth?”

“I am here, love.”

“What happened?”

“You were wounded, but are healing.”

“Mortimer?”

“A part of our past best left forgotten.”

Eiandra sighed, relief and disbelief washing over her. For so long, Mortimer had been a piece of her life, and now he was gone, no longer to haunt her or to be a threat. She could move on, start a real future for herself, and be the woman Seth deserved. She opened her eyes, seeing the wetness on his handsome face.

“What of the woman?”

“Indigo is well. Soon, when you are healed, many will come to see you.”

“Shifters?”

“Yes.”

In the back of her mind, she remembered. Many had helped to save her, and she had much to be thankful for. For now, she just needed her mate beside her.

“Seth, come and lay with me.”

He removed his clothes and gently climbed in beside her. When he pulled her into his arms, he took another breath of relief, loving the way her head and hand lay against his chest.

“How do you feel, Eiandra?”

“Sore, tired, but free and alive.” She kissed his chest. “When I am rested, you have much to tell me and show me. I am a white dragon and will need your guidance.”

“Yes, you are a white dragon.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“No, love. It is a wonderful thing.” He kissed her brow. “But, before you rest, I need only to know two things.”

“Yes?”

“How did you know about your blood and what it could do?”

“I can not explain it, but it was like a voice inside of me, guiding me. I am sorry I hurt you, but you needed to believe if Mortimer was to believe.”

“I understand. Though at the time, I wondered if I should be relieved or spank you.”

She chuckled, glad he still had faith in her.

“What else can I answer for you, Seth?”

Jaded Beasts 3, Dragon-Snake

“I only need to know that you love me, as I love you.”

Hugging him to her as tightly as she dared, Eiandra understood his need to hear the words.

“I do love you, my dragon. Never, no matter what life brings our way, never doubt that I love you.”

As they drifted into a peaceful slumber, Seth knew life would be a challenge, but one he would happily meet with his mate and his love beside him. The mighty blue-eyed dragon had been seduced, and he loved every minute of it. He smiled to himself, remembering his mate’s courage and pride. When she was fully healed, he planned to love her like there was no tomorrow. When that tomorrow arrived, he would love her all over again.

It was time the seducer became the seduced.

Serpentine Magick
By
Ravyn Reccio

The Serpent Lord thought he could conquer any woman, until he came across the mysterious beauty known as the Dark Witch.

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Serpentine Magick

By

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Prologue

Before the dawn of time, Draygen Zahndevahl, a Dark Lord Serpent shifter, feasted upon the blood of his victims and controlled the Underworld with his dark magick. With hair as dark as the shadows of night and eyes sinisterly beautiful like a jaded snake, he looked so seductive and piercing, women could not resist him.

As his father's sole successor to the throne, Draygen joined him, Lord Draconis, whenever council was in session with the warlords of the lands. Lord Draconis Zahndevahl spread fear and terror throughout Terra, and was equally feared by the women. Many rumors and dark stories had been spun about the demon shape shifter warlord and his bastard son.

The women often told him his long and lean body reminded them of the power of a sea serpent sliding across the waves of a dark, stormy ocean. The serpent lord thought he could conquer any woman until he learned about the mysterious beauty of the Dark Witch.

Legends claimed for centuries, that a Dark Witch had been the downfall of many great warlords. Dark warlords, like Draygen himself, who found themselves unable to resist her beauty. Her wicked ways tricked them all into believing she indeed was their slave; where in fact, the men became slave to their own sexual desires. The Dark Witch brought out those deepest desires hidden in every man, bewitching their minds with such wild sexual fantasies, the likes of which only she could fulfill.

As the night mist rolled in, the villagers of Terra locked their homes so no man or beast could gain access. Each night, the women of child-bearing age would force themselves to drink a tonic, leaving

their wombs temporarily barren in case the serpent lord found his way into their beds.

Then, one night Draygen seduced Morgana, the Seer promised to his Father, the High King. His punishment for seducing his father's Seer, a virgin who was never to have been touched, affected him even now. He'd caused the banishment of the Seer, and his own suffering lay in knowing he'd never find sexual fulfillment ever again. That fact brought him great sadness. It seemed no goodness or humanity resided in Darkest Eden.

Draygen received visions of Morgana, but he could not understand them. Time and space seemed to open a portal to both the past and present. A thick mist appeared, opening doorways, allowing the Dark Lord a glimpse of what was to be and what once was. On the left, he presumed pictured past visions of how his lust betrayed him, just as it had his father before him, on the Night of the Serpent Moon hundreds of years ago.

The visions on the right bestowed upon his eyes her cradling an infant in her arms, rocking him gently to sleep as she breastfed him. In his mind, Draygen mocked the powers-that-be for showing him his sin and the one thing he craved, a child of his own. He had been cursed, never to sire a child. His own dark magick could not make the vision before him any clearer. He could not work out why the visions came, except to haunt him like his dreams. His voice echoed loudly throughout the castle as he began to chant an incantation to bring the woman closer.

"I call upon the powers of Darkness which flow through my blood. I command the Dark Forces below. Bestow upon me your Dark Gift. Show me this woman's face so I may see who she is. Allow me to see further into this dream you place before me."

His voice bellowed throughout each and every corridor of the cold isolated castle. The Dark Lord repeated the chant over and over again to no avail. His pleas went unanswered.

Draygen planned to ask the Celestial Mage, sister of the Great Owl and aunt to Morgana, for help. He wondered if either of them might have answers at the High Court.

Morgana's mother, the Great White Owl, was known all over the vast land of Terra as she sat on the right hand of the High Court. Her healing methods preceded her as well as her ability to change or curse one's fate. It was the Celestial Mage that sealed Draygen's fate after he was caught in the act with one of the Virgins of her kindred. The

Celestial Mage came into service of his family over a thousand years ago. She served many great Dark Lords throughout her time and never denied anyone happiness until now.

As legend had it, Morgana was to be Seer to the House of White Wolf in the adjoining district that would have made Terra a protectorate of the small village. Morgaine, the sister to the Celestial Mage, had been the one who tipped the scales of balance in favor of the Dark Arts. Draygen's cold heart grew heavy. He tired of this life and wished for a normal one. His deepest passion, of having a child of his own, and a mate to live out the rest of his immortal life, played with his emotions. His last thoughts, before the mist washed away, were how he might change the past.

Morgana, daughter of the Great White Owl, was blessed with many gifts and attributes because of her bloodline. Being born of a shape shifter father and a Fey mother provided her with great magick. This magick would pass to her offspring, the son of Dark Lord Draygen. Unlike her Aunt Morgaine, Morgana did not choose to use her power for evil. But, unfortunately, it seemed her twin sister, Vivienne, decided to follow in their evil aunt's practices. The word around the place was that Vivienne performed her evil deeds in Morgana's name, pretending to be her. Vivienne had even been seen at the council posing as her—Morgana—and begging the downfall of Morgaine.

As the two witches worked closely together, Morgana knew they would seek to control the power of Lord Draygen. Her twin sister's desire to see Morgana's demise pained her. Vivienne's jealousy had gone too far this time, but Morgana wondered how best to stop her. However, any discovery of Morgana would put her son's life in danger as he stood to gain the most power when older. Born to rule, her son would be sought after by the dark witches. This was the reason her mother, the Great White Owl, spirited her away. All others believed her banished. Apparently, Morgaine would not stop short of killing Morgana.

Morgana watched the villagers closely as she sat on the highest mountaintop in the kingdom of Darkest Eden. Darkest Eden was touted to be the birthplace of the Dark Witch, Morgaine. Morgana learned that in Morgaine's younger years, she found out about seduction from others like her and those who came before her. She studied all she could to gain what she wanted in life from those weaker than herself. No man could escape her means of entrapment.

She came in their dreams, toying with them, as they slept. During these dreams, she would drain them of their most precious asset – their seed which sustained her youth and beauty. Her body subjugated all the men of the town. All of them begged her to use them, for none could control the wild sexual desires which had fallen over them. The one thing she coveted most was a position on the council, like her sisters, the Great Owl and the Celestial Mage. When she was denied this, Morgana knew her aunt's jealousy and rage became paramount. Along the way, in an urge to be seen as powerful, Vivienne had fallen in line with the dark magicks.

Lord Draygen was much the same in his feeding habits. He seduced women for sexual relief, in turn giving him the blood he needed to survive. The snake tattoos on his arms came to life and, at the peak of his orgasm, struck the woman and fed on her blood. But it hadn't been this way for her. Morgana had been violated by Lord Draygen on one of his many nights, seeking out his insatiable hunger. He looked for the one maiden yet to ingest the bitter tonic to avoid bearing a child. As luck would have it, Morgana's cycle had passed, and she was very strong-willed and defiant in refusing to drink the potion. Morgana loved the Dark Lord Draygen; she wanted to bear his child and belong to him. She knew, inside, he harbored the need to love and be loved; he just did not know what love was.

Her constant refusal to drink the potion brought about many confrontations with her mother. As the eldest daughter of the Great Owl, a young Morgana openly boasted of the powerful magick within her family. Vivienne, being only minutes younger, never gave her mother any trouble but showed signs of jealousy to her sister, quietly seeking out the dark magick that called out to her.

Morgana's destiny changed the night Draygen came to her and took her virginity. Now she had to go to him, to risk their son's life, before anymore of this madness continued. If he fell completely under the spell of Vivienne and Morgaine, they would use their sexual power to control him.

Despite what her mother advised, Morgana knew she must go to him and convince him she was the real Morgana. She toyed with a tiny serpent made of gold, its eyes made of jade. The gemstone shone in the same color as Draygen's eyes. Eyes she longed to look into again. This magickal snake would be the proof she needed. He'd given it to her as a pledge of his loyalty. The golden serpent belonged to his family, passed from ruling male to his intended bride. That day,

Lord Draygen pledged himself to her, but her mother, the Great Owl, took her away before she saw him again. Her mother said Lord Draygen would do as his father wished and would be cursed for his actions. She was to forget him and take care of the babe who would rule. But Morgana saw Draygen's eyes and dark hair every time she looked upon her son. Forgetting Draygen was not an option.

With the rise of the full moon, the town folk would expect Morgaine to come and play havoc with the people of the village, looking for a new male to enslave. She also knew the women of the town wanted to be rid of her before more men fell victim to her seductive ploys. She could picture her niece, Vivienne, posing as a simple peasant, a single voice going before the Dark Lord Draygen on the night of the Serpent Moon, under the guise of her glamour spell, to plead for his help. The Night of the Serpent Moon, the one night of the year on which the Dark Lord held court to atone for his own sins and listen to the voices of the people in his kingdom. Morgana was not sure what her sister and aunt played at, but she knew it would have no good end if she let it be.

Chapter One

“Come, my lord, the people await you,” a beautiful servant begged as she approached him. The neckline on her long black gown plunged all the way down to her navel, exposing most of her breasts and abdomen. Dark Lord Draygen, a serpent shifter king, slid his gaze to the gathering where his demon knights, in the adjoining chamber, awaited orders for the royal escort. He’d long grown weary of this place and the creatures that called his kingdom home. He wanted more than the cold passion of the Terrans who gave their kisses and bodies without a care.

“Be gone from me,” he snapped at her. The girl’s eyes flashed red, and she scurried out of the room.

Draygen sensed a presence behind him; he knew his mandrake accompanied him. “Do not stand behind me, Tristan, if you wish to remain in your normal human state.”

The tall Mandrake moved forward to stand at the left of Draygen. Born blind and cast out by his people as a freak of nature, he became a constant and loyal protector and companion to Lord Draygen. Tristan’s eyes shone a pale shade of silver. He wore his dark hair in a long braid that fell over one shoulder, to his waist. His skin was perfectly tanned. In human form, Tristan could barely see at all. Draygen knew he used his magic to sense other beings or any objects, making him as keenly aware as any full-sighted man. As a dragon, his full vision returned to him.

Tristan was one of the most powerful beings in service to the Dark Lord Draygen Zahndevahl, and the closest thing he had to a friend. Draygen never understood why.

“What say you, M’lord? Shall we commence the procession to the Great Hall?” Tristan asked, holding out a silver jewel-encrusted chalice.

Draygen took the chalice and sipped. The wine tasted cool and fresh. “Aye, let us proceed with this night.”

Tristan glanced over to one of the demon knights and nodded his

head. Draygen knew this gave the knight full acknowledgement to commence with the ceremony. The guards stood ready in their places. Each one bowed his head to the Dark Lord as he made his way to the center of the group. Two single lines of demon knights walked in unison with the Serpent Lord and his Mandrake into the main hall.

As the practiced procession commenced, Lord Draygen remained lost in his own thoughts. "Tristan..."

"Yes, M'lord?" replied the Mandrake.

"How is it that you came into the service of my family?"

"Both our mothers left us as babes, M'lord. It was your father's wish that we were raised together, sharing the same wet nurse. M'lord is only a few months older than I."

Draygen smiled, turning his head slightly. "I have often thought of you as more than a servant, Tristan, more like a brother."

No further words came from either. Continuing forward, Dark Lord Draygen's thoughts swallowed his attention once more. The silence gave way to the calling of the guard to enter the Great Hall. The golden doors, adorned with a huge winding serpent on the outside, and a dragon on the other, opened slowly. The masses of people who had been patiently waiting rose to their feet. Draygen wanted to use this night to ask for forgiveness of his sin. The sin of seducing and wanting his father's promised seer, Morgana.

He thought hard and long of his former mistake and wondered whatever became of the Seer whose life changed both of their futures forever. Night after night, he'd become insanely aroused by Morgana's beauty. Draygen ached with longing too great for even him to control. Each night, he would avoid her council in order to maintain some kind of dignity.

Then, one night he'd gone to her bed, she'd wanted him, something he'd never experienced before. He did not have to trick her mind to seduce her; she'd given herself willingly. His punishment affected him still. He'd caused the banishment of the Seer, which hurt the most. He'd never find sexual fulfillment ever again. Never find another woman able to fulfill his needs. Draygen wanted no other woman, but his selfishness meant she was lost to him forever, along with any chance of offspring.

Knowing this brought him great sadness and anger. So much anger he often took his frustration out on the servant girls available to do his bidding. He used them, sating his need for blood, while trying to achieve satisfaction. Every time he reached the verge of orgasm, he

shifted into his serpent form. No goodness or humanity seemed to remain in Darkest Eden. He only hoped the Celestial Mage could relieve him of this cursed existence and of the visions that haunted him.

* * * *

High Court started at the rise of the Full Moon and went on until almost sunrise. Draygen knew all in attendance waited for him to make his grand entrance into the Great Hall. As the townspeople filled the Great Hall, his council members made sure all was in order for him to preside over his court.

The pages stood in line as the six council members slowly entered, taking their rightful places to the left and right of the throne of the Dark Lord. Each council member represented the six adjoining communities of Darkest Eden. The Celestial Mage and Great Owl sat at his right. His father, Lord Draconis, sat in the middle as Ruler and High King. Alyssa, Daughter of the Druids, sat next to the other women of the council.

Tristan sat on the council, as well, because of his shape shifter bloodline from his father's side. Lord White Wolf, brother and protector of the Wolf people of Darkest Eden, sat to his left. As well as Dream Seeker, the Shaman of the High Council and brother to the Great Owl.

All in attendance gazed in awe of the Great Council, sitting before them. Normally quite uncommon for a group of people, from all walks of life, to serve in the common interest of anyone, on Darkest Eden, it was uncommon not to. With the different cultures within the vast lands, each group had to be represented.

Once all was in accordance with all in attendance, the Mandrake stood before all. "Tonight we all come here as one in hopes to atone for our sins of the past and those of our forefathers."

The hall remained silent as the Mandrake's words spoke of truth and loyalty and of forgiveness. "On this night of the Serpent's Moon we come together to honor the traditions passed down to us, shared over a thousand years ago. I now ask who shall be the first to atone for his or her wrongdoings."

The Mandrake stood perfectly still as his gaze sought out anyone from the crowd, willing to go speak first. No one spoke. "I shall speak first." Lord Draygen Zahndevahl stepped forward. The Great Hall remained silent, as the shock of the Dark Lord's unusual request to speak first seemed to take all by surprise.

Never in all the centuries of the Feast of the Serpent Moon had this been done. Lord Draygen's situation was treated as a private matter between the Great Owl and the Dark Lord. Draygen knew in his heart he did the right thing. A great burden filled his soul—a soul that seemed heavier after seeing Morgana and the babe in her arms in his vision. To be taunted by that which he may not have seemed unbearable.

“Come then, M’lord.” The Mandrake gestured with his hand, directing him towards the Celestial Mage. “Stand before us all so we may hear your pleas for exoneration. Take your place and kneel before the Celestial Mage in hopes of finding forgiveness in her heart.”

Draygen knelt before the Celestial Mage, bowing his head in reverence of her exquisite beauty and power. Her voice spoke gently as she towered over him. “Speak, M’lord, beyond the visions of your dreams which bring you here before me. Tell me of the great burden which sits upon your heart.”

He found peace as the Celestial Mage’s words wrapped around his mind, bringing some hope of life into his soul.

Her pale hand reached out and touched his hair. She pushed back the locks covering Draygen’s face. It hid the scar he’d received during one of his nocturnal outings to feed. He received the scar, midway between a shift from Serpent to human form, and caught part of the blade from a villager whose wife he seduced.

Words did seem needed as he and the Celestial Mage exchanged glances. Draygen did his best to hide the feeling in his heart.

“Your heart betrays you, my lord.” Her words, soft as a rose petal against the flesh, lulled one into a peaceful calm. “You come to me to seek forgiveness for your sins and to restore your faith in mankind.”

“Yes, My Lady, I come to you, as a humble servant of this court, to beg for mercy in asking for peace of mind from the torment of my dreams and visions.”

The Celestial Mage cupped his face in her gentle hands and looked deeply into his eyes. “ You seek forgiveness I cannot grant you, yet. It is not within my power to lift the curse until it is seen fit by all whom you have mistreated. I *can* grant you peace of mind, knowing when the time comes, what you desire so greatly in this life, will come to you.”

Draygen took great comfort in her words, smiling at her. Dark

Lord Draygen heard nothing but her words in his mind as he returned to his place with the others.

The Mandrake once more looked outwards towards the villagers, making his voice stand out among the loud chatter in the hall. “Who here wishes to stand before the council and the Celestial Mage to bear witness to all against the atrocities they have committed against man, woman or child?”

Silence filled the Great Hall once again as no one stepped forward. The Dark Lord rose from the throne, and the room grew silent. “On this one night, no one chooses to come forward? How is it I hear so much banter before now and yet no one wishes to speak?” Turning his head slightly to meet the on-looking eyes of the council members, the Dark Lord relinquished the floor to his Mandrake.

Draygen noticed a peasant woman being nudged forward by a group of women he vaguely recognized from the village. The young woman knelt before the Mandrake, asking permission to speak to the Dark Lord about her village Terra. “My Lord, since no one else wishes to come forth and speak, I beg an audience with you.”

She wore her hair covered with a piece of cloth that matched her dress. A pale blue peasant dress and kerchief, it seemed, was considered the best clothing for attending court. She appeared to be no more than twenty years old although it was hard to tell. Not once did the fair maiden make eye contact with the Draygen, Mandrake or the council members.

The council took a few moments in deciding whether to continue listening to any other members who chose to speak to the Celestial Mage, or opting to hear from the people and of their needs of improvement in the Village. Everyone agreed the needs of the villagers held precedence above all.

“Come forward my child and speak,” said the Celestial Mage.

The maiden knelt before them with her legs tucked neatly underneath her, covered by the fabric of her dress.

“What is your name, child, and why have you come here on this night?”

“I was chosen to come here this evening to speak on behalf of those that dare not, My Lady. I am called Alexandria.”

Pausing for a moment, Vivienne—disguised as Alexandria—waited for acknowledgement from those sitting before her. “I come here to ask the Great Lord for assistance in ridding our people of the Dark Witch who has enchanted and seduced our men. No man is safe

from the Dark Witch Morgaine and her wicked ways, My Lord. Please, I implore you to help us in our time of need.”

“Have the townsfolk tried to stop her?” Draygen queried, his curiosity now peaked at this woman’s boldness. Something about her seemed so familiar.

“Her powers are too great for such simple people.” Her eyes remained lowered.

As the council members discussed the issue, the decision before them proved a simple matter; they all sounded their agreement to help the people of Terra with the Dark Witch—all except one—the silent voice of the council, Lord Whitewolf.

Draygen gave his solution according to the majority of the council.” My Mandrake will accompany you back to Terra and aid in your quest to rid yourselves of this Dark Witch once and for all.” The Dark Lord Draygen paused momentarily to give Alexandria the chance to gather her thoughts.

“Are there any other matters that you wish to bring before this court?” Draygen asked, waiting patiently for her reply.

“Just the normal daily matters of the wall which divides the lands between us and the other villages. This constantly requires reinforcement, M’lord.”

Draygen felt a pull to this peasant girl, and he tried to study her more intently. She held an aura about her that felt like an aphrodisiac in his blood, making him aroused and hardened. He assumed Tristan felt the same, from the reddening of his face, as he, too, watched the girl speak.

Draygen watched Tristan shake his head as if trying to rattle loose the feeling accosting him. But Draygen’s wicked thoughts led his mind elsewhere. It took him back to the night of his own sexual demise—the last night he enjoyed any form of carnal pleasure with a woman. The desire in him grew intense with no appropriate means for release at this moment, or ever, in his case. His curse allowed him to become aroused but never to sate his thirst. What a cruel fate for any man, he thought, as he did his best to control the need in him.

“Thank you, my Lords and Ladies, for allowing me to speak before thee.” Alexandria was helped to her feet by two of the knights beside her, in case she harbored thoughts of harming any of the council members.

Chapter Two

As the night dragged on, Draygen found himself deep in thought on how to render the Dark Witch powerless. While Tristan and the others dealt with the trivial matters at hand, his thought grew deeper and darker. In his mind, he could not envision the face of this Dark Witch that many have spoken of and feared. To him, stopping her became just another task at hand. The first ray of morning light kissed the moisture-dipped grass around surrounding the Castle.

Slowly, the remaining villagers made their way back to their homes after a night of feasting. The long night of festivities took its toll on everyone, leaving all weary and in need of a good day's rest. The council members each went their separate ways, parting company until the next meeting. Lord Draygen and his Mandrake made their way back to his bed chamber. The Mandrake's body shifted into his dragon form before he'd any chance to tend to the Lord's Draygen's needs.

It was customary for Tristan to spread his wings across the night sky before shifting back into human form, but last night he couldn't. Too much going on and too many people in the castle to enjoy a flight. "Do not worry, my brother. I will tend to myself today." Draygen gently rubbed the dragon's snout and felt an even stronger bond with him. "Rest well, my friend."

The Dark Lord lit a fire in the hearth, warming his cold, damp bedchamber. The chamber, cleaned by the female servants, contained a bath. The water still felt warm enough for one to enjoy. He dipped his finger into the inviting water, stripping his body bare. Slowly, he sat down in the water and enjoyed the feeling of it against his flesh.

The soft gentle caress of the water against his body brought thoughts of Morgana again, and the unseen witch who haunted his dreams, stirring the lust within him. He sat back and closed his eyes while he envisioned the dream witch who called him to her every night.

His hand grabbed at his throbbing erection, and he slowly stroked himself with thoughts of being buried deep within Morgana. The ongoing thoughts brought him more pleasure than he thought he could handle. With each stroke of his hand on his shaft, Draygen swore he heard the Enchantress's sultry voice enticing him further. Her voice sounded of Morgana.

"Feel my silky body wrapped around you as you seek pleasure from me. I am your dark witch; you created me," spoke the voice in his head. His body trembled with an intense need to explode. His hand continued to pump his massive erection that seemed to be controlled by the Dark Witch's powers. Everything about her rang of Morgana, could it be her using such cruelty against him? The Witch's laughter filled his head as she pushed him further into oblivion. His voice begged for release, echoing over and over to be allowed, just this once, to have his thirst sated. The pleasurable pain of his erection consumed his whole body. Draygen's body arched, and he thrust his hips upwards into the air, feeling his balls swelling up and becoming tighter.

In his mind, he saw Morgana riding him, thrusting her own hips against him as she rubbed her juices against his shaft. His orgasm loomed. *Could this be the time?* At the moment his body's release, he shifted into his serpent form. His curse had denied him an orgasm once more as he slithered around the bronze tub.

* * * *

The sun began to set before anyone in the castle made themselves known. Most of the servants spent the early part of the morning cleaning up the Great Hall and gathering up all the "gifts" brought to the gathering. Draygen stirred a moment then settled back to sleep. He noticed Tristan was no longer in the room.

He must have shifted back into his human form and quietly slipped out of his master's chambers. Deep in a dream, Draygen's body awoken to the Witch's touch. He knew it to be a dream, yet it felt so real. Her fragrance of jasmine filled his nostrils, driving him insane with want. Even in his darkest of all dreams, he could not escape her touch.

His thick erection responded to her every touch, her every move a mad whirl of pleasure. Her hands on his body and passionate words made these dreams excruciating. Tears of emotion welled. These tears reflected his physical reaction to the Dark Witch's powers over him. *Morgana?*

She gently toyed with his hardness as she placed a lone single talon-like nail in his mouth for him to suckle. His head jerked back, a gasp rumbled from deep within his throat, her single touch driving passion through his veins. His entire body trembled. Her bewitching touch felt more pleasurable than he ever knew possible—more than he could bear as he moaned loudly while his dream came to life before him.

Her finger slowly moved from his mouth, as she looked deep into his eyes. Draygen felt his lips quiver with need, aching to be kissed. It was his beauty, Morgana; her raven hair and pale skin captured his senses. She felt different somehow, but he could clearly see she was indeed this witch haunting him. Could she hate him so much she continually punish him this way? Slowly, she removed the clasp from her cloak, standing naked before him, furthering his arousal. Her steps slow as she moved to straddle his hips, feeling his muscles twitch against her naked flesh.

Draygen stared deeply into her eyes, unable to resist the temptation before him. Caressing her cheek, he whispered, “My Queen. Your gaze...hypnotizes me. It holds me under your power.”

“It is my very essence that holds you under my spell,” she replied. Her talons pricked over his body, so long and very sharp as they drove Draygen further into the madness of want, rendering him unable to speak coherently.

“Th...that is exactly what you do to me, Morgana. It’s as though your nails themselves deliver more of your magic into my system, in such an arousing way. I know it controls me, y-yet I want more, because of how it's delivered,” he whispered hoarsely.

His throat seemed to swell closed; he now could hardly talk. The mere touch of her nails drove him insane with lust. The massive erection he now sported proved that fact. Her words frightened him; not being in control frightened him. Feeling any type of fear with Morgana frightened him. They’d never shared any fear. Draygen wondered where her hands would wander next.

She leaned her body closer, enabling him to feel the heat of her lips against his. Gently, she nibbled on his bottom lip, her kisses taunting him even more.

“Close your eyes, Draygen, and, with each breath, take in my scent that awakens a darker desire deep within your soul.” His body already felt on fire, betrayed him as his desire grew.

“The taste of my warmth, upon your flesh, brings out the beast

which lingers in the darkness, waiting to feed from your own dark desires.”

The Dark Lord gasped, as he could no longer fight the intense pleasure of her touch. It frightened him to lose so much control to his dark desires. He’d remained in control of them until now. “I never want you to stop. I want to be y-yours” he labored breathlessly

His only thought was taking her, burying his body deeply in her sweet well. Thoughts of the silkiness of her womanhood, wrapped around his erection, possessed him.

“Have you forgotten that you are already mine to use and play with at my beck and call?” Her petite hands worked their way down his stomach as he quivered under her seductive touch. Her voice bewitched him, “Your body serves me and only me. I can take and give you the pleasure you so deeply ache for.”

The Dark Lord groaned out in pleasure. “N-noo, I have not...forgotten, just, having t-trouble speaking.” Suddenly, he shrieked out loud as the sharpened edges of those nails trapped his pulsating cock between them, like a miniature prison “Oh...this feels so...good...” The tremendous pleasure of her touch continued to arouse his desire. The witch, his Morgana, propelled him past the brink of sheer madness.

A total hypnotic state engulfed him. His trembling body flopped in a muscular mess. Her words, so soft and soothing inside of him, yet so wicked as they pounded inside his brain. A loud banging on his bedroom chamber startled him awake. *Damn this never ending nightmare.*

“Who the hell dares bang on my door?” he growled, hiding his erection from sight. The Dark Lord, already in a foul mood to begin with because of his unfulfilled dream, did not feel inclined to deal with anything which didn’t prove a life or death matter. “Enter and be quick about it,” he shouted.

The servant bowed her head before fully entering the room. Looking down at the marble floor, everyone feared the Dark Lord’s wrath when angered. Draygen noticed the servant girl’s eyes looking over him and refrained from acknowledging her curious stares. In such a state of arousal, he could take the wench to his bed and take out his frustrations on her. The ache for Morgana still felt too great for him to control.

“I am sorry, my lord, but there is an urgent matter requiring your immediate attention and could not wait for you to rise. Your father,

the High King, sent me to return with you to his chambers.”

Draygen’s face felt like granite; he tried to remain totally somber. “Fetch my robe, girl... and I shall accompany you to my father’s chambers.” She scurried over to the hearth and grabbed his robe.

The Dark Lord slowly dragged himself out of the bed. The dream encounter left him drained of strength. He felt as weak as a new-born babe. He looked around his room for his Mandrake, nothing. Tristan must have helped him back into the bed this morning after shifting late last night in the tub. His legs wobbled underneath him, for a brief moment, as he tried to regain his balance.

The young girl approached the bed with his robe in hand. Draygen saw her gazing over the serpent tattoos on his arms. Each one represented his family’s crests. The Dark Lord extended his arms, helping her with the green silk robe, which he knew brought out the deep jade green color of his eyes. Standing on a stool, she helped smooth out the heavy robe against his flesh.

Her small hands took their time as she brushed his strong body through the fabric. The servant finally came down off the stool, making her way in front of him to tie the robe. As she grabbed at the golden ties, she touched him once more. Her body pressed up against his, for a moment.

Draygen’s hands held her close, letting her feel his cock pressing up into her thigh. “Take care, girl, that you do not become any wetter. I could smell your arousal from the moment you entered my chambers.”

His hand reached down to tip her face up so he could look at her. Draygen smiled as he looked into her deep blue eyes, seeing how aroused she was. He pressed his lips gently against hers as he reached down and grabbed her ass. He pulled her dress up over her hips, feeling the wetness between her legs. He slowly rubbed her clit in small circles. The servant girl broke away from the kiss, closed her eyes and laid her head against his chest, seeming to enjoy his touch.

He continued to rub her clit, making her moan in pleasure, dipping a finger far inside her. *She is not a virgin.* Being her father’s servant, she must be here for a reason. She wore the silver bracelets of a pleasure slave, meaning she could not bear any children. “What is your name,” he asked as he inserted another finger inside her.

“Moir, my lord,” she breathed.

Draygen smiled, *never was a pleasure slave as bold as this little one.* He took her into his arms, kissing her waiting lips. He kissed her

deeply, with an animalistic lust, unable to shake the need for satisfaction. He could not fight his urges. His mouth took her hardened nipple. She arched her back against his arm, giving him more of her breast to suck.

Her hands found the silken ties she'd earlier tied. She untied them, revealing his naked body. Clinging to his neck, her legs snaked around his waist. Standing his ground and gripping her backside, he entered her with one quick thrust of his hips. Draygen buried his cock into the slick folds of her wet pussy. Both her legs tightened around his waist, making it easier for him. He turned around, with Moira impaled on his cock, and placed her onto his bed.

Draygen became more intent on teaching this brazen slave a lesson. He couldn't be sure why he sought to control her, perhaps because he felt so helpless under the touch of his dream witch. He grabbed at her nipples, making her cry out. He didn't know if she cried out in pain or pleasure. Either way, he didn't care. He was going to give her exactly what she came here for... the fucking of her life. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he heard the laughter of the Dark Witch. Deeper and deeper, he rammed into Moira. Drawing his cock out, he made her get on her hands and knees, entering from behind. His hands reached for her clit, rubbing it as he pounded into her.

He grabbed at her hips holding her tight against him. He could feel her body tremble against his. She clamped her pussy down around his cock, urging him to ride her. Draygen could feel her juices, sliding down his cock. His desire for relief hit fever pitch now, and he sought another way to achieve this. Moira pressed back, groaning loudly with each penetration.

The Dark Lord slid his cock out, rubbing it up against her ass cheeks. To his surprise, Moira lunged back to him, and the head pushed inside her tight hole. He knew she could not resist.

Draygen pressed his length into her. He loved how he felt inside of her. So tight and warm, Moira pushed back against him, giving him more to push up into. He began stroking in and out of her firm ass. She begged for more, pleaded with him to go faster. He wondered how much she could withstand, but, again, his mind took over his actions, and he obliged. The tightness of her ass muscles thrilled him. The more she begged, the harder he gave it to her, unable to deny the way his mind urged him on. His sac grew hard, filling with his juices. He thrust into her and felt, for the first time in ages, he may actually be able to achieve an orgasm.

Draygen pulled out of her, turned her onto her back and pushed deep into her waiting pussy. He felt his cock would burst at any moment. Beads of sweat trickled down his brow. He didn't care. All his focus remained on enjoying this feeling while it lasted.

The snake tattoos came to life, slithering along his arms, hissing. Draygen mesmerized Moira with the magick of his eyes. With no idea what would happen next, he wondered if he would achieve orgasm. Continuing to fuck her, his serpents found the life line of the servant girl and patiently waited for the right moment to strike.

His hips pushed with tremendous force; he thought her bones almost cracked. Draygen felt her body withering violently under him as Moira's release hit. His serpents made their mark, taking from her the very essences of her life force, striking out and digging their fangs deep into her bosom repeatedly until her blood sated them and their Master.

So very close to coming, Draygen buried himself deeper still. He felt the tip of his cock ready to explode. His breathing became labored as the intensity of his pending orgasm overpowered him. Dark Lord Draygen screamed in agony and shifted into his serpent form. The dark witch's laugh filled in some recess in his mind.

Damn you, will you never set me free?

Upon his bed, the Serpent Lord collapsed across the servant girl, who came to him of her own free will, and aided in continuing his eternal curse. The massive serpent shut his eyes and waited patiently for his body to return to its "normal" state once more.

* * * *

Several hours passed before Tristan returned to his master's castle. The midnight hour neared, meaning a lot of work remained to do in order to deal with the Dark Witch. He had spent most of the afternoon surveying the village of Terra. He tried to speak with the woman folk there. Many chose not to speak with him, fearing the wrath of the Dark Witch. Strangely enough, Alexandria had disappeared. Something about this did not ring true. He remained alert to danger.

From the marketplace, Tristan gathered up enough herbs and oils normally needed to entrap a witch. All he needed was a male of age, who could not fall under her enchanting gaze. Dinner preparations went ahead in the kitchen. He made his way into Draygen's inner chamber where a woman's attire lay crumpled next to the bed. He let out a breath in frustration. Draygen would not be very good company

after this happening for a second time in two days. Tristan drew open the drapes surrounding the four poster king size bed, drapes that kept out prying eyes.

He came upon a beautiful servant girl, bitten repeatedly, drained of all color and barely breathing. Coiled around her almost lifeless body, his master, in serpent form, laid very still.

Tristan removed the massive python off her body.

He called for two other servants to take the girl back to her own room. "See to it that she is well cared for and nourished. She lost a lot of blood this evening." The women had been in the Dark Lord's service for many years and attended to him solely. The elder of the two women was a healer, experienced in the craft, and the other a nursemaid.

Both servants had gained ample experience in healing a pleasure slave after being with the master.

"My Lord Tristan, sir, this girl was sent by the High King to fetch Lord Draygen hours ago. What shall I say to him if asked," enquired the nursemaid softly.

"I will send word to him personally." Tristan answered.

The women left, without making any kind of noise, with the girl being carried carefully by one of the Knights who stood guard outside the Dark Lord's chambers. Once they left, Tristan tended to his Lord, drew a bath for him and left a hearty meal on a tray. Tristan personally went and spoke with His Majesty, the High King, informing him about the reason for the delay of his son's visiting his father's chamber to speak about matters concerning his state of mind with regards to Draygen's frequent nightmares.

Upon Tristan's return, he found Lord Draygen laying back in the tub, lost in thought. "Careful with those dark thoughts of yours, My Lord. They seem to get you into a lot of trouble as of late," Tristan snickered.

"Careful, Mandrake, or I shall nail your wings to the floor when you sleep!" He tossed a handful of water over at Tristan who successfully dodged it.

"How can it be that not once, but twice, this has happened to me!" Draygen continued to rant and rave while Tristan just sat and listened to him bellow on and on about his dreams of a Dark Witch.

"Is this the same Witch that has the people of Terra all worked up?" Tristan asked.

"Aye, I fear it may be the same bloody wench that will not let me

sleep or enjoy my own dreams. She is the same one that has cursed me never to enjoy the fruits of my own desires.” The frustration in the Dark Lord’s voice grew heavy. “I believe she might be Morgana, my father’s promised Seer. I have seen her, and I’m sure it is her coming to exact her revenge for me causing her banishment.” In his dreams, her body looked perfect in every way. “Does anyone know what this dark witch terrorizing the town looks like...or where she comes from, Tristan?”

“They say she is a descendant of the Witch Morgaine, who, in her youth, seduced many mortals and magickal folk as well as Great Warlord. No one knows truly, M’lord. She is said to have raven hair and eyes equally as dark. Her complexion is as pale as her hair dark. They say her skin feels like silk, her voice bewitches them as they sleep and her lips are as red as blood,” continued Tristan. “Her eyes are dangerous to look into, for one who falls in the abyss of her powers is lost forever, only to serve her.”

“Yes, indeed, that is how she looked and felt, just like Morgana. It seems I have driven her to the dark magick. Still, no matter who she is, she must be stopped.”

Draygen offered some fruits and meat to Tristan, aware he had not eaten. Trying not to speak with his mouth full, Tristan noticed Draygen swallow the fruit quickly.

“You know, Tristan, that the only way to trap her is going to be difficult. If this is the same Witch that I have seen many times in my own dreams then we must use Serpent Magic to overcome her. She controls me sexually. I must take that control back. Once I have succeeded, her powers will be useless against me. Maybe...” He paused for a moment, looking over at Tristan. “We should use you as bait my friend.” Draygen grabbed the chalice of wine, drinking it down slowly.

Tristan felt shocked, to say the least, at the mere mention of being used for bait. He sat there, looking directly at Draygen. He nearly choked on his food.

“Have you gone mad, M’lord...? Me? Bait! Since when do dragons get used as bait?”

Tristan’s high-pitched voice echoed through the room. Its pitch alerted the dogs in the courtyard below. The shrill made all the dogs in the area bark.

Draygen laughed.

“I am happy to see you find my anger so amusing, M’lord.”

Tristan answered, more annoyed than imaginable. “Witch bait!” he yelled, storming out the room.

“Dragons are so temperamental, just like a damn woman!” Draygen made sure he dressed in proper attire before following Tristan.

Tristan was long gone in flight before Draygen realized he could not catch up to him. In dragon form, Tristan became a beautiful sight to behold. His blood red reptilian skin emphasized his purple eyes. The Dark Lord walked about the garden, adjacent to his bedroom.

The garden, cared for by his servant, grew roses and other flowers at his request. He kept his promise to the Celestial Mage, honoring her always with a large abundance of flowers of all different colors and fragrance.

The land of Terra always enjoyed warm weather, so flowers, blooming all season round, found a perfect environment. As he continued into the garden, the fragrance of a Black Rose bush lured him in closer. The scent of White Musk, Cinnamon, Jasmine and Lavender filled his nostrils.

The soft seductive scent of musk aroused every fiber of his being. He recognized the intoxicating fragrance from his dreams. His heart pounded furiously against his chest, causing the hairs on the back of his neck to stand on edge. The intense feelings of unadulterated arousal overcame him. He could not stop inhaling the scent. The roses captivated the sweetness holding him prisoner, the ancient magick of the land...Morgaine’s magick.

* * * *

Draygen’s thoughts began to spin out of control. He became very light-headed. Every part of his body felt heavy, making it extremely hard to continue standing. The Ancient Magick, which protected the roses, was more powerful than his own dark magick, rendering him helpless.

A deep sleep fell over him, and his dreams took him to another place and time. A time when man and beast stood side-by-side, champions of the Olde Ways. The Greatest Serpent Lord of all stood towering before him. There he stood dressed in the finest green silk and satins. Gold to match the headdress, golden snake’s bracelets adorned his wrist and ankles. On his neck, twin rubies embedded in a snake’s head mounted in gold.

“What manner of beast are you?” he asked. He looked down at Draygen.

“I am no beast,” Draygen replied. “I am the son of the High King Draconis Zahndevahl.”

“If what you speak is true, and you are descendant of my bloodline, why do you cower like a servant on the ground?” His words bit sharply. “You are not meant to be servant to anyone’s whims. Not even the Witch who torments you as you sleep. There shall always be one before her and one after her. She is the one creature we can...”

* * * *

The shock of cold water wakened Draygen from the deep sleep caused by from inhaling the scent of the Black Rose.

“Has anyone told you never to smell the Black Rose, M’lord?” Tristan stood over him, holding a dripping bucket.

He shook his head, holding his hand out to Draygen, and helped pull him to his feet.

“You would think one would remember the roses existed, but no one ever journeys this deep into the Garden. Dragons are a lot smarter when it comes to gardens,” he snickered.

“Tristan, hold your tongue before I feed it to you! You would sooner drown me than save me, I gather,” he snapped at the Mandrake. The comment seemed to amuse Tristan even more.

They walked back to his chambers, bantering back and forth, about how smart the other was. Not once did Tristan ask what Draygen dreamt. The Dark Lord’s head pounded, and the ringing in his ears grew louder, drowning out Tristan’s words.

Once back in his room, Draygen threw himself on his bed, placing his hands over his eyes shielding them from the candle light. “I swear I feel as if I had been drinking all night and am now feeling the serious recourse of it all.”

“Best thing to do, M’lord, is sleep it off. The fragrance of the Black Rose has always been intoxicating. There is no medicine for what ails you now.”

Draygen groaned even louder. His body ached, as well.

“Sleep will do you well though I doubt your dreams will be any better than they have been in the past. I’ll stay here, in case a nightmare should wake you.”

Chapter Three

Draygen tossed and turned as the dreams began again. The voices he heard speaking out to him he didn't recognize. Each voice rang out louder than the last as they spoke to him of demons and druids. Of mystical creatures he had banished from Terra. Of blood that was shed over the land, his mother who had died at childbirth and of the woman and the babe she held in her arms. Still, no face appeared before him. Just the beautiful male babe, with hair dark as his and eyes green as jade.

Something did appear different about the baby's features as he attempted to get a closer look. The baby's fingers tugged at his mother's strands of long hair that was within reach of his tiny hands. He gurgled and fussed a bit, smiling to show his tiny forked tongue, a serpent's tongue. The child was born of serpent blood and would, one day, take his place at his father's side.

The Dark Lord watched from afar, listening to the mother's sweet voice singing to the babe, as she cuddled and fed him from her breast. This brought a smile to the Draygen, but also made him wonder if this was a vision of his future or taunting on the behalf of the Dark Witch.

Draygen felt a familiar presence standing behind him. He turned to look, finding Dream Seeker there with him. "What brings you to this dark place, my brother?"

My dreams, Old Friend," replied Draygen. This Witch, or woman, whoever she is, haunts me as do the visions of this child. Why do they show me this?" he questioned.

"It is your path to walk alone, for yours has always been the ways of the Darkness, and I can not intervene in your customs. I can only serve as your translator of these visions. As quickly as the Shaman appeared, he vanished into the mist. The woman in the vision stepped out of the room. She had put the babe down to rest and had changed her clothing to her sleeping attire.

He shut his eyes for a moment, only to find himself inside the

cottage with Morgana.

"I am glad to see you have returned, M'lord," the gentle voice said. "I have just placed the babe down for the night."

Draygen felt confused, wondering how he came to be inside her home, and why was she speaking to him with some form of recognition and level of comfort? Bewildered, and speechless, Draygen looked for a chair to sit in. It became too overwhelming for him to accept as real.

"Now, you are here before me, M'lord," she said, smiling at him.

"Yes," he replied, "humbled by your very presence, as always." He stared deeply into her dark, inviting eyes. "Your eyes say so much..." He spoke to her with the tenderness he felt for her. If only this vision could have come true.

Just as your body does," she replied. "It speaks loudly of your need."

He stared into her eyes continuously, unable to look away.

"Yes, my eyes are entranced by yours, and my bulge is controlled by your mere presence." He could feel her powers, wrapping around him tighter as it surges through him and around him, drawing him in more.

"I f-feel it, my Dark Witch," he replied. "I feel it more intensely, each time we meet. My lips tingle at your wicked games."

Slowly, her hand reached out to caress his face, letting a single finger touch his waiting lips. His lips trembled as his body felt on fire.

"How you quiver at my touch." Her voice seduced him equally as her touch.

"I can't control it. Y-you make me want you and need you so badly." His body shook with such an intense need. "I dream about it...lying in bed at night, waking in a cold sweat, feeling you in my sleep, taunting me. Whispering in my mind as I try to dream...talons caressing the underside of my sac as I sit in my bath, as if trying to test me, to see if I can remain in human form."

Slowly, she placed a single long talon against his chest, his heart pounded furiously. "Is this what you ache for?" She asked, pausing for a moment, as if knowing her touch had broken all the barriers between them. Silence filled the room as the Dark Lord succumbed to her. She dug the talons into his chest gently, not piercing any flesh. Her hand felt like a branding iron, singeing the hairs on his chest.

His senses reeled, as if he was drunk. "Y-you know it is. You know I long to be under the spell of your voice and those talons."

She cupped his face into her hands, nibbling softly on his bottom lip. His eyes remained shut tightly. As he felt her mouth on his, he whispered. "I am yours. Morgana, my Dark Queen, forever."

He savored the taste of her lips, parting them with his tongue, deepening the passionate kiss. Her lips pressed harder, her tongue greeting his, sliding against it. Draygen knew he must fight this feeling. He could not give in to her magick, not even his Morgana could be allowed control over him this way. His selfishness and lust turned her to the dark practices; now he may well need to destroy her. He promised her he would take care of her, and then she'd been banished, from her home and family, for taking him into her bed and losing her virginity. For that, he was truly sorry, and he knew he deserved the punishment metered out. But now, others were being affected, and that could not be allowed.

"Such intoxicating sweetness from your lips," he said softly. His body ached to feel her underneath him once more. His arousal only brought intense pain in his loins. He needed to find some manner of release and soon.

He felt his own Dark Magick fighting her, becoming a battle of wits. The Dark forces behind him aided him as he continuously called upon them.

But there was no denying the powers she had.

Draygen fought, with every inch of power he had in his body. Every muscle in his body, and some he never knew he had, twitched and strained against her magick.

He refused to allow himself to become a puppet to her sexual sadistic ways. The harder he fought her, the more she used the power of her touch against him. Through the information Tristan had found out about the Dark Witch Morgaine, Draygen knew he was just a pawn in her twisted game to gain a seat on the council, controlling the men's minds through sex. She now used his love for Morgana against him. Apparently, Morgaine controlled her, as well.

"Soon, you will be forever under my control, with no will of your own. Powerless to resist my Dark Magick," she hissed.

Her hand reached down to his cock, releasing it from the constricting clothing that encased it. His cock throbbed against her very enticing touch. It became alive, seeking fulfillment inside of her chasm. Her talons stroked his sac, making him harder still. His body became crazed with desire, unable to control the beast that lurked deep inside him. Grabbing the hand that held his cock, Draygen

pulled Morgana into his arms. “Your magick is not stronger than mine,” he growled. He met her eyes with a look of sheer animalistic lust.

Her feeble struggle to escape his grasp was bleak. Vivienne—posing as Morgana—pushed him past the brink of sanity. She found herself trapped in her own ploy of seduction. He ripped the dress from her body. His mouth found her breast, nibbling and biting into them. Draygen pinned her body up against the large wooden table. He spread her legs wide, toying with her clit. The witch fought him, trying to keep her legs closed. “You will *not* deny me, Witch!” His hands fumbled beneath him.

He pried her legs open with his knee, shifting his weight in between her legs. Vivienne screamed furiously at her tormentor. “You bastard! You aren’t man enough to mount me!” she exclaimed. There was nothing gentle in his manner of touching her. He dug two fingers deep inside of her, making her cry out in pain. He could no longer maintain the need to bury his cock deep inside. “We shall see who is not man enough.”

A growing sense of panic overcame the Dark Witch. Her magick was failing her. She felt the power of her glamour spell failing, and she could not maintain the appearance of her twin sister much longer. She held on with every bit of strength in her. She called upon Morgaine to aid her.

Draygen removed his fingers from inside her, bringing them to his mouth and tasting. He rubbed his thick shaft against her entrance. The heat of his cock burned. She continued to squirm beneath him, trying to wiggle her small frame out from under him but wanting him inside, at the same time. All this seemed to do was enflame his lust even more.

“Move again, and you shall feel the cold steel of my blade against that lovely neck of yours. Do you understand me?” All she could do was nod in response. For the first time in her life, she felt real fear.

With one swift thrust of his strong hips, he buried his cock deep inside her. Vivienne gave into his demand. Her control now gone, she gave herself to him.

Draygen held her arms above her head, pinning her down against the table as he rocked his hips back and forth against her. Each time, he thrust harder and deeper inside of her than before. Ferociously and without even stopping, he fucked her like a wild animal that is

possessed. Ramming hard as possible, over and over, deeper and deeper, he thrust into her wicked pussy.

Gasping for air, he said, "I am no longer your slave. You are *mine*, now!" His voice growled, thick with sexual frustration.

Draygen pounded his cock deep into her, making her moans louder, diminishing the spell around her. She was powerless against his charms and his Dark Magick.

The witch finally gave into her own desires, enjoying the feel of his cock buried deep within her. She wrapped her legs firmly around his waist digging her talons deep into his back. He jerked back and forth, plugging her harder and harder, his lips sucking her neck and earlobe, his hands grasping her ass and massaging it fiercely as his manhood found its way deep into her chasm. She pleaded with him to go deeper.

Draygen obliged her, ripping his thickness deeper and deeper inside her until it hurt to the point of ecstasy, plunging so fast and so hard and so fierce.

She moaned into his ear, "Take me, my lord. Take me for all I am worth."

Somehow, he summoned up further strength and drilled harder, stretching her pussy, finding depths no cock had ever found before. Vivienne never heard the "hissing" sound above their screams and moans. But she knew the snakes would come now that he had control. He continued to pump into her wetness. It took one swift hard thrust, and an explosion gushed inside her. Draygen jerked into his release, screaming out into the darkness. Vivienne felt the blackness engulf her.

Chapter Four

In his mind, he screamed out for his Mandrake to come to his aid. The Dark Lord knew the inevitable would be happening soon enough to his body. His serpents had bitten the Dark Witch, leaving her body drained of energy and blood that they sought nightly. But instead of the raven hair of Morgana, the witch's hair was now blonde. Draygen had not idea what happened. Her facial features looked similar. But, this was definitely not Morgana. She faded away, the dream state gone. The screams, coming from Draygen's bed, must have startled Tristan as he came scrambling through the doorway. Tristan breathed a very long and deep sigh of relief when he sighted Draygen. He was about to leave the room when both heard footsteps, coming closer towards the bedchamber. Tristan drew the curtains around the bed, shielding Draygen from the prying eyes of whoever was coming.

The Knight, that stood watch at the door, knocked, requesting to speak with Tristan. "There is a visitor, waiting downstairs for Lord Zahndevahl, a female who said it is of an utmost urgent matter that she be allowed to speak with him."

"Send her away. Lord Zahndevahl will not see anyone at this ungodly hour of the night."

* * * *

Inside the Main Hall, Morgana waited. She immediately came to her feet when she saw the Mandrake come through the doorway. Dressed in peasant's garb and a hooded cloak to avoid any recognition until she was ready, the young woman stood and bowed to Tristan as any peasant from the village would. Underneath the cloak, she hid her raven hair and her pale skin. She made sure not to make eye contact with anyone in the room. The cloak hooded far over the top of her dark eyes, shielding them as well. This should not seem unusual, as it was customary that no one made any eye contact with the lords and ladies of the High Court unless told to do so. The young

woman held some hope of speaking to Lord Zahndevahl before sunrise. It was crucial that it be done without delay before Vivienne and Morgaine gained total control over him.

“My Lord? Is my request to seek a private audience with Lord Zahndevahl granted?” She waited patiently for his reply.

“I am sorry, but he will see no one tonight,” Tristan replied.”

“I must speak with him tonight,” she demanded. “Before it’s too late.” Her voice echoed down the Main Hall and into the cold, damp passageways of the castle.

“Too late? What do you mean?” Tristan frowned. Morgana knew she had aroused his suspicion.

“Guards!” Immediately, four of the palace guards stormed into the Main Hall, ready to carry out whatever orders were given. “Send some men to check on the High King and Lord Zahndevahl. Apparently, this young woman seems to think that they are in some sort of danger.” He ordered two of them, “You two stay, and restrain our visitor.”

The guards took their places at her side, holding her by her arms. Morgana put up a valiant struggle to break free.” I demand that you release me! You have no valid reason to hold me like this against my will,” she screamed.

Her voice grew louder as she continued to struggle against the brutes that restricted her movements, and pain set in. “Release me, I say!” she demanded. The tight hold the guards would leave marks on her skin. “Is this how you welcome the daughter of one of your most favored council members?” Her tone became bitter, yet she knew she must maintain her composure if she was to speak with the Dark Lord.

“Ha!” Tristan said. A daughter of a council member dressed in peasants clothing. Do you think me a fool?” he replied, mocking her.

“What manner of man are you to mistreat a guest? I came here of my own free will to speak with Lord Draygen Zahndevahl about an urgent matter, and I shan’t leave until I do so. I demand that you have these buffoons release me. Now!”

She summoned her own magick from deep within her. It had been ages since she used the knowledge of her craft for anything, let alone to subdue anyone. It troubled her she needed to use her gift as a form of self defense. She had no choice in the matter, saving the life of another was well worth the risk.

She felt the power of her magick, filling every fiber of her body. It was like breathing fresh air after being stuck in a damp, dreary

prison she had made for herself. Instantly, the guards restraining her collapsed, stung by the electrical charge her body released. She hadn't hurt them, just shocked them.

Everyone on the castle grounds became alerted to the ongoing, blaring commotion going on in the Main Hall. Servants scattered everywhere to avoid collision with the knights enroute to protect the High King and his son, Lord Draygen. The guards quickly entered the room, circling Tristan, protecting him from any oncoming danger.

In all the commotion, no one noticed Morgana followed Tristan. She used her magic to conjure up decoys in her image. This made it easy for her to distract those in the room. It also made it simple for her to walk past them without anyone noticing. It was a magick trick she perfected when she'd gone into hiding.

The guards were kept busy down below by the decoys. By now, Draygen was fully awake and rather annoyed by the noise and movement about the castle. Morgana heard him yell, "What the hell is going on! Has everyone here lost their damned minds?"

"We have an intruder in the castle, M'lord, and, from the looks of it, she was headed this way," replied one of his guards.

Tristan stood beside the hearth, facing the entrance to Draygen's chambers, ready to incinerate anyone that came through the door. The cloaked woman materialized before them. Tristan, in his dragon form, nudged Draygen behind him, shielding him from her powers. "Show yourself whoever you are!" he commanded.

"I will show myself only to Lord Draygen and no other," she replied.

Draygen was completely dumbfounded by her. No one had ever stood so strong against him. No one ever dared to, not even Tristan in his human form.

Even though she knew she was bested, she refused to allow her fears to control the moment.

Tristan's eyes narrowed. She stood strong before them, determined to be heard and stop Vivienne and Morgaine from taking control.

Draygen came out from behind the protection of the dragon.

Even now, she felt scared; the dragon could incinerate her in a second should he choose to. Morgana forced herself to close the short distance between them. Tristan stood quietly, as if he was made out of stone while the fire crackled and danced.

The air hung thick with the scent of wood and pine. For a reason

she didn't understand, she felt the urge to touch the beautiful black dragon that would not leave Draygen's side. His loyalty touched her; it was obvious to her that he, too, saw the good in Lord Draygen. Instead, she balled her hand into a fist and rested it against her side. Her heart ached for Draygen. She couldn't imagine what it must be like to be hated by the women who desired to be with him, yet feared him.

"I will not ask again." Draygen growled. "Remove your cloak, and reveal yourself before I have you physically removed, or shall I remove the cloak from your body myself?" After a slight hesitation, Draygen drew his short blade and cut the ties holding the cloak over her petite body.

She stood proudly before the Great Serpent Lord, showing no fear at all. He remained speechless as the woman in his dreams came to life before him. She wore the deepest of purple gowns, long and flowing, which revealed her milky white breasts. She was exactly as the rumors said she would be. A raven-haired beauty with eyes dark as night and full lips colored so red one would have thought they'd been dipped in blood.

"Morgana?"

The Dark Lord reached out to touch her, making sure she was real.

"I am as real as you are, My Lord Zahndevahl," she replied softly. "Many nights, you have dreamt of me, and this very night I stand humbly before you, knowing the great risks I am taking in doing so."

He shook his head in denial, *how can she be here? Who is that witch in my dreams?* "Why have you come to me this night?"

"I have come to you because of another who has been using her knowledge of the Craft and passes herself off as me, My Lord."

Draygen stared at her, confused and puzzled.

"I am Morgana, daughter of the Great Owl, sister to Vivienne. She is the one using her magick to torment the villagers of Terra. Vivienne uses the Craft for her own dark needs. She lives off the suffering of others, taking what is not hers. I come before thee to warn you of her misdoings and to advise you that she is capable of posing as me. She is my twin."

He shook his head in total disbelief. "You're what? There are two of you?" Draygen could not believe what he heard. Yet, it made sense too because of the visions he had been allowed to see. It was not the

past and present of one woman, Morgana, he was shown. It was both females, each in present-day form. "My twin sister. It is she who has placed fear in the villagers and used a glamour spell to appear as me."

"How can I know it is not Vivienne before me now?" Draygen questioned suspiciously.

"She revealed her true self to you, did she not? Her hair is blonde, not dark as you know mine has always been."

"This proves nothing, you could still be her." Draygen could not believe his love stood before him. He watched as she reached into a pocket inside her cloak. He felt Tristan tense as she retrieved something and put up his hand, signaling him to be still.

This woman, who looked and felt so much like Morgana, held out her hand. In her palm sat the golden serpent he'd given to her, promising to be her husband. His body relaxed, and he knew, without a doubt, this woman was his Morgana.

"Tristan," Draygen said quietly to his Mandrake, "leave us please."

Tristan's eyes flared, with relief, as if he understood what Draygen was about to do.

For a second, Draygen expected Tristan to argue. He didn't. Instead, the Mandrake got up and headed for the door with a cold silent look on his face that had always reminded Draygen of his father, the High King.

Dismissing the knights at the door as well, he waited until he and Morgana were alone before he returned to her side. He couldn't believe what he was about to do. Never in all these centuries had he ever helped anyone. No one. But Morgana needed help, and he was responsible for her banishment. She risked death by returning here. Regardless of whether she still wanted him or not, he owed her this much. A great injustice had been done in her name and he alone, with the help of his magick and that of Tristan, could right the wrong. He might then be able to redeem himself in the eyes of the Celestial Mage and finally be free of this century-old curse.

But, even if he still had to bear the curse, he would accept it. His action would be solely on behalf of the woman he loved, Morgana. Draygen angered when he thought of the bad light Vivienne had shown her in. His best course of action would be to arm Morgana with the sleeping potion derived from the Black Roses so that she could fight the bitch, as her equal, and bind her powers so she would not ever hurt another. If he unlocked all of Morgana's power, and

made her reach deep down inside of herself, she would stand a fighting chance alone—a chance he was not willing to allow her to take. No choice to be made here, at least, not for a man like him. He'd entered this world, damned from birth, as a bastard. If he had to leave this world, it would be on his own terms.

* * * *

Many hours passed by. They sat and watched the sun rise from the balcony of his room. They spent the night talking, at length. Morgana knew about the pleasure slave still healing from the serpent's bites. She knew, as well, about the nightmares. She heard of the dreams her sister appeared in, feeding from them. Much was said throughout the night, but Morgana did not mention the babe. She knew Draygen had seen the baby in his vision. But she wasn't ready to mention her son yet; her need to protect him, at all costs, ran high. She would wait and see if Vivienne and Morgaine were defeated. Morgana explained to Draygen about how her sister used the Dark Arts instead of using her magick for good as she'd been taught by her mother and aunts. She never revealed anything about the consequences, making her go into hiding. She refused to speak of the babe—his first born son. Draygen believed her to be banished; Morgana would let him keep that belief for now.

She spoke of how both she and Vivienne had been promised into service of other Great Warlords of the lands and of how they would have a seat on the council, representing them as well.

"Vivienne has always been the rambunctious of us two, always getting into trouble with mother. She found favor with our Aunt Morgaine, who I gather taught her there is more magick to learn, using it for a Dark purpose."

Morgana refused to speak ill of her twin; she knew, somewhere deep down, some goodness remained. She hoped it was not too late to save her from the path she had taken.

"Your sister, Vivienne, has forgotten that this is my Father's kingdom to rule and mine after him. She has defied the King's sanctions against using the Dark Arts to destroy another kin of Terra. She must pay for what she has done to you and others."

Draygen paced back and forth in front of the cold hearth. The anger showed in his face and the tensed state of his body. All these months of restless nights and sexual repression must have finally taken its toll on him. Morgana rose from the wooden bench she'd sat on almost all night, into the early morning hours. She stood in front of

him, her body trembling. Would he still want her as his or had the damage done by Vivienne, in her image, been too much? She reached up to place her hand on Draygen's cheek. His whiskers scraped her palm as he opened his eyes to look down at her.

Time seemed suspended, as their gaze locked, nothing hidden between them. She glimpsed inside this man's heart and saw it to be every bit as cold and ruthless as he claimed throughout their conversation. In his life, he knew nothing about treating anyone with kindness. He only knew of his own depravity and his need to take whatever he wanted and how to use people for his own selfish needs. She saw the sufferings, as well, at the hand of the High King, the beatings he was given as a boy for crying out for his mother. All this made her heart break. As her hand stroked his cheek, a glimmer of something shone in his eyes. The hardness there softened, yes, Morgana saw he still craved love.

She learned some wounds time can never heal. But she knew those bad experiences could be eventually overshadowed by good experiences. Wanting to comfort him, she guided him down so she could capture his lips with her own. Draygen cupped her face, in his palm, as he opened his mouth to welcome her tongue inside.

Pulling back from the kiss, he smiled at her.

"You have been through much since last night when you bravely came to me, my lady. You need to rest.

Morgana drew in a deep breath as her fingers lingered on his mouth, toying with his lips. "I am tired, and, at the same time, I am not." She glanced up from his lips to those green eyes, smoldering with desire...for her.

Draygen wondered how he might feel kissing her after the nightmares he'd endured. Now, he knew. For the first time in his life, he'd seen inside another life. He'd heard the gentle sounds of Morgana with the babe. His vision showed him the love she had for her son. His son. Her silence baffled him, but, more than that, it tore him apart. He saw what he'd never known or felt as a child, parental love. He knew now where Morgana learned to be gentle and kind. She had inherited it from her mother, the Great Owl, and her loving aunts. It must be extremely painful for her to see her twin sister try to destroy her. Now in order to protect her, he must pretend he knew nothing of his son.

Pain overcame him, as he knew a family life was forbidden to him. He made his decision, long ago, to be a demon lord and to live

among those who were as cruel as he. However now, no matter what, he would see Morgana and his child safe. Somehow, he would find a place for them so that she could live and no longer fear anyone harming her or her son—a part of him said he might never see or hold his son. How could he be good for a child? Perhaps it was for the best he stayed away from him.

Draygen wished he could help her understand what he felt. To be honest, he enjoyed this moment with her. With no angry voices inside of his head demanding that he strike out and hurt whoever was near him, he allowed love into his heart. No rage burned inside of him, just a sense of peace, unlike any he'd ever experienced.

How he wished he could take the three of them someplace safe, away from all this madness. Someplace where there was no Vivienne, no magick, just them. Caring for her would be his weakness, guessing it would leave him feeling vulnerable. He held little doubt that Vivienne already knew this. One mistake, one tiny miscalculation and Vivienne would win, and he would be dead by nightfall.

“You may rest peacefully here. No one will disturb you,” he said.

She looked around the cold gray room. Nothing here was inviting or welcoming. It reminded her of a cold damp dungeon. “Where is this place that I am safe?”

“My bed chamber.”

As soon as he spoke those words, he vanished into a cloud of smoke. Morgana looked around the dark room. There was nothing warm here. No fire burning in the hearth. His bed was huge in comparison to hers. It was covered in black furs and didn't look that comfortable. It took her a few moments to adjust to being alone in his room, but, when she climbed up onto the bed, she quickly fell asleep.

Chapter Five

Draygen did his best to avoid the throne room at all costs. He knew Tristan would be in there, waiting for him, since he had told him to leave them last night. With the foul mood he was in, he wasn't ready for a confrontation—not a physical one anyway, he decided. But, as he saw it, he had no choice; he needed Tristan's help to defeat Vivienne. Sighing, he closed his eyes and mentally summoned the Mandrake.

Draygen sat on a perch, facing the river so he wasn't at his back.

"You have need of me, My Lord?"

"Aye, watch her for a bit. I have something that I need to do," Draygen instructed.

Tristan frowned. "You are leaving?"

"I'll return."

The Mandrake arched his brow at that. "Why do I think you are about to do something very stupid?"

"Most likely because I am about to do something stupid."

"And is there a reason for this blatant act of stupidity?"

"None, really."

Tristan's eyes danced with humor even though Draygen knew the Mandrake could see nothing more than the outline of his body.

"Well, in that case, I shall stay behind and guard her and not join you in your stupidity, as you said. And I'll try my best to stay out of trouble."

"Guard her well, Tristan." A deep sense of sorrow surrounded his heart. Something that he'd never felt before. It weighed heavily on Draygen's emotions. Never had one woman made him feel this way. All his flaws, and all the cruelty he'd taken part in, didn't seem to faze Morgana. To be the mother of his child, and still not speak of his birth, annoyed him even further. He needed to take Morgana back to her home, before Vivienne figured out she was here with him. There was only so much he could do, or more so *would* do, to keep her safe,

including killing someone in cold blood.

* * * *

Morgana lay on her side on the large bed, staring out the open window at a perfectly blue sky. If she were home now, she would have bathed her son and have been singing to him as she tended her garden. She closed her eyes and conjured up an image of her home. She smiled as she imagined holding her six-month-old son, hearing his laughter, seeing the smile on his small, mischievous face as he tried staying out of trouble.

Opening her eyes, she saw what looked like one of the blankets she wrapped her son in at night but no sign of anyone else. She sat up with a gasp and examined the blanket. Aye, without a doubt, she knew every stitch and every fiber that went into making it. “Lord Draygen?”

There was no answer. “Please My Lord, if you are there, show yourself to me.”

“Why?” the word whispered in the air around her like a dream. “I would like to thank you for this and explain why I kept the knowledge from you, as well.” She heard the snide comments he was making to himself. .

“Keep your explanations and your blanket.” It hurt him greatly, not to have been with them when the child was born.

Stung by his words, she looked down at her son’s blanket. Draygen must have gone to some effort to bring it back to her. He snuck into the cottage. Yet, he seemed to do it for no other reason than to ease her mind, knowing that her son was safe. She knew, first hand, that such an act wasn’t normal for a man like Draygen. He didn’t want thanks with meaningless words. It wasn’t his way. She knew the time had come to tell him the full story about his son and why she kept the child hidden.

* * * *

Draygen leaned back where he sat with his back against the wall of the gazebo. He heard Tristan growl low in his throat. “What madness has come over you now?” he impatiently asked.

“The same madness that came over you to venture into uncharted lands in search of some babe’s swaddling clothe to make some peasant girl happy.”

Draygen looked away. “Who said I did so to make her happy? What I did, I did for myself.”

Doubt shone on Tristan’s face. “Since when does it matter to you

about anyone's happiness? I thought you loved seeing others miserable?"

Normally he did, but, because the swaddling blanket belonged to his son, it did matter to him. "Is there some point to this conversation, or are you suddenly possessed with the urge to die?"

Tristan held his hands up in surrender. "Only thought you would enjoy hearing you made the woman very happy."

Draygen scoffed at that. "She is very simple-minded, and it takes nothing to please people of her background.

The Mandrake leaned down to speak softly. "It feels good to do something nice for someone. Doesn't it?"

Draygen reached up, grabbing Tristan by his throat. He pulled him down until he was sure he could see him.

"You have overstepped your bounds, servant. Do so once more and you shall find yourself part of my armor." He released Tristan, who stared at him without so much as blinking. Draygen didn't want to admit his feelings to himself let alone to Tristan. There was a perfect outline of his hand against Tristan's skin. He saw no fear in the Mandrake's expression.

"As you wish, My Lord." His words sounded with a slight degree of sarcasm.

Draygen flung his hand out and used his powers to remove Tristan from his sight before he did something more drastic.

As he sat there alone, the foul mood passed. He considered what the Mandrake had said, about making Morgana happy. In all these centuries, Draygen never made anyone happy, not even himself.

* * * *

Morgana sang quietly as she sat on the bed, holding the blanket against her. Tristan came into the room with a tray of food— enough to feed an army. He seemed suspicious about her but spoke kindly. "You should eat before the food gets cold."

Slowly, she rose and crossed to the platter where she picked up some bread. He stared at her. Morgana felt self-conscious. "Am I doing something wrong?" she asked.

"Nay."

"Then why do you stare at me so?"

Tristan laughed at her question. "I can't truly see you when I am in human form," he explained. "What I do see is your shadow, and, when you move, I see you like a blurry haze."

"You're blind?"

“Only as a man. As a dragon, I have better than perfect vision.”

“Why?”

“It is a curse, I guess. I was born like this.”

“I’m sorry, Tristan. Do you need any assistance?”

“Nay, my lady. I shall leave you to your meal.”

“Tristan,” she asked as he turned before leaving.

“Aye?”

“Thank you for bringing the food.”

He smiled a broad smile, perhaps he wasn’t used to such thanks.

“My pleasure, Morgana”

* * * *

Once she took care of her own grooming, Morgana ventured out of the bedchamber into the hallway in search of Draygen. She wasn’t too sure where he would be. Relying on her instincts, she made her way through the darkened corridors and down the stairs until she reached the first floor. Sure enough, it opened onto a giant hall lined with tables.

Banners hung from the rafters overhead. But she wasn’t paying much attention to them. Her gaze was solely focused on the man, sitting before the roaring fire. He wore the darkest of all armor. Shaking her head, she took a moment to study the angles of his handsome face.

Dark whiskers lightly covered his face. His long hair fell over his forehead. He was, without a single doubt, the most handsome man she had ever set eyes on. Her thoughts shifted momentarily to her son—their son. She saw his features in the child—the dark hair from parents, her complexion and Draygen’s jade green eyes.

He no longer looked like the harsh demon he was made out to be. He looked like a mere man resting, one with a very kissable mouth. She didn’t know how long she had been standing there, watching him sleep. He looked so peaceful she was afraid to wake him. It was impossible for her not to reach over and touch his face.

So she did—touched his face. Luckily, Draygen didn’t stir.

She could not resist the temptation of placing a kiss on his lips. Then she took his hand into hers and held it to her lips, kissing the hard calluses.

Out of the shadows, a low voice spoke.

“Are you sure you want to wake him, my lady?”

“Tristan?” Morgana turned to look around the room, looking to see from where the voice was coming.

“Where are you hiding? Show yourself. Don’t you know it’s not polite to spy on people?”

“Aye, my lady, I know ‘tis not polite, but, when it comes to Lord Draygen and his safety, politeness does not matter to me at all.

Draygen stirred in his seat.

He slid his hand around her waist, holding her tightly against his body. “And do you not know it is also not polite to watch others as they sleep?”

Morgana let out a loud gasp when she felt his face nuzzle her cheek.

Tristan laughed, obviously amused by her momentary shock.

“Come, we must talk,” Draygen said. “I know there is something you have yet to speak of, and I want to know what it is.”

Morgana knew this talk was long overdue and could not be avoided any longer. “Aye, my lord, yes, there is much I still need to speak to you about.”

“Tristan, I have a task for you, something to retrieve for me.”

“Aye, Sire, what might that be, and where am I going?”

“You ask too many questions, dragon,” he said. “For now, I want you to go back to Morgana’s cottage, deep in the forest of Terra by the waterfall, and bring back her son. I mean, *my son*.”

Chapter Seven

Tristan's jaw dropped to the floor. He was utterly surprised, unable to believe his lord's words.

"Your son, My Lord?"

"Yes, Tristan, *our* son." Squeezing Morgana to him.

"As you wish, My Lord."

Tristan vanished into a puff of smoke, in search of the child.

"You knew the child was yours, My Lord?" Morgana felt a little surprised.

"No, not till last night when I kissed you. That is when I made sense of my visions. The same one that showed me the boy before you came to me." His face hardened. "No Lord of Terra will ever claim you as theirs. I will not make the same mistakes my father did. Our son will have a name and will not be raised as a bastard child to live among peasants. Why did you hide my son? Did you see any need to keep me from him?"

"Lord Draygen, I beg forgiveness. I could not tell you about the babe because I feared for his safety, as well as mine. I feared that if Morgaine ever found out about us, she would kill us both.

"She speaks the truth, Lord Draygen. It was I who took her from here and found a safe place for her to raise the babe."

The Great Owl and the Celestial Mage both appeared before them. Lord Draygen knelt, paying them the respect they rightly deserved, and had received for hundreds of Centuries.

"Mother!" Morgana cried out happily.

"My child, come here."

Morgana ran into her mother's waiting arms. The Great Owl held her daughter tightly, tears of happiness running down her cheeks.

Draygen had never been exposed to such a show of affection. This was all very new to him. All he ever knew was how to hurt people and make them miserable. He sat there, watching the women hug and kiss each other. The Celestial Mage smiled as she teased her niece about the way she was dressed. "Do you have a hug for your

aunt, as well?"

Draygen felt very uneasy. He couldn't understand why it was so important to express feelings at all. Women. Who could understand them? After all the giving and receiving of affection finally ended, the Celestial Mage took matters into her own hands.

"Morgana? Has Lord Draygen been told yet?"

"Told, My Lady?"

"Yes, Lord Draygen. Have you been told about your son and him being the key to removing the curse on your family?"

Morgana feared this most of all. She knew once she told Draygen of this, her life would be forever changed. She would no longer be able to live the simple peasant life she'd grown to love. "No, Aunt, I have not had a chance to speak to Lord Draygen about this. We came upon an impasse, and he found it impossible to be in the same room with me."

Morgana let out a deep sigh of discontent. This was going to be a lot harder than she thought.

"Mother, may I speak freely?"

"Yes, you may," she replied.

"What is to become of Vivienne now that we know she has been impersonating me? The use of her magick against my son and me should not go unpunished. I ask that you bind her powers forever and banish her from this land."

"Your sister will be punished for what she has done. Of that, there is no doubt. First, we must find her. I have heard stories that she resides with your Great Aunt Morgaine, deep in the mountains where no one dares to venture."

Draygen knew all too well that his Demon Knights had no qualms about venturing into unknown lands. There was nothing they feared, other than his wrath if they failed him.

"My ladies, a moment if you please. My knights are at your disposal, awaiting orders at your command. Why not utilize them to bring back Vivienne?"

"It not as easy as it seems, Lord Draygen. Morgaine has centuries of olde magick behind her. She will know that we are sending your knights to bring back my wayward daughter to face her punishment."

As Morgana opened her mouth to ask him about his plan, Tristan's voice echoed in the room around them. "Lord Draygen, the babe was not to be found. I searched the entire cottage, and no one was there."

“What!” Morgana turned towards the Mandrake and stood listening to him saying that her son was missing.

“What do you mean that my son was not there? He could not just have walked off all alone without the wet nurse I left with him.” Tears started to form in her eyes.

For the first time ever, Draygen felt helpless. He was a great warlord and knew how to lead his men into battle. He was trained for war, never for this—to be a parent to a babe. It was a frightening thought, like so many others before him; he laid the foundation of his own destruction. In a moment of thoughtless passion and greed, he’d lost control of himself and sired his heir. The stabbing pain of not knowing the whereabouts of their son could drive him insane. For the second time in his unnatural life, he actually cared about another living soul.

Seeing Morgana, falling apart emotionally right before him, didn’t help either. From what he knew of her, he saw her as a strong and independent woman who would stop at nothing to work for what she wanted. Her one true weakness was her son. She would die for him, if need be.

She swore up and down the Main Hall that whoever had her son would pay dearly, with their lives, for this treachery. Her voice carried throughout the entire castle. “I refuse to idly stand by while some crazed person has my son!”

“*Our son*, Morgana,” he said. He grabbed her wrist and pulled her into his arms. Draygen looked deep into her beautiful dark orbs, seeing the anguish in them.

“Just as you are his mother, I am his father, and he is of royal Serpent blood. He will know who I am, without you being put at any risk.”

Morgana was beside herself. Her heart was breaking. If she remained, there would be nothing to do but worry. If out there with the rest of them, there might be a chance she would find the child alive, but she might also put herself and her son in more peril.

“It is much too dangerous for you to be out there all alone, especially if Vivienne and Morgaine have the child,” Draygen ordered.

“Please Mother,” she begged. “Tell him that I must go. He does not know where to look. He will listen to you.”

“No. Lord Draygen is right. It is much too dangerous. You are needed here. It is safer for you behind the castles walls, in case

Morgaine or Vivienne return with your son.”

“I will stay, but only because I can see the sense in it. You must send word if you discover anything. If I hear nothing, I will come seeking you and our son.”

It didn’t matter to her that she was royalty. What mattered most was the safe return of her child.

* * * *

“Bring my son back alive. Or I shall have your life in his place”

“Careful with your choice of words, My Lady. It is I that rules this kingdom, not you. Lest you forget that. Tristan! She does not leave the castle grounds,” Draygen shouted as he stormed out of the Great Hall with his men, ready for battle.

Her mother and aunt remained behind, making sure that Morgana did nothing to hinder the search for the child. They busied themselves in preparation for their return. Morgana refused to stay indoors. She felt like a caged animal, used to being out in the dark of night. She followed the path of the Full Moon to a small lake on the Castle grounds. Beside the lake, she came upon a hidden gazebo, perfect for one who wanted to be alone with her thoughts.

The slight breeze kissed her cheek as she sat quietly. She looked up into the night’s sky, just as she had done every night with her son, counting the stars in the heavens. Her eyes became misty and filled with tears at the thought of never holding him again. She held the small blanket up to her cheek as the tears flowed endlessly.

She looked up into the heavens, praying to the Gods and Goddess to grant her son safe passage into her arms.

“Do not worry, M’lady. He will return with your son.” She looked around to see where the voice was coming from. She could have sworn she was alone.

“Tristan?”

“Aye, M’lady.” In his smallest of all dragon forms, Tristan blended in perfectly with the night. He certainly was very good at getting about without being detected. His black scales, with silver marking, allowed him to fly at night as part of the sky.

His silver eyes shone like twin orbs against the night sky. “Must you always sneak up on others?” She shook her head and smiled at him. “Damn dragon, always lurking in the shadows.” They laughed about it for a moment as Tristan shifted into his human form.

“I am sorry that I startled you, M’lady, but it is my job to make sure you are safe. Even here, one does not know what might happen.”

They sat on opposite sides of the bench, staring up at the sky.

“Do you feel it, Tristan?”

“Aye, I do,” he replied.

Her heightened senses became alerted to a dark presence coming closer. It was not Lord Draygen; something or someone much more wicked.

“Someone is coming. There is a trace of powerful magick in the night’s air, M’lady. We must return to the safety of the Castle. Out here, we are targets, and Lord Draygen will certainly skin me alive if any harm befalls you. Hurry, M’lady!”

Tristan grabbed her hand and shifted back into his dragon form. They were too far from the castle walls to make a run for it. Flying would reduce the danger for both of them. Morgana held on for dear life. She had never flown on top of a dragon before. She held tight and closed her eyes.

“Open your eyes, M’lady. The view is exquisite.”

Never would Morgana have believed she would ever be able to touch the stars— this would be something she would do again when her son was safely in her arms.

Upon landing, Morgana saw her and Tristan weren’t the only ones who felt the black magick in the night air. Her mother and aunt had conjured their own dragons for defense. Tristan made it a point to stand close to the women. With a slight wave of his hand, he drew up a protective shield around them. His magick always served him well, and he prayed this time it would not fail.

Tristan was duty bound to serve and protect the lives of the Great Owl and the Celestial Mage. As the Eldest and dearest members of this council, death would befall anyone who would see either of them harmed. A dark mist filled the throne room, making it difficult to see beyond. A single voice spoke out from the mist.

“Is this how you welcome me, Sister?”

Morgaine stepped through the mist with Vivienne at her side.

“Do you not wish to greet your mother, Vivienne?”

“Hello, *Mother*,” she spoke bitterly.

Morgana stepped forward, glancing over to see that Vivienne held her son in her arms.

“You have something that belongs to me, Vivienne. Hand me my son!” Morgana demanded, her jaw tightening in anger. Her glare burned, like pools of fire, as the rage consumed her. Her thoughts filled with protecting her son from harm. Tristan could not maintain

the protective shield around Morgana. Each step she took closer to her son became dangerous outside of Tristan's grasp.

"Step any closer, Niece, and I personally shall end his cursed life," she said

The Dark Witch Morgaine had seen the visions of what the child was capable of doing. As heir to the throne, his magick would bring an end to the pain and suffering of the people of Terra. Darkest Eden once more would thrive and flourish. There would be peace all over the distant lands.

"Morgaine, you would not dare harm an innocent child. He has done you no harm. Release him. He is of no use to you," Morgana's mother said.

"My sisters must think me a fool to release such a child to them. You both knew that the child would bring an end to the curse that I placed upon this family and the people of Terra. That is why you hid them both from my sight."

The child began to fuss and cry. The scent of his mother's milk alerted him to her presence. "Not a step closer, Morgana," Vivienne warned.

"Please, Vivienne, he is hungry. That is why he is crying. He knows I am here."

Morgana pleaded with her sister to allow her to feed him. Her pleas went unanswered.

"Vivienne. Give me my son!" She moved dangerously close to them. A step closer and she saw the blade being held against him.

"One more step and I shall kill him myself, Morgana. Do not test my patience, sister"

"I will rip my son from your dead carcass, Vivienne. This I swear.

Morgana felt her power rising within her. A magick with such great force, it shook the very core of her being. Her mother and aunt stood by watching, as their power flowed safely into her. She summoned the magick of ancient times before her. Her Fey blood came to life within her. Such power was only Morgana's to call upon. "Now, Aunt Morgaine, my son. Now!" Her voice echoed loudly. It rung in Tristan's delicate ears, making him fall to his knees, covering his ears, crying out in pain. Morgana turned to look at him.

Blood seeped from his ears. He looked in intense pain. The Celestial Mage tore a piece of fabric from her dress, covering his ears. Tristan must have been too far gone, passed out. The Great Owl and

her sister pulled his body closer to them. Morgana turned back to the dark witches, determined to defeat them.

“Don’t be foolish Morgana. Your magick is not strong enough to defeat me. You have deluded yourself in thinking so,” Morgaine boasted.

Morgana stood face to face with her aunt. It would have been so easy to snatch her son from Vivienne’s arms and flee. But the blade held against him stopped her. She focused on her Aunt Morgaine, to bring her outside of her own protective shield. Once out of her shield, Morgana would be able to fight her.

The battle of the Witches began. Morgaine used the dragon’s breath spell, an evocation of Fire and Death, cloaking Vivienne and the child in a ring of smoke and brimstone. .

Each blast of magick, used against the other, filled the room with bright lights of color. The fire in the hearth crackled and hissed at the small explosions of sulfur. The room filled with dark noxious fumes. Each powerful blast of Morgana’s magick hit Morgaine’s, causing her to bleed on contact. With the swift movement of her hand, Morgana cleared the room of such fumes. She looked down at her feet to find Morgaine lying in a blood-soaked dress. Morgana reached down to touch her aunt’s face.

Morgaine’s hand went for her throat. She dug her nails in deep enough to draw blood. Morgana struggled helplessly, weak from the fight.

“I told you, Niece. I am too strong for you, or anyone, for that matter.” Morgaine managed to stand. Her hand still wrapped tightly around Morgana’s neck.

“Now, Niece, you shall watch as your son takes his final breathe. Kill him!”

Instantly, without hesitation, Vivienne drove the blade into the infant’s body.

Morgana screamed, “No! You bitches!” She found the strength she needed to escape Morgaine’s grip and ran over, snatching her son’s body from Vivienne’s arms. She drew the blade from him and wiped his blood on her face. Her body trembled and shook. She could no longer feel her legs underneath her.

Her screams became louder, each one shattering the mirrors in the castle. The pain was almost too much for her to handle. She rose from the ground, her son cradled in her arms, and looked at her aunt.

“He was just a baby.” She moved closer, holding out her blood-

stained hand. “You took his life, Aunt, and now I will take yours.” Morgana summoned all her powers and plunged the blade deep into her aunt’s body, again and again, feeling no remorse.

Morgana watched her aunt shrivel up in pain. “I curse you, Aunt. I curse your soul, your very existence, that you may never find eternal peace in this life or the next; that you will travel the earth as you have cursed others before you—as a snake, the vilest of all creatures.” Her bitter words rang out for all to hear. Morgana turned to look for her sister. She was nowhere to be found. Vivienne escaped when Morgana’s back was turned.

Morgana’s legs gave way once more. She cradled her son and rocked him back and forth, singing him a lullaby.

The doors to the throne room magically opened, slamming back with tremendous force. Draygen and his men had returned. The carnage in the room was something he was not prepared for. He saw his Mandrake, unconscious, and covered in blood; saw the body of a woman with multiple stab wounds. He looked again to find Morgana’s hands and face covered in blood.

“Isn’t he beautiful, M’lord?” She looked up at Draygen as the tears in her eyes stung the cuts on her face. “Vivienne did this. She killed him. I couldn’t stop her.

Draygen held them both tightly against his body. He cried for the first time. Tears streamed down his face as his cold heart became warm, feeling the pain of losing a child.

“Come” He picked them both up and sat them in front of the Celestial Mage. She had been protecting Tristan from Morgaine’s wrath. “Heal him. You who have the power to heal, I ask you to bring him back.” He didn’t know what else to say. He looked down at his son’s lifeless body and wished he had known of his birth. “Please. I beg this of you.” Draygen’s heart ached for his son and for Morgana. What he had taken from her so many years ago was now taken from him.

“Please, while there is still color in his cheeks, save them both,” he begged.

“What do you have to offer in exchange for their lives?” asked the Celestial Mage.

“I will gladly give my life to save them.”

“Then so be it. Your life for theirs. Such a great sacrifice and deed will be rewarded in your next life, Lord Draygen.

Draygen placed a kiss on his son’s forehead. He then put a ring,

which bore the family crest, in his son's tiny hand. When he was of age, it would guide him when it came his son's time to reign. He gently placed a kiss on Morgana's lips. He brushed the hair from her face, looked upon her for the last time. Hers was the face of an angel that showed him true love. His heart beat began to slow down; he felt it fading within him. With each beat his heart skipped, his son's heart became stronger.

With his last dying breath, Draygen reached out to touch the child one last time and whispered, "I love you."

* * * *

Weeks went by, and the horror of that night slowly passed. Morgana settled back in her cottage with her infant son. The sacrifices made were never spoken of again. The people of Terra enjoyed life without Morgaine. Peace thrived throughout the land. Villagers enjoyed toiling and tending their crops again. Plenty of food and meat was now available, enough to keep them happy for another thousand lifetimes.

Tristan said he found a worthy adversary when playing chess with Morgana. Not a day passed that he didn't show up.

Her mother told Morgana of Draygen's noble sacrifice, of giving his life up for his son, which left her feeling empty inside. She glanced over at her son and smiled. She would one day tell him of his father's great deeds and how much he loved him.

Her mother and aunt both paid frequent visits, each bringing the toddler a different piece of the puzzle they had been working with him on, as well as warm clothing. As the winter arrived, traveling became difficult. Even Tristan's visits became few and far between. Morgana spent many lonely nights, thinking of Draygen and her love for him. Being so isolated gave her plenty of time to dwell on a life that could have been.

Finally, the tree blossoms glowed with life. Hungry baby birds chirruped, and a long awaited knock came on her door. Rushing to answer it, starved for adult company, Morgana greeted her visitors. Her mother and Tristan brought gifts and food. Another man carried desperately needed fire wood. Morgana hugged and kissed her mother. Tristan got his fair share, as well. Morgana's son giggled at being smothered by his grandmother's love.

"Morgana," Tristan said, "where do you want my helper to place all this firewood?"

"Have him set it down by the fireplace. He may drop it in the

wooden crate there.”

Morgana busied herself in the kitchen. Her son toddled around, excited at the entire goings on. A roaring fire now burned, and a turkey set on the spindle to cook.

“I have a surprise for you, Daughter, but first I must cover your eyes. Tristan, come help me guide her into the other room while I cover her eyes.” Morgana wondered what on earth they had for her now.

“Now, promise me you won’t scream. I don’t want you shaking the rafters loose.” Tristan kidded. He constantly teased Morgana about her loud, shrill screams.

“I promise, Tristan,” she giggled. Her mother removed her hand from her daughter’s eyes. Someone sat at the fireplace. As she walked closer, a familiar feeling grew in the pit of her stomach. The tall man rose and turned to face her.

“Lord Draygen,” she gasped, “but how?”

Morgana froze in her tracks. Touching his face to convince herself of his existence, Morgana gasped. Draygen felt warm to the touch so she knew he was not a spirit. Her body hummed from the happiness she felt.

“Woman, has the cat got your tongue?” he asked in jest. Draygen pulled her into his strong arms, holding her tight against his body. He pressed his lips softly against hers. Oh, how she’d missed his taste. Morgana’s body felt alive as he smothered her in kisses.

He held her close, and Morgana did not want him to let go. They sat together on the bench.

“Why didn’t you tell me, Mother?” Morgana asked.

“Daughter, I couldn’t. As much as I wanted to, I was sworn to secrecy.”

“By whom, Mother?”

“By me, Morgana,” Draygen said. “I asked that you not be told. I had much to organize for our life together. I couldn’t be sure if the shock of seeing me wouldn’t kill you. I am granted a second chance for my selfless act, and I needed time to adjust to my new life, filled with love instead of death.”

She looked at Tristan. “You knew he was alive all this time, didn’t you?”

“Ummm. Well, yes. You see, I couldn’t speak of it, either, or I would have been made into a stew,” he chuckled.

“Morgana. I want to bring you back to live with me in the castle

as my Queen and as the mother of our son. We have the blessing of the council. ” He held her hand in his and looked at her wounds which had finally healed. He kissed each one softly.”

Tristan’s humor shone in his words, “Give a man a second chance at life, and he becomes a mush.”

The room filled with laughter.

“Aye, M’lord Draygen I shall return with you to Darkest Eden and be your Queen. Before I do so, there is a matter at hand we must take care of,” she said.

“And what might that be, my love?

“Our son is in need of a name. I have still not given him a proper one.”

“Hmmm, that we must remedy right away,” Draygen scratched his head. “Draconis T. Zahndevahl.”

“‘T’ stands for what, M’lord?” she asked.

“The T is for Tristan, after his uncle.”

Tristan smiled ear to ear, “His uncle?”

“Aye, Tristan.”

“I see there is much that I need to be told of. Much has happened in these past months, I see.”

“For now, My Lady, let us make our journey back to the castle before nightfall. It is a long way back, and I want you in my bed.

“Morgana’s smile generated love from deep within her heart. She’d dreamt of this day over and over as a child. Now, it would be real.

* * * *

That night he came to her. The fire in his eyes could have lit up the entire room. Little Tristan fed and put down to sleep for the night, Uncle Tristan now kept watch over the little imp. Morgana and Draygen renewed the passion locked away for each other, starting their new journey together. A fire roared in the hearth. He stood before it, totally naked. Morgana stepped out of the tub. Draygen had replaced all the shattered mirrored walls. He brushed her hair back from her face. Morgana trembled at the fierce sight of his naked body.

Draygen dipped his head down to kiss her. He growled as he held her naked body close. Sweeping her up in his arms, Draygen carried her to their bed. He gently laid her down before joining her.

Reaching up, she cupped his face in her hands. He looked so beautiful as he placed himself between her legs. She couldn’t imagine wanting another man like this. She brushed the hair back from his

face before she kissed him.

Their gazes locked, and he spread her thighs wide before he sank deep inside her. Moaning, she reached up to fist her hands into his hair. Draygen's breath caught as Morgana once more pledged her love to him. Morgana would belong to him forever. In that instance, he seemed to lose all control. Growling deep inside his throat, he clutched Morgana as their bodies exploded in ecstasy. They surged with a wave of overwhelming power.

Still joined, he pulled her down on top of him, making them comfortable. Morgana drew a contented breath, as she laid her head on his chest.

His green eyes burned into hers. "I love you Morgana."

She smiled at him. "I know," she replied softly. "I love you."

The journey forward in life wouldn't be an easy one, but it would be interesting and exciting. And, most importantly, their life would be filled with love for each other. Always.

The End

Snakes And Ladders

**By
Anna Fallon**

Lily Marchant loves her fire-fighting job. She loves pythons. Volunteering in India combines these and adds a double helping of danger, and mystical passion.

<http://www.annaf.net>

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Snakes And Ladders

**By
Anna Fallon**

Chapter One

Lily watched the skin peel from the back of the Python. Glistening new scales reflected the sunlight beating down. Mesmerized, a wanton shudder engulfed her slim-line body. Some said she possessed the body of a snake. No particular shapeliness, no flaring of the hips, just a lean, muscular frame.

Not at all masculine, her hips sashayed in an erotic manner, which drew attention from men. Lily did not *try* to walk sexily; her body movement displayed a natural undulation. Very much like the movement of a snake, she supposed. Her eyes were still transfixed on the miracle of nature before her, a sight rarely seen by the human eye, to witness the shedding counted her among a chosen few now watching this spectacular event. A regular visitor at the Australian Reptile Park, Lily had been thrilled to hear of their special display. For six months, the Pythons would be here. The shedding was a bonus. No one expected it, but everyone sat in awe of it. Lily lived only forty-five minutes away, in Newcastle, and, if anything special like this cropped up, she could drop in anytime.

Unfortunately, those chosen few sat with her now. The reptile sanctuary did not represent the place Lily imagined her first shedding to take place. Filled with wonderful imagery of India, Lily stuffed a mouthful of popcorn in and chewed slowly, not shifting her gaze in the slightest. The Python slithered a little and broke away from the old skin. How Lily wished a human could do that, shake off the skin of the past and head into the future, a clean, shiny new person.

Lily did not seem to fit comfortably into the life carved out before her. Estranged from her mother, her one brother off ‘finding himself’ and her father killed by fire five years ago meant she led a

lonely life. Her only friends seemed to be workmates and pythons. She truly loved pythons, especially the Indian Python she watched now. They could grow twenty feet long and weigh two hundred pounds. Two hundred pounds of writhing muscle. The snake now slid completely away from its excess baggage and continued to bask. Lily shivered delicately and imagined her hand caressing those bright new scales.

Everybody assumed a snake to be slimy to touch. Nothing could be further from the truth. The scales felt smooth and bumpy all at the same time. The pure muscular ripples of the body of a snake could be nothing short of arousing in Lily's mind. Imagining a man so slim and lithely muscular, sliding over her body and wrapping himself around hers came pretty close to perfect in her mind. *As long as he doesn't eat mice!* A surreptitious giggle escaped.

A couple of hardened stares came her way. *Stuff it, you lot. No law against laughing.* As the shrill sound of her beeper imposed on the quiet, Lily swore under her breath. *Damn! Not another fire already?* With three whole days off, the beeper would only go off in a dire emergency. *Oh God.* Hostile eyes from the small bunch of onlookers glared at her. Quickly switching the irritating noise off, she ran back into the reptile park office and called the down town fire station.

"Chief Peters," a male voice answered.

"Chief, what's up?"

"Ah, Lily, yes..."

Lily knew he would recognize her voice. After all, she was the only female fighter in his unit. Following in the footsteps of her father, she had wanted to make him proud. The job ended his life. Lily's mother seemed so sure her daughter would quit the silly idea of becoming a professional firefighter after that. Lily hadn't changed her mind. Her mother refused to speak to, or have anything to do with, Lily, 'until you come to your senses', she'd said. But Lily loved her job, especially the ladder rescues. So proud of her achievements, Lily helped calm many a hysterical woman and child, coaxing them to safety. Many times, she helped operate the hose in the hard-to-reach spots.

Yes, the fires could be very dangerous, but she loved it. If her mother couldn't understand then she could go without her daughter. *Damned stubborn...* All these thoughts filled her head, and then Chief Peters' voice brought her back to reality.

“It’s not a local fire emergency, but they have called every available fire fighter to an immediate meeting. I want to get together a group from Newcastle as we have a good deal of experience with the rough Australian terrain. Get here as soon as you can, Lily.”

“On the way, Boss. ETA fifteen minutes.” She ended the call. *Sounds intriguing.*

* * * *

“We need fifty volunteers. It won’t be pretty, maybe quite dangerous, but we’ll be helping to save a lot of the world’s unique flora and fauna. Not to mention human lives. Those who say yes just step up here, and I’ll take your details. If you can’t then that’s okay, too. We’ll have enough of a time here, being fifty fighters short. So, if any of you, who can’t go, can step up to extra shifts for a week, it would be appreciated.”

Lily did not hesitate one second. India, home to her beloved python, called for world help. Raging wildfires ravaged the lands, and the unique habitats of many species would be destroyed if help didn’t come. Winds fuelled the fires, and every available person in India had fought it for the past week. If help didn’t come, India would lose much of the industries in farming and timber, and their water supplies would be soiled. Lily worried mostly about the pythons. Already an endangered species from trophy hunting, snake-skin-boot-wearing poachers, they looked forward to a possible decline in their natural habitat. Who would be thinking of them?

Lily pushed through the throng of co-workers, all talking, milling around and speaking into their cell phones. She needed to call no one. Each and every one of them had valid passports and up-to-date vaccinations for just such an event. Lily’s unit made sure of it. In fact, she’d never felt more ready for anything.

“I’m in,” she said to Chief Peters.

“You sure, Lily? It’s going to be pretty rugged over there, along with the threat of wild animals.”

“Chief, put my name down. You know I can handle it. Besides, a change of scenery will be nice.”

“Fine, I will. But, Lily, do me one favor? At least, call your mother, and let her know.”

Chief Peters had been best friends with Lily’s dad, Barry. He always asked about her mother Carmel. The estrangement seemed to worry him. Once upon a time, the family shared a closeness, and the Chief became part of the family life they enjoyed.

“Lily, I know you miss your father. God knows I miss the best friend I ever had. But what hurt just as much is seeing the family unit crumble over petty arguments. It’s not what your father would have wanted. Look, if something happens over there, do you really want to leave things this way with your mother?”

Lily considered his words for a moment.

“I didn’t want her to *not* speak to me. I love being a Firey... sorry, fire fighter,” Lily apologized, knowing how Chief Peters hated slang terms for their job. She continued, “It’s in my blood. Why can’t my mother understand that? She cannot dictate my life.”

“Lily, listen and, just for a moment, think. Your mother lost the one person in the world she loved beyond recognition. Now she has to worry about her only daughter, as well. Your brother is already off back-packing around the world. Can’t you see she just can’t handle anymore worry? Even if she won’t budge, at least leave this country knowing you told her you love her.”

Lily knew the chief spoke the truth. Five years, such a long time to go without the family. Throwing herself into the fire fighter training, plus her work at the hospital, kept her busy enough to never have to recall the night her father died. So proud of his little girl wanting to be just like him, Lily intended to see nothing ever took away that feeling. She strived for excellence, and she’d achieved it.

Seeing the pleading in the older man’s eyes, Lily conceded the truth. She missed her mother. He was right. She must try to make things right. Not ever sharing a true love with someone, Lily could only imagine how lonely her mom must be.

“Yes, I guess I have been a little selfish. I will go see her.”

Chief Peters hugged her. “Lily, I wish your father could be here to see you now. At twenty-five, with a stubborn streak just like him. Give my best to your mom.”

“I will, Chief. Thanks.”

“We fly out first light tomorrow, so meet here at four in the morning and I’ll introduce you to your Chief for the mission. From now on, until you come home, you’ll answer to him.”

“I’ll be here.”

Back in her car now, Lily remembered the raucous laugh of her dad. A big man, he would pick up her mom and swing her around. They’d all laugh at her mom’s false protests. Her dad bought her a small python as a pet many years ago. Long since dead, the love of a much misunderstood animal remained steadfast. Concentrating on her

driving as the traffic weaved in and out, Lily finally made her way to the freeway. It took an hour's cruise-time to get home. A long five years since Lily set foot in her childhood home. Her heart quickened a little in anticipation of all those memories flooding back.

Each time she called her mom to try and work out their disagreements, they'd end up in another argument. *Well. I guess I can always try one more time.* Lily never wanted to get close to anybody after her dad died in the fire. He saved three kids. Threw the last one out to Chief Peters just before the burning building collapsed around him. Cited as a hero, *a dead hero*. Lily considered how the chief must have felt watching his best friend die before his eyes, powerless to help. Recollection flooded back of her parent's cuddling on the sofa at night and the looks shared between them. She remembered how her dad followed Joe's football career and never missed one game as he climbed toward the big leagues. Lily remembered the rowdy sports on television Dad shared with the Chief on many occasions.

Yes indeed, Lily now recognized her selfishness in all of this. So busy thinking about her loss and how she could get through it, she promptly forgot the pain of the others. The fire fighting, heralded as a way to feel close to her dad, in all honesty, became the way Lily hid from her pain. Even more so, it helped her hide from the pain of those she loved most. Her brother, Joe, her mom, Chief Peters, all loved and missed her dad, just as much as she did. Time she grew up and dealt with the loss, get this family back together again. Dad would hate this situation. His family unit, the most important thing of all to him, now lay crumbled. How ironic that this tragic event could draw them closer and not have the opposite effect.

* * * *

"No way! Peters. No way am I taking a woman on this trip. It's too dangerous. I'll have enough to worry about without mussed-up hair and chipped nails."

"Damn it, Hughes, get your head out of your ass and come into the twenty-first century. Anybody would think you're my age instead of thirty. She's capable. Her dad was the finest this city has ever seen. And I'm still your Chief."

"Sorry, Chief. I already have enough to worry about, is all. Women fighters and I don't get along. I haven't time to baby sit."

"Well, you can stop worrying about this one. She's going, and there isn't a damn thing you can do about it, save stay home yourself. We don't have volunteers crawling from the woodwork. As it is, we

only have twenty-five on such short notice. Lily Marchant is one of our best. If you have a brain in that chauvinistic head of yours, you'd welcome the chance of some intelligent female insight."

This comment hurt Rob a little. He'd never considered himself a chauvinist. This would be his first position in command. A place he'd coveted since he started in the fire department. This one placement could spell great things for his career and put him into Chief Peter's shoes one day. Rob knew he would worry about a woman more, and that might distract him from the job. It seemed he had no choice. *She'll probably be one of those Amazonian, masculine types, anyway.*

Rob recently transferred to this unit. Moved states, from Western Australia to New South Wales, when the position became available in Newcastle he applied. With his background and qualifications, he secured the job. Rob wanted to be chief of the biggest and the best in Sydney eventually. Right here, at this unit in Newcastle, would be a great start and leading the volunteer squad in India could set him up to be chief. Auguring a chance to prove himself in India thrilled him; he didn't want his soft spot for women to interfere.

His mom raised him to respect women and nurture the female presence in his life. Rob left no time for love interests. His schedule had no room for emotional connections. He didn't expect any woman to wait around for him to get where he wanted to be. All his spare time went to the fire fighters.

"Okay, guess I have no choice then. I just hope she can do her job and not get into any trouble."

"You'll be left in her wake, boy. Now, let's get through this checklist. You'll need some sleep. It's an early start tomorrow. The Army says they'll freight everyone in Hercules planes. We have about eighty all up. You'll be in charge of our group, and called on to monitor the other groups' placements. Think you can handle that?" Chief Peters cast him a concentrated glance.

"No problems, Chief." Rob knew he could, even though a few butterflies fluttered in his stomach. He could handle it. Busying himself with the last of the preparation, Rob felt sure sleep would not be his friend tonight.

* * * *

Turning the handle on her mother's front door slowly, Lily poked her head into the small gap. "Mom?" she called tentatively. Her nervousness increased threefold. Sweaty palms, pounding heart,

shaking legs; Lily experienced all the symptoms. Seeing a large family photo on the sideboard in the hall brought tears to her eyes.

“Lily?” Her mom appeared in the hallway, looking shocked. Lily straightened up, slipped off her shoes and stepped through the doorway.

“Oh, my God! Lily...has something happened to Joe?” Time wore a little on her mom’s face, but she remained a beautiful woman.

“Mom...No, he’s fine. Well, as far as I know. I’m here to see you.” Lily held her breath. *What if she kicks me out?*

“You’ve given up fire fighting?” The light of hope shone in her mom’s eyes. Lily realized how foolish her attitude with her mother had been. *Now here I am to tell her I’m taking off to India!* Her mom would have kittens over this.

“No, Mom. I haven’t given up fire fighting.” Lily sighed.

Her mom stiffened, and the hopeful look quickly turned to defiance. For the first time in Lily’s life, she recognized her mom’s anger to be exactly what it was, a front to hide pain. Just like Lily’s commitment to fire fighting.

“Well then, you have no business being here.” Carmel Marchant retorted and turned to walk along the passageway to the family room. Lily normally would storm out or argue. This time, she followed, keeping her voice calm.

“Mom, I have every business being here. This is my home, too, our family home. We have to work this out, before I leave.” Lily watched her mom reel around.

“Leave? You are leaving?” Unshed tears glittered in her mom’s eyes. Lily’s heart went out to her.

“It’s only temporary. I’ll be back before you know it.” Lily used a gentle voice and sat on the sofa, facing her mother and held her shaking hand. Lily noticed the skin, still so soft, it always reminded her of silk.

“Where are you going?”

“Never mind that now. Mom, you know this isn’t how Dad would want things to be between us,” Lily prompted.

With that, her mother burst into tears. The pain, so obviously open and raw, started Lily’s tears.

“I know. I am such a failure. Your father would be so disappointed in me. Oh Lily, I’m so sorry.”

“Dad could never be disappointed in you. He loved you—loved us, so much. I have been selfish and stubborn and am sorry.” Hugging

each other, Lily rejoiced in the feeling of a mother's hug once more, warm and comforting. Crying helped wash the hurt away a little. Soon her very capable mother placed a mug of hot coffee and chocolate chip cookies before her. She'd missed the home baking.

"Eat, Lily. You're as thin as a rake. Tell me where you are going. You know, I may never like you being a fire fighter. But you must live your own life...I realize that now. I was just too stubborn to admit it. And you're right, this is not the way your father would want things. I still worry about you, Lily. That is a mother's way that I cannot help."

"I know, Mom, I know. I'm sorry my job causes you distress. I do feel close to Dad there, at the station." Lily told the truth.

"Yes, I suppose you would. I never really thought about it like that. Tell me, how is Tony Peters? We used to spend so much time together. He and Bill were such great buddies."

A faraway look came over her mom's face. Lily knew she must miss Chief Peters, as well. The chief's wife died a long time ago. The four of them went to school together, apparently. Chief married his sweetheart first. When she didn't fall pregnant, investigations showed a rare form of uterine cancer present. Buried her two months later. Since then, the Chief never seemed interested in finding a new love. Lily talked to her mom about it after an embarrassing attempt at match-making. At fourteen, with no idea about the circumstances, Lily tried to get the Chief to go out with her friend's mother. Now she put the incident out of her mind and spoke freely.

"He's actually the reason I'm here. He wanted me to make things right before I go fight fires in India." Lily's hand came up to cover her mouth, too late. She'd wanted to be more careful about that information.

"India! Lily, no! You simply can't."

"Mom, I know how this sounds. But the country is ravaged by wildfire. They need help. All those poor helpless animals dying, losing habitat, burned to death. The Indian Python is already on the endangered species list. I have to help. Please, say you understand." Lily suddenly realized how much she wanted her mom's approval. Her gaze searched her mom's warm, chocolate brown eyes.

Her mom's stare softened a little

"Oh, child...you and those darn snakes! You keep yourself safe, you hear." Lily enjoyed another hug. This one very special, given with total acceptance of the person she had become, at long last. "And

you tell that Chief Peters, I'm holding him responsible. Tell him to keep me updated on it all."

"I'll tell him to come see you. Is that okay with you?" Lily didn't want to bring back any painful memories.

"That would be lovely. It's time we chatted over old times. He must feel terribly lonely. I know exactly how he felt after he lost Becky," Mom agreed.

"Mom, I have an early start. We leave in the morning, after debriefing, at 4 am. I'll keep in touch as much as I can, and I'm sure the Chief will keep you updated while I'm gone." Lily stood, gave her mom another cuddle and a peck on the cheek.

"How long will you be gone?"

"I'm not sure. We'll have to wait and see. But I shouldn't think it would be more than two weeks." Lily patted her on the shoulder. Inside, she felt a little nervous about the trip to India, an excited kind of nervousness. This time tomorrow, she would stand in another country, facing fires *and who knows what other dangers*.

Chapter Two

The roar of the Hercules engine drowned out any last minute nerves she might have. After a quick hug for the chief, Lily made him promise to visit her mother. Boarding the massive troop carrier plane, the vibration thrummed throughout her body. The Hercules, equipped with aerial fire fighting equipment, boasted a huge interior. A little rough around the edges, certainly no first class flight, Lily sat on a low, metal bench seat. The debriefing went quickly. Lily hid in the background, hoping not to draw attention from the arrogant man running the show.

Good looking, yes, built...oh, yeah. But attitude-wise, no thanks. Lily did not have time for a man, obviously so full of himself, to start bossing her around. Of course, Rob, Chief Hughes, held authority, and Lily fully intended to respect that and follow orders. But if he started sticking his nose into her personal life, well, she would not allow it. Something in his lingering gaze rang of 'personal'. He looked at her almost as if she needed looking after.

Hell! If he tried treating her like a child...Lily still could not get his dark eyes out of her mind. As he'd addressed the group, she would have sworn his eyes never left her. But, since she hid toward the back, she thought maybe her imagination played tricks on her. Determined to pull her weight and really get involved in India, Lily didn't want anyone to think of her as anything but 'one of the boys'.

Proudly holding this position since her second year of service, Lily loved the way the men joked around her. Not one of them even bothered to change the subject if she walked into a conversation anymore. The need to fit in burned deeply for her because, in her job, decisions needed to be made in an instant. No one paused over whether a woman could handle it. A quick well-made decision could mean the difference between life and death. Lily wanted to be like the great fire fighter her father proved himself to be, regardless of gender. This meant she must show the utmost respect to her chief who, for the

time being, came in a very distracting package. Yes, she would have to be very careful with Rob Hughes.

Her head rested back on wall of the huge military plane. The vibration soothed her somehow, and, for the last half hour, she had been off with the fairies, daydreaming. The roar of the plane engines did not interfere with her thought pattern. Lily might have been relaxing on a tropical island.

“How are you feeling about the trip, Marchant. Any problems or concerns?” the velvety voice of Rob interrupted her thoughts. The voice caressed her, same as she imagined warmed chocolate oozing over her body...

“Marchant!” he demanded, causing her to jump.

That damned tone annoyed the bejeezus out of her. Opening her eyes quickly, she did her best to throw optical daggers of defiance.

“Yes, Chief Hughes. Please don’t afford me any extra concern. This little woman is doing just fine.”

“Is that a fact?” He crooked an eyebrow. “Actually, I’m doing a status report for the emotional well-being of my crew.” He flipped his clipboard around.

Lily saw all the names on board had details filled in; she looked to be one of the last.

“I see. In that case, I am feeling fine about the trip. Actually, although I may be a little nervous about going to a foreign country, I am looking forward to saving some habitat for the wildlife.”

Rob wrote on his sheet and nodded. “We have a long flight ahead of us, Marchant. Best you rest while you can. The less people moving around the plane the better, but drinks and food will be handed out shortly. There are toilet facilities at the rear.” He looked up and addressed the team, “If anyone feels out of their league, let me know. We are a volunteer group, for assistance, you do not have to unnecessarily endanger your lives.”

Most nodded.

“Thanks.” Lily said and rested her head back again, letting her eyes close. She mocked him inside her mind, mouthing unspoken words, her head moving from side to side. *You’ll get no special treatment from me!* Lily imagined her voice would be squeaky.

A small smile played at her lips, and she jumped again when Rob spoke. She thought he’d returned to his seat by now. He must have stood and watched her. *Oops!*

“Say something, Marchant?”

“Who, me? No, no, just thinking is all, Chief *Hughes*,” she said, emphasizing his surname.

All her crew called each other by their first names or nicknames. It wasn’t as if they’d joined the Army. She hoped he took the hint.

“You have something to tell me?” he asked cockily.

“With all due respect, Chief, if I’d wanted to be referred to by my surname, I would have joined the Army. My name is Lily; I’d prefer you use it.” Lily heard snickering from her co-workers.

“With all due respect, *Marchant*, I am here to do a job, not to make friends.”

Lily wanted to get up and slap him. Of all the arrogant, chauvinistic, pigheaded...

“Just as well,” she quipped “It would be a damn long trip for you otherwise!”

Rob glared back at her, and the snickering grew a little louder. “Like I said, you’d best get some sleep.” He stalked off to his seat, and her best friend in the crew elbowed her.

“He’s hot for you!” Barney whispered.

“Don’t be an idiot, Barney.”

“Okay then.” Barney said it with that little raised pitch in his voice that rang of a future ‘I told you so’.

“Shut up, Barney.” Lily tried not to smile at his jibe, such a funny manner. She loved his crazy humor, but saying Rob Hughes had the hots for her sounded utterly ridiculous.

Rob almost burst out laughing as he watched Lily mimic his words in silence. The cute little smirk and head wobble almost brought him undone. She acted fiery all right, a fiery Firey! The corny joke caused him to mentally chastise himself for lack of sleep. Just to keep the upper hand, he would continue calling her Marchant. If that lithe, sexy sway of a woman ever got a whiff of how he really felt, she’d probably whack him one.

Looking over her records before he left, Rob saw his concerns of having to baby sit Lily Marchant would more than likely go unfounded. She showed remarkable commitment to the job and her colleagues. Maybe after a week of work here, he might be able to get them all back home safely then ask her out on a date. He suspected she was the kind of woman he wanted to get to know, intimately. Something told him Lily Marchant would be no push-over in the romance department, either. A woman, like her, would make a man work hard for even a sniff of what she offered.

Lucky I'm used to hard work! Rob could not help but wonder exactly what went on inside her head. He knew her to be an animal lover from her answer. *Extremely independent, as well.* The way her male peers behaved around her, he could tell she could hold court in a sleazy pool hall without any trouble. The way she articulated told him she would be equally at home in a king's court. Her hazel eyes seemed mostly brown but verged on green when they flashed with anger. The woman showed spirit. That alone might spell trouble in India. He'd have to keep her busy. She gave all the signs of loose cannon syndrome, especially with threatened animals.

"You'll have to get past Chief Peters before you get anywhere near Lily," Greg Wrass spoke from the other side of him.

"Why's that, and who says I'm interested?" Rob tried to sound nonchalant, but he knew he'd been caught staring at her while she snoozed. He'd learned to know Greg the best since his arrival.

"Chief Peters protects her, like a daughter. Warned us all off, long ago. But none of us really thought of her like that. She's our buddy, you know? We all been through a lot together, and Lily's always got our backs," Greg continued.

"Why do I get the distinct feeling I hear the words, 'if you hurt her, you'll answer to me?'" Rob appreciated Greg's concern, but he really didn't need a lecture on who he could and couldn't show interest in.

Greg shrugged. "Just so as you know..."

One thing Rob did appreciate was honesty. "Look man, I'm hearing you. But you have nothing to worry about. Something tells me, she can look after herself just fine."

"You got that right."

"For now, we have a job to do and get back home safely. You can warn me off then."

Greg chuckled. "Yeah, right."

Rob rested his head back and thoughts of the coordinating job in India danced in his mind. The wildfires spread to the jungles in the North East. Some raged in the South as well. The worst part being, all these fires were lit deliberately. Farmers, campers or poachers usually did the damage. This time, the winds showed no signs of letting up, and the fires had wiped out half of the reserves, as it was. Rob was determined to stop the burning and save what he could. He'd stay tough, bossy and get them all home safe.

* * * *

The precious water supply had all but dried up. Smoke billowed out of the trees, the branches burned. Frightened animals were fleeing everywhere, but they would not find any sanctuary, not this day. Trying desperately to breathe, Molurus dared not take his true form. The trophy hunters followed closely, coveting the legendary giant python skin. To lead the remaining snakes into the land beyond, if these fires did not turn around fast, remained their only chance of survival. Somehow, he must stop the poachers, cornering and herding them up for the kill. Or for live sale, which may be worse.

None of the shape changers lived anymore. Not to Molurus' knowledge anyway. He seemed to be the very last of the python shifters. Consequently, he remained the only chance of survival for the Indian Pythons, if these fires kept burning. Being a quiet species, pythons seldom thought to flee possible death or attack anything threatening them. They asphyxiated small animals for food. Indian Pythons did not register in an aggressive category. Molurus remembered the days when many snake shifters walked the earth, protecting. Who would come to protect the pythons now if he could not do it alone?

His human form, lean and muscular, boasted inhuman strength. He could save himself easily enough. What he could not do was leave the rest of the snakes to be destroyed. If it meant his death, so be it, but he would not run from them. He needed water to hide in, deep cool water. But everywhere he looked, the filthy ash and silt polluted the lakes, the rivers almost ran dry. His snakes needed fresh water and trees to laze around in. Molurus remembered a place he visited with his parents, a perfect oasis for animals. If only he could find it now. Legend rumored it as long gone. He'd lived for two hundred years, but he could clearly see it in his mind's eye.

The fire seemed to shift a little. Immediately, Molurus stopped and leaned against a huge tree trunk. His skin took on the colors of the tree, and the tingle of camouflage washed through him. As a human, he could call back the pattern of the highly-coveted snake skin to blend in with the landscape perfectly. Trying to keep his panting to a minimum, he saw the men race past. Yelling and calling about finding the Great One. The legendary race of the Giant Indian Python, over thirty feet in length and weighing three hundred pounds, poachers wanted the glory of the biggest.

Those giants no longer roamed the earth, aside from Molurus, and he had not been sighted in snake form for a hundred years. How

he wished for a mate, but it would never happen. Now he must save as many pythons as he could. Somewhere in the area, a steep opening led into a broad cave with a myriad of tunnels. One of those tunnels opened out to a water filled-paradise, a place where the snakes could find sanctuary until the raging fires ceased, and the habitat re-vegetated. Molurus knew he could find the right tunnel. He remembered it as a sudden drop off and, just when you thought you would never stop descending, the oasis appeared, fresh and untouched by human hands.

Certainly, any human stumbling across here would mean ruination for the forgotten area. Not large enough to sustain the rest of the snake population for a large amount of time, but for a week or two of respite, it would be perfect and a place they could go when danger threatened. Molurus did not want any human getting a sniff of the place. After his kind had been killed off by human intervention, he did not trust any of them.

The poachers ran into the distance. Molurus searched the low lying scrub for the opening to the cave. It wasn't really large and looked like a big hole in the ground. The thick undergrowth hid it well. A human could slide into the cave on their backside but after that, finding the right tunnel could prove deadly. Indian Pythons grew heat sensors on the side of the mouth to detect mates and direction. Once in the cave, he would find his way in snake form. He couldn't risk changing now while the trophy hunters loomed so near. He scrambled around on the ground, under the dense plant life, sensing closeness to the opening. *It must be in here somewhere.*

Then, as if by magic, his hand pushed through and kept on going. No earth stopped it, and he found the opening. His heart beat quickly in excitement, he looked around, straining his ears to listen for his attackers. No noise except the coming of the fire and the sound of fleeing animals. Feeling the heat rise from his core, the searing pain of a changeover began as his bones elongated, and a thick diamond patterned snake skin formed. His legs and feet became two tiny bumps on either side of the lower body, and his arms became as one with his body. So long since he'd shifted, it would take a few more times before it came easily. Slowly, Molurus recovered from his shift and moved his head into the opening. It felt so much cooler as he slid down the steep tunnel. *Yes!*

Using all his muscle to stop from sliding down the tunnel too quickly and into an unknown area, Molurus moved slowly, with

purpose. His sensors near his mouth picked up moisture in the air, and his tongue lazily flickered to gauge the direction. The huge snake body slithered easily toward the Promised Land. What relief to be out of the smoke and heat for a while. Yes, it would be tempting to live out the next hundred years down here, but he would never abandon his charges while danger threatened.

The cavalcade of tunnels opened up underground, one by one. The giant snake inspected the openings. Many would spell out instant death for him, only one would lead him to the place his ancestors called The Pool Of Life. To be a snake again pleased him greatly. With the danger lurking over the land these days, he never took the chance to shift. But now, Molurus thrummed with energy, the feel of his muscles moving over the earth gave him a feeling akin to arousal. This is what he was. An Indian Python and he headed for home.

The scent of the tunnel hit his sensors like a sledgehammer. He knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, The Pool Of Life, suspended in time in the underground haven, lay beyond this opening. A wash of emotion engulfed him. How dearly he wished for someone to share this place with. If only every remaining Indian Python could live here. He moved faster now, drawn like steel filings to a magnet. Years he'd searched to find it again.

Long before the last of his family died, the snake shifters ceased coming here. In the early years of poaching, the amount of killers in the jungle far surpassed the remaining groups. The chance of The Pool Of Life being discovered became too great. At least now, the government did what they could to stamp out the illegal activities against all the animal species. But, as with everything, where there is a will, there is a way, and inevitably some still succeeded in the hateful practice. Still, coming here now should prove much safer than before, and the species needed the life boost if the fires continued.

Once he confirmed the existence, Molurus would return to the surface and call the pythons forth under the cover of darkness. Five hundred, maybe a thousand, would heed the ancient call of the snake shifters. Anyone in the jungle this night could stand testimony to the ground moving underfoot. Indeed a sight to behold, the mass movement of glorious snakes. The pathway steepened, a sure sign the end approached. Plenty of room for a human form to get in but a sheer drop down for forty feet. Being over thirty foot long, Molurus carried the length and strength to easily glide to the bottom. Even if a human

made it down without fatal injuries, getting back up would be nearly impossible without a ladder.

Not that it mattered because he would not let any human in here. Molurus' senses became assaulted with the familiarity of safety and peace. He saw the light ahead and slid the first half of his body into the clearing. It looked more beautiful than he remembered. He morphed back to his human form, for a moment. He needed to feel this place with every sense. The pool glittered as bright blue, deep and cool, as he recalled.

Dark green foliage gave way to the tall canopy trees. Everything felt as it should. Above him in the cavern rock roof, light shone through tiny openings like down-lights, letting in enough brightness to foster thriving plant life. The pool bubbled warmly. Indian Pythons loved the water, and they swam regularly, for fresh water was paramount to their survival. Fresh water became a rare commodity during wildfire.

Everything here looked perfect. Molurus sensed something else, another presence. A stick cracked behind him, and he turned. A set of very blue human eyes stared back at him. Long white hair framed a rounded face. A female.

Chapter Three

The landing felt less than ceremonious. Lily bounced around on her behind, holding onto the seat. At last, the flight arrived in India. She inhaled deeply, not really knowing what to expect, but wanting to get out there and get on with the job.

Rob stood up, gripping the side of the plane as best he could. Lily watched him take a couple of steps forward. The plane lurched as it came to a halt. Unfortunately, Rob did not come to a halt but stumbled and ended up across Lily. *Boy, he smells good!*

“Shit...Sorry, Marchant,” he said, grinning sheepishly. One final lunge of the plane found him completely supported by her. Lily felt a surge of energy and a rush of heat to her cheeks. One of his hands almost went right between her thighs, the burn of a male touch through her jeans. Automatically trying to push him up, the hardness of his body surprised her.

“And you’re here to look after us...great!” Lily retorted quickly, hoping to cover her embarrassment. Sexual feeling rushed to her brain. The rest of the crew tittered.

“Hey, Boss, hands off Lily. She’s our best man!” someone yelled out, and the others laughed.

“Sorry...lost my balance,” Rob explained unnecessarily.

“So it would seem.” Lily couldn’t hold back a grin, thinking he looked as uncomfortable as she felt. Then that hand moved as he used it to push off her. Lily squirmed, stifling a gasp at his closeness. Rob made eye contact. The look could easily start a fire somewhere. She did not mistake the passion of want she saw. *Green eyes as well.*

Rob brushed himself off, and a few wolf whistles sounded after the lingering look, which apparently, no one missed.

Great, that’s all I need, she silently cursed. Lily never, ever, considered sex with any work colleagues. Friends and sex just did not mix, she’d found out, after a fling with someone she’d considered a good friend. He wanted more out of it, and Lily wanted to stay

friends. Frustrated, he'd turned on her. Spreading horrid rumors around all the guys, saying awful things, only rewarded him with a solid punch in the jaw from Barney and a transfer.

Lily still missed the time spent with Sam, as a friend. They'd been inseparable for two years. Yes, sex ruined friendships, and friendship proved more important than something she could get easy enough elsewhere, if she wanted. But Lily did not really want casual sex, either.

"You okay, Marchant?"

Lily finally registered what he'd said. "Sure, Chief, take more than that to rattle me."

He brushed his clothes down and addressed them all.

"When we get out of the plane, we will be taken to the campsite which will be our work station. Please stay together, and report to me as soon as we arrive. This is a strange country to us, but plenty of English-speaking men will be on hand to fill us in on where we are needed. You twenty-five will answer to me and me alone. There's no time to lose, so we will start work right away and give some relief to the Indian crews on the ground. But no one goes anywhere I don't send you, and no one..." he looked over at Lily, "...is to go off on their own."

Lily's heart hammered. The feeling he brought about, with one look, scared her a little. She felt just like a naughty school child. Lily longed to stick her tongue out at him, but, instead, she raised her eyebrows and tried to look innocent. With no intention in the world of wandering off, she wondered just where he got off silently accusing her like that. *Damned smart ass.*

The temperature certainly increased in the plane, but, when the door opened and she stepped out, the heat took her breath away. Sweat immediately poured from her. This was hotter than any weather she'd experienced. Bottled water, handed out as they stepped from the plane, was received gratefully. Lily hoped plenty of water would be provided. Gulping it down, she wiped the spillage from her chin, the drops splashed over her chest.

"Going for a wet t-shirt competition, huh?" Barney elbowed her playfully. "A certain Chief would love that. Man, I could practically feel the sexual energy bouncing off you two!"

"Barney, shut up."

"Come on Lily, he's gorgeous. You have to admit it."

“Barney, if you don’t cut it out, I might let these guys know just how qualified you are at identifying gorgeous men!” Lily teased quietly.

Barney’s eyes became as big as golf balls. “You wouldn’t!”

“Try me.” Her stare challenged him then she smiled. A look of relief spread over his face, his sky blue eyes glittered with humor.

“Tease! No one here knows I’m gay except for you. I don’t know what they’d say if they found out,” he lamented in a voice meant only for her.

Lily couldn’t repress a giggle. “Oh, Barney. They all know...they just don’t care. You’ve had their backs so many times, they couldn’t care less if you turned out to be a mass murderer.”

“You think?” Barney glanced around the others walking on, oblivious to their conversation. She punched him in the arm, and he laughed.

“He still has the hots for you,” he added.

Lily headed for the large truck and, as she went to jump up in the back, Rob walked up.

“You can ride up front, if you want, Marchant.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Chief. I’ll be fine here with my buddies.” Lily glared at him.

“Suit yourself. Just offering.” Looking around, he asked, “Anyone else?”

The group all said no or shook their heads and climbed in the back, Lily in the thick of them. The back of the truck buzzed with conversation. Everyone seemed keyed up about the country, and the job ahead, Lily included.

“No ladders here, Monkey Girl.” Bruce Jones called out.

“No, but I’m sure I’ll keep busy, Bruce.” Lily loved the relationship between her and her colleagues.

“Boss will keep you busy, I reckon,” he teased.

Lily just grinned. “Reckon so.” Laughter sounded again, and everyone went back to their conversations.

At the camp, smoke filled the air, and the heat was stifling. Lily pulled her long sleeve top off, revealing a tight tank top. Much better, she thought. Tents had been erected and filled with sleeping gear. Lily threw her gear in one. Walking back to where everyone had gathered, she listened intently to the instructions on where they would move out to and for how long. Trucks with water tanks on the back, stood

waiting for groups of five to take them into action. India appeared well-equipped. Only man-power lacked, at the moment.

Lily could see where the fire burned, and, over in the distance, smoke billowed from the trees. *Those poor animals.*

“Marchant, you’ll be on my team, and we’ll be in the thick of it. We need to get as much water as we can on the flames. The Hercules will be in to help us in an hour. You good with that?” Rob asked.

“I am. Let’s go do it then.”

* * * *

The heat from the fire seared her face. The protective shirt she’d donned offered little respite. Two of them held the hose as they targeted the fire. Others went out to back burn and try to stop the path. The hot wind dried her lips. They cracked as she licked them. Suddenly, the voice behind her was Rob’s.

“You doing okay, Marchant, Bruce?”

“Fine. Thanks, Chief,” she answered, yelling above the roar of the fire.

Bruce nodded and kept right on aiming the powerful spout of water into the fire’s path.

Despite the heat, Lily felt Rob’s breath burn close to her ear.

“Great. The helicopter is due in ten minutes *then* we rest a little, okay?”

Lily nodded.

She had to admit Rob’s talent at organizing and looking after them proved second-to-none. Lily felt safe with him. The plight of the animals worried her. So many had perished already. Briefly, she wondered if she would get to see an Indian Python in the wild. The thought of poachers taking them, for skins and zoos, seemed abhorrent.

Before she knew it, Rob tapped on her shoulder, and the hose went limp. Walking back to the safe area, she gratefully took the water he offered and drank with vigor.

“Another hour and we go back to camp for some food and rest. No wandering around, there are a lot of scared animals around here. You ever seen a tiger, Marchant?” Rob asked as if genuinely interested.

“No, never, unless you count the ones in the zoo. Have you?”

“Yep, right here in India, in fact. The Bengal tiger, further south though. Magnificent creatures, but I tell you, I never want to meet one on a dark night. They look so powerful.” Rob talked freely.

“So you’ve been here before. Lucky you. I’d love to see some wildlife before I go.”

“If we get this over with early, I’ll take you to one of the animal sanctuaries. I suppose you are interested in the big cats?”

“Nope, not me. I want to see an Indian Python!”

Rob almost choked on his water. “What? Don’t they crush you to death and eat you whole?”

Lily laughed at his misconception. “Actually, they asphyxiate and, unless you are a small furry mammal, you should be safe. Maybe a small deer for the larger snakes. Pythons aren’t aggressive. The female Indian Python actually makes a circle around her eggs and vibrates to generate heat to keep the eggs warm until they hatch,” Lily informed him.

“Well, there you go. I never knew. How’d you find out about that?”

“My dad gave me a python as a pet. Started a life-long passion for them.”

“I see. I’m sorry for what happened to him. I read up on everyone’s records before we came here. Sad story.” Rob sounded completely sincere. Lily simply nodded and looked up. The plane dumped copious amounts of water down on the fire then left to refill.

“How about tonight, I’ll find a local who might be able to help us find a python. I must admit I am curious to see one, as well.”

“Sounds great.” *Why does he have to be such a nice guy?*

The next truck arrived, and Bruce stood up and walked to the hose.

“Just needs a ladder, eh Lily?” Bruce asked.

“Sure does, Brucey, sure does.”

Rob looked puzzled, his brows met adorably in the middle.

“I love the ladder work, always first on and last off,” she explained.

Rob looked as if he understood and nodded. “Me, too.”

Then back to business as usual. Lily tried to keep her mind on the job, but thoughts of Rob filled her mind. This man will be hard to resist, she admitted.

India looked to be a beautiful country. Lily hoped she’d have some time to look around a little before going home. At nightfall, gathered at camp to debrief, Rob informed them what would happen the next day. The winds dropped little, and the buzz rumored they might even

turn in a couple of days. This would put the fires back onto themselves, and they should effectively burn out, with a little help.

The glow of the campfire shone through her canvas tent. Lily knew she should sleep, but her mind danced and weaved. The heat, thoughts of Rob and the pythons gathered in her head. Sleep would not come.

Lily unzipped her tent door and crawled out. Maybe a drink and stargazing, for a while, might help. The glow of wildfires still visible in the distance gave the moon an eerie yellow color. She lay back on a rug near the small smoldering fire and stared up at the sky. *What will life bring now? Mother and I are speaking again. Is it time to let love into my heart? Should I try and find Joe and bring him home?* Lily sighed deeply, the questions remaining unanswered for now.

“That’s a big sigh. Can’t sleep?” Rob’s voice sounded low and sexy.

Oh no! Not with all this pent-up energy. Why did he have to be awake as well?

“Tried, must be the heat.” Lily tried to sound natural, but nothing about her racing pulse and throbbing centre felt natural.

“Same here. I have a lot on my mind. Yet, all I can picture is a big snake curled around her eggs. It seems so out of character for all the fear most people have about snakes, doesn’t it?” Rob observed.

“Yes, it sure does.” Lily could hear Indian music, sitars and pipes playing over in the next camp. The locals gathering sounded jolly. Her head turned toward the sounds.

“You want to see if we can go over?”

“Really? That would be great,” she answered, excited at the thought of talking about her beloved pythons with folk who grew up with them.

Rob held out his hand to help her up, and the electricity, as they touched, almost made her jump. He kept her hand in his when they headed toward the other camp. The wind seemed to be non-existent now, and she knew the night crew would be grateful. Holding Rob’s hand felt good, despite her doubts. The big comforting warmth of it made her feel safe. Maybe he wasn’t so bad, after all.

Standing on the outside of the energetic circle of Indian men, it wasn’t long before two men beckoned them in, pushing a bit of wood out for them to sit on. Squeezed up on the log with Rob, Lily smiled at the men. These two spoke English and rearranged the seating to get

close to her and Rob. She recognized them from the truck journey earlier. Rob grinned across at the one called Vinod.

“Lily, here, loves the giant pythons.”

Lily felt a thrill at him using her name. Vinod smiled wide, a gap between his front teeth showing.

“Ah, the Indian Python. Yes, we have much love for it, too. So do poachers.” Vinod answered.

“I hate that. They are cruel and selfish people.” Lily meant every word of it.

“Yes, indeed they are, Lily. They want the big one—the legend. They all covet the trophy snake. Men are greedy, sometimes,” Vinod told her, his eyes glittering.

“Does it exist?” Lily’s curiosity primed inside her.

“Perhaps...perhaps not. But they say he does. Thirty feet long and weighing at least three hundred pounds. They also say when the ground comes alive with pythons, the Great One lives.”

“Do you guys believe in all that stuff?” Rob asked, leaning into Lily as he spoke.

“Many of us believe in a great many things. The Great One, he will walk among us, in human form, protecting his charges.”

“Walking as a man...how can that be?” Lily was agape at the thought. A snake that was a man, imagine the sexiness of that!

“Surely you Americans have shape shifters in your legends?” Vinod asked as if it was the most natural question in the world.

Rob laughed. “Well, if you include rabid man-wolves who rip your throat out, then yes.”

Vinod smiled. “Give me a giant python any day.”

“Can you take me to see one, an Indian Python?” Lily’s heart beat into her throat.

“For you, pretty lady, I would do anything.” His gappy grin lit up his face.

Lily felt Rob shift a little. “None of my crew go anywhere without me.”

Vinod laughed out loud, and the music livened up again. “You do not wish to let the snake lady out of your sight. Just as well, I think the Great One may want to keep her.”

Rob did not reply. Lily wondered at that statement, *what if a man really could shift into a snake?* Everyone clapped along to the music, and Lily let a yawn escape. At last, tiredness decided to claim her. Rob’s lips brushed her ear.

“Want to go to bed?” he asked seductively— well, it *sounded* seductive.

Lily’s body screamed to be touched. Suddenly she wised up. *He just wants a quick fuck! Then he won’t want to know me back home. Hell, I don’t even know if he’ll be staying on back home. No way!*

“I wouldn’t be going with you, Chief Hughes. Why don’t you just get back to doing what you do best? I have enough friends now. I don’t need another!” Lily walked off, leaving Rob sitting on the log. She wanted him, but starting a relationship with him was not an option. *Now that was close!*

* * * *

“Who are you?” she asked in a soft voice. Her eyes searched his.

“I am Molurus.”

“Molurus, I have seen that name, carved in the green rock here.”

“Yes, I put it there a long, long time ago, as a boy. My grandfather brought me here.”

“Yes, I remember you then.”

“I do not remember you. Who are you?” Molurus could not get his head around the fact this woman stood before him. She must be a changer to be here. Why had he never met her, and why had his grandfather never told him of another?

“I remained hidden. My family did not wish us to be seen. Father says we will be killed if we are discovered. My name is Boidae. Why are you here?”

“I seek refuge from fires burning on the surface. Many snakes are dying. They need some time here. I will call them to come, very soon, if the fires keep raging.”

“Father will not like that,” she replied quietly, “But I am sick of what Father does not like. I have never walked the surface. How can I help you?”

“You mean there are more of you?” Astounded, all this time, Molurus though he was the last of the shifters.

“Many of us—many.” Boidae seemed surprised at his shock. She certainly gave Molurus’ masculinity a pull. Her innocence begged to be protected and, at the same time, longed to break free. Molurus sat on a rock and watched the water bubble.

“I do not believe this. For so long, I have thought me the only one left.”

"I, too, assumed no other male snakes, save my own family and the ones I have grown up with, existed. I am pleased to meet you. I cannot say if Father will feel the same." Boidae looked worried.

"Never mind your father. I will show him the utmost respect. He will come to accept my time here."

"You will not stay?"

"Not this time, only long enough for the danger to pass above." Molurus thought staying with Boidae might not be too bad at all, but he had a job to do. The pythons depended on him.

"I will not tell him, for now. I'm not supposed to be this side of the jade cave. But I do come here often," Boidae confessed.

"The jade cave? But any jade lies further south, in Burma. In China, as well."

"Father says this is unknown and, if it were discovered, our home would be destroyed." Boidae fingered a carved jade necklace she wore. A python hung from it. Molurus noticed the similarity to the one his sister wore. He'd housed it under a rock the day she died.

"I see. This is most surprising, Boidae, most surprising but not unwelcome. I am very pleased to meet you." Molurus really felt happy; perhaps, after all this, he would have a mate. The heat sensors in his lips went wild at the thought.

The Indian Python tracked a female using these heat pits. The sensors were contained in the scales near the python's mouth. Those sensors now screamed at Molurus to claim his female. He would do no such thing, could not take advantage of her. Maybe in the future, when he gained her trust and that of her father, he would have thoughts of making love to her.

After Boidae heard of the situation on the land, she could not believe the story of humans killing snakes or taking them to be sold into captivity. Molurus assured her not all humans were bad, but he wasn't sure she looked convinced. He wasn't sure if *he* felt convinced.

He listened to her life story and how she watched him in this very pool when much younger. Boidae said she did not reveal herself as her father's voice scared her. Now she wanted to discover the rest of the world and the things it could teach her. As she spoke, her blue eyes met his with a look of fire. Molurus sensed she wanted to feel the love of a man.

He wanted to be the one to give her that, but only if he truly loved her. This sweet female deserved to be loved and worshipped the

rest of her life. Molurus stiffened in arousal at the thought. Now he must be extremely careful that his urges didn't run away with him. This became increasingly difficult as her soft fingers traced down his cheek.

She whispered, "Teach me, Molurus."

Leaning forward, the sweetness of her lips met his. A tentative, exploratory kiss only inflamed his loins more. Molurus deepened the kiss, running his hands through her platinum blonde hair, pulling her into his kiss. The tip of his tongue played against the softness of hers. Without hesitation, she opened her mouth. Inviting him in, pulling him down to her as she lay back on the grass. Molurus, half atop her now, kissed with passion and gentleness. Boidae groaned into his mouth, and her muscular body writhed against his. Her large firm breasts pressed to his chest. He felt the hardened buds of her nipples. His large erection throbbed against her thigh. The time to turn back became less. Molurus tore his mouth away from the kiss, breathing hard.

"Molurus. Have I upset you? I know we have just met, but I longed to be kissed."

"My dear Boidae, your kiss thrills me. Long has it been since I have had that. However, it will not do you any favors to keep on. Your father would not be pleased, and you deserve more than to be used for sexual want alone."

"I see. But you have pleased me." Her hand softly brushed over his still-hardened shaft and quickly pulled away. "And it seems I have pleased you. What more do you need?"

"I need love, Boidae, as do you. You should accept nothing less." Molurus kissed her forehead. "We cannot love after one meeting. Love takes time."

"What will we do from here then? Perhaps, I may never see you again."

Molurus ran his finger over her ruby-red lips, still shining with moisture from his kiss. "Trust me on this, Boidae. When all this is done, and the pythons are out of danger, I will ask your father's permission to see you. The only thing to keep me away is death. But I cannot say how long I may be."

"Father will not be happy, but I accept your offer and appreciate your decency. Then we may get to know each other and see if love comes."

“Now you must go. Do not come back here. I will come for you. I’m not sure what will happen, and the chance of a human finding this place is not impossible. Stay beyond the jade cave. I promise, I will find you.”

Again, they kissed. Molurus let it linger and then pulled away again. He could not take much more of her ripened body against his.

“Where did you get such colored hair and eyes for a snake?” He’d never seen anything quite like it.

“When I change, I am—my people are—Albino.”

Molurus drew breath. The white snake people, he’d thought them only legends. But then, most people thought *him* a legend. “I see. You must indeed be beautiful as a python because you are breathtaking now.” She moved to kiss him again, but he stopped her.

“Please, Boidae, my resolve can only take so much. Go now.”

“Very well. I will wait for you and follow your instructions. Take care Molurus.”

“I will.”

When she left, Molurus shifted once more, reveling in being a snake once more. His lip sensors burned for her, his tiny nodules created from his legs twitched. Male Indian Pythons used these to caress and rub against their female before finally entwining and mating. Sliding into the cool water of The Pool Of Life, he never needed cold water so much. After a swim, he hung languidly in a tall tree. Soon, he would face the heat of the surface.

Chapter Four

The whole day passed, and Lily did not speak a word to Rob, except to answer yes or no to his orders. As predicted, the winds began to turn, and, unless they flared up again, this mission would be over by week's end. Lily guessed her trip to see a python would be off now, but maybe she might spot one herself. One never knew. At night, Lily felt horny as hell, remembering Rob's lips against her ear and the feel of his body when he fell on her. She just wanted to get home and make a booty call to a trusted and very talented African-American man she knew across town. Anything to quell the throb between her legs and put the moistness to good use.

Rob made no attempt to broaden the conversation that fuelled her suspicion about him only wanting one thing. *Well, dammit, he can find a booty call of his own!* Of course, she wanted him, but the fear of him rejecting her afterwards held her at bay. Lily wavered on a crossroad in her life, and facing her past hurt. Dealing with her loss and her Mom's took a toll emotionally, and the heat wave here did not help any. The forecast deemed it to ease by the next day.

With the help of the Hercules, and back burning, the area soon became secure, and Lily went back to camp early. The night would be here soon, but a couple of hours of daylight still remained. More than anything, she longed for a bath. Hot and dusty, she felt like crap. Spotting Vinod, she walked over to him. "Hello."

"Snake Lady, hello to you. Do you need help with something?"

"Yes, Vinod. Can you tell me how dangerous the jungle is, and is there anywhere I could...ummm...freshen up a little?"

"Your boss will not like you wandering off, Snake Lady. You move like snake. The Great One may take you."

His attitude pissed her off, but she knew she must be nice if she were ever to find a spot to bathe.

"I won't go anywhere if it's dangerous. I just thought there might be a creek close by."

“Ah, I have upset you. So sorry, Lily, I am only teasing. Actually, a fresh pool is not far away. Not many dangerous animals roam here now. Most have been driven away by the fire, and the pool is within screaming earshot. I will run if I hear you. See the big patch of trees over there?” He pointed to them, and she nodded. “Walk into there about three hundred feet, and you will see it.”

“Will no one else visit there?” Lily wasn’t keen on that thought.

“I will be sure to keep my men away until I see you return. I’m not sure about anyone else, so perhaps you should remain clothed a little.” Vinod smiled. Lily knew she blushed. She mumbled ‘thank you’ and headed off with her towel.

Rob had been called into another group to check on them, so she knew she had, at least, until dark before he would miss her. She took her lantern, just in case dark fell suddenly, and a small knife. *Maybe useless but better than nothing.*

“Barney...”she woke him up when she called into his tent.

“Hmmm...yes? Lily, what is it?” he mumbled.

“I’m going to bathe in a pool through the thick trees over to the left. I may be a couple of hours. Just so you know where I am.”

“Uh huh...okay, Pet. Have fun.” Barney rolled over and emitted a couple of little snores.

“My brave protector!” At least, she’d let someone else know.

The pool felt exquisite, small but exquisite. Lily lolled around in her singlet top and bike shorts. Admittedly, it wasn’t like a real bath with soap and such, but it felt like the best water she’d ever been in. She’d removed her bra. Her shorts she wore as underwear anyway, so she was as close to naked as she could get. The daylight failed a little, and she thought it time to get out. Drying as best she could, she put fresh trousers and a top over her damp garments. The heat would dry her off, in no time anyway, she figured.

Hearing noises further away in the forest, Lily walked in that direction, her curiosity piqued. From behind the protection of a large tree, a man scrambled around the low lying shrubs. A large gun hung on a leather strap over his shoulder.

Oh, my God, this might be a poacher! Lily knew she should probably get out of there and back to camp, but then something rustled further in. When she strained her eyes, she saw movement. A huge Indian Python head emerged from the shrubs. She could not believe her eyes. She froze, mesmerized by the beautiful sight before her.

Unfortunately, the man saw it as well and jumped up. He aimed his gun at the massive reptile. Lily could not let this happen. The python stopped, as if sensing danger. She could see about ten feet of the snake, the rest obscured by the shadows. The poor creature became trapped. Screaming ‘no’, she ran flat strap at the man with the gun, and his momentary surprise worked to her advantage. She hit him with her shoulder and hip, throwing him off balance. His head struck a rock as he hit the ground. His chest still rose and fell with his breathing. Thankful she hadn’t killed him, Lily wondered what to do next. Surely, Vinod would have heard her yelling, but what if he saw the snake, would he save it? Other voices came from the opposite direction, sounding closer by the second. *Shit, what if there are more poachers?*

Looking back to the snake, she witnessed a sight she never would have believed if she had not seen it with her own eyes. The snake rose up and became a man. A naked man who actually shifted before her very eyes. “A shifter,” she whispered.

The strange voices neared. The snake man beckoned her. “Come, hide with me until they are gone. They will kill you. Come!” his voice a loud whisper, holding out his hand.

For some reason, Lily trusted him, and she grabbed his hand. He pulled her down into bushes and urged her to scramble beneath them.

“In here,” he whispered, pushing her into a small opening. Not expecting the level to drop, Lily slid away, unable to stop herself in the dark. Forcing herself not to scream, she landed with a large bump. A second later, the snake man landed beside her.

“Are you all right? We’ll stay here an hour until they are gone.”

“It’s dark. Where are we?” she asked, her voice sounded a little shaky.

“It’s a secret cave. No one knows about it, so you’ll be safe. Wait right here. Don’t move,” he ordered.

Lily didn’t think she could move, even if she wanted to. Shortly, a soft glow of light came from what looked like another opening in the rock. The snake man came back and effortlessly lifted her, carrying her into the alcove. A soft fiber mat covered the rock floor, and a lantern glowed. The snake man’s body rippled with muscle. With every movement, she felt the sinewy hardness. Lily’s wantonness resurfaced. The worst timing but this man had the eyes of a dream god.

“Do you live here?”

"No," he laughed, "I used to spend a little time in here as a child. I brought all this here a long time ago. Luckily, the matches and lantern still sat exactly where I left them."

"You changed from a python," she gasped.

"You saved my life. Why would you endanger your own?" he asked, holding her in his arms. Lily did not mind in the least.

"I love pythons."

"Lucky for me," he chuckled a little.

"Lucky for me. I just saw something no one else has seen, didn't I?" The excitement of the situation hit her.

"Yes, you did. What is your name?"

"Lily, Lily Marchant. We came out from Australia to help fight the fires."

"I am Molurus, the last of my kind." Placing Lily on the ground, he sat beside her.

"The last?"

"Yes, well, I had thought so, but I have just discovered some albino changers."

"Wow!" Lily couldn't manage any other words, she felt star-struck, as if she met someone really famous.

"Thank you for hiding me." Lily touched his hand, and the need surged into her mind.

"Another two minutes and you would have been shot," he replied, placing his other hand over hers.

Lily did not know if her next move would be the right thing to do or not. At this point, she really didn't care much. With her booty call a long way off, she took the bull by the horns and leaned in to kiss Molurus. His lips held a firmness that encouraged her to press harder. Buzzing with heat, she rejoiced in his answering kiss. Never before had such a burning encompassed her. This need drowned out any second thoughts about right or wrong. At this very moment in time, she wanted Molurus.

He responded immediately, pressing his tongue to hers, fuelling her desire to new heights. Lily allowed the kiss to deepen and wrapped her arms around him, her legs resting over his thighs as he sat. His hands gripped her bottom and pulled her forward until her pussy rested against his obviously swollen cock. Gently she rocked, loving the position. The kiss he now administered thrilled her to the core, her tongue moved over his languidly. Opening her mouth further, she gently sucked on his. Molurus groaned into her mouth as

he thrust up his hips. The clothing allowed the friction to tease her mercilessly. Needing to gulp some air, Lily broke away from the kiss.

“Are you sure you want this, Lily?” he asked, and she could have sworn he dragged out the ‘s’ sound.

“I’m sure, Molurus. I do want you.”

“You know we have no future together. I cannot breed with a human, and I do wish for a family, if the gods decree it.” Molurus looked deeply into her eyes.

“I know, and I do not wish a relationship. I just need you, at this moment. I hope that does not sound awful,” she admitted.

“Oh, I also have need. I do not think less of you for this. I applaud your honesty.”

He brought his heated lips to hers again, and Lily reveled in the joy of the kiss. His hands roamed her outer thighs and massaged the globes of her ass as he pumped his hips up. Her clit felt the pressure of his erection, and she knew she needed more, much more. Reaching down, she softly rubbed his muscular abdomen. His body, a mass of rippling muscle, shuddered under her touch. This pleased her greatly. Pulling out of the kiss, she stood before him, the lantern offering a soft glow.

Molurus hooked his fingers in the top of her trousers and shorts and pulled them down to her ankles. She stepped out while removing her shirt. Moving to his knees, he effortlessly removed her tank top. Standing naked before a man never pleased her so much.

“Ahhhh, Lily, you have the body of a snake woman. You are truly beautiful,” he murmured, kissing her belly.

Lily felt like tickling butterflies raced madly inside her. Her breath caught as he fluttered the tip of his tongue inside her belly-button. She giggled quietly. His hair felt so soft, like silk, but feeling his shoulders and back fired up her need to have him. As his tongue moved lower, her legs parted, and the aroma of arousal filled the alcove. Lily worried her legs would not hold once he began his ministrations, imagining only what a snake’s tongue could offer. As if in answer to her thought, Molurus stood and lifted her, as if she weighed as little as a feather.

Lowering her to the matting, he latched his mouth to a nipple. Lily cried out in passion and quickly placed her hand over her mouth.

“Do not stop yourself, my snake woman. None can hear you. Please, voice what you feel. If only once in your life, voice yourself here for me now.” Returning to her breast, he drew her nipple in

sharply. Again, Lily cried out, not stopping this time, as a guttural cry rose from her throat. Molurus suckled hard, and Lily wanted more; she needed to feel his bite. Throwing all caution to the wind, she let her desire speak without analyzing in her mind.

“Yes, Molurus, bite it. Please, bite my nipples.”

Not a question, an order and he obliged as his hand rubbed over her mound. Lily screamed this time, the unique pleasure of pain surged around her body, like a drug to her brain. Alternating nipples, Lily’s shudder signaled she might orgasm without any direct stimulation to her clit. She never came without her clit being stimulated.

Molurus stopped his rubbing and straddled her stomach, resting lightly on her body. His huge erection lay on her belly, and she moved to touch it. Molurus took each of her hands and put them beneath her.

Securing her arms by applying a little more pressure as he sat, Lily realized he gave her no choice but to enjoy the feelings swirling inside her. Strangely comfortable, she moaned loudly, and Molurus answered by taking each nipple in his fingers and pulling them up. Stretching her hardened nubs, he shook them quickly. Lily writhed beneath him, voicing her arousal in no uncertain terms.

“More...yes. I want more.”

With the whole of his palms, he applied friction by rubbing his hands quickly back and forth over the nipples. Lily felt her climax building, but she had no idea how she would find release. Now the tips of his fingers flicked speedily on the very tips, and she groaned for more. Hovering on the edge of orgasm, she wanted to beg him to drive her with his cock. Grabbing her nipples, he pulled again. A tiny tremor ran through her.

“Ohhhhhh!”

“Come for me, Lily. Feel me working your nipples. Imagine me between your thighs, my tongue driving into you. Imagine my forked snake tongue tickling your clit then reaching up inside you, further than any tongue has ever been.”

“Shit! Yes.”

Lily felt him pull harder and work her stretched nipple around in a large circle. As he pumped them up and down, her shudders began again. She thrust her hips over and over, trying to get some sort of friction on her clit to find that blissful release. Imagining his snake tongue on her, in her, over her, as he mercilessly worked her nipples with deft fingers, Lily vibrated beneath him.

“Do it, Lily! Come now and give my tongue something to lick out of you. I want to lick you hard, Snake Woman. Lick your sweet, sweet juice from your tight cunt,” he hissed.

Those words took Lily over the edge. Her orgasm broke, different from any other she’d experienced, the waves washed over her again and again. She pressed her head back to the ground and cried out. Molurus put his mouth over hers, kissing her hard. She felt the twin tips of the forked tongue tickling and knew this would be a moment of her fantasies coming true. His tongue remained surprisingly thick and tapered to a forked end. He lifted off her, and she freed her hands, which she immediately moved to his swollen cock.

Even this felt different. It moved as if with independent muscles, writhing to her touch, straining for her. Lily wrapped both hands around the thick shaft. It took two hands, and she worked them up and down. Molurus groaned his agreement. She worked fast, gathering the lost juices from his throbbing tip and smearing it over his cock. Her hands slid easily. He leaned back, hands on the ground beside her as he lifted his pelvis up to give her plenty of stroke room.

“Yes, I love this. You do it so well. Don’t stop.”

Lily had no intentions of stopping, not until he came. Watching his muscles ripple under his skin excited her greatly. She pulled up hard on him, and he cried out. She showed no mercy and kept beating him as fast as she could. Molurus growled, and his whole body tensed above her. His orgasm exploded from him as he roared his release. His cock pumped out streams of cum. She felt it land on her face and chest, even in her hair. Immediately, she closed her mouth over the head of his magnificent cock and gently sucked the spent remains from him, encouraging out every last drop.

After his shuddering subsided, Molurus breathed somewhat normally again.

“Sweet God, I wish you could be mine. I have never felt an orgasm so intense.” He breathed his words into her ear.

“I am yours, for now, as you are mine. Right now, we need not worry about the world.” For just a little while, Lily wanted to forget everything and remember what joy and abandonment felt like.

Molurus moved down her body, placing his hands on each thigh and pulling her legs apart. His acute senses loved the smell of her, the heat pits in his lips ached to taste her. His forked tongue quivered to lick her. This he could extend so much further than an ordinary man’s tongue. Using the very tips of the fork, he tickled at her clit. Using his

fingers to separate her folds to the maximum, he exposed the very centre of her tiny bud of nerves. Her body shook when he flicked his tongue over her most sensitive possession. Molurus wanted her to come as hard as she ever had. This special moment, in time, he wanted stamped in their memories, forever more.

Her cries for more spurred him on, and he pressed the flat of his tongue over her swelling bud and moved over it gently. Her hips pressed up as her hands moved to the back of his head, firmly meshing his mouth against her. Molurus did not need to move his tongue, for Lily rocked her pelvis back and forth, working her exposed clit against him. This woman turned him on so much he hardened once more. If he wasn't careful, he would come again as well. Pulling his mouth free, Lily moaned and begged his return until he placed his hands under her ass and held it up off the ground.

"Now, I fuck you with my tongue. I will lick you inside. Taste your sweetness. Would you like that, Lily?" Molurus prompted, wanting to get his own satisfaction at hearing her words.

"Yes...please. Do it, shove your tongue into me. Snake Man, I want your fucking snake tongue inside me."

Molurus used his thumbs to fully open her entrance, widening it as far as he could and flicked around the edge, teasing her opening. Lily screamed like a woman in hysteria, begging him for more. He obliged and drove his seven-inch tongue as far inside as he could. Twisting and turning it, massaging the inside of her clenching tunnel. Lily screamed again, babbling obscenities of passion as Molurus rejoiced in the feel of her cunt around his tongue. He fucked her hard, his tongue having every bit of the hardness of muscle displayed by the rest of him. Fully inserted inside her, he moved a thumb to her clit. She held her hips up to him, his hand support unnecessary. Circling her mass of nerve endings with his thumb, her ecstatic sounding noises gave way to trembling.

Knowing her next orgasm loomed, Molurus pressed his other thumb to her puckered anal opening. Lily screamed yes and thrust up. Molurus let his thumb slide inside this hole even tighter than the one housing his plunging tongue. Wriggling his thumbs in unison, Lily vibrated fully and fisted her hands tightly in his hair as her paroxysms hit her body. Screaming his name, Molurus did not stop until the final grip of climax left her. Knowing he satisfied her fully, he moved to kiss her lovingly. At this moment, he loved her. She accepted his kiss

readily, worked her lips over his chest, suckling and nipping his nipples in turn.

Molurus leaned back on his hands, letting her have her way. Moving to his enraged cock, the softness of her tongue and mouth enveloped him. He jerked at the heat inside her mouth. His cock moved of its own free will, it seemed, and Molurus swore it tried to surge forward into her mouth. His long, thick cock had never been wholly sucked into a woman's mouth. Most played on the end of it and used their hands for the rest; some did not even try to fit it in their mouth. For that reason, he'd never come into a woman's mouth. He could feel the hesitance within them, and that fact never let him relax enough to reach orgasm. Molurus watched Lily kissing his shaft.

"Such a gorgeous cock, I am going to suck you until you come." Her hazel eyes sparkled up at him. "You aren't the only one good with your mouth."

Lily placed the head in her mouth and closed her lips over it. Molurus throbbed in desire, glad he did not stand. His knees trembled as it was. Opening a little wider, half his length sucked in, and she cupped his balls with one had.

Fuck, this woman can suck cock!

Lily's mouth opened even more, and, as she squeezed hard on his sac, the tip of his cock hit the back of her throat. He clearly felt it. Feeling a little faint, Molurus toyed with the idea of being deep-throated. As the thought entered his mind, Lily's throat opened to allow the entry of the head of his penis. For the first time in his life, he enjoyed the feel of a woman who eagerly swallowed him whole. *This woman must have some python in her.*

Still not seeming enough for her, she worked her mouth up and down, letting his knob slide into her throat. No gagging, just groans of joy came from her. The orgasm built in his balls, boiling and moving, waiting for release. She must have sensed it because she worked down hard on him now, slathering him. He sensed her want of his sperm. He could not hold it back any longer. A force, greater than control, made him fist his hands in her hair and pull her mouth onto him as he thrust his hips up. Fucking her mouth with a wild abandon, the first shot of cum traveled his length. A roar of satisfaction ejected from his mouth.

Pump after pump of sweet release and she took it all. Swallowing most, it seemed, but he felt trickles escape onto his balls and thighs. "Lily!" he cried out, unable to stay quiet. Not until he had expelled his

very last seed did she stop. Now completely sated, satisfied beyond imagination, he held her to him. They kissed sweetly, and he held her longer.

For a brief window in time, the plight of his existence disappeared from his mind. For some unknown reason, Molurus felt no need to take it further. He wanted to save the ecstasy of the perfect joining with his wife. Perhaps that wife may be Boidae, he hoped. He had no doubt he could reach those heights with Lily, but his need for a family burned within. To ignore that need now would cause ultimate heartache, for Lily and for him. Lily did not deserve a half relationship. She deserved complete devotion.

“Molurus?” Lily asked, hoping he wouldn’t think her unusual with her next request.

“Yes, Lily?”

“Would you mind if we didn’t...I mean, I don’t really...” Lily stammered, embarrassed.

“You don’t want to go any further either?” Molurus asked her.

“You mean you don’t? That was enough for you?”

Molurus cupped her face in his hands, “Oh, Lily, you have just given me more than I’ve ever had. Truly, I could not ask for more. And I also would like to save some for my future wife. I think I may have found her with the albino shifters.”

“Phew! I thought you would think me crazy. I mean, I have only just met Rob, but he popped into my head just then. You also gave me exactly what I wanted and needed and then some. I don’t know if any other man can top that, but I would like to leave some room for him to try,” Lily confessed, thinking of Rob and knowing she wanted to pursue possible happiness with him. She’d had enough of hiding in pain. The time to live out everything she truly wanted had come.

“Can you wait here, just for fifteen minutes? I would like to give you something to remember me by. Then I will go up and see if any danger is out there. I’ll escort you out.”

“I guess another fifteen minutes won’t hurt. I think we have been down here about two hours now. They will be searching for me,” Lily thought out loud.

“I promise I’ll be quick.” He kissed her cheek and shifted to the large Indian Python she’d first seen. Unable to resist, Lily reached out and stroked his elongated body. The perfect power of the muscular movements thrilled her as he slid away.

Chapter Five

Rob searched everywhere for Lily. He worried he might never find her. Apart from not knowing how to tell Chief Peters, the realization Lily filled a special place in his heart, hit him. *What an idiot I am, treating her like a kid who couldn't have any candy.* Coming up on two hours after nightfall did not fill him with confidence. Neither did the fact an injured poacher babbled on about seeing a giant python not far from the pool in which Lily bathed. He remembered her saying the Indian Pythons were not aggressive. What if it decided it was hungry? Why had he left her alone?

A headstrong woman, in a mood, should never be left alone. Vinod still searched, his distress did nothing to quell Rob's rising fear. Just when did he push the panic button and let everyone know? Her friends probably thought she was asleep in her tent, dreaming sweet dreams. Rob had urged Vinod not to raise the alarm just yet. The last thing he needed was for his crew to go racing around a dark jungle, compounding the problem. Rob headed back to camp, the darkness too dangerous to search. Re-tracing his steps exactly, he imagined the conversation he must have with Chief Peters. He shuddered.

There was good news, though. The crews were managing the fires, getting them under control. They could be home within a week. Rob couldn't envisage leaving without Lily Marchant. Back to where her pack of toiletries had been found, Rob stood and put his head into his hands. *Two hours, where can she be? God, Lily, please be okay.* Silently pleading, Rob heard the bushes rustle near his feet. He yelled out as a hand gripped his ankle. Shaking it free, he heard the cheeky giggle of Lily Marchant.

"Fraidy cat!" she teased.

“Lily, what the fuck? You scared me half to death! Where have you been, and why are you crawling around under the bushes?” Rob wasn’t sure whether to kiss her or spank her.

“Nothing much, Chief. A friend was showing me around.” Lily stood and brushed off her singlet and bike shorts.

“Is that any way to dress in the jungle at night?” Rob could see her nipples hard against the material. Then he stood aghast as a man, dressed in familiar-looking clothes joined Lily from under the shrubs. Rob surged with jealousy since Lily’s work clothes dressed this stranger.

“I see. Well, Marchant, I’m sorry to have interrupted your little sight-seeing excursion. No matter we searched high and low, thinking something bad had happened to you.”

Rob was furious. He wanted this woman, and, now it seemed, she’d found another to keep her entertained. *You don’t own her. It’s a modern world. Stop being possessive.* Rob realized this attitude found him at odds with Lily in the first place.

Lily laughed. “Sorry. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you are jealous. Anyway, I was in danger. A poacher was going to shoot a big python. I pushed him. His friends would have shot me, probably, if Molurus here hadn’t hidden me.” Grabbing the other man’s hand, Lily pulled him forward, saying, “He filled me in on the local history until the threat was gone.”

Rob stuck his hand out to Molurus. *Strange name, but this is a foreign country.*

Molurus shook Rob’s hand firmly, looking him straight in the eye.

Rob didn’t feel any threat from this man. “Thanks for helping Lily. I appreciate it.”

“She risked her life to save a python. I appreciated that.” Molurus bowed his head slightly in a thankful gesture. Rob could feel something different about the man, a certain calmness radiated from him.

“So you got to see your beloved python up close and personal. How was it?” Rob could see by the wide smile on Lily’s face it had been a profound experience.

“Probably the most awe-inspiring, satisfying encounter I have ever experienced.” Her eyes shone with excitement and, something more, satisfaction. Rob prayed that didn’t mean what he thought it did. Molurus smiled as well.

“Well, you’re safe now. That is the main thing. I was going to offer you an evening to visit with the snakes and other animals, but I doubt I could top that reaction.” Rob spoke matter-of-factly. Lily took him by surprise when she hooked her arms around his neck and placed a firm kiss on his lips. Excitement raced through his body.

“Oh, I don’t know about that, Rob. I thought you liked a challenge,” Lily teased, grinning all the while. “When do we have our date?”

“Our date? Oh...yes, well, I suppose it is, would be a date.” Rob stammered, stunned at her openness, in stark contrast to her attitude to him when they’d last been together.

“Molurus, thank you, for everything. I think now I can finally begin to live my life again.” Lily hugged him, and he held both her hands in his. Rob knew they shared something, he just couldn’t place what.

“I am honored to have met you, Lily. You, too, have changed my life for the better, Snake Woman. Please take care, be happy and return one day to share happy news of your family.” He leaned forward and pressed his lips to her hand. Rob noticed Lily’s eyes glittered with tears; his lantern light reflected in them. It seemed such an intimate moment, yet she took hold of Rob’s hand and held on tightly as if frightened to let him go. He could get used to this.

“I will, and good luck with your...mission.”

Molurus then leveled his gaze at Rob. “What of the fires?”

“Oh, they look all but under control now. Much damage has been done. I hope your jungle can recover.”

“I must thank you for coming to help us. The past few days you have saved the area here most concentrated in python habitat. Many of my friends have escaped death because of you and your team.” Molurus bowed to him again.

“No worries, our pleasure. So, are you the snake ranger around here or something?”

Lily giggled, and Molurus smiled. Rob was puzzled.

“Something like that,” Molurus answered.

Lily tugged on Rob’s hand. “Come on, Rob, let’s go plan our trip.”

He turned and walked off with Lily. “Should I ask how a strange man ended up in your work clothes, and you ended up in, well...underwear.”

"His clothes were...ripped, so I lent him mine. No biggie. You're jealous, aren't you?"

"Maybe. Is there anything to be jealous of?"

"Nope, nothing. Molurus is my friend."

Rob heard a noise in the undergrowth. Checking behind them, he could no longer see Molurus. *He sure moves quick.*

"You and he seemed pretty chummy for people who just met." Rob couldn't help himself.

"Rob Hughes, are you accusing me of something? I am my own woman. If I want to spend time with the Devil himself, I will. What I do and who I see, until the day I have a ring on my finger, remains my business." Lily sounded more than a little teed off.

Rob offered no argument because she spoke the truth. He just squeezed her hand and mumbled, "We'll have to see what we can do about that."

"Grumble-bum," Lily retorted but, out of the corner of his eye, Rob saw her smile.

"You found her! What a relief. You gave me quite a scare, young lady!" Vinod strode over, his gappy smile beaming in the lamp light. "Are you all right? The arrested poacher said he saw a big python just before you knocked him over. He is not very happy with you, Lily. These enemies, you do not want to get on the wrong side of them."

Lily looked at Vinod defiantly, "What should I have done? Leave that bastard to kill an innocent snake? I don't care if he hates me. He has no right to slay animals, of any kind! I hope he gets jail time."

"Police have nothing to hold him on. He will get out in the morning. It might pay to lie low for a day or so."

"I won't hide from him, or anyone else, for that matter. I have rights and so do the animals. I'm sorry, Vinod, that is just the way it is," Lily stated with conviction. No way would she let those horrible men hurt any python, especially Molurus. She hoped he would be able to stay out of sight now that the fires were almost controlled. Trouble was, the poacher she pushed would be shooting off his mouth about the giant snake he saw. The jungle would soon be crawling with poachers and trophy hunters. Well, Lily had a couple more days here yet, and, if need be, she would stand up to them.

Almost back at the camp now, Vinod talked about the fires and the work to be done the next day. Lily didn't interrupt. Instead, she thought of Molurus and the time they shared. Now her actions seemed quite impetuous, even verging on reckless. She knew, at the time, her

decision just might be the best one she'd ever made. Now she was ready to get on with her future and living every day to the fullest.

Vinod spoke again, "Lily, tell me, the poacher you knocked down. He has said he saw a giant Indian Python. I do not believe the ramblings of fools.. I wondered if you saw anything other than a normal-sized python. Maybe eleven feet long?"

Lily pricked at the question. Her answer must be carefully metered. "I saw an Indian Python. I could only see the head and part of the body. I don't know how long it was. I just focused on the man with the gun."

"I see...so where have you been these past two hours?"

Lily, thrown a little, hesitated a moment, "A man hid me from the others who came. They must have heard my scream. He took me into a hiding place further into the jungle."

Vinod nodded. "Lucky for you to meet such a trustworthy person in the jungle. He might have been a dangerous poacher, pretending to protect you. Women are far too trusting. It's what gets them into trouble."

Anger rose in Lily, her heart pounded hard, and sweat pricked on her brow. "This man was...different. I knew I could trust him."

Rob joined into the conversation. "He seemed okay, strange name though, Molurus."

Lily elbowed Rob. If only she'd taken the time to tell Rob not to mention Molurus to anyone.

"Molurus? Very unusual. You know, Molurus is the scientific name for the Indian Python. Python molurus." Vinod informed them.

Lily almost choked on the air she breathed. "Really! Well, maybe he is a snake lover like me." *That sounded totally lame. He'll guess I'm hiding something.*

Now at the camp, Vinod gave her wide smile and simply said, "True, true. Glad you are safe, Lily." He walked off, and Lily could not be happier that the questions ended. Barney stuck his head out from his tent and yawned, looking at Lily. "You back already?"

Lily just shook her head. *Poor Barney.*

"I think I'll turn in early. Sounds like we have a busy day tomorrow, checking for spot fires." Lily needed to be alone. Vinod's questioning rattled her a little. What if that poacher found Molurus again and the cave? She could not allow it. Fingering the jade necklace Molurus brought back as her keepsake, she wondered how long he would survive these men. Cold and smooth, the gorgeous

green stone, threaded on a simple band of leather calmed her. Molurus survived this long, he would no doubt survive a lot longer.

A simple circle, a snake with its tail touching its head, Molurus told her the pendant was very old and sacred to the Shifters. This one belonged to his sister, now dead. So sure Lily would have gotten on famously with her, he'd fetched it from some secret place. She would hold a special place in his heart always, and he would never forget her, that's what he said. Lily felt the same.

* * * *

"Lily...Lily. Wake up!" a loud whispered voice roused her. Not sure if still in dreamland, Lily tried to shake the sleepiness out of her head. Focusing a little more to the dark, she saw someone's head in the flap of her tent opening.

"What is it?" she questioned.

"Lily, they have a snake cornered, the poachers. Come on...hurry!"

"Rob?"

"Get some clothes on. This python is huge and white!" Rob answered her.

Panic grabbed Lily. Shit! A white python, it must be one of the changers. They must try to stop them. Grabbing her jeans and a shirt, Lily rushed out of the tent. Standing up, she pulled her clothes on as fast as she could. Pulling her hair back in a band she carried around her wrist, she took a deep breath. Rob stood waiting.

"I had to wake you, Lily. I knew you would have my head if I didn't. We must be careful though. We are in a foreign country, and these men can be hostile."

"Take me there." Lily did not care about any of that, she just wanted to get to the python before it was too late. Rob quickly led her into the jungle. Not far from where she and Molurus surfaced.

Lily saw the magnificent white python first. It did not move, and she silently begged it to still be alive. Five poachers, all with guns, watched the snake, seemingly in awe of it.

"Get away from it!" Lily ordered and went to place herself between the snake and them. "I'll call the police." The men all laughed and pointed their guns at her. Lily took a deep breath. *Show no fear, they won't shoot you.* "You can't just shoot a helpless snake."

The biggest of the men stepped forward, wearing a safari suit. He spoke perfect English. Obviously educated, he should have known

better. "You best leave now, little lady. You might get hurt. What we do here is no concern of yours."

"The hell it isn't. You aren't laying a finger on this snake."

"Just how do you intend to stop us?" He smiled evilly.

"Anyway I can. I have help, you know." Lily would not back down. The snake still did not move.

"White skins are valuable, but the live snake will fetch much more. I don't want the animal dead. I will take it to a better place, no fires, plenty of water."

"If you care so much about it, why don't you do more to save its natural environment?" Lily smiled at Rob as he stepped up beside her.

"You can't kill us both," he said. "We are Australian citizens, and there will be repercussions." Rob glared defiantly and took her hand. Lily swelled with pride.

"They tell me I can't do a lot of things in this country. But I seem to get things done anyway. The harder it gets, the more money they pay. I have been dealing in pythons for twenty years, and the money just increases. Never been caught yet, I won't get caught this time. And people, who get in my way, get hurt," the leader told them. The men moved forward.

"You don't scare me. Anyone who can pick on a defenseless animal can't be all that tough." Lily wondered what the hell she would do next to get these men away from the snake. And worse still, if a changer, how long before someone discovered the truth. She must do something and fast. Squeezing Rob's hand, she spoke with authority.

"The only way you are going to get this snake is to kill us. If you murder us, you sign your own death warrant."

"I'll take my chances," the poacher said, and the others cocked their rifles ready to fire. Lily's heart beat fast, and she started to shake a little. But, outwardly, she eyed the man defiantly. Dawn would be with them soon. A loud voice spouted Indian language from behind them. All four of the men, holding guns, dropped them and ran.

"Get back here, damn fools! That's what I get for hiring locals."

"This will be the last hiring you'll be doing, Godfrey. Unless you are doing it from an Indian jail." Vinod stepped forward with another man. Lily remembered him from the campfire the other night. He put the barrel of a pistol hard up against the poacher's head. Vinod smiled at her and Rob as he stepped past them to cuff the man.

"You've got nothing on me, Inspector. I should have known my old adversary would be back someday." The poacher spoke calmly.

"I have enough now to put you away for life. All I needed was the admittance you just gave on tape, and, with years of paperwork evidence, you and your filthy scum will be stopped," Vinod told him, none too politely. "Take him away. Don't take your eyes off him."

Lily turned to Rob and gave him a huge hug. "Rob, I can't believe you stood beside me like that!"

Rob laughed. "Something tells me, Lily Marchant, that standing beside you, might just be the safest place to be. I can tell you, I'm not going to stand against you."

"Vinod, you're a cop! You could have told me." Lily turned to him.

He smiled with his gappy grin. "Well, it did serve my purpose better to have you not know. I have been playing cat-and-mouse with this man for years. He's clever. Thank you for acting exactly as I predicted you would. The confession was the thing I needed most." Vinod stepped up and shook Rob's hand. "Thanks for your help and going to wake her up."

Lily thumped Rob in the arm, "You knew!"

"Only about fifteen minutes before you did, I swear." He put his hands in the air in protest.

"Well, I'm glad you did. What about the snake?" Lily noticed the white snake still lying in the same place. Its beauty was awe-inspiring; the whiteness glowed in the rays of the rising sun breaking through the jungle canopy.

Vinod looked at the animal, a deep admiration shone in his dark eyes.

"Enjoy until the snake chooses to leave you. It will not harm you. No need to be afraid. I must follow them to the holding place and get my report done and officially charge Godfrey. Indian authorities have long waited for this moment. One day, we hope to stamp out the slaughter and sale of India's precious animals," Vinod spoke solemnly.

"I promise I will do everything I can to raise awareness back home, Vinod."

"I will see you again before you leave." He walked away and left them with the huge snake.

"How did you know?" Lily asked Rob.

"I was asleep when Vinod came to me, explaining what he wanted. He tracked the poachers and saw a snake cornered.

"Poor thing, so beautiful." Lily walked to the head of the Albino and squatted down. Stroking it, she gazed into its pink eyes. "Please, are you a changer? You are safe here. I know Molurus. He is my friend," Lily coaxed.

"Lily, what are you talking about?" Rob asked.

"Sshhh, Rob. Just wait. I have a hunch." Lily continued speaking to the python. "Please, we are friends, let me help you. Why are you on the surface? Have you seen Molurus?"

The snake moved a little then coiled itself, head raised in the air. Lily stood up, and the snake eyed her levelly.

"Careful, Lily I think it might be getting ready to attack." Rob sounded scared.

Lily looked around. "Don't be afraid, Rob." She turned to face the snake again.

Before their eyes, the python became human. A beautiful, naked woman, with flowing blonde hair and eyes the color of glittering blue topaz.

"Oh, my God! How?" Rob stammered.

"Oops. No clothes, Rob...go get her some water," Lily asked

Rob took off his shirt and handed it to the snake woman. "Here, use this till I get back." The woman gave him a blank look. Lily took the shirt and placed it on her. Rob ran off.

"You know Molurus?" she asked in a soft voice.

"Yes, we met yesterday. I saved him from being shot. I know he is a changer, as well." Lily answered, beckoning the woman to sit down.

"My name is Boidae. Molurus is in danger."

"Boidae, he told me about meeting you. He hoped you two would have a future together. What danger is he in?" Lily was determined to help him, whatever the problem.

"He did?" the woman looked happy at the thought but then her look turned dark again. "They have him. They took him before me. I did not know what to do. I could not change into human form. It's my fault. I should never have come to the surface to find him. My father had me followed a few days ago and discovered I met Molurus. We did nothing wrong. Molurus promised, when the pythons were safe, he would come back for me. My father wishes him dead. He is very protective of me. I have never been to the surface before. The only

way I could track Molurus was in snake form.” Boidae wrung her hands. “I could sense him close, and then the men closed in. Thank goodness, they did not see where I came from. If my family were killed due to my actions, I would never forgive myself. Molurus must have been high in the trees. Coming down in snake form, they took him away. He did not struggle. He sacrificed himself to give me a chance to disappear. But I just couldn’t go.” Boidae’s tears flowed freely now.

Rob came back with fresh water. “Here you go.”

“Thank you,” she answered.

“Rob, they have Molurus, in snake form. He’s huge, Rob, at least thirty feet long, and he must weigh three hundred pounds. He will die if they try to keep him in captivity, that’s if they don’t kill him for his giant skin.”

“Molurus is one of these, as well?” he nodded back toward Boidae.

“A changer, yes. I found out after he changed to rescue me.”

“Where is he?”

“That we don’t know. But we have no time to lose. They must be on the road, not too far from here. It’s not like they have fast transport. But first, I must get Boidae to go home.” Lily replied, her mind racing over the possibilities.

“Boidae. Is that her name? She is so beautiful,” Rob admitted.

Lily felt a pang of jealousy then she remembered what she and Molurus shared. She had no right. “Yes, she is. But if we don’t get her back down the secret cave, her whole race could get killed.”

Lily saw Boidae still crying. “Boidae, you must go home. If they find you, they might discover the secret world below.”

“But what of Molurus?”

“You must trust us to free Molurus. If we do not succeed, you must never come back to the surface again. Men up here would see you dead and dig the ground for the others. You must promise me you will not come back here. Molurus will come to you.”

“And if he doesn’t?” Boidae asked the question Lily did not want to think about.

“If he doesn’t then Molurus will be gone. Boidae, you must be strong,” Lily urged.

“Yes, I will do as you say. I cannot bring my kind more danger. Good luck.” Removing the shirt, she began her transformation. Rob

looked amazed and shook his head as Boidae disappeared into the bushes.

Lily broke into a run, "Come on!"

Piling into one of the water tanker trucks, Lily hit the key and fired up the engine. Rob piled in beside her. "Where do we go first?" he asked.

"I think they will be on the back track on the other side of the jungle. In the area, we worked the back burns on. I noticed on the map they connected up with the main road later on."

"Sounds sensible. But can we catch them?"

"We have to. Molurus is the last of his kind. He has only just found the albino changers, and he wants to get to know Boidae in the hopes of bonding and having children of his own." Lily explained as she careered the truck around an almost impossible curve.

"Shit, Lily, go easy. We can't help him if we are wrapped around a tree."

* * * *

The heat in the back of the truck stifled Molurus. He wondered if Boidae had been captured. He could not see her taken without trying to help her. He could only pray she'd stayed alive. Molurus wondered what fate awaited him, would he be sent to a zoo in some foreign country or get his skin stretched out above some rich trophy hunter's mantel piece? He preferred death, actually. If he could just get them to stop out here and change shape, his human strength would enable him to escape. His speed and ability to stop more than one man with a gun became a disadvantage in animal form. The truck made such a rumble, no one would hear him bashing on the side. Plus he did not know how many men transported him. They would be armed, this much he did know.

Well, some things I just have to leave to fate, I guess. My only chance is to shift to my human form.

The truck bumped and heaved along. No doubt, the back roads their preferred option to avoid police inspection. One thing in his favor, they would never be expecting a naked man when they opened the doors. The change now complete, Molurus sat down and leaned against the side. He prayed Boidae did not get captured or killed. The truck gears made an awful grind, and then it lurched to a halt. Molurus could hear yelling. He had no idea what went on, but this might be the chance he waited for. He crawled up next to the door.

After about five minutes of yelling, he heard the locks rattle; someone opened the door on the back of the truck. He knew that voice, *Lily!* How on earth she knew where to find him, he did not know, but he wasn't about to start complaining.

"Molurus, Thank God you are alive!" Lily jumped into the back and hugged him. Never had he been so happy to see anyone.

"Lily, once again you save me. Do you not read traditional romance where the men do the rescuing?" Molurus quipped. Rewarded by a huge smile, he hugged her again.

"Never was much of one for tradition. Are you okay?" she laughed.

"I am. But Lily, Boidae, they had Boidae." Molurus verged on tears. This close call almost became too much for him. The thought of Boidae, innocent and loving, being hurt by those pigs angered him.

"No, Molurus. She is fine. We have met, spoken. Boidae went back home to wait for you. I urged her to stay there and not come back out. She agreed."

"Oh, thank God! Lily, don't tell me you saved her, too?"

"In a round-about way, but I did have some help. Boidae came out to find you. Her father discovered her meeting with you and was angry. She was afraid he might harm you." Lily explained.

Molurus chuckled. "I don't think so." Then he laughed some more.

"What is so funny about an angry father on the warpath?" Lily looked puzzled.

"You see, Lily. I am the Great One, the ruler of all snake people. When he sees my jade pendant, he will shake in his boots and beg me to marry his daughter."

"You mean, you are the Great One Vinod spoke of? The giant Indian Python?"

"Yes, Lily, I am one and the same. Now, I may be able to build a new race of snake people. Perhaps, once I marry Boidae, I will have grandchildren and great grandchildren to teach what Grandfather taught me."

"Lily! Have you finished your little conference in there? I have some very angry-looking men held at gunpoint," Rob called from outside.

Molurus chuckled.

"Okay, keep your hair on, Chief!" Lily replied.

Jaded Beasts 3, Dragon-Snake

“I’m afraid you have once again caught me off guard.” Molurus looked down at his naked body. Now Lily giggled. Molurus liked the sound of his dear friend’s happiness.

“We’ll have to stop meeting like this, Molurus. People will start talking. Wait. I will get you something from the water truck.”

What a woman, if only she were a snake!

Chapter Six

“Where are we going?” Lily pleaded. The fires had been put out, and the time to leave this country had arrived. But Rob apparently wanted to take her somewhere on their last night. He instructed her to bring a bag with something nice to wear in it and to wear her protective cover-alls.

“You’ll see, Nosey Parker. Just follow me.” Rob would say nothing more despite her constant begging.

Stopping in the familiar shrubbery, Rob said, “I believe you know the way into the secret caves.”

“Yes, but...”

“No buts, young lady, just get down there, and I’ll be right behind you.”

“It’s awful dark in there, and very steep on the way down. We’ll never get back up again.” Lily moaned.

“Get!” Rob ordered and stood pointing. Lily scrambled into the undergrowth, with Rob in hot pursuit.

“I’m not sure I like you being behind me like this,” Lily teased.

“Better hurry, or I might bite your bum.” Rob gnashed his teeth together, making a growling sound.

“I might like that!” Lily slid into the opening and made the slide as carefully as she could. Below, she could see the soft glow of light. *That wasn’t here last time.* Reaching the bottom with a soft thud, Lily, mesmerized at the sight before her, held her breath.

“Holy shit!”

Rob arrived with a slightly harder thump and a groan and stood up, pulling Lily up with him. He, too, looked awestruck. The walls of the cave, now lined with fireflies and glow worms by the millions, shone romantically. Gazing at the inlaid jade seams and magnificent stalactites in every color imaginable, Lily simply could not breathe. The quartz crystal clusters sparkled as brightly as diamonds, and the jade gave the whole place a soft green hue.

“Oh, Rob!” Lily turned to him as the tears ran down her face. “I have never seen anything so beautiful!”

Rob smiled and wiped her tears away with his thumbs, cupping her face. Slowly, he leaned in, his soft lips ever-so-gently brushed hers. Lily went weak at the knees. Rob pulled away, looking into her eyes.

“It’s not half as breathtaking as you are, Lily Marchant. Please, would you join me for dinner this evening?”

“I would be honored. But where...?”

“No more questions. Just enjoy.”

Just then, the Great One appeared in one of the many holes and alcoves in the cave. The snake seemed to slide forever, before his tail came.

“Wow! I cannot believe how big Molurus is as a snake,” Rob gasped.

“He sure is something, isn’t he?” Thrilled to see her friend again, Lily clapped her hands. Shifting into his human form, Rob threw Molurus a robe. Molurus winked at Lily and said, “I see he is prepared this time. No appreciation for the human form.”

“It’s not my appreciation I’m worried about.”

Lily saw Rob crook his head in her direction and laughed at his suggestion.

“Never let it be said I don’t appreciate the human form,” Lily teased, and both men laughed.

“So where are we having dinner, Molurus?”

“Did you bring the rope ladder?” Molurus asked Rob. Lily’s curiosity peaked.

“I did.”

“Great. Secure it firmly at the mouth of the tunnel from where I just came.” Molurus indicated where to secure it, and Rob threw the rest of the ladder down the hole.

“Good. Now you two are about to witness The Pool Of Life. This is the snake haven. Shifters have come here for hundred of years. This place, and everywhere surrounding it, is now my kingdom. No human has ever set foot in here, and none ever will again. This gift I give to you as thanks for saving my life and caring for the fauna of India.”

“Oh, Molurus, are you sure?” Lily could not think of anything more unique.

Molurus nodded. “Rob, please go forward, down the ladder. I will bring Lily.”

“Sure,” Rob replied and started down the ladder.

Lily looked deeply into Molurus’ eyes. “I will not see you again after this night, will I?”

“No, Lily. We will not see each other again. I must close the opening, forever, after this night.” A little sorrow laced his words. No words needed to be spoken between them. All they had shared in this cave spoke for itself.

“I will change now and escort you down to the bottom.” Lily nodded at him and took the robe from him as he shifted back into a python.

Wrapping his huge snake body around her twice, he lifted Lily into the air as if she weighed nothing. The feel of Molurus wrapped around her gave a wonderful feeling of safety. Moving into the tunnel opening, the giant python carried her all the way to the bottom, holding her just tight enough. Below, Rob waited. Lily met his gaze as Molurus deposited her into his arms. Molurus waited behind as Rob carried her further inside.

Every color of green grew in this lush oasis. Many species of jungle plant covered the area. But, by far, the most stunning feature lay in the middle. The glittering pool, so blue it shone like the sky on a bright day, invited them to play. Quite warm down here, Lily practically salivated at the thought of lazing in the pool after being covered in dirt, dust, ash and sweat for the past week.

“I cannot believe this.” She gripped Rob’s neck tightly and swung her legs over to jump down. Molurus now stood behind them in a loin cloth.

“It’s stunning. Can we swim here?”

“You may, and you will find food over beyond that large rock. I also added some champagne from the surface. I will leave you now to start your lives together. I can never, ever thank you enough, Lily. And you, Rob. No one will come here for the night so take your time. Enjoy.”

“Wait, Molurus What of you and Boidaie? Did you deal with her father, and are you making plans together?” Lily asked, wanting to hear of her friend’s life now.

“Boidaie sends her regards and well wishes for the future. Her father is more than glad to have the Great One as a son-in-law. We plan a long engagement, to be proper, and to get to know each other a little better,” Molurus answered.

“That’s fabulous! Congratulations. Sounds like a good idea!” Lily said as Rob put his arm around her waist.

“Goodbye, Molurus, my friend, I will never forget you.”

“Nor I you, Snake Woman.” With that, he disappeared into the trees.

Lily could not help but feel the pull of separation. Rob seemed to understand and let her have a moment of solitude.

He busied himself unpacking his fresh clothes and laid them out on a nearby rock. Then he stripped to his tighty whitey’s and stepped into the pool. Lily almost giggled at his conservative underwear. She unpacked her clothing, stripped to her sports bra and tight shorts and stepped into the warm water. Oh yes, this felt like Heaven. Wetting her hair, she swam straight into Rob’s arms, and his kiss fired her passion. For the longest time, they played in the water, kissing and frolicking. Rob did not put any pressure on her to have sex. In fact, he seemed to be enjoying things just as they were.

Sitting down to a wondrous meal of fresh fruit, hot curries, and breads, all warmed in the natural rock holes that acted like ovens, Rob and Lily talked and talked until they’d learned everything they could about each other.

“I want to keep seeing you when we return home, Lily.”

“I’d really like that, Rob.”

“Let’s do this properly. Start over at home. We can date a while and see where it leads. But, I warn you now, I am not into casual relationships.” Rob sounded so sincere. Lily smiled, pleased he had the same idea about relationships she had.

“Good because neither am I.”

* * * *

Lily disembarked the plane, hand in hand, with Rob. Seeing her mother and Chief Peters waiting, she let go and broke into a run. So happy to be home again, India truly changed her life. Hugging the Chief, she then took her mother into her arms and cried. Her mother cried, too. “Thank God, you are home safe, Lily.”

“She was a handful, Mrs. Marchant. A real handful.” Rob’s voice sounded behind Lily. She wiped her eyes and turned to playfully thump him. Carmel Marchant laughed and agreed she would have been. Rob shook Chief Peters hand and thumped him on the back in a quick hug.

“Top job, Hughes, top job. I knew you could do it. Indian authorities sang your praises and Lily’s. Don’t worry. The rest of the team got a mention as well,” Chief Peters complimented.

“Mom, this is Rob Hughes.” Lily grinned, and her mother beamed back.

“Wonderful! You must come for dinner, Rob. Soon.”

“Thank you, Mrs Marchant. I’m sure you’ll see me plenty.”

“Call me Carmel,” she answered.

Walking to the car, they all talked at once. Then Chief Peters shocked Lily, and, by the look on his face, Rob as well.

“I’m retiring from the Fire Service.”

“You are?” Lily couldn’t imagine what the place would be like without him there.

“Yes,” he reached out and took Carmel by the hand. “It’s time I started living my life again.”

Shock tore through Lily again then happiness exploded inside when she saw her mother and the Chief so happy together. “Mom! We can double date.” Lily laughed.

“You don’t mind?”

“Mind? I couldn’t be happier, and Dad would love it, too.”

“So, a replacement for me will need to be found soon, and I will only be making one recommendation.” He looked directly at Rob.

“I’m honored, Chief.”

Lily knew Molurus and India gave her the courage to live life again. As she fingered her jade snake pendant, she silently thanked her Snake Man.

The End