



Eagle Clan Series 2: Destiny

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Eagle Clan Series 2: Destiny

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L. Shannon

Dedication

To Tori of the golden eyes...

Chapter One

Western Pennsylvania, December 21, 1983

Dàn found the clue just as a body fell past the window. Not just any body, but that of his adopted brother, Molach. Mo's fall from the roof was accompanied by a surprised wail that cut off with a crash as his body demolished an innocent shrub.

Not the azalea... It would have such beautiful pink blooms in just a few months. He closed his eyes to focus on the damage outside Ella's house. Mo was fine, of course, but the azalea was probably a lost cause.

Or would be without some help.

Leaving behind the Keeper's ancient records, Dàn went to the rescue of the doomed perennial. He found both Mo and Mo's twin brother, Romie, staring at it with the plant's owner, Ella Turner.

"Oh, Dàn. Do you think it can be saved?" Ella asked as he walked up. Her ninety-year-old body belied the youth in her eyes. She cuffed Mo lightly on the shoulder. "Why couldn't you fall three feet to the right?"

Mo chuckled. "Guess no one cares that I fell off the roof."

"We care. But like all emergencies, we will take care of the critically injured first." Dàn knelt and studied the dry, broken branches. The poor thing was busted all the way down the center.

"Dàn?" Ella asked from over his shoulder.

She might have only spoken his name, but what she was asking was for him to make it as it had been. To fix the problem like they knew

he could.

The twins and Ella all stared at him expectantly. He leaned forward and carefully set the thickest of the broken pieces together then cupped his hands over the wound. Easy as that, he willed his healing power to mend the wood, and it did. He repeated the healing on each limb, straightening the breaks and building the shrub back up to its former size and shape.

The whole process took more than ten minutes and before he finished, both twins had left to finish the roof repairs he'd asked them to do. Ella sat quietly on the cold ground next to him.

"What do you think?" he asked as he materialized a blanket and draped it around her thin shoulders. She shouldn't be out in the cold weather, even if he had kept it more temperate than was usual for late December.

Ella trembled and pulled the blanket tight. "It still looks sad."

She was right. The shrub might have mended limbs, but it still lacked the thing that made it well. He wasn't sure if he could restore that lost strength of life, but he was willing to try. He reached out with both hands and caught onto sturdy branches. Then he closed his eyes and poured his own energy into the plant, hoping it would make the difference.

"They're beautiful." Ella's quiet gasp drew him back to his surroundings. The shrub had burst into thick leaves and an abundance of pale blue flowers. "Why, they're the same exact shade as your eyes, Dàn. Stunning! The neighbors will all wonder what my secret is that I managed to get such beautiful blooms this time of year."

"Will this cause you problems, Ella? I didn't mean for it to bloom."

"No, child. It's beautiful and will at most make people wonder what garden tricks I'm not sharing." Ella held out a hand and let him gently pull her to her feet. "How was the search going in the old records? Have you found anything?"

Dàn couldn't help but smile. He was four hundred and twenty one years old, yet the sweet woman still called him child. "I think I might have. Come and look with me. Just before Mo fell, I found a description of

a demon that sounded like the man who brought my mother back to the clan.”

“Really? Well, that could be interesting.” She led the way back toward her private rooms and into the library there. She went right up to the open book and started scanning down the page until her finger rested next to the passage.

James of the Fox Clan sends word of a stranger in Londontown.

There, walking calmly among the men was one who did not walk like others. His bearing and carriage was of nobility, as was his dress. But as darkness fell that night, he was transformed into a beastly vision of half man and half horse. In this form he raced along the streets, swearing that the end had come and that none would survive the rebirth of the world.

James followed the demon unto a quiet drinking hall where he was once more in the form of a tall and comely black-haired man. His clothing, previously torn by the transformation, was mended and neat. But when spoken to, he was found to be broken by some grief. He strove to such efforts to drown his grief with vast amounts of alcohol that any other would surely have been far beyond ill, but this one appeared barely affected.

James was driven off by the man when he took the form of a dark demon and drew the fire of the devil to his eyes. I believe this was an aberration, perhaps a soul demon set loose to walk on earth. James said the man was called by the name Grant.

Dàn stared at the words and knew they would change his life. Once more he was at the fulcrum. Where would he land next and would it be for good or ill? While Ella shuffled off to confirm the similar description of the man who’d carried his mother into the clan’s secret village bleeding and near to death, Dàn relaxed his mind and let his consciousness flow in the streams of fate. He sifted through his memories, and those that were not his own, feeling for a connection to the name Grant. To a demon

named Grant.

Ella returned with a different tome. "You plan to find this man, Grant?"

"Yes." Like wading into a raging river, the many currents rushed over him. The crushing power would sweep him away if it could, but he had been walking these waters for centuries and his footing was steady as he reached out in his search.

"Do you have any idea where to start?"

Of all his own memories, of the memories of others, of the endless stream of what had yet to be... There among the swirling waters, Dàn found what he was searching for. He found the one called Grant.

But more than that, he found a confusing mixture of unconnected extra currents tangled around the demon. Within the swirling waters, the only repeating strand was the echoing words—*the companion and the watcher*—and the image of a dark-haired man with flashing red eyes looking out over...

"Niagara Falls. The demon is at the Falls."

* * * * *

Rath au Julf stared at his friend in shock. "Let me get this straight. We're going to Niagara Falls to find a demon?"

"We need to go. I need to go." Dàn settled his bags into the open trunk then moved around and pulled open the passenger door to the car.

Rath tossed the small duffle into the trunk and slammed it shut before sliding into the driver's seat. "And why is that again? Why exactly are we hunting down a sight-seeing demon when we could be heading back to the clan to celebrate Christmas?" His sister, Adhar, had planned a feast. They'd planned to fix Ella's roof and hurry back. He started the smooth engine and steered the Mercedes toward the interstate that would lead them north.

If Dàn said they were heading for Niagara Falls, then they were heading for the falls. He probably shouldn't push Dàn for reasons, since pushing never did any good anyhow. Sometimes, though, Dàn just

needed a push and no one else seemed willing to do it. Long ago he'd given up trying to understand Dàn and all his mysterious ways. Dàn was just Dàn, and he kept everyone, even the clan, on a need-to-know basis. This time, Rath wanted to know more whether he needed to or not. When Dàn didn't answer his question after more than a couple miles slid behind them, Rath eased back on the gas and tapped idly on his thigh.

Dàn sighed and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "I need to meet the demon who I've *seen* at the Falls. I believe he will be at one of the clubs. His name is Grant, and he may be able to give me some answers I need."

Ok, so he managed to answer without telling much. That was one of Dàn's best skills. "Who is this Grant?" He figured he was more likely to learn about *who* was being asked about than *what* was being asked.

Dàn reached up to his shoulder and appeared to be scratching the air beside his ear. It wasn't air of course, but actually his usually invisible pet, Dearth. The quiet hum that followed was her purr of pleasure. He'd seen Dearth once, just after she'd joined Dàn. Rath had to admit the little draconic creature was endearing.

Dàn's hand dropped back to his lap. "I only know that Grant is a half demon and chooses to walk the earth. Ella's words, not mine. I can't see him clearly."

That actually told Rath quite a bit. Grant could be a problem, but Dàn wouldn't be able to see ahead of time to know what kind of problem he would pose. Dàn rarely foresaw events that were of the most personal importance, leaving blank spots in his powerful, precognitive sight. Were the questions that important then? Never hurt to ask.

"What will you be asking this Grant?"

After a long pause, Dàn surprised him again by answering, "Who my father was. Or possibly is."

Well that was a big one! "And this demon might have that information?" Rath asked. Then he thought about how Dàn worried about his parentage. Dàn wondered about his father's identity and about the strange powers that he may have inherited from him. Then another thought occurred to him. "Damn. You think the demon is your father?" he

asked, maybe a little too bluntly.

"I don't know." Dàn used his telekinesis to turn on the radio, an obvious attempt to end the conversation.

Rath reached over and turned the soft rock channel off. "You don't know much about Grant. What do you know about other demons?" The radio flicked back on with the volume significantly higher. The song "Who Will Stop the Rain" by Creedance Clearwater Revival roared from the speakers. Dàn loved this song, and Rath let it play, but as soon as the song faded out, he reached over once more and switched the radio to off.

Dàn sighed. "I know very little about demons."

"I doubt they can be all bad. Especially if Ella is sending us to speak with this one." But then how much would Ella know about demons?

Dàn didn't add any comments, so Rath let the subject drop and concentrated on driving.

He never hesitated to help Dàn in any way he could, but he was beginning to wonder why he was along on this trip. Although Dàn didn't drive often, he was capable. He had a license and a pretty '62 Corvette that didn't get much driving time. He had little need for a vehicle when it came to travel. Dàn could shift more than his shape. He could shift shape, location, and who knew what else. Rath wondered if even Dàn knew his own limits. No one else seemed able to figure them out.

Within a few miles the music came back on. The combination of the tunes and the soothing empathy Dàn constantly exuded made the miles fly by.

Rath was still thinking about all the things that could go wrong when dealing with an unknown demon when they reached Niagara Falls. The dazzling lights from the many businesses along the main street caught his attention. Many of the buildings were decorated in festive Christmas lights, making what could have been a drab and dreary street into a colorful wonderland.

Since they were continually counseled by their more adult family members on caution, their clan had been slow to integrate back into society. Some of their members had only left the family home a few times in the last couple of years. Even Rath had never been to a city of this size

before, and he was surprised by the bright decorations and the many people still out at this time of the early morning.

Suddenly, a small girl darted out from a side alley and ran in front of the car. With a startled yelp, Rath braked and steered to miss her. Before he could shout a warning, he watched the girl run into the next lane and into Dàn's arms.

Chapter Two

Destiny watched as her manager's face turned red with anger. He continued to rant about letting Angel come to the club. She knew children were not supposed to be here while she worked, but she didn't have anyone to watch her. And Angel was always so good. None of the other dancers minded her being there. They thought of her as a little mascot. Even now, Angel was waiting to go home, probably hungry, and still she didn't complain about the delay. Destiny looked over at her forlorn daughter who sat on an upturned box outside the back exit of the North of Nevada Gentleman's Club. They had been on their way home when Frank had stopped her to yell.

Frank yelled a lot lately. Maybe it was time for her to think about getting a new manager. She'd been with Frank for more than three years. He was terrible, but he did get her jobs, which she needed in order to take care of herself and her little Angel.

Frank grabbed her face and pulled her gaze back to him. "Are you even listening to me?" His fingers bit into her cheeks painfully for a moment before he let go.

"Yes, Frank. I know I can't bring Angel to work, that she's not allowed in the building."

"And?" He snarled.

Now she was stumped. He must have gone on to complain about another of her many failings while she wasn't paying attention. She had no idea what, but hated to say so.

"I knew you weren't listening to me," he said with cruel triumph. "I don't know why I bother with you. It's a good thing those men don't come to the club to watch your brain. There's nothing but air in there. Every blond joke I've ever heard was written about you."

Destiny tried to listen without hearing his insults, reminding herself that as bad as he was, he did find work for her. Something she had trouble doing on her own. But why did he have to be so nasty about it? His cousin Joey wasn't like that. Joey and his wife Amanda had taken her in and helped her before Angel was born. Without their help, there was no telling how bad off she might have been.

Angel was growing so fast she'd need new clothes soon. That would cost money and needed to be taken care of before she started kindergarten next fall. Even now, Angel needed a new winter coat. Maybe she could buy that tomorrow. Because Frank kept her working, she could afford a small apartment in a fairly decent neighborhood close to a good school. Because of this new position at the Nevada club, she had enough money that she didn't have to panic at the thought of buying Angel a new coat.

"...and the private party will be at one." Frank's rasping voice broke into her thoughts.

"What? What private party? You know I don't want to dance for private parties." She had managed to avoid doing any of the private dancing since working with Frank. They were better pay, but the idea terrified her. She knew from terrifying, personal experience that some of the men expected more than dancing. The only time she had ever agreed to do one, she'd almost been raped. She was too scared to try again.

Frank's face turned a deeper shade of red as his panting breath puffed out into the chilly air. "You will do this one."

Usually, he was a little more understanding and could be reasoned with. "Frank, I don't do private dancing anymore," she reminded him.

"You will do this one," he repeated.

"No, Frank, I won't." Firm might not be her best strength, but she wasn't going to give in on this. The thought of being trapped and helpless sent a shiver of fear down her spine and brought back the memory of that

night so clearly that she could feel the terror from when the two drunken men had pinned her down. She'd been beaten and almost raped before they'd been interrupted.

"Yes, you will. You were requested. The payment is a thousand dollars. You'll do the job." He held her arms in a painful grip.

She bit down on her lip to keep it from trembling. Something wasn't right? Why was he so upset over this dance? "That is a lot of money, but I still don't want to do the job."

Frank was never very pleasant, but this time he was out of control. He shook her hard then slapped her across the face. "I said, you'll do it." When she shook her head in stunned pain, he took it as refusal and slapped her again.

* * * * *

Rath yelped in surprise when the car, with him still in it, jumped location to land in a space on the curb. A glance at where he'd been in traffic showed a phantom of his car easing forward and making a turn into an alley and then fading away. Dàn was downright scary at times.

Dàn had swept the little girl up out of the path of traffic and carried her back to the sidewalk.

Rath threw the car into park and shut off the engine before rushing to Dàn's side. "Is she hurt?"

"No." Dàn cradled the girl in his arms, awkwardly patting her back. She clung to him and cried quietly. Despite not having much contact with children, Dàn was doing fairly well to comfort the child.

Rath held out his hands in an offer to take her, but Dàn shook his head and cuddled the girl closer to his chest. With a shrug, Rath asked, "Where did she come from? What are we going to do with her?"

"Mommy," the little girl said into Dàn's shirt with a loud snuffle.

"Her mother is in the alley." Dàn shifted her weight slightly. *You should go see to the mother. She is in some need. That's what sent this little angel flying for help.*

Rath nodded and reached out to brush a hand over the child's dark

hair. *Give me a few minutes to settle the problem before you bring her back.*

There was no reason for the child to be put in any more danger.

Of course. Dàn leaned against their parked car and began whispering into the little girl's curls.

Rath strode into the alley, wondering what he would find and wishing Dàn had given him more information. But then, that was very like Dàn. The confidence that he could handle whatever he found was a blessing of a sort. Dàn rarely let anyone walk into something they couldn't handle.

The hair on the back of his neck bristled when he saw the pale man shake then slap the woman he held. She was young and delicate, fragile even. Her petite beauty twisted Rath's animal instincts into a knot. The abusive prick should die for even daring to touch her, let alone causing her pain. Rath's instincts rode him with desire to tear the man apart. She was one to protect and to cherish, never abuse.

A growl slipped free as he approached the couple, but before either could react, Rath grabbed the man by the shoulder and spun him away from his victim.

"What? Let me go!" the man cried out as Rath crushed his shoulder in a fierce grip.

"Perhaps I will, after you apologize to this lady for your ungentlemanly actions." Rath moved his hand to the back of the man's neck and dragged him before the woman. "Now."

"I—I..." The man tried to pull free, but only succeeded in losing his balance and dropping to his knees before the woman. "Jeez, Destiny, call off your thug!"

Rath cuffed the side of his head.

The man cringed away from him. "I'm sorry. Okay? Now let me go."

"Good enough. Now leave." It wasn't enough, but Rath wanted the guy gone. The woman was shaking so bad she might be in shock or hurt worse than she appeared. As it was, her lovely features were flushed with a red palm print where the jackass had struck her.

The man had called her Destiny. Was that her name? In his mind he

heard the voice of the Oracle from so long ago. *This child will find his destiny as the sword of Fate.* That was part of why he stayed at Dàn's side. In Gaelic, Dàn's name meant fate. Rath had always known he was meant to protect Dàn even when he was too young to appreciate the duty. But was this woman *his* Destiny?

The man staggered off with a departing glare, leaving Rath alone with the woman. She stepped back from him and looked about to bolt. "Please don't be afraid. I only wanted to stop him from hurting you."

"Thank you." She looked around the alley, probably for the child.

"Your daughter ran in front of my car—"

"Oh, God! Angel!" She frantically jumped and would have run after her daughter if he hadn't caught her slender frame in his arms.

Rath's heart slammed into overdrive. "She's safe. See, here she comes now." His body caught fire when her fingers dug into his bare arm. But what undid him entirely was her fear, which shot over and through him, bringing his body to life in response, ready to protect her at all costs.

Her voice shook while her gaze took in the sight of Dàn carrying the child toward them. "Who has her? Who are you?" She pushed free of his arms only to wrap her own tightly around her shivering frame.

"This is Dàn, and I'm Rath." He held out his hand, waiting for her to supply her name, praying it would be Destiny. But instead of reaching for him, she reached for her daughter. Only when she hugged the child in her arms did the panic fade from her eyes.

"Mommy, Dàn saved me. And he said his friend would save you. Did he?"

She rained kisses over the girl's face. "Yes, dear, he did. Did you remember to thank Dàn?"

"I did, Mommy. Did you thank your hero?"

"I...guess I forgot to." She shifted her gaze back to Rath. Her teary eyes melted something deep inside him. "Thank you for stopping Frank. I can never repay you both."

"I would be happy with an introduction."

"Goodness. I'm so sorry. I'm Destiny Powers, and this is my daughter, Angel." She shifted her daughter's weight and held out a hand

to Rath.

He slid his palm against hers. "Rath au Julf." He offered her his full Gaelic name, which offered honor to his ancestors, even though she wouldn't understand the significance.

"I really would like to thank you properly. We sometimes catch some breakfast at the diner down the street. It would be wonderful if you would join us."

Dàn's mission was more important than his own need to learn more about this woman, even if she was his destiny. "We should find our hotel and check in, shouldn't we, Dàn?"

Dàn gave him an odd look. "We have time for breakfast."

"Great. We can walk there, if you don't mind. The diner is only at the other end of the block," she said while cuddling her daughter close.

"That would be fine." Much like he thought with his first assessment, this woman needed protection. How could she trust two complete strangers enough to leave with them? Well, at least with them she would be safe. But what would happen to her after they left?

Destiny put Angel back on the ground for the walk. "I can't carry you the whole way, sweetie. You'll have to walk."

"Aw, Mommy. Can Dàn carry me? He's really strong." Angel grabbed onto Dàn's hand while bouncing in place.

Apparently the antics didn't impress Destiny. "Angel, use your manners." She frowned at her daughter then dug through her bag.

"I don't mind," Dàn offered.

Angel jumped up and down, and then leaped into Dàn's opened arms with a happy cry. "Yeah!"

"Angel..." Destiny warned. Angel stopped wiggling and wrapped her arms around Dàn's neck like she belonged there.

The picture of the two of them looked so natural that Rath had to blink several times to remember that they had just met the child. It was more than obvious that little Angel felt safe in Dàn's arms. But then, he usually had that affect on everyone.

"Really, it's okay. I have a niece at home that climbs all over me, and Solas is much bigger than little Angel." Dàn reached out and brushed

his hand gently over Destiny's shoulder.

Rath recognized the motion as one way that Dàn could enforce his will over some humans. He recognized it and struggled to hold back his protective growl. What was it about Destiny that made him so touchy? And against Dàn, which was ridiculous.

"All right then." Destiny still looked doubtful of his willingness. "What brings you to Niagara Falls?" Then she turned her beautiful blue eyes in Rath's direction.

"Well..." Rath was hoping Dàn would answer this one. He wasn't sure how much they should tell her, but Dàn remained typically silent. "We came to see if we could track down an old friend of the family."

"So you and Dàn are family?" she asked.

Such a simple question, yet so very complicated. "Like brothers." In his heart, he thought of Dàn as a brother. In some ways even more than a brother.

Destiny stopped to stare at Rath with her brows raised in surprise. Dàn and Angel walked on ahead a few feet, leaving them a little privacy. "You don't look like brothers. In fact, I don't think you could look any more different if you tried."

She was right about that. Dàn was lean, six foot eight with pale, blond hair, while Rath was eight inches shorter and about fifty pounds heavier. "We were raised together, like brothers."

"Why's that?" Destiny asked as she sped up her steps to close the gap between them and her daughter.

He answered with the truth, but left out the details. "Our parents died and we were adopted by the same man. He raised us both, so we've been like brothers for most of our lives." Athair technically hadn't adopted either of them, but both chose to call him father. Although Acair was their Alpha and leader, Athair would always be their patriarch.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so cruel." Destiny reached over and caught his arm, giving it a light squeeze. The contact sizzled through him, leaving him with a hard ache.

"It's okay. It was a long time ago." A really long time ago. More than four hundred years. Her offer of comfort was sweet, but the pain of

losing his parents had eased with time. Her touch that continued to brand his skin kept his mind firmly in the present and on what he would presently like to do with her.

Destiny's impossibly wide eyes met his. "Still..."

He changed the topic. "What do you do here? Do you live in Niagara Falls?"

"Yes. I've been here since before Angel was born." She hesitated then finished quietly, "I'm a dancer."

"A dancer?" One could make money dancing? He thought humans danced for fun. Maybe this was a different kind of dancing.

Her voice stiffened. "Yes. It's good, honest work, and I'm proud to entertain people."

He'd obviously said something wrong, but wasn't sure what. "I didn't mean to offend you. I was just wondering what kind of dancing."

"Can't you guess? I'm a showgirl. Well, more of an exotic dancer." She spread her long jacket to show she was dressed in red and green costume made of a filmy material that barely covered her body.

"I don't know much about that. Can I watch you dance sometime?" What would that costume show as she moved? Surely its many strips would reveal more than it hid.

"Sure. You and about fifty others, six nights a week."

That many would see her reveal her body? Was that why she was upset by the subject? Maybe he shouldn't watch. The thought of other men watching her body... He swallowed hard to conceal the growl that threatened to escape his clenched teeth.

Rath still wasn't sure why she was upset, but whatever it was, he'd happily take it back if she would relax with him again. He watched her straight back as she marched ahead of him into the diner. They settled into a booth and ordered their meals from the waitress. Dàn was unwilling to give up his new friend and settled her into the seat next to him, leaving Rath and Destiny to share a bench.

"You said you were looking for an old friend. I might be able to save you some time. I know most of the staff and many of the regulars of the North of Nevada Club and a lot of locals come in there."

That wasn't very likely. She seemed far too innocent to know the demon they were here to find. "What do you think, Dàn? You think she might hang out with Grant?"

"Grant? *My* Grant?" Angel piped up.

"Is your Grant tall with dark hair?" Dàn asked.

"Yep, he sure is. But you forgot about his wings." The child giggled at her joke.

"Angel! What have I told you about telling stories?"

"Sorry Mommy, but he does have wings, and horns too." She sank back into the bench as her lower lip popped out in a pout.

Dàn unwrapped the spoon in front of the girl and stuck it to Angel's nose. His tactic worked and within a minute Angel was giggling happily. "I haven't met him yet. What's Grant like?"

"He's fun. Like you. He watches me sometimes while Mommy dances."

"Mr. Grant has been very good to us both," Destiny added.

Rath could see that Dàn was having some trouble reconciling the demon and this seemingly benevolent man the girls described. It bothered him, too, especially when Angel compared Grant to Dàn so easily. Was it possible Dàn was half demon?

Since Dàn turned silent, Rath asked, "Has he been here long? Does he work for the club?"

Destiny tugged at a curl of her blond hair. "I think I first saw Grant about five months ago. As far as I know, he doesn't work at all. That never came up. He is just another playboy here to enjoy the games."

Still the descriptions didn't add up. Was the man a demon? Was he a Good Samaritan? Was he a playboy? What was the truth? "Yet he watches Angel for you?"

"There's nothing between us, if that's what you're asking. One of the girls introduced him to Angel one day, and they adored each other from the first." She flushed at what she probably thought was criticism. "I know what you think, but Angel is very good at judging people."

"I believe you. We just don't know Grant, and were surprised he seems so willing to spend time with a child."

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Surprised and, by Dàn's expression, hopeful.

"I don't know what you've heard, but Grant's a good man."

Chapter Three

Rath sighed as he watched Destiny and Angel leave the diner. He wanted to follow them to be sure they reached their home safely, but he had bigger problems. Dàn had long since given up picking at his meal and now stared silently out the diner window. So far he hadn't commented on what they had learned.

"What do you think?" Rath gathered up the plates and got his money out to pay.

"I think Destiny and Angel seem very nice," Dàn said absently. His stillness was unnerving, but at least he wasn't scaring the diner staff by shaking the walls or flicking the lights.

He pushed at Dàn's mental shields, more to get Dàn's attention than to actually learn anything. He wasn't anywhere near strong enough telepathically to breach Dàn's defenses. "Dàn, what about Grant? That is who we came to find, isn't it?"

His pushing worked. Dàn turned his icy blue gaze on him. "Perhaps. Sounds as though Grant made a good impression on Destiny and Angel."

"Yeah. He doesn't sound very demon-like, especially while Angel was talking about playing hide and seek with him in the costume closets. Are you feeling any more optimistic now?"

"Not yet." The words were a whisper.

"Well, try to. Sounds like Grant could really be decent. And you should give him a fair chance to show his true colors."

"Rath..."

They'd been through a lot together, and Rath recognized the slight annoyance in his friend's voice. "Yes?" Not that Dàn would ever intentionally hurt anyone, but still, an annoyed Dàn wasn't much fun.

Tension crackled between them until Dàn dropped his gaze and looked out the window once more. "I will give the demon a chance."

"Good." Rath nodded at the booth across the aisle where a man slouched over the table. "Check that out." The man's offensive smell told that he'd been drinking and was probably out for the count. But what Rath was motioning to was a young girl who had slid into the bench with the man. She made motions as if to speak to him in low tones, but Rath and Dàn could easily tell she was in fact stripping him of his wallet. Mere seconds and a few deft motions later, she had her prize and was on her way.

As she glided past Dàn, he shifted a long leg out and let her stumble over it, catching her with one hand to keep her from falling. Rath snorted as the girl hurried away, and Dàn showed the retrieved prize. Then he slipped it back into the drunken man's jacket pocket, knowing the victim would never be the wiser to his rescue.

Rath chuckled at Dàn's slick moves.

Dàn, however, was just as serious as before. "We need to get our room so we can be rested for tonight."

Rath stood and dropped enough money on the table to cover the bill. "Have I thanked you lately for the clan's improved financial status?"

"Not since I bought you the car."

"I know I gave you a hard time about using your abilities, but I'm rather glad you did," Rath said as they left the diner and made their way back toward the alley where they'd met Destiny.

"Still think I'll go to hell for unfairly winning the lottery?" Dàn led the way to the front entrance. Unlike the other bright signs and flashy buildings, this one was plain and only had a small sign next to one of the double doors at the entrance. The sign read, *A Gentleman's Paradise. North of Nevada.*

Rath flinched at Dàn's use of the word hell. He didn't mean to, but

with the possibility that Dàn was a demon and talking about him going to hell... well the weirdness was too much. Dàn was probably the least likely candidate for hell that Rath had ever met. "You might, but I'm still glad you did your thing."

Inside the doors was a lobby with a short counter and two more sets of doors.

"Can I help you, sirs?" asked a nicely dressed elderly man from behind the counter.

Dàn stepped forward and laid a pale gray membership card on the counter. "Yes, we'd like to reserve three connected rooms, suites if possible, for an indefinite length of time."

"Hmm, let me see..." The man shuffled the pages of a crème colored ledger. "Yes, we have three suites with connecting doors on the third floor. Will that do, sir?" The man's small nametag read, Emmett, Hotel Manager. When Dàn nodded, Emmett sorted through some keys, pulling them from their hooks. Handing the keys over, he waved them toward one set of doors, which led to a short hallway with stairs and an elevator.

"How do you plan to hook up with the demon who's been up here baby sitting all this time?" As they stepped into the elevator, a swirl of energy signaled the return of Dàn's pet, Dearth. This time she was visible.

He reached up to his shoulder and stroked the tiny, red, winging serpent. "There is much we still don't know. It may not be as innocent as Destiny believes."

"It's not like you to be this negative. Is there anything I should know about going into this venture? Have you seen anything that we should be watching for?" Rath didn't bother to comment about the creature's comings and goings. It could do as it wished, so long as it continued to protect Dàn like it did.

"No, I can see nothing about Grant or the information that I hope to get from him. But then, the one we are looking for is a demon." The little dragon rubbed its head against Dàn's cheek and purr-growled its weird happy sound.

"Figures." Sure would be easier if Dàn could see the things that

were coming for himself more clearly. Of course, maybe it wasn't meant to be easy.

The two continued up to the suites, each of which included a bedroom, bath and sitting room. After the more than hundred years his clan had spent living in the *teaghlach* with each having dug out dens, the suites seemed quite decadent. The changes in the past three years were a bit jarring sometimes. Rath shook his head to clear it of the lost centuries.

The clan still had many problems and he, for one, was glad they were taking their time integrating back into the fast paced human world. "So much is changing..."

Dàn paused at the connecting door to the second suite. "Don't worry too much, Rath. The times always change, and the world will change with it."

"And so must we, if we are to survive." But changing was not always easy.

"Maybe it is not meant to be easy," Dàn replied to Rath's unspoken thoughts. "Don't worry too much for the clan. Better times are upon us. I can see there will be many hardships but also much happiness."

That was encouraging. So often, Dàn's visions offered only disaster. Or maybe those were the only ones he shared? Either way, his promise of hardships was not unexpected. "At least we can be fairly sure of what's going on with the traitors, now that they have settled into Cleveland and claimed it as their territory."

Dàn materialized both their bags and lifted his own to the bed to unpack. "True. They now call themselves the Kodiak Clan."

"The nerve!" Rath's shout sent Dearth blinking out again. "You mean, as if this is an approved splinter of the Bear Clan? As if they weren't exiled for their horrific crimes?" He couldn't believe they dared such a bold move. "Is anyone buying it?"

"More than you would think. Many of the elders remember the honor of Bequf's forefathers, and they are giving far too much credit to Bequf in the hopes that he will prove himself with the building of this new clan."

"How many members has he enticed away? Not too many, I hope."

After watching Bequlf torture Dàn with a specialized set of silver weapons, he'd be happy to see the rogue wolf die in a pool of his own vomit. Instead, Bequlf got away with his crimes and actually had others following his criminal ways.

"He has over fifty in his territory and three times that many claiming his clan without relocating to its center."

Shit. The asshole had himself a small army. "That many..."

"Most are wanted outlaws. He has opened his doors to all exiles, welcoming even the most depraved to join him and thrive under their non-laws."

A rumbling growl slipped out before he could swallow it back. The new clan was a danger to everyone, but mostly to humans. The so-called Kodiak Clan believed in hunting for pleasure, and their favorite type of prey was innocent humans. The fact that they drew so many other renegades with the welcome would be like black powder to the fire. "And Diolain. Who would have believed it?" Díon, as he'd asked to be called, was of their clan no longer. The bastard had attacked a helpless woman and should have been killed.

Dàn sighed and poofed his empty bag out of sight. "Many. Díon has always been an odd fit with us."

Rath pictured Destiny trapped by such a soulless monster. "But what he did was terrible. I never would have believed it, if you hadn't been the one who brought the charges against him." Before the charges, Díon had been odd but never seemed all that dangerous. Yet, Dàn had confirmed the charges that Sgrios had witnessed.

"I know. It is an awful sacrifice."

"I still think he should have been punished within the clan instead of exiled. I can't see how turning the dangerous ones loose like that does anyone any good. And now he has joined up with the Kodiak Clan. No, we should have taken him down, not let him go."

Dàn frowned at him. "You never understood him."

"And you did understand Díon?" Why did Dàn have to make it all such a tragedy? Díon was a bad apple right from the beginning. He was never a part of the clan in any real way. Only Dàn would think of his exile

as a loss.

"Probably not." He paused. "Get some rest, Rath. We have quite a lot to do tonight."

Rath gathered up his jacket and bag, returning to his own connected rooms. His mind drifted back to Destiny and the gentle smile she'd given him when she left. And then the peek of shapely calves below her coat as she walked away. "She was very nice, wasn't she?"

"Pleasant dreams..."

Chapter Four

The casino side of the hotel was really more of a private club. The building was five stories high, and the first two were dedicated to entertainment. Dàn was reasonably sure that without his influencing the security, he and Rath never would have made it through the doors to the main gaming floor. But he had, and this time the calculated use of his powers only gave him a brief pang of guilt.

The second set of doors in the lobby opened into a spacious lounge, which focused attention on the large stage to the back. Along one side stood a long bar, and part of the center offered an area for dining and watching entertainment. The rest of the room and, he suspected, the entire second floor, was dedicated to a variety of games of chance. The second floor was only about two-thirds the size of the first and set up almost like an enormous loft. It, too, allowed for an easy view of the stage.

Now all he had to do was find the demon among the hundreds of pleasure seeking humans.

Dàn opened his senses and searched for what he thought a demon might feel like. When that didn't work, he tried again, searching for any non-humans in the area. That met with better success, much better than he had expected. Besides himself and Rath there were more than a dozen others scattered through the people. A couple of other Valàfrn were in the building but not in the main rooms. A couple of those he couldn't identify were gaming along the left hand wall, so that was the direction that Dàn decided to start with.

Only one of them matched the description of Grant.

Dàn paused and turned to Rath. *Rath, I believe I see him. I would like to speak with him alone.* Even if Rath didn't understand, he would agree.

What do you want me to do?

I'm not sure. Just give me some room, but not too much. At Rath's nod, Dàn moved toward the man who must be Grant.

He stood in front of an automated machine, dropping tokens into a slot, and then pulling the handle, which set the machine in motion. The man's long black hair was tied back in a neat tail, and his clothes were that of a relaxed businessman. In other words, he didn't look like a demon.

The man must have felt his approach. He turned and met Dàn's gaze with a quirking half smile. He studied Dàn for a long moment then turned his attention back to the machine. "Ahhh. You must be the son. I think I remember they named you some god awful thing like Dàn."

The son sounded a bit too close to exactly what Dàn feared. "You're Grant." Dàn stepped closer and watched the strange man. "You're not what I expected."

"Then you must have expected horns. I do understand, but they won't let me play if I show them. And I do love playing these marvelous games. On a good day I think it was a very wise career move." Grant gave a laugh and pulled the lever on the machine. "You, Dàn, are much like I expected. You look like your father in your build and face at least, if not in coloring."

Dàn's breath caught. For a second he compared himself to the demon. He was maybe an inch taller and probably close to the same weight... "You knew my father?" His heart sped up. For four hundred years he had been desperate to find out who his father was. All that time and not so much as a hint to tell him the truth about who or what he was likely to become. The hope of finally learning the truth won out over the fear of what that truth might be.

"Oh, yes. I spent many enjoyable millennia with him."

Dàn restrained the sigh of relief. Grant knew his father. The demon wasn't his father. But then what kind of man hung out with a demon? Was his father a demon like this one? Was he worse?

"You must be wondering about me." Grant dropped another token into the slot and let out a "whoop" when the machine flashed, rang and released a handful of tokens into the cup braced at the front.

"Yes..." But only so he could learn about his father. He'd happily question the devil himself to learn more about his family and about himself, though he hoped it didn't come to that.

"How did you find me? I'm not exactly in the phone book." Grant tapped his chin. "Well actually, I guess I am in the phone book. Is that how you found me?"

"In the phone book? No, I..."

"Not the phone book. Hmm...Is your sniffer over there good enough to track me down by scent?" The demon chuckled softly as he pulled down the lever once more.

For a moment, Dàn didn't have any idea what he was talking about. Then he realized Grant meant using Rath's wolf nose to search him out. "No." His prophetic vision was running haywire. It was always worse when he was under stress, and the demon was firing question at him that didn't seem to make sense. He tried to feel for the truth in the demon's words, but found nothing but static.

"Well, if not the phone book or a good nose... Do you have CIA connections? I know they keep track of me. This might actually be the first time their attention proved useful."

"I don't have anything to do with the CIA."

"Then...no, not the president." When Dàn shook his head, the demon's grin faltered. He turned back to the machine and dropped another token into the slot. "You haven't been hanging out in Niflheim. If you had, I'd know."

"No. I don't know anything about Niflheim."

While his hand absently drew the handle down, the demon's attention turned back with the force of a landslide. Grant's piercing gray eyes pinned him. "Then how?"

How could he get Grant to tell him about his father? He didn't know how to handle Grant. How did a demon live among the mortals so happily? He was nothing like what he'd expected, and the strangeness left

Dàn off guard. "How what?"

Grant snorted at the question. "How did you find me?" He took out a cigarette, offered it to Dàn who declined. "Boy, you are young."

Dàn watched the red glow reflect in the demon's eyes with each casual puff. It was distracting and, for a moment, he wondered if this was a trick of some kind. After all, he hadn't any idea what kinds of powers this demon held, nor did he know what Grant would possibly want from him. "The Kee— A friend thought you might be who I've been looking for."

Grant's jaw fell open. "Whoa, there." He held both hands up defensively. "I'm not into *that*, no matter what your dad says. I'm not that kind of demon... Well, I am, but I'm not into that specifically. Nope, not into guys at all."

Into what? Oh! He thought he was looking for a man? "Umm...no." Why would his father think...? "My dad?"

"Yeah, your old man. I take it you two finally got caught up and that's why you came to find me, right?"

"No." How could he explain? Before he had time to try, Grant interrupted him.

"Then maybe he's finally got his head on straight and would like my company once again. If so, I would be more than willing, but it would have been nice for him to come himself." Grant sounded decidedly put out.

Dàn hesitated a moment, gathering his thoughts then began, "No. That's not—"

"Then he's got himself into some fix and wants my help to get out of it...?" The thought of rescuing Dàn's father seemed to cheer Grant considerably.

"No. I—"

"Oh good grief, I hope nothings happened to him. He's okay, isn't he?" The demon leaned back against the mostly forgotten machine.

Enough was enough. "I don't know. I don't know him. I don't even know his name."

Dàn's snarled words brought the demon up straight. He was about

the same height as Dàn and met his gaze with a blunt directness. "What? Explain yourself, boy."

He couldn't afford to lose control of his temper. As it was an agitation to the air around him acted like a red flag warning. Dàn took a deep breath to calm himself and tried to explain. "I came here to find you, to find out about my father, and to maybe find him if that is even an option."

Grant said nothing, just puffed his cigarette and watched Dàn with a never-wracking calculation. "I see."

"You see what?" Had all of Grant's babbling been designed to set him off balance? If so, it had worked entirely too well. For the first time in ages, Dàn felt completely unarmed and inadequate against a stranger.

Grant took another slow puff on his cigarette. "I see quite a lot. I see you need me, yet fear me."

"I don't fear you." It wasn't exactly a lie. He wasn't particularly afraid of the demon. He was, however, worried about losing control of this meeting and terrified of what the demon might know.

"You do, just not as much as you fear yourself. Tell me, is your friend over there to protect you or me?" The glowing cigarette dipped in Rath's direction.

"He is here for another reason." And mental support, but Dàn wouldn't be admitting any weaknesses to this demon, if he could help it.

"The wolf doesn't have your trust. You wanted to find these answers on your own. You, young Dàn, are afraid of his rejection."

Surely he couldn't read minds... There were many things that Dàn still kept from the Eagle Clan. He was closer to them than any others and still they didn't accept that he wasn't wholly Valàfrn like them. If they couldn't accept that, then they were not ready for what he suspected was the truth. "I trust Rath more than any other."

The demon laughed. "That says a lot, doesn't it? You trust no one with your secrets."

The sarcasm grated over Dàn's usually infinite patience. "Will you help me or not? I only want a few answers."

"Perhaps." Grant leaned back against the machine and slowly

puffed away, carefully blowing tiny smoke rings in a way that was thoroughly annoying. "Yes, I will help you. On one condition."

"What condition?" Dàn would give nearly anything to learn about his father. He offered up a silent prayer that Grant wouldn't ask for anything he couldn't give.

"You must let me show you around town. For as long as you let me lead you, I will answer your questions."

It was too simple. There had to be a catch. "What do you get out of this arrangement? From what I can tell, nothing, which makes me doubt the offer is genuine."

"That is the end of a long tale." Grant looked down at his hands and frowned. "I... I spent a very long time with your father, and I miss him. I want to share him with you for my own sake, to keep the memories of my more honorable lives alive."

Could he trust this demon? Could he afford not to? "What do you have planned for the night then?"

Grant turned back to the machine, dropped a token in, and pulled the handle. "We should go dancing. I can get a couple girls and we can head down to this great club I know about."

"Dancing?" Even with prophetic sight, Dàn never would have guessed that he'd spend the evening dancing with a demon.

"Yeah, dancing. Do you want to invite your friend to go with us?" Grant's brow raised in question. "How close are the two of you? Will I get to keep both girls for myself?"

"Rath is my brother."

"Brother?" He looked Rath over from head to toe. "He is not Jerdin's, nor Vinola's, so how do you mean brother?"

Since Vinola was the name of his mother... "Jerdin?" He'd finally learned the name of his father. A glass-like tightness shattered, easing one of Dàn's oldest desires.

"Jerdin is your father, but don't think you'll get all my secrets so easily. You must mean that you and the wolf were raised in the clan together. Does he know that you are not Valàfrn?"

Not Valàfrn? Then just what the hell was he? What had his mother been?

He'd always assumed he was at least half-Valàfrn. Dàn bit down on the fear that rose with the new knowledge. "Rath has suspicions, they all do, but none know what I am." Not even he knew. Dàn ached with the very meager knowledge that had been passed to him about his mother. Mostly about how she had died while giving birth to him.

"The question then becomes, do you wish for him to know?" Grant asked.

Dàn hesitated. Rath had been his closest friend since the massacre that had nearly wiped out the Eagle Clan. What if Rath couldn't handle the truth? What if he turned away in fear? He paused and reached for his power to see into the future. Would Rath be able to accept whatever it was they learned from Grant? Instead of reassurance, he found only emptiness. His talents rarely offered him comfort. All that was left was faith that Rath would understand, that Rath would not fear him. "I trust him."

"Fine. Call him over so I can say hello." Grant fidgeted with a second cigarette but didn't light this one.

Why was the demon pushing to meet Rath? Did Grant have a purpose beyond the obvious? "Perhaps I don't trust you."

Grant laughed and smacked his hand against Dàn's back in a hardy slap. "Then perhaps you are smarter than you first appeared. Call the pup over."

Chapter Five

Dàn braced his feet against the slap that was far stronger than he'd expected. *Rath, please join us.* "I have called him."

Rath walked over. Outwardly he looked calm, but Dàn could feel the strain rolling off him. He would have to get used to the idea of being around a demon if they were to agree to Grant's demands. They'd be spending a lot of time together if he was going to get answers.

Just as Rath stepped close enough to speak in the crowded room, he was bumped hard from behind and pushed into Dàn's side. The jostling wasn't much of a worry, but the girl who had been shoved against Rath let out a muffled cry.

It was the little thief from the breakfast diner. The same drunk from that morning was now more than alert, and he had the girl cornered.

Rath turned and glared at the man. "What's going on here?"

The man grabbed the girl by her denim jacket and delivered a bone-rattling shake, setting her strawberry blonde head shaking like a broken toy. "She's a thief. She stole my wallet just now, and I caught her!"

Rath freed the girl from the man's rough hands, but settled her between them all to cut off any escape. "Do you have proof?" he asked even though they scarcely needed any after seeing her in action once already.

"Yes, I have proof!" The man straightened his rumpled clothes while still glaring at the girl. "That's my wallet in her jacket pocket. It has my I.D. and everything."

"Okay, girl, hand it over," Rath growled at her. She tried to dart past him, but Rath cut her off with his thick arm.

"I don't have anything." She was a belligerent little thing.

Her response set Rath to laughing. "Dàn? Can you believe we have to retrieve it again?"

The little drama was in part an irritation that delayed any answers that Grant might offer but, on the other hand, it also broke up the building tension. And for that Dàn was grateful. "The wallet's in her pocket like he says."

Rath reached in and pulled out the wallet, then passed it back to the man without ever looking in it. "What are we going to do with you, little thief?"

"Turn me loose?" She smiled up at Rath with a cocky grin.

Rath laughed again, but it was more forced. "I don't think so." His words might have been to the girl, but his attention had shifted back to the man.

"Grant, what's the policy on thieves here in the club?" Dàn asked while using his empathy to calm their volatile group. He focused most of his effort on Rath who was suddenly trembling with tension.

"I'm not sure, but I can take her to security and find out." Grant reached over and took the girl's arm, giving her a tug that almost pulled her from her feet.

"Wait, she has something in her hand." The man jumped forward and grabbed the girl's hand, emptying it of a pocket watch she'd taken.

"Hey! Give me that," Rath said. He held out his hand expectantly, but the man held onto the watch.

He lifted the watch closer to his face and squinted at it. "It looks like mine." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a matching one. "Where did you get yours?"

Rath answered evasively. "I've had it for a long time."

"How long and where did it come from?" The stranger pushed.

Rath stared at the man with a puzzled frown. "I'm not sure where I got the watch, and I'm not sure it's any of your business even if I did know. Where did your watch come from?"

“My father left it to me. Supposedly, one of my ancestors made it. I always thought it was one of a kind, but I guess not. These two seem to be identical”

Grant tapped Dàn’s arm. “You can sort out the big watch mystery while I take little light fingers here to see if she has to walk the plank or be hung at dawn. Have fun.” Grant dragged the girl off.

Dàn never took his gaze from the stranger with his very familiar watch, and he finally put it all together. No wonder Rath was more on edge than ever. This stranger was a descendent of the human who had tried to rape Rath’s sister. Dàn caught Rath’s arm and growled his own accusation. “You’re a Wynne.”

Chapter Six

Grant held on tight to the wiggling nymph-like girl when all he wanted was to turn her over to security or better yet, turn her over his knee. He wanted to finish this business and get back. He looked forward to getting to know Dàn and teaching the whelp how to loosen up.

"Jeez, you don't have to rip off my arm, you great brute." She yanked at her arm as if she had a chance of pulling free. "Relax a bit, would you?"

The cute little thing certainly had spunk. "I would, but I have a feeling you are far too slippery to hold loosely."

"But you should turn me over in one piece, right?" she grumbled. "I don't know why I would expect less from your kind." She sagged in his grip, forcing him to more than half carry her slight weight.

"What do you know of my kind? You're nothing but child, a seed tossed to the wind." Cute or not, her antics were getting on his nerves.

She tugged against his hold again. "I am indeed a seed carried away and moved by the wind. Just like you, Gypsies have wings to carry them where the fates choose."

He stopped so quick he almost fell from the forward momentum. "Wings? What the hell are you talking about?"

She threw back her head and laughed at him with a surprisingly deep, throaty sound. "I see you more clearly than the others, demon. No disguise will obscure your true appearance from my eyes."

"Who are you, that you have such eyesight? You are not descended

from the line." He caught her chin and forced her face up and angled into the better light. "Although the children from my line can see me, you carry no mark."

Her eyes sparkled with anger. "Oh god, no. I am no spawn of yours, you devil."

"Who are you?" How bizarre that she saw his true form. No others could unless he forced his body into the shape of the beast. And frankly, that tended to ruin clothes faster than a Florida hurricane. He studied the girl in his grip. There was a subtle essence to her that was definitely not human. "Ah, now I see. You are no more human than I, at least not by much."

She snorted a very unladylike sound. "I am Gypsy and no more."

The way she said Gypsy made it sound more than human, but he knew better. "You may be Gypsy, but also much more. Who and what are your mother and father, child?"

"I am no child. I'm nineteen now. I just look young," she grumbled

"And use it to fleece innocent marks." Not that he cared whom she chose to steal from, but he was very interested in how she could see him.

"I never fleece the *innocent*. I can see who deserves to lose their money and trinkets, and I only rob them. Fortunately, there are many who deserve to be humbled and few innocents to be found anywhere."

Grant wondered what that meant for the human she'd stolen from twice now. Would he be a problem for them all? Or was the girl just another nut? ">From where do you get this wonderful sight? What are you?"

She stubbornly refused to say another word.

"Fine, then we continue on to speak with security." He pulled her along to the short hall where the security station was housed. Grant was about to knock when a loud voice sounded from within. He motioned for quiet and they both listened, suddenly seeming to be together for this purpose instead of at odds.

"How will we find what he wants?" the voice cried out. "Damn it! He'll be here tomorrow, and I have no idea how to find one young enough to make him happy. His fetish is dangerous, and I don't want him causing

any problems with the patrons."

Another voice spoke but was too muffled to understand.

"I know that! I can't risk his people pulling out of the partnership. I can't afford it. I'd lose the club. If he wants a child, I'll find him one."

There was another muffled response. "Yes, I know. Maybe we can distract him for a day or so, but then he will want the child. The dancers are good, but not good enough to be more than a delay. And thank you for making the arrangements for the party. You're sure you got the best of the dancers?"

This time the other's response was louder but still unrecognizable. "Yes."

"Who?"

There was a scrape of chairs. "Destiny."

"Good. She'll dance for him and more if needed. Whatever he wishes, make sure she'll be given no choice but to give. Wait, doesn't she have a daughter? This could work out very well. Very well indeed." The sound of footsteps and the creak of a floorboard acted as warning.

They were about to be caught eavesdropping.

* * * * *

"I'm Rhys Wynne. Why does that sound like an accusation?" Rhys didn't know these people. What could they possibly know about his family?

"Your family was once close to our family, but there were problems," the blond said, while the brown-haired guy glared at him.

"What kinds of problems?" The only problems his family had ever had were being a bunch of lunatics who believed in the existence of werewolves, ghosts and goblins. More than believed. They'd dedicated their whole crazy lives to the extermination of the monsters. *How ridiculous.*

The brown-haired guy looked like he wanted to punch him, but he wasn't sure why. "A man who carried your name tried to hurt a young woman from our clan." He stepped forward aggressively.

Rhys couldn't help it, he stepped back. The guy must be a steroid freak. He was huge and, with his fists clenched like that, didn't look very stable. He thought back to any family history that might be what this guy was talking about. Then he remembered. But that wasn't the story he had been told or found written in the journal. "The girl's name was Adhar, Gaelic for sky." *She was one of the werewolves, according to the hidden journal.*

"Yes, Adhar. So you do know the story."

"I heard it from my father." His ancestor, his namesake, had fallen in love with the girl. When he had pressed his attentions, she'd supposedly nearly killed him. Then her family had turned on him and forced his family to shun him, breaking the Wynne family into two lines.

The blond guy had his hand on the big guy's arm. "Is your father with you?"

"My father is dead." The words were no easier to say now than they had been two weeks earlier, when he had first spoken them as a question.

"How did he die?" the blond asked. He seemed the more sociable of the two. All the other one did was glare at him.

"A hunting accident." He was off hunting his werewolves and had been found torn into very small pieces. Rhys had no idea what had killed him, and neither did the authorities. But his first guess was that his father hadn't been killed by werewolves.

"I'm sorry. Where was he hunting?"

"Near Cleveland." His father had openly talked about his plans at home. He had planned the Cleveland trip for several months before setting off. He claimed that there was a new coven of werewolves terrorizing the city. And his ever-loyal son had told him how stupid it was and refused to believe him or go with him.

"The hunting can be dangerous up there. It is a shame about the accident," the blond guy said.

Thinking of his father and the senseless way he'd died left Rhys with a choking lump in his throat. "I need to be going. Here's your watch." He held it out to the still glaring one. When he took it, Rhys noticed a ring finger tattoo on the guy's hand. He'd seen that pattern in

the journals along with dozens of others of similar style.

Without waiting for niceties, he turned and left them there, heading for the bar even though it wasn't long into the afternoon.

A horrible thought ran through his mind repeatedly.

What if my father was right?

But he couldn't be right. How could there be werewolves and other monsters living among them? It was just crazy. Fucking crazy.

But what if he was right?

The tattoo supposedly identified the clan of werewolf. The one that man wore, with its feathers entwined, was of the Eagle Clan, which was the one his family had befriended. The Eagle clan was the one that supposedly caused the split in his family.

But all of that, the men had confirmed. That didn't make them werewolves, but if they were it might explain why the guy was still pissed over something that had happened three hundred years ago.

According to his father, they had used mind control to convince the patriarch of the family to disown the son who had made the mistake of falling in love with Adhar. One mistake, and his branch of the family had been severed forever.

That was when the branch decided to fight back. Since then, they dedicated themselves to stopping non-humans from controlling humans.

That was the purpose his father had tried to teach him as he grew up. He had seen the various things brought back that supposedly proved the need to hunt these creatures down, but he'd never believed in the cause. And after college he had openly called his father a charlatan, a liar, and worse.

That was the week his father had told him of the trip to Cleveland. He had gathered a couple other believers, and they were going to hunt down those they claimed were responsible for a series of reported deaths.

The last words Rhys had ever said to his father were accusations.

What if those angry words were terribly misplaced? His father promised to show him everything, to convince him, when he got back. But he'd never come back.

Almost a month after that, only two weeks ago, the police

contacted him about a body that had been found.

The cold bastard at the morgue mailed his father's pocket watch to him still covered in blood. How the asshole had known where to send it, he'd never know. It arrived the same day as the phone call.

Then his father's executor made quick work of the disbarment of the will. Not so hard, since he got it all. About ten grand of equity, and thirty thousand worth of debt.

There was, of course, the vault, to which the executor had a key but no knowledge. Inside the hidden, sealed room was a mercenary's dream playground. Every weapon imaginable with directions for training and active use. Most of it military grade or better. All of it adapted for 'special' targets. Silver, crosses, holy water, garlic, white lazar lights, you name it.

Not that he intended to use any of it. One walk through the room and his only thought was that selling all of the weird crap might pull his accounts back to the black. The one thing that did catch his eye, though, was the journal. It was handmade and bound in white leather. A beautiful work of art. Later, when he'd had the courage to read it, he'd found it full of detailed accounts of his family's battle against evil. There were tidbits of evidence crushed between the pages, but none of it had meant a thing to him.

That was why he was here at the Falls. The journal had listed people who knew about the threat. One of those listed was a step-cousin of his named Karl. One call later and they'd agreed to meet here at the North of Nevada club.

He motioned for the bartender to set him up. Karl wasn't due yet, and Rhys didn't plan to be sober until he had to be.

Chapter Seven

Kita gasped as Grant dragged her out of the hall. He didn't take her back onto the main floor. Instead, he kept to the wall and continued until they reached the shadows to one side of the stage area. Once there, he turned on Kita with an intensity that made her flinch and try to pull from his grip.

"Hold still." He gave her a shake and lifted her from the ground, bracing her against the wall. He stared, but more through her than at her. She could almost see his thoughts whirling, sorting out what was to be done with what they'd overheard.

She studied his demonic looks now from this much more vulnerable position. Even when she first saw him, she'd known he could be dangerous. How could he not be with his powerful build and inhuman strength? She'd told the truth about her ability to see a true being. To her the truth clung to each like a superimposed image, or double exposed film. She'd always had the ability, and there were few things that surprised her anymore.

Many other races lived among humans but outside of their sight, so seeing a horned and winged demon gambling and partying away had only made her look twice. In that second look she had sorted out more of what she could see in him. Honor. She had known from that second glance that this demon was like no other, and he was not as dangerous as one would think.

But now she watched as a fire flared and burned brightly in his

eyes. She reassessed him as very dangerous in the right circumstances; ones like this. His searing gaze sizzled through her, and she almost pitied whoever might dare to anger him. But what had caused this rage? She remembered his long fingers digging into her arm at the mention of the dancer.

"Who is she to you?" She bit out the words while wondering why it bothered her that some woman held his attention so well.

"So, there are some things you can't see? Good."

She didn't like his smug look, but she wasn't sure why it mattered. "Who is Destiny?"

He didn't answer. "I need to think this through. If I let you down will you try to run?"

Damn her curiosity. She wasn't going anywhere, even if Grant did let her feet back down to the ground. "Depends. Do I have any reason to stay?"

Grant's hands eased up on their shackle-like hold. His sexy-as-hell lips relaxed enough to quirk upward on one side. "How about money? A hundred now, and another after Destiny finishes her dance number. That should be enough time to find a plan."

Hmm... Yeah, money wouldn't be bad. His finances might save her time fleecing the public. "When does she start?"

"Any time now. Destiny's first up tonight."

Kita nodded. "Fine by me then."

He set her back on her feet, dropping one hand to fish out his wallet. The hand still resting on her arm felt hot even through her denim jacket, and the now light touch tingled though her, flashing images into her mind of what his naked body might look like—feel like—against hers. Not images she usually had pop into her head at random times.

She shrugged off his hand suspiciously. "What kind of demon are you anyway?"

He casually pulled a hundred from his wallet and held it out to her. "Synn."

Oh shit! Well, that certainly explained the images and her strange reaction to his presence. "Great, an incubus. I thought your kind was only

left loose on the clock." She reached out to claim the money, but he didn't let go of it for a long moment.

Grant's lips tugged down into a frown, and he dropped the money like it had suddenly turned to dog poop. "You could say I'm currently unemployed."

When he turned away, she felt abandoned by his gaze. The temperature fell, leaving her pocketing the money and rubbing her arms for warmth. "What does that mean?" Demons, as far as she knew, were never unemployed. They were either working or dead. Her ability to see creatures like him had made her especially interested in anything nonhuman. She'd been devouring information about various paranormal beings since she was old enough to pronounce the word 'paranormal.'

"It's complicated." His tone of voice killed the subject.

"Wonderful. You're a complicated sex demon. Just what I need in my simple Gypsy life." It was a good thing he didn't want to discuss the topic anymore. She didn't have time to deal with his complications right now. She was here for a reason, and she wanted to get the deed done and get back to her family.

"And your life is simple, huh?"

Hardly. Too much shit had happened to make her life become anything but simple since she'd sworn revenge for what had happened to her little brother, Kaimyn, but Grant didn't need to hear her problems. "Something like that."

Just then, blue spotlights came on and skipped around before focusing center stage where the curtain cracked open slightly. Soft, deliberately fuzzy music floated over them. A long, perfectly formed leg slid from between the curtains then was followed by the attached and equally perfect body, which moved like silk, flowing gently as if carried by the smooth notes. Kita envied the dancer's grace and beauty that inspired every man to focus on her motion. Two other women joined her on stage and they, too, were beautiful, but Destiny was the perfect one that they all wished could be theirs.

And she was the one that this demon would fight for. Why was she not surprised? His dark looks and charm would match her pale beauty

and raw sensuality so perfectly. Together they'd stop and break the hearts of every being they met.

She nearly moaned her despair when she heard his soft sigh and felt his warm breath blow into her short hair.

"There she is." The air from the words sent goose bumps dancing down her spine and a warm flush up her throat. She felt him lean forward, brushing against her back, startling her into looking over her shoulder at him.

His gaze was not following the dancer, but instead rested on a little girl sitting on the far side of the stage almost hidden by the edge of the curtain. *What the hell?* Why was he staring at the child? The little dark haired girl must be the dancer's child mentioned in the security room, but what was she to Grant? Did he get off on little children? She looked back at him, studying his expression. He looked protective, but not sexually interested in the child. Even his demon appearance showed only a tense form of menace that stated that the child would be kept safe at all costs. But why?

"Who is she to you?" She hadn't really meant to ask the question, but restraint was never her strong point.

He didn't answer, only flicked his gaze over her then back to the child.

Kita tried to ignore his warm length pressed against her back and pay attention the dancer and her small child. "Have you thought of a plan yet? She's about half done with her dance."

"No, but she'll dance two numbers." His words caressed her. One of his hands rose and rested on her shoulder.

She brushed his hand away. The sensation left her wanting to try out some of those vivid images involving them both naked and sweaty. He was far too distracting for her well being. A little space might help. She stepped to the side and missed his warmth at once. Which pissed her off. "Just tell her to not dance the private party."

"She doesn't dance private ones now, so simply telling her won't do." His usually unseen demonic wings shifted slightly, as if he were stretching tight back muscles. She wanted to touch him and feel those

massive muscles that were so casually hidden from most of the world. "I'm more worried for Angel."

Across the stage, a woman peeked in beside the little girl, then they both went behind the curtain. As the girl turned, Kita saw something that completely explained Grant's interest in the child. Fragile-looking black wings sprouted from the child's shoulders. Black rag wings that matched Grant's in color and texture, if not in length or strength. Unreasonable pain shot through Kita. "She's yours. Your child."

A long silence met her statement before he answered. "No, but she is of my blood many times removed."

The child wasn't his daughter. For some bizarre reason that knowledge made Kita want to jump for joy. Part of her had bound up Grant and the dancer in happy matrimony. Although he hadn't said he wasn't interested in the dancer, the fact that the child wasn't the product of their *love*, gave her a shot... But a shot at what? "Is that your interest in her, one of guardian?"

"Yes, of a sort," he said quietly.

It was none of her business and she still wasn't sure why he was bothering to answer any of her intrusive questions. But her curiosity continued. Maybe because as long as he was here answering her questions, for at least that long, she had some claim on him. "Does she know?"

Grant drew back slightly. "Yes, but Destiny doesn't. She's not ready for that knowledge just yet."

His paternal protective instincts affected her deeply. He could so easily walk away from the whole situation, yet he didn't. He could just as easily walk in and crush the men who were a threat. Instead he looked at the situation almost as a human would. Working around it, protectively circling his wagons. The strangeness of it rang of an honesty that she respected and wanted to be a part of.

Kita reached out and caught his arm with one hand, drawing his attention back to her. "Okay. How do we protect them?"

He froze. The muscles of his arm locking into stone under her hand. "We don't."

She laughed. Kita couldn't help it. She'd expected him to say just those words in just that tone, and hearing them burst from him was like an echo from her mind. An echo she fully intended to ignore.

He jerked his arm from her grip. Then his wonderful hands jumped out and grabbed her upper arms. "I don't know or trust you. *I* will protect them." His eyes darkened as he pulled her close enough to brush her small breasts against his chest.

Kita widened her blue eyes and blinked them in all innocence. Whether he agreed to help or not, she would be a part. But for now she wanted him to think of her as young, so she played on her youthful appearance. "But I can help. I can—"

The momentary desires disappeared in a blink as he set her back from his body and freed her arms. "You can stay out of the way. You look far too much like a child to play any part in this."

She bit back her smile. He was seeing exactly what she wanted him to see. Though, she did miss that heavy-lidded look of arousal. "But my looks could be useful."

"No." He pulled out the second hundred and handed it over.

She thought about refusing it, but money was money, and he seemed more than willing to hand his out. "Fine," she said, all the while thinking of how she could help to keep the child safe, with or without his permission. She planned to do her part regardless of what Grant said. "How about I keep an eye on them while you go back and talk to the shifters, since the bad guy won't even get here until later tomorrow."

Grant hesitated. His gaze darted to the stage then back across the room where he'd left his friends. "I do want to speak more with Dàn."

"Go ahead. I'll watch over the girls until they head home tonight." When he hesitated, she pushed onward. "I can even come tell you when they've gone, if you tell me where you'll be."

"That might be all right, I suppose, but just for tonight. Tomorrow you make yourself scarce. Deal?"

"Deal." She turned away, planning to slip into the crowd so she could get closer to where her new marks had gone. Marks of a different kind perhaps, but still the marks that her sharp eyes would watch.

Grant caught her arm and spun her back around. "You may need more money for cover, to spend on the slots or something." He pulled his wallet from his pocket and lifted out two more c-notes.

"You must love to give away your money. I certainly hope you can afford it."

"You've heard of Whammies Super Centers?" When she nodded, Grant continued. "I own them. So yes, I can afford it."

She chuckled. "I always knew those stores were demonic." Instead of taking the bills he held out, she reached over and lifted his wallet slowly, allowing him plenty of time to object. He didn't object, only grinned down at her audacity, watching as she checked the contents, handed back his identification, and pocketed the rest. "There, that should give me plenty of cover for the night, and a good reason to stay out of sight tomorrow."

"Good." He must have believed her. Grant ran his hand through his long black hair, neatening and retying the length with what looked like a strip of black leather.

Damn, the man had sexy hair. "Where will you be later?" Maybe by then he might even see her as more than a child.

"I plan to take my new friends to the Happy Hill for dinner and dancing. We will probably be there until they close. Do you know the place?"

She smiled to herself as he straightened his already neat suit jacket. "Oh yes, I've been there plenty." She'd actually only been to the bar once, but she kept that to herself too. This time when she turned away, he let her go, but she felt his heated gaze on her back as she wound through the crowd.

Chapter Eight

Rath watched as the demon left the shadows beside the stage to saunter back toward them. His sharp eyesight easily spotted the thief darting off through the crowd.

Why had he turned the little criminal loose?

He didn't trust the demon. Maybe it was the simple fact that he was a demon and if so, did that make Rath a bigot or just smart? Whatever it was, the demon set off his bullshit radar. Dàn, though, seemed completely taken in.

So what had changed between the diner this morning and meeting the demon tonight? Why was Dàn now ready to do whatever the demon asked? More importantly, what would Rath have to do to keep Dàn safe?

Grant walked back to where Dàn and Rath waited. He glanced over his shoulder a couple of times toward the shifting crowds and the empty stage.

Rath extended his senses, but couldn't read Grant even as he returned to their sides. Even without his empathy, Rath could tell the demon was nervous about something.

"Any problems with the girl?" Dàn must have sensed the same or more than Rath.

"Well..." Grant smoothed his suit jacket. The motion was done almost absently as if the demon found comfort in his tailored clothes. "I didn't turn her over to security."

What the demon then told them about the overheard conversation

and the threat to Destiny and her daughter sent a wave of emotion through Rath in a confusing variety that together felt much like pain.

Grant went on to explain how he'd left the troublesome girl to watch over Angel and Destiny.

How ridiculous. The little thief was barely more than a child herself. "Not that I'm saying I doubt your decision, even if I do, but what exactly can one small girl do to protect them?" To Rath it was no better than them being completely defenseless. What they needed was a strong man to watch over them, not some brat.

"Kita is more than she appears, but I only asked her to watch them tonight before this man is to arrive. They should not be in any danger until tomorrow evening."

"I would feel better if more eyes were watching over them," Rath growled lowly.

"You should take Destiny and Angel to dinner. Then you can watch over her as well," Dàn suggested.

"That's not a bad idea," said Grant. "But you should know that Kita, the thief, knows what you are."

Why did that not surprise him? The demon had wasted no time betraying them to the strange girl. "What did you tell her?"

"I told her nothing. She has talents of her own."

"Does she?" Dàn didn't seem fazed by the demon's news, and that was some comfort to Rath. "How interesting. Will she cause Rath any trouble?"

Grant faced him. "I doubt you will even see her, but I would like you to watch out for Kita if you can, if she'll let you. I don't believe she can be nearly as skilled as she thinks, and she may need help if she gets into another fix."

Frankly he didn't give a shit if the little brat got herself locked up for her thieving ways. Maybe then she might learn to keep her fingers to herself. All that really mattered to him was watching over Destiny. Where had that thought come from? How did she come to be on the short list of beings that he would risk his life to keep safe? He had even thought of her safety before Dàn's in this case. "Are you okay with this, Dàn?"

Dàn laid his hand on Rath's arm and, through the connection, he felt Dàn's confidence that this was the right course. "Yes, you should go watch over her. Call if you need me."

Rath nodded and strolled toward the stage area, weaving his way through the crowd toward the stage. People made room for him in the front row. One man actually left a chair to move further away. He sometimes had that effect on humans.

He took the seat and watched the empty stage. So this was where Destiny danced... The thought of her up on the stage before all these strangers left his stomach in a knot. Even now, between dances, the tang of the men's arousal burned Rath's nose. How did she do it? *Why* did she?

He could easily picture his adopted sister, Allaidh, teasing the men into a sexual frenzy, but Destiny was different. She didn't seem to have Allaidh's wild ways.

The spotlights swirled over the empty floor, drawing attention to center stage. Soft country music eased up to fill the area. The curtain jumped back to reveal a woman in spiked boots, sheer satin pants, halter-top and gun belt.

Not Destiny but another dancer.

She danced in a saucy sashay across the stage, each motion smooth and provocative. She worked the edge of the stage the most, and that was when he noticed small cups built into the frame. Some of the men watching were pushing money into the cups. It seemed the more money was given, the more attention she paid to that area of the stage.

She was selling herself for the entertainment of these strangers.

No, that wasn't quite right. Or maybe it was, but it wasn't wrong, was it? She was dancing. The men enjoyed watching. Yet... What was it that bothered him?

Nothing bothered him with this dancer, but the thought of these men lusting after Destiny drove an icy rage into him.

Jealousy? Oh yes. His gold eyes might even be glowing green. He didn't want to think of Destiny sharing her beauty and grace with other men. But who was he to tell her not to? He had no reason to even ask it of her. Still, in his imagination he pictured Destiny dancing before the men

and catering to their calls for attention.

He'd come over to watch her dance, and now couldn't fathom watching without chasing off the other men. What was wrong with him?

The cowgirl dancer finished up her dance by drawing her fake guns and shooting them off to special sound effects. Then she was off the stage. The lights dimmed and Rath started to turn away. But then he noticed none of the other men were moving off. If anything, they were settling in and jostling for better spaces. The shifting around settled down and servers came through with refreshments.

A young man came around the stage and emptied the cups. When he got in front of Rath, he caught the boy by the arm.

"Is the show over?"

The boy looked surprised by the question. "No, Sir. There is plenty more. You'll want to at least watch the next dancer. She's amazing." He raised an arm to catch the eye of the server. "Hey, Ebony, bring this guy a drink, would you?" Then he moved off toward the door to back stage.

Rath relaxed into his chair. So there was more. That explained why everyone was still waiting. But why was the next act so special?

The waitress, Ebony, brought over a glass and a pitcher. "Beer, or would you like something stronger?"

"Beer is fine." Far as he knew, nothing would affect him, so the usual fair was as good as any, and he was getting quite fond of the American ales. Though, it was an acquired taste and not much like the meads of the old days.

The tables in front of center stage were all filled, and more men gathered behind the tables and closer to the stage on either side. Conversations rumbled like growling puppies. Excitement was almost a color shading the air over the waiting crowds. The scent of the humans' emotions was flecked with such rich variety that Rath found it almost intoxicating. He wasn't particularly strong empathically, but this wash of humanity laid like a thick blanket over them all.

He opened himself to the experience and accepted in all the emotions. Many, perhaps even most, were simply filled with excitement, but others had more depth. Not quite joy, or hope, but a lifting of spirits.

An optimism.

Whatever was coming offered these men a special element that had been missing before.

The stage lighting brightened to a point and silence descended over the crowd. Into the deafening silence, a soft lullaby floated out of the speakers. Then Destiny was standing in the bright light with sparkling red, green and gold confetti fluttering down over her.

He hadn't seen her move to the spot, but the crowd's response was instantaneous. They clapped and whistled, but only until Destiny took her first step. Then they settled back into silence.

She was dressed as a fairy, with glittering transparent wings that matched the flowing gauzy gown. Despite the fact that a large part of her body was showing, she was the essence of innocence. Her every motion as she performed an exaggerated waltz with an imaginary partner was that of a child dreaming. With her eye contact and flowing elegance, she welcomed others to join her in the magic.

Rath tore his gaze away from her to study the men's reaction. Every single one stared at the stage, enraptured by Destiny's presence.

Even more interesting was the scent of the emotion she inspired. It wasn't lust or arousal, though both were present. It was something much more precious.

Destiny changed her routine and began to work the edges of the stage. At the same time, she picked up a microphone and began to sing the dreamy lyrics of the song. The sound was both sultry and relaxing. But overall it was sexy as hell.

As she worked her way to his edge of the stage, two men rushed forward in front of Rath. Like others had, these men pushed money into the cup and waited for her to offer them the attention they so badly craved.

Rath bit down on the urge to drive the humans away from the stage, away from Destiny. His every instinct said they were a threat to her and it was his duty to protect her. She wasn't his and yet...he couldn't bare the thought of her with any other.

This was insane.

He had to get a grip and get it pretty damn soon. He was all but growling, and all the men had done was enjoy her performance like the others.

Rath tried to close his vision to all the men and focus only on Destiny. She was gorgeous. Her filmy dress flared out as she rotated her hips. Her loose top accented her full breasts. And dear God, her voice trembled through him, leaving a path of destruction behind.

He was lost.

He was also standing right behind the men, just as eager for a moment of her gaze as they were. She handed the microphone to one of the two humans, then danced and sang to the three of them as if the rest of the world had never existed.

And for Rath, perhaps it never had. His every sense danced with her. She filled him up to overflowing. Nothing else mattered except Destiny's assurance it would all be right.

She knelt before them and brushed her fingers over each of the humans in the lightest of caresses. Then she took back her microphone and moved on.

He wanted to go with her, to follow wherever she might lead, just to be in her presence, to bask in her comfort.

The man to Rath's right must have felt the same thing. He leaned forward and began to jump up onto the stage.

Rath grabbed him by the shirt and, with a slight shake, settled him back on his feet. The fellow swayed and jerked away from Rath. Then both men shoved more bills into the cup and moved off to give Rath more room.

Rath hovered at the edge of the stage, but she did not return to him. Before long the dance was over, and Destiny was slipping behind the curtain.

She was magical. She had some ability to bespell men with her charms. What other explanation was there?

But he hadn't felt any magic on her when they'd met and, as far as he knew, neither had Dàn. Surely he would have mentioned it if she had any powers or was a sorceress. Could she be one of the witchens, those who

used earth energy to do magic? He'd only met a few in his lifetime, and never one who felt like Destiny did.

He sank back into his chair while his body ached to chase after her.

Before he went off to track her down and figure her out, he'd better get control of his body. As it was, his arousal would be obvious to anyone with eyes, let alone the alpha pheromones he was putting off in challenge to any male in the way.

Damn.

He sipped the beer and watched as the other men scattered. The violent possessive side of him wondered how many of them would be leaving to pleasure themselves or find another willing female to ease the arousal that Destiny had brought forth.

It was an ugly thought, even as his own body wanted him to play the game of lying pleasure, begged him to find any willing female and use her while thinking of Destiny.

No.

Strength, honor, courage. The way of the clans. He would sit here and think of other things until he had control of his wayward body.

Several minutes passed with only the image of Destiny's glitter covered eyelids framing her brilliant blue eyes.

Chapter Nine

"Destiny, can we talk?"

She froze at Frank's voice. *Where is Angel?* She glanced around the large dressing area and realized that Sandy, her dance partner, must have chosen now to sneak Angel into the costume room. "What is it, Frank?" She turned to him, hoping to get this conversation over before Sandy and Angel came back out.

Frank stood awkwardly in the doorway holding his battered hat in his hands. "I'm really sorry about how I acted in the alley. Will you forgive me?"

Her hand crept up to touch where he'd slapped her. The mark was gone. It hadn't bruised, but the memory of it still stung. "Why should I?"

He crumpled the hat in his fists. "Look, I'm sorry. I was desperate and scared..." His voice stuttered to a stop, and he took a step back, as if he was about to leave.

Frank wasn't very pleasant, but the attack the night before had been out of character. Maybe she should at least give him a chance to explain. "Frank? What's going on?"

He shook his head sadly. "I don't want you involved. I've got some bad problems, and you'll need to find a new manager soon. Maybe real soon."

She'd been planning to anyhow after he slapped her. But the way he said it sounded as if... "Frank? Please tell me. Maybe I can help."

"Well... No, I won't ask you to."

What was going on? Frank would never be called suave, but he was usually fairly confident. "Is this about that private party?"

"No...well, sort of. I know you don't dance those anymore. I shouldn't have asked you. I wouldn't have asked if it weren't so important."

Something wasn't right. Frank was never this...scared sounding. What was happening? "Why did you need me to do the party?"

"Des, I made a big mistake. I...I don't gamble very often, but a while back I lost big to someone not very nice to those who fail to pay up."

She shivered at the thought of being involved with anyone who could scare Frank like this. She'd thought he was done with his gambling problem. She hadn't even seen him inside the Nevada Club in the last year. "And the dance is what, payment?"

"Yeah. A connection I have cut a deal with the guy to get me clear. For the cost of my home and the best dancer in town, he will...uh...let me live."

"Let you live? How horrible." Poor Frank... But how could he ask her to dance for that kind of men? How could she say no? She was still friends with his cousin who'd taken her in off the street when she'd reached the end of her money. She owed Joey and Amanda so much... How could she look them in the eye if she didn't help Frank?

"I'm sorry I roughed you up. I don't know what came over me. I was just thinking of how I already sold my house and cashed everything I can, and it would be worth nothing if I couldn't talk you into dancing."

"I'll think about it."

"No, I'm not asking you to. I know you're scared of what could happen."

She hated the thought of being involved with killers. The very thought of it brought back memories of the men who had hunted down Angel's father. That kind of violence was beyond her understanding. After watching Angelo die, she hoped she never understood it. "If I don't dance at the party, how will you get out of it?"

"I...I asked my connection to talk to him, but he refused. I'll have to run for it."

"Run? Where will you go? How will you live?" She and Angelo had run, and look how badly that had ended. Him dead and her forced to hide for the rest of her life.

"I don't know. I don't care. What scares me is this guy might come after my family, and I don't know how to keep them safe."

"Your cousins? Joey and Amanda? Would they be in danger?" Joey was a sweet guy. He didn't know anything about Frank's problems. He and Amanda ran a little souvenir shop. She couldn't imagine them ever getting into this kind of trouble on their own. And she couldn't handle it if

they were hurt.

"From what I hear, yeah. I just don't know what to do..."

She sighed. She knew what had to be done. "Listen, I'll do the dancing. Do you think they would allow someone to come with me? Like an assistant, maybe?"

"You mean like a bodyguard?"

"I could feel safe then, I think." She hoped so anyhow. It was hard to pull off sexy dancer when you were scared of the patrons.

"I think I could set that up, but are you sure you can do this?"

"Yeah, just set it up." Destiny sank back into her chair as Frank left to set up all that needed done. Angel and Sandy peered out of the costume room. They must have seen Frank out here and been hiding until he left.

"Are you really going to do it?" Sandy asked.

"I guess so."

"Make sure you get someone you trust to watch your back." Then Sandy grabbed her bag, getting ready to leave too. "I don't know why you put up with him or why you would even consider doing that party. I happen to know how you feel about private dancing.

Angel pulled off the Santa hat that she'd been playing with. "Will Grant watch over you, Mommy?"

She pulled her daughter close for a hug. "Maybe he would. Do you think I should ask?"

Sandy paused at the door. "Well you'd better ask someone. I just don't trust that Frank. I think he'd sell you in a second to save his butt."

Sandy was right. She just didn't feel safe with Frank anymore. Maybe she never had, but now Frank's actions put even Joey and Amanda in danger. Probably the dance wasn't that big of a deal. The other dancers did private dancing all of the time. She could do it this once, if that was what it took to keep Joey and Amanda safe.

"Mommy, did you know Rath watches over Dàn? Maybe he could watch over you, too."

Rath with the golden eyes. She'd almost forgotten the song lyrics when she saw him so close to the stage. She'd looked over the two younger men and there he was, such a huge man, intimidating,

waiting...watching. "Is that so? Well, it's time we get some food, honey. Shall we?"

"Okay."

She gathered up their things and led Angel out of the dressing room. And crashed into a solid wall of flesh. Her startled scream cut off as she met Rath's glowing golden-eyed gaze.

* * * * *

Dàn looked around the bar that Grant had taken him to. It was loud and filled with people. The festive atmosphere was chaotic, almost overwhelming. Every doorway and much of the walls were draped with garlands baring the weight of ornaments and flashing lights.

"You see, Dàn, you just need to relax and have a good time. We need to find a couple girls and dance the night away. Wait here. I'll go get the girls," Grant said, giving Dàn no chance to comment before he disappeared into the crowd. Two minutes later he was back with a beautiful girl on each arm. Both were dressed as Santa's elves. "Since I picked them both, you may have your choice. Do you prefer blonde or brunette?"

Since this really wasn't Dàn's idea to begin with, he didn't have a preference. Both were attractive and seemed happy to be with Grant. When Dàn looked at the brown haired girl, she smiled up at him and flicked a tinsel garland over her shoulder like a boa. Her smile was very nice, reminding him a bit of his friend Maura from the Bear Clan.

Grant gave the girl a gentle push his way, and she willingly wrapped her arm through Dàn's.

The girls walked with them toward a table near the edge of the dance floor.

Grant held the chair for his date, while the second girl seated herself. Then Grant led Dàn to the bar.

"The secret to having a good time is tequila. Most alcohol has only a diminished effect for us lucky few. But tequila is every bit as potent to us as anyone. I had a wolf once tell me it was the worm. It brought out the

hunter in him. How I wish I had this back in the days with your father. Without it, it took most of two centuries to get him to loosen up. With it, I should be able to show you the brighter side of life starting right away." Grant turned to the bartender and ordered two bottles of amber liquid then passed one to Dàn, collected glasses, and then led them back to the table near the dance floor. Once seated, he poured a glass for each and drank his own in one swallow before refilling.

Dàn smelled the drink and noticed that the girls each waved off the tequila in favor of ordering from the waitress.

"Drink up. It won't hurt any and should wash away any stress you have built up."

Dàn lifted the glass and sipped, but hesitated at the burning sensation following the drink. The taste was different from any other he'd tried, and he couldn't imagine why people would chose to drink such a thing. He set the drink down.

"Drink. I know it's harsh, but it is well worth it."

Dàn took a longer drink and studied the taste and effect. "I don't feel any different."

"It takes three glasses to notice. Maybe four for you. So, drink up."

What would it be like to be carefree, without responsibility, even for a short while? Could this drink offer a reprieve from his visions? The temptation was too much. Dàn drained the glass in a long swallow just as Grant had. He did the same with the second and the third. Then he waited. Still nothing, but Grant had refilled his glass again.

Grant was a mystery. Should he trust the demon? He believed what Grant said so far, but he really didn't know much about him. Perhaps he should have thought of asking more before trusting him about the tequila.

The brunette stood and took the blonde girl by the hand. "We're going dancing. Enjoy your chat, boys." They giggled and headed off for the dance floor.

All the questions from centuries of wondering welled up in Dàn. But above all others was what had happened to his mother. "Was it you who brought my mother back to the clan?"

Grant swallowed and took a sip of his drink. "Yes."

"Why you?"

Grant met his gaze with a degree of grief that surprised him. "You mean why not your father. Those were very dark days. Jerdin had been taken against his will, and left me to watch over her. When I saw how badly injured she was, I thought her clan could help her better than I could."

"I thought my father had abandoned her or possibly been the one to hurt her." He had thought many terrible things.

"If you believe nothing else, know that Jerdin loved your mother dearly, and you as well, once he learned of your birth."

Dàn felt the emotion cracking within him. The beast cried out with pain over all that had been lost. He fought the pain back down and focused on the positive. "He knew about me? My father knew about me?"

"Yes. But he wasn't able to contact you."

The knowledge that his father had known about him all this time and never tried to contact him was a two edged sword. "Why has he never contacted me in over four hundred years? Why was I never even told his name? Even now he could be out there and I wouldn't know my own father even if I set eyes on him."

"Dàn, I have not contacted him since the year 1625. That's why I don't know if he lives or not. But I can assure you that if you met him in person, you would know each other at once. There is no doubt in my mind that Jerdin has a strong connection to you even if you are not yet aware of it."

1625. Sixty-three years after I was born. "Could you contact him if I asked?"

Grant wouldn't meet his gaze for a long moment while slowly lifting his drink, then he turned to face the other way and sipped again. "Could I contact him? Probably. But that may not be wise."

"Why not?" What wasn't wise about finally meeting his father?

"Your mother's death was very hard for him to take. He did not deal with it well. Not well at all."

"Is he still being held against his will?"

"As far as I know, Jerdin is sleeping. You need to understand that

he became violent and would have been a danger to himself, the world, and everyone in it. He was forced to ground until time could heal his pain enough to return. I don't think it would be wise to wake him."

"Ever?" The thought of his father out there, somewhere, imprisoned, seemed like an awful future.

"Until Cernunnos decides to."

"How is Cernunnos a part of this?" Dàn had been contacted by Cernunnos several times in his lifetime, but he'd never known why the god had taken an interest in him. The first time had been before their village was attacked. Cernunnos had warned Dàn and showed him how to hide any people he could get out safely. Another time had been a few years ago when the god had saved his life again.

Grant's jaw fell open. "You really don't know...?" Then the demon regained his composure and just looked uncomfortable. "He is your grandfather. Jerdin's father."

No, that couldn't be. "But Cernunnos is a god. I thought my father was a demon like you."

"No, he is no demon. Basically, Jerdin is a god, and so are you." At Dàn's doubtful look, Grant continued. "There are many layers of beings called gods. Don't start thinking the rest of us will be bowing down to kiss your ass. Trust me, we won't be."

"I'm no god. I'm Valàfrn."

Grant refilled their drinks. "That, too, more or less. Not everyone can claim only one family. We all have many roles to play in this world, and even more when considering the other eight realms."

Dàn thought about what he'd learned so far. He'd never considered the blood that made him different from his clan could be a good thing. To him it had always been the fear of what he could become that drove him in his search for answers. If what Grant said was true, maybe it wasn't all bad. But was Grant an honest kind of demon? "What role do you play?"

Grant gave him a lopsided grin. "I am a companion for now."

"A companion for whom?"

His smile slipped away. "For Jerdin, until he went to ground. So I guess you could say I'm between jobs."

"Four hundred years of unemployment must be some kind of record."

Grant shook his head. "More of a long vacation and, after four thousand years, I'd say it was well earned."

That sort of made sense, but Dàn was still worried by how little he knew about the demon. "What are you exactly?"

"You already know that. I'm a half-demon. Tascryn demon, to be precise."

"What else? There is much more to you than that."

"Isn't that enough? Guess not. My father was not who they thought. I have very little human in me. I, too, carry the blood of the gods." Grant winked at a passing woman before continuing. "Your father and I traveled together for a very long time. One of the first places we visited was the land my father came from. I was told he was a human and of no consequence. He was the son of Rah and, if not for another destiny, he would have been the first pharaoh. Instead, with a little help, my uncle became pharaoh. We saved him and set the path before moving on."

Dàn studied him and could sense no lies in Grant's words. "And there is still more to you, some part I don't recognize."

"You do ask a lot of questions. But I suppose that is why you're here. Okay, you want to know all my secrets? My mother is not just any demon. She and her mate rule over the Tascryn demon legions. Being a feeble little mortal, I was given Cyvampis blood to extend my life. Without it I would have died long ago. With it, and the occasional nip of blood, I haven't."

Dàn didn't know much about the mortal and immortal rules over such things, but he thought if Grant truly had a god-like Rah for a grandfather, then he would surely have more than a mortal life. "Even with the blood of Rah?"

"Yes. I see your doubt, but sons of Rah were mortal. I was mortal."

"Mortal or not, you must be powerful."

Grant frowned. "Not as much as you would think. My powers were corrupted and bridled, but that is another story. How are you feeling?"

"Not too different, but tired in a relaxed way."

"Good. Now it's time to dance."

Chapter Ten

Rath caught Destiny's petite body against his chest. His arms paused, as if they liked the feel of holding her. And he had to agree. She fit perfectly, and it took all his effort to move his hands to her arms and set her away from his body.

"Oh! What are you doing here?"

He drowned in her wide blue eyes. "I was waiting for you. I watched your dancing and wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed it."

"Thank you."

He pushed a stray curl of blonde hair back from her cheek. The tingle of something elemental shot through him at the light contact.

"Would you like to have dinner with me?"

"I would!" Angel said.

Destiny hesitated for a moment, catching her lower lip between her small teeth. Then the shadows fled and she smiled up at him. "I think that would be nice. Where did you want to go?"

"I don't know what's good around here, so you can pick any place you want."

She looked nervously around. "We can't stay too late. Can it be somewhere close?"

Why was she afraid of him now? Had he done something wrong? He shrugged his shoulders slightly and tried to relax his tight muscles, hoping it would make him less intimidating. "Sure. We can go wherever you would like. What would be open this time of night?"

"Oh... I hadn't thought of that. Not much."

"Can we go to Eat-n-Park or McDonalds? Can we?" Angel was tugging on her coat, and Destiny had to stop to help her with it.

"I don't think that's what Mr..." She turned to him with a brow raised in question. "I don't remember your last name, Rath."

"It's Julf, Rath au Julf."

"That isn't the kind of restaurant that Mr. Julf had in mind, Angel."

Rath had no idea what either place would be like. "If that's where you want to go, it's fine with me. Really, it is."

"Well, okay. At least it shouldn't be busy this time of night. We can go to the McDonalds then. It will have a little play area for Angel."

"I've never been in a McDonalds restaurant before. What are they like inside?" He was hoping for candles and a chance for some romance.

"It's a fast food place."

"No candles or wine?"

Destiny's face took on a wistful glow. "Oh, no. Definitely no candles or wine, though that does sound nice."

Rath wanted nothing more than to find a place to take her where she could have whatever dream she was thinking of. "Perhaps you will let me take to a slower food restaurant on some other night?" He caught her hand and let his fingers stroke over her smooth skin. "Do you usually go out to eat after your shows?"

"No, usually I get Angel home so she can sleep at least part of the night in her own bed. I don't know what we'll do in the fall when she starts school."

He followed her out through the back doors of the building and into the alley where they'd first met. "Why?"

"She's a night owl, like me. We both stay up most of the night then sleep past noon, and I think that will be a big problem when she has to stay up during the day for school."

"Oh, I see what you mean. Are all schools during the day, or could you send her to one at night?" He watched as Angel danced ahead of them down the alley.

She laughed. "I don't know of any night schools for kindergarten."

Her laugh softened his nervousness. When had getting her to like him become so important? "Oh."

"Angel, come back here and walk with us."

The little girl spun about in a circle before running back to them. Then she held her arms up to Rath expectantly. "Will you carry me, Rath?"

Destiny frown a little when he picked up Angel but all she said was, "Where did you go to school, Rath?"

He'd never gone to school of any kind. His childhood had been over before any kind of centralized school system was set up. And later, he couldn't have asked for a better teacher than Athair. "I learned everything I know from my family."

"Home schooled... I wish I could do that with Angel."

Her voice was so wistful, he asked, "Why can't you?" With Angel snuggled in his arms, he couldn't think of anything nicer than the chance to teach the little girl all he knew about the world.

"I never finished school. I couldn't teach her."

He couldn't imagine any teacher being better than a parent. Especially a mother as gentle and caring as Destiny. "I think you could teach her all the important things."

"Thank you, Rath. That's very kind of you to say." They reached the restaurant, and Destiny held the door open for Rath. The moment they were inside, Angel wanted down and ran off to the small play area. Destiny and Rath ordered the food and settled into a booth.

"Why didn't you finish school?"

She looked away from him. "I met Angelo. I was... I became pregnant with Angel when I was only sixteen."

"That is pretty young." It was the age he'd been when his parents were killed.

"I know. My family wanted me to give her up, but I couldn't. From the very first moment I wanted her. Even when her father... was gone, I knew I would keep her, no matter what."

"It's obvious that you love her and are a wonderful mother. To be honest, I don't know how you do so much on your own."

"I just want to build a good life for her."

She was doing a damn fine job of it from what he could see. "What about you? What do you want for you?"

Destiny blushed and turned her head to watch where Angel was playing. "That's not important."

"What would you want if you could have it all?"

"I...don't know. I haven't allowed myself to think about that for a long time," she said. "A long time ago, when the future was still way off, I used to dream of a man who would think I was special. My mom had these books that I would sneak away to read. They always showed the man loving the woman completely, even if she wasn't perfect. That's what I want." Her blush deepened. "What about you, Rath? What do you want?"

After hearing her words, he wanted to make her dream a reality. He wanted to be the man in her life. "I want a home."

"A place to live? I thought you lived with your adopted family?"

Rath closed his eyes and shared his soul as he'd never done with any other. "I mean a home of my own. A place to belong. A family to care for. A mate, a wife and a friend. And children. Plenty of children. I want a home filled with all that." When he found the courage to open his eyes, her blue gaze was damp with emotion.

She reached out and cupped her small hand over his. "I think that sounds wonderful."

The ground trembled with a wave of energy. Rath suddenly froze in place.

* * * * *

Dàn hesitantly followed Grant to the dance floor where the girls were still dancing but more than happy to include them.

He felt awkward trying to dance the fast steps that Grant was doing so effortlessly. The little brunette, Sally, did her best to stay out from under his suddenly clumsy feet. Grant slid and shimmied as his date applied herself firmly to his body. Then the song ended and another,

much slower one, began. Sally moved closer and slid her arms around him. One glance at Grant showed that the purpose of this music was to allow all but intercourse on the dance floor. Grant slowly moved in gentle twisting motions that Dàn quickly imitated.

Sally seemed to appreciate the change. She pressed flush against him and the slow movements raised a hot, sexual friction between them. More importantly, he was in no danger of stepping on poor Sally or tripping over his own feet with this slow dancing. The pleasant motion went on and on and for once, Dàn relaxed into the moment. He had no worries about what might come beyond having a good time with Sally.

Then suddenly the world tilted and lightning agony shot through his head. The pain settled into bright flashes of blinding light, each vivid image more awful than that last.

Dàn stumbled toward his seat. His head spun, but worse was the vision that crowded his sight, blocking out his surroundings. He was so used to the constant flow of visions that he could scan them while doing other more normal things. But this vision was different. It dominated his attention, completely blocking out the world around him. It was full of bright flashing images but lacked focus. The repeating scene burned through his mind over and again.

A school bus full of children. Battered. Burned. Dead.

Dàn dropped into the chair, holding his head in both hands. He needed to get his focus back. He had to see this vision. Stop this from happening. Save these children.

But he couldn't see the beginning. He couldn't see what caused this to happen, or where or when. He simply could not see enough to make a difference.

Grant charged up. "What the hell happened?"

Sally answered Grant. "I don't know. He sort of had a fit of some kind. He started shaking and then stumbled over here. He looked so bad I thought he might be having a seizure or something."

Grant patted her on the arm. "Okay, I'll take care of him. Why don't you girls go ahead to dinner without us?"

"Will he be all right?"

"I think so." Grant slid into the seat across from him. "Go ahead. I'll take care of our boy and meet up with you later." With that encouraging comment, the girls left them, and he turned back to Dàn "The tequila didn't stop the visions?"

Dàn couldn't stop shaking. His head was throbbing, but the vision kept beating at him. "It did...for a while."

"And this one's bad I take it."

"Yeah."

"Here, have another glass. We can't tell anything until you can see past the pain. One more..."

Dàn drank another glass of the horrible liquid. Once he got past this, he would never have another drink of it. But after the second glass the pain did fade, leaving only the terrible, fragmented images.

"Care to tell me about it?" Grant asked.

He hesitated to talk about the vision. Who in their right mind would want to know such things? Then another thought crossed his mind. If his father had dealt with the same sort of visions, maybe Grant would be able to handle it, maybe even help. "Children burning... I think in a bus accident."

"Nice." Grant's low sarcastic voice was filled with sorrow.

Dàn almost smiled, but another wave of the vision crashed over him. "I don't often see bunnies playing in fields."

"But why not? Bunnies have some habits I am fond of." His hand formed bunny ears then obscenely bounced against another bunny.

"About this bus accident. I take it you plan to do something about it. What else did you see?"

"Not enough." Nowhere near enough to stop it from happening. Every time he reached for the frayed strands of the premonition, it fragmented and the backlash left him with no way to connect anything.

"Can you recall a vision once it's gone?"

"Usually, but I've never had a vision like this before." He'd be more than happy to never have another like it either.

"Do you have time to try again tomorrow?"

His best guess was that the accident wouldn't occur tonight, but

even that he couldn't be sure of. "I think so. But what if I can't call it back? If those children die, I will watch it happen forever."

"Jerdin had some ways to help clear up problem visions or help him think more clearly." Grant closed his eyes in thought. "He had a fondness for water. If you can't recall the vision in the morning, you can always go see the falls. That much water should help if anything will."

Chapter Eleven

Rath's eyes slid closed then they flashed open once again and began searching the room. Finally they settled on a teenager who was slouched into a booth on the far side of the dinning room. "Kita, come over here." Somehow he managed to have his voice carry and still stay calm as it rolled across the room to the girl.

The girl stood and moved to join them. She sank into the seat next to Destiny and glared at Rath. "What is it?"

"Where did Grant take Dàn?" Rath didn't even try to keep the growl from his voice.

"Dancing, why?"

He grabbed the insolent little brat by the jacket and yanked her close. "Did you feel that tremor run through the ground?"

"Yeah."

She struggled to pull free, so he gave her a good shake. "That was Dàn having a bad day. I need to know where he is specifically, and directions to get there. And I needed it five minutes ago." What he didn't say was that Dàn having a bad day could wipe Niagara Falls off the map.

"What's going on? Rath, let the girl go." Once he loosened his grip, Destiny turned on Kita. "Who are you? How do you know Grant?"

"Nevermind. I can take you to where Grant and Dàn are, but we can't leave the girls behind." She cocked her head in Destiny's direction.

"Destiny, I know this is a lot to ask, but could you come with us as far as this dancing place? Then you can take the cab home."

"I guess so. Will one of you tell me what's happened?"

"Yeah, but can it be while we are on our way? I need to make sure Dàn's all right."

"Okay. I'll get Angel and meet you outside. The cabs come by here fairly often. Shouldn't be long until we can get one." Destiny hurried off to the play area.

"For your information, wolf, I heel for no man. So, you can knock off the growling dog routine. Ordering me about just won't fly."

"And if I don't?"

"If you don't, I will lead you to the boonies and be damned with your *friend* and whatever his issues are. Do you get it?"

"Yeah, I get it. Now let's get there." He couldn't believe her. With the shit about to hit the fan, Kita was bitching because he hadn't said please. "What I want to know is what you plan to do with your knowledge."

"Probably nothing. I only call enemies, enemies. At this point I have little against you personally."

"Fair enough. For now."

The trip in the cab was short and quiet except for Angel and Destiny's chatter. When they reached the bar, the girls decided to go home. Kita rode with them. Although he missed Destiny's presence immediately, he was happy to have her away from a situation where he didn't know what to expect.

What he found was Grant sitting across from Dàn in a booth on the far wall of the hall. Grant sipped at some drink, and Dàn slouched in the opposite seat with his head resting on his folded arms. He looked asleep. Or...

Rath grabbed the demon by his shirt collar and lifted him from the seat. "What happened?" He slammed the demon into the wall and waited for an answer.

Grant met his gaze evenly and made no effort to free himself. "Dàn's not hurt. He had a bad vision."

Rath let him down to the floor but didn't release him. Dàn might trust the creature, but he wasn't about to. Not yet anyhow. "And?"

"And Dàn drank enough to float a small whale and now is blessedly passed out." When Rath released his shirt to lean over Dàn, Grant used the space to straighten the expensive silk.

"Passed out? How? Nothing works well to get one of us intoxicated."

"I will tell you the same as I told him. Tequila is the secret for one of you to get drunk. He took it to heart and went a bit overboard."

"Oh. So now what?"

"Now we get him back to his bed so he can sleep off the effects. I imagine tomorrow he will want to do something about that vision."

"He'll be okay?"

"Back to usual, anyways."

Rath more than half carried Dàn back to the hotel and settled him in to his bed. Then he returned to the club's gaming floor to watch the people who came in and out. Before long he saw Kita return. She was about to slip into the stairwell when he caught her.

She spun about in surprise. Her hand shot out and cracked him hard against the upper chest. She followed through with a leg sweep that would have dropped a lighter man. Rath missed the neck chop by inches and the leg sweep by more than a few pounds, but he did gain a little respect for the minx. Before she could adjust her tactics, he grabbed her hands and said, "Easy, I just wanted to ask how it went." He let her go.

"Fine. I got them back to her place and was returning to follow up on something else," she all but snarled at him.

Was she upset at him or had something gone wrong while she was watching the girls? "Are they okay then?"

"Yeah, they're fine. I rode with them back to her place and even walked them to the door. Isn't that what you would have done? Or were you expecting to stay for a nightcap?" As fast as the girl's angry words flew at him, he thought her tongue might be just as dangerous as her attack. Then she was changing the subject. "Do you know where Grant is?"

So she was looking for the demon... "He was in the club bar a while back. I think he may have retired for the evening."

"No doubt with a girl on his arm."

"Two, I believe," Rath corrected.

"What an ass," Kita spit out.

Her fist flew in Rath's direction, and he deflected the blow easily.

"Now that's not nice. He seems rather upright to me."

"He is a swine who seeks only to rut, but I should expect no less."

She kicked the wall beside him. "You should be careful. His kind are faithless."

"I see." The little thief had a thing for the demon.

"Do you really? I hardly think so." Her anger ran out and it seemed as if her whole body deflated back to her usual childlike size.

All the pleasure of taunting Kita disappeared with her will to fight. It was simply no fun battling a defeated man or, in this case, a humbled little thief girl. "Perhaps you could enlighten me."

She snorted in a very unladylike way before spinning away as if to run off. "I doubt that. Can't teach an old dog a new trick."

He caught her before she could escape, actually glad to have her back to sparring with him. "What exactly do you have against me?"

"Nothing. You can't help being a dog."

He bit back the growl at her condemnation. He hadn't done anything to the snot yet, but some mighty fine ideas were coming to mind. "What do you have against my kind?"

She pulled free and sagged back against the wall. "Your kind drove my family from our homes to claim it as their own."

He backed off some. Maybe she had good reason to be leery of Valàfrn. "What clan, which territory?"

"Kodiak scum. From Cleveland."

If the only Valàfrn she'd met had been the Kodiak, he could hardly blame her for giving him a hard time. "I know of them, and I am sorry. I have my own grudge with the Kodiak."

"A shared enemy in this case does not make us allies. I know how quickly your breed turns on its own. No, thank you. I've learned to be flexible and watch my own back."

She turned and slipped through the door before he could stop her.

When he followed, the stairwell was empty of annoying, antagonistic, criminal children.

Chapter Twelve

After ditching Rath, Kita headed for the back entrance of the Nevada Club. She'd barely slipped into the shrubs before the limo pulled up right in front of her. The weather had turned foul. Kita pulled her hood up and stood in the freezing rain.

Oh shit. It was Karl and he was early.

While the long, gray limo waited for the passengers to get out she saw easily identifiable vanity plates, ALL MINE. Karl must be the guy Grant was worried about, too. Why hadn't she realized the connection before? Karl was more than just an asshole; he was a complete amoral SOB.

He'd hurt her brother and would eventually pay. She had run into him a few times in Cleveland, where he worked for the Kodiak scum. She'd almost had him in once. He had gotten away because she'd hesitated when a she-wolf had stopped him from getting into the car she'd wired to blow.

After she had found out the woman's character, she truly regretted not pulling the switch that would have blown Karl and the little bitch, Beysira, back to hell. As it was, she had the minor satisfaction of seeing Karl and the girl beat each other around for a while. A short while. The she-wolf would have killed him then, if her father hadn't shown up and sent her off on some task.

This man, Karl, was why she was in the casino to begin with. For what he'd done to Kaimyn, she planned to take him out, as well as the

operation he ran for the Kodiak. She figured that would even the score between them.

Surely he was the creep that demanded Destiny and Angel to feed his sick perversions. He wouldn't get away with hurting anyone here, if she had anything to say about it.

Memories of the night she'd found Kaimyn beaten almost to death behind the orphanage rushed back to her. Even though it happened months ago, it was just as fresh and painful in her mind. Kaimyn had been an innocent bystander. He'd gone to the orphanage to visit a couple friends, when Karl arrived and tried to abduct two little girls. Kaimyn had tried to stop him. *Tried and failed.*

Both girls were found a few weeks later, fifty miles away in a remote forest. They'd both been raped and beaten and... Kita swallowed back on the horror of it. The girls had been partially eaten.

Kaimyn blamed himself. Even though he couldn't have done any more and had paid dearly for trying.

Poor Kaimyn... The beating had left him blind in one eye and deaf in one ear.

Karl was to blame, and Karl would pay.

All her theories were confirmed the moment the manager came out into the rain to greet the limo and hold a huge umbrella so Karl could reach the doors without getting his toupee wet.

She had to tell Grant.

She slipped back into the building just behind Karl's henchmen. They were almost large enough to block the rain.

Once inside, she ran up the three flights to Grant's suite. There she pulled out her lock picks and twittered the workings into the right order. Since she'd already been in his room once, it wasn't all that difficult to do it again. A few seconds later, she was on the inside of the door, listening for clues to where Grant might be. Considering the clothing trail from the door to the bedroom, she figured that was the most likely location. A throaty giggle confirmed. He was still in bed with a woman. No, make that two women.

She sighed and went into the bathroom to grab a towel to dry off.

What did I expect? He's a synn demon. Though, she'd never met a demon like him before. She had met two others. One had come for her grandfather. She had been beautiful and cold. The other had been watching one she was watching. Having seen him, she knew she had no worries about the woman's destiny. He, too, had been serious and indifferent to the mortals.

Grant was different.

He seemed to care. He acted as if the world mattered to him. As if he was truly a part of it.

Another giggle reached her along with the almost unheard squeak of bedsprings. He certainly seemed to thrive on mortal desires. But he said he was between jobs. What did that mean? Could a synn demon turn their powers on and off? Or would these lovers leave here so relaxed and ready to die that they could be in danger?

Was he that without conscious? Would he leave these women at risk or was there some way to turn off his pheromones so they were unaffected, or at least less affected? Had he thought of that? Did he care enough to bother?

The bed squeaked a little more in protest, followed by a mumble and a door opening. She guessed she was about to find out.

The brunette almost floated toward the bathroom, but her knees seemed to freeze as she saw Kita standing there toweling herself dry. She let out a short scream. "Who are you?"

"His wife." She didn't know why the perverse lie jumped to her lips but there it was, filling the room just as the bedroom doorway was filled with naked Grant.

The second girl shoved past him, grabbed up her clothing, and rushed toward the suite door. She pulled the dress on, as did the other girl, then both exited as quickly as their partially covered bodies could move.

Completely nonplused, Grant picked up a dropped shoe and handed it to one of the girls before closing the door and turning back to face her.

One perfectly sculpted eyebrow raised, and his question was clear.

Good grief... More than his eyebrow was perfect. His entire length, she did mean *length*, was sculpted perfectly. The man was built for sex. He was beautiful, and he knew it. He made no effort to cover himself, but moved forward toward her, one slow measured step at a time.

"My wife? How interesting..." The words were a sexy purr.

Oh shit, oh shit! She must have interrupted him before they'd finished. Surely he didn't expect...

He was directly before her. His hard human-like body pulsing sexual heat in waves that caressed over her body. Her still damp clothes would be steaming soon. His arms settled on either side of her shoulders. His head lowered, and she had yet to say a word... Maybe it was because she wanted this.

Or did she?

He was a demon. He was a freakin' demon!

She, if no other, could see all of him. His bulging muscles, his black, marbled skin. His hot, glowing eyes... His beautiful wings... As he shifted closer, they lifted and fluttered slightly with the motion of his back muscles.

His face lowered closer to hers. His mouth was a breath away from contact. "Is this what you want, little wife?"

Words at first were impossible. A moan escaped. Her eyelids trembled as she fought to remember his question. "Want..." What did she want? She wanted the heady feeling surrounding her to continue forever. She wanted to feel his strength. She wanted...oh, she *wanted*...

His lips crushed over hers, demanding, conquering. His touch burned her. His desire for her petite body. His need to possess her.

Her eyes sank closed and the world spun then settled onto her own flushed face. After a moment of confusion, she realized she was seeing herself through Grant's gaze, through his mind. Her head was thrown back against the doorway. Her body arched, pushing her small breasts forward against the thin damp cotton of her shirt.

She felt his need to touch her. His thoughts filled her, disorienting her further by showing her as she had never been seen before. She was desirable.

She watched his hand move slowly to cup her chin before he once again kissed her. She felt his groin jump in need. She felt him restrain himself. She felt the flush of guilt that he had pressed her, used his advantage, with a mere child.

Her eyes shot open, pulling the perspective back to her own thoughts. She wanted him, oh yes. But she couldn't have him, not like this. Not when he saw her as a child.

She forced her arms to rise and pressed her hands against Grant's chest, his lean tanned chest, his massive black chest. Both. She pushed just enough to request that he back off. He held the power here, but she thought his guilt would make him give in, and it did.

Grant turned away. His wings ruffled then settled back with a slight droop, their tips brushing the floor behind him. He went into the bedroom and returned a moment later wearing a pair of slacks. "I take it you had a reason to bust up my little party."

"Yes," she whispered.

"And?"

"I...um..." She had a hard time concentrating with so much of him still showing. His two forms were like opposing sides of a beautiful coin. One was surely the perfection of masculine human attractiveness and the other... She could easily imagine his darker form was just as prime among his demon brethren. She wasn't even sure which form she liked better. They were both so very de-lish.

"Well?"

It took her a moment to remember what he was asking. "It's about Destiny." She gathered her remaining brain cells and banished his lingering hormonal influence. "I saw the guy arrive this morning."

"I thought I told you to stay away from it?" he snarled at her.

"I thought you realized I have my own mind." *Sometimes at least.*

"Fine. Was that all?" he grumbled while grabbing her arm as if to physically show her the way out.

In for a pint, in for a pound... She might as well tell him all of it, because he was going to be a shit about her involvement anyhow. "No. I know this guy, and I won't stay out of it."

He stared at her for several heartbeats. "I can handle this. You do not need to be involved at all."

Kita met his fiery gaze with her own. "But you won't be handling this alone."

"It is not your problem." He picked up his jacket and pulled out a cigarette.

"He was my concern long before he became yours. I will not back down."

After three flick of his lighter, he tossed the failing tool across the room. "Fine. What do you know and how do you plan to go ahead? You don't really seem like much of a team player."

"I may not be much for team sports, but I always know the score. And that man, Karl Leeders, still has a debt to pay. I will be sure that he and his pay up."

"So it is Karl. I thought as much." He cupped the end of the cigarette and, when he moved his hand, the tip was glowing red.

"You knew?" Why hadn't he said anything?

Grant settled his ass onto the back of the sofa and drew on the cigarette before bothering to answer. "Yeah, I knew, but Karl is just a little fish."

"With big, violent appetites." Karl might be a little fish to Grant, but to Kita he was the sole reason for her coming to the Falls. It seemed pretty damn important to stop him before he could hurt anyone else.

"True," Grant said slowly. His voice low and sexy. "What do you plan to do about him?"

"I came here to take him and his associates down. I had planned a slow operation—"

"Then why in the hell were you pick-pocketing?" His body still looked relaxed, but Grant's angry tone caught her by surprise.

"None of your business."

"I believe you have made it my business."

She didn't want to tell him, but she couldn't think of a single way to divert him. "Fine. I needed the money, and I've been looking for his lower men." It was the truth, even if the first half was more true than the

second half.

"Why?"

Did he mean why did she need money? Or why she was looking for the underlings? She answered the choice she preferred to answer. "I want the whole group taken out of the picture."

"A little vindictive, isn't it?"

"No, I don't think it is. It's justice." Even thinking about what the bastard had done made her stomach churn with the need to keep him from ever doing it again. And since all his associates had known what kind of a monster he was, they deserved the same fate.

But Grant wouldn't let it go. He just kept pushing. "What did Karl do to you?"

"Nothing specific," she hedged. Grant didn't need to know what had been done to her brother. "It's more than just him though. I want his bosses too."

"Oh? Why?"

"Look, I don't talk about family." And she wouldn't share what Kaimyn saw as his shame. He was wrong, of course, but there was no need for Grant or anyone to know what happened the day she'd found Kai behind the orphanage, facedown in a pool of blood.

"This is about family? Fine. I understand your need for revenge."

"Good." Because she would get revenge for the beating they'd given Kaimyn, and for the two little girls he hadn't been able to save. "I just came up here to tell you what I know. You can do with it what you want. And if you have a problem with me doing what I chose to do, then you can stay out of it."

"Do whatever you want to Karl and his associates. I don't care what you have against them or what you chose to do about it. However, I will be sure that Angel is not harmed because of your inadequacies."

"Fine."

He glared at her between puffs of smoke. "Just tell me what you have planned, and maybe we can help each other."

"Why would you?"

"Truthfully, I don't know. I guess I don't want you hurt either."

"Oh." Why would Grant care about her? It was a strange feeling. Not many people worried about her safety. Even her family didn't. She been taking care of herself for too long for them to think she needed a keeper.

"Do you plan to share your plans with me or not?"

"I guess so. I plan to use the better players in the club to bust the bank and sell the business down the river. Not all of the games are fair. I've been watching and learning how they work and picking the players who I think can pull it off with the right information."

He chuckled. "That would certainly hurt them where it counts. However, I think I would like to see Karl hurt in a more personal and permanent way."

"You, vindictive demon, you. I didn't know you were such a bloody soul. But fair enough. I did have more planned for Karl since I realized just what kind he was."

"Oh? Do tell."

Damn, it felt good to share the plan with him. "I plan to set him up to look like he is the one who ruined the club. Then his bosses would take care of his discipline, saving me the trouble."

"Good plan. I like it. Now to figure out how to keep Destiny an Angel safe until it all plays out."

"Nothing springs to mind at the moment, other than watching her like a hawk."

"Or perhaps like a wolf?" He raised an eyebrow in question.

"Oh. You think Rath might like that job?"

"I do." He laughed at his pun, then winked at her. "And I think he will, as well. He was more than willing to run around playing guard dog tonight wasn't he?"

"Speaking of the shifters, how did your dancing go?"

"Fine, right up until Dàn drank himself into vision tripping, then it kind of lost its fun." Grant ran his finger through his loose hair, which should have left it looking rumpled. Instead the silky locks fell smoothly to his shoulders. "If you don't mind my asking, what do you see when you look at him?"

"You can't tell? You don't know?" she hedged, not sure how to answer or if she even should.

"Perhaps I can and am just testing you."

She didn't believe that for a second. "He is the light."

"What do you see," he asked, narrowing his eyes at her.

Grant's expression was earnest and perhaps a little bit worried.

"He is too young to have form. All I see is light. Pure, soothing energy."

Chapter Thirteen

Rath stood over the breakfast cart and wondered if he should wake Dàn. Surely he would want to get up soon. It was well past noon, and they had a lot to do today.

He opened the connecting door to Dàn's suite to find Dàn sitting at the small table already awake, a cup of coffee in front of him, but not looking very comfortable.

"How are you doing this morning?" he asked.

"Better." That had the sound of a lie.

"I ordered some food. Do you want some?"

"No." Dàn swallowed hard and paled slightly. "Thank you for bringing me back here."

"You're welcome. Grant helped." Dàn looked bad. If this was what tequila did, he would be sure to avoid the drink and encourage Dàn to do the same.

"Still, thank you," Dàn said quietly while rubbing his temple.

"Sure. So how bad was the vision?" He'd rarely seen Dàn this shaken up. "Grant said it was about children."

"It was bad. Yeah, I saw children in a bus. They were in some kind of accident, but I couldn't see enough detail to do anything to stop it from happening."

And not being able to stop it would drive Dàn crazy. "Have you tried to recall it this morning?" When Dàn nodded, Rath asked, "Any luck?"

"Some." Dàn rubbed absently at his chest. He still had yet to move from where he sat at the table.

"Do you know enough to make plans?" Rath's first responsibility would be to Dàn, but he was hoping to be able to spend more time with Destiny.

"I think so."

"Have you made plans yet?" Dàn always had a plan. Once he saw what needed done, he could be counted on to make it happen.

"Not yet."

That wasn't like Dàn at all. Was he telling the truth or trying to keep him in the dark for some reason? "Well, are you going to let me be part of this?"

Dàn sighed. "Yes, I need your help, but not with the accident. You will have to stay here." Dàn pushed the empty coffee cup back. "I'll go and stop the accident. You are needed here to keep Destiny safe."

"Is she still in danger?"

"Yes. She has agreed to dance for the party."

"She has? I thought Grant was going to talk to her. She didn't mention it last night."

"He did speak to her. She thinks she can do it safely if she takes special precautions."

She was so good-hearted. Rath was sure Destiny would have a good reason to do the dance, but his whole body objected to anything that put her in danger. "But she's wrong, isn't she?"

"Yes," Dàn whispered.

"Tell me, Dàn, is she going to get out of this?"

Dàn shook his head, sending a wave of fear through Rath. Then he rubbed his temples and said, "Yeah. Destiny will be okay, but you have to be the one to watch over her."

The phone jangled loudly once then quieted to a subtle tone for its second ring. Dàn picked it up with, "Hello, Grant."

Rath listened closely but couldn't make out anything that Grant said, and Dàn said too little to tell what Grant's long talk was about.

He left them to settle whatever was happening and went back to

his room to grab some of his breakfast. Even if Dàn wasn't up to eating, he thought this food was wonderful. And better yet, none of them had to hunt or cook it. Hotel life definitely suited him. It was no wonder they called the set of rooms a suite. They certainly were *sweet*.

Dàn walked in, but stayed near the door.

"What did Grant have to say?" Rath asked.

"Destiny agreed to the party."

"You knew that. Did he have any more information?"

Dàn leaned against the doorframe. "Yes. Kita saw Karl arrive this morning." Dàn seemed healthier now, but still made no effort to reach the breakfast cart. "A man called Karl Leeders. He is the one who wants Destiny."

"And Angel," Rath added with a growl.

Dàn nodded slowly. "Yes, and Angel. He arrived, and Kita knows him." Dàn materialized a hairbrush and used it to neaten his blond hair. "It seems that Kita was hunting Karl on some sort of vendetta. He is why she is at the Nevada club."

Surprise, surprise. The little thief might be useful. "We all seem to want the same thing. Is that a good thing?"

"Yes, I think so." Dàn finished brushing his hair and left it loose. "I have to leave you and stop the bus accident from happening. Grant will be going with me. That will leave you to watch Destiny and Angel." Dàn moved around the room as if to stretch tense muscles.

"And Kita. Will that be enough?" Just him and the thief to keep Destiny and Angel safe. What if it wasn't enough?

"Grant doesn't want Kita involved, but he thinks she will be part of it anyhow. I think she may even be helpful. But I want you to be careful. There are things I can't see clearly."

"When will you and Grant be leaving and how long will you be gone?"

"We will be leaving within the hour. I don't think we will be gone long. Maybe a day. Maybe even less."

"That's not long. Surely not much can happen in that time."

Chapter Fourteen

Dàn rode with Grant as they drove to a nearby town. There, in a small bar, they would find the man who would accidentally kill so many children.

Grant had rambled on most of the drive, telling stories about his travels with Jerdin. "I really miss those days with your dad. We had a fine time in the Middle Ages. Really raised some hell and from me, that has meaning."

When Grant grew quiet, Dàn urged him on. "Tell me some more of it. I would like to know him."

"Hmm." Grant tapped thoughtfully on his chin. "There was the time... No, I shouldn't tell that. What about... Once, when I was trying to impress a princess, he let me slay him. Would you like to hear that one?"

"Yes." Dàn caught his breath when he heard the word slay. Possibly...as in dragon? He had enough identity issues that he would be glad for conformation of some similar traits.

That was when they reached the bar. They reached the bar quicker than he'd expected. Even the delay of a few minutes felt like endless frustration to Dàn.

Grant continued his story once they were in the bar and settled into a darkened booth with drinks in hand. "You see, there was this very lovely girl who I met at a ball. While talking to her, she told me that she secretly wished there were still monsters and dragons. She said that all the greatest heroes had faced and defeated some great evil. Without great

villains, there could be no great heroes. I tried to argue the point that there were plenty of villains in the enemy armies that her father kept throwing us at. But alas, she said, "Tis simply not the same. We are without great heroes.' Which of course I saw as a challenge." Grant looked toward the door of the tavern when several men came in. "Is he one of those?" he asked.

Dàn quickly scanned the group looking for the man who needed to be stopped. "No."

"Where was I? Right, the girl. She wanted her hero to fight a dragon, and I happened to be traveling with one. I talked Jerdin into kidnapping the lovely Princess Maya, so I could rescue the good maiden. The kidnapping went smoothly, except that her father called out the entire army to track and kill the dragon. For a small kingdom in the back of nowhere, he had very good trackers."

"But in the end I had slain the dragon, got the girl, and impressed the king. Well, briefly impressed the king. Before long the girl began to show, and I had to hit the road. For you see, I hadn't the disposition to marry a princess or run a kingdom. Nor did I have a pedigree that suited the family, regardless of how many dragons I had slain."

"What of the child?"

"Oh, they married the girl off to another good knight who fit better into their plans. I checked in occasionally. The boy grew into a very good warrior and an even better king. Even today most of his descendants have had some psychic abilities. Angel is one of those. Rather a shame most will never know it comes from a drop of demon blood. I wonder how it would change their outlook on the world and the whole good against evil theme."

Dàn's mind returned to the most important detail from Grant's story. "My father could take dragon form?"

"You really don't know much about him, do you?"

"I know only what you have told me." How could Grant understand? Once the Oracle had agreed to raise him, no one was allowed to even discuss his mother, let alone help him learn about his missing father. "Please tell me about him. I am obviously not like the rest of my

family and have often wondered about his identity.”

“All right. First, Jerdin did not take dragon form. He was, or is, a kind of dragon called a daegyn-rok. Actually, he was more like a serpent, as in the eastern dragon form. Though, he could easily take the heavier winged western form too.”

Dàn nodded thoughtfully. He had figured as much. He had spent a lifetime hiding his true dragon form from everyone, even family. Not that they were unaware of his being different, but that he needed to downplay those differences. Because he wanted their acceptance instead of their fear.

Showing more understanding and compassion than anyone would expect from a demon or half-demon, Grant laid a gentle hand on Dàn’s shoulder and said, “You have the dragon form?”

“Yes.”

“Will you let me slay you?”

“What?”

Grant was laughing at his shocked look. “Just kidding! There’s no pay in dragon slaying these days.”

* * * * *

Destiny jumped when Frank barged in. “It’s tonight.”

“What? No. I can’t, Frank. Not tonight. We — I haven’t been able to talk to Grant about it yet.”

“Grant? What does that gambler have to do with your dancing?”

“You said I could take someone to watch over everything. I’m sure if I asked Grant to, he would. But he’s out of town today. I don’t even have a way to get a hold of him until he comes back.”

“Then he wouldn’t be able to go with you anyhow. The party starts in two hours. I expect you to be ready.”

“Oh! I know. I can ask Rath to go. I’m sure he would be willing to do it.”

“Who? The guy in the alley? No way. That won’t work. They said I have to be the one to go.”

“What? No, not you.”

"Destiny, I'm the only one they will let come. Please trust me. I won't let anything happen. I promise. I can keep you safe. And this way you can have Rath watch Angel and keep her away from anything that might go wrong."

"I don't like it."

"Please, Destiny. Please do this for me. For my family."

Much as she feared what she was about to do, she would do it anyhow. She had promised, and she couldn't let anything happen to Joey and Amanda. "Okay."

* * * * *

Rath knocked on Destiny's dressing room door. The sudden rise of voices inside awoke his protective instincts. No one would hurt Destiny if he could help it. He silently twisted the knob and entered.

There he found Frank kneeling at Destiny's side. His hands held hers, and Destiny was looking down at him with the shine of tears in her eyes. What was going on here?

"Destiny? Are you all right?"

Frank jumped up and away from Destiny. The guilty expression on his face was quickly covered by fear. "I...I gotta go, Des. I'll see you in two hours." He darted behind Rath and out the door.

"Oh, Rath!"

Her glistening eyes broke something in him. He moved into the room and groaned in pleasure as she raced into his arms. Her tiny body pressed against him in all the right places and for a moment he let the sensation distract him from whatever it was Frank had done to upset her. But only for a moment. "What happened?"

"I'm such an idiot."

Rath tilted her chin up, forcing her to meet his gaze. "No, no you're not. Just tell me what Frank did." *And I will kill him in a most painful way.*

"I agreed to the party—"

"I know you did, but why? You didn't want to. I could feel your fear at even the thought of dancing in a private party."

"I owe Frank and his family so much. I guess I didn't want to let them down. He promised I could take someone with me to make sure nothing happened."

"Then I'll go."

"That's the problem. Frank said he's the one who has to go, and I don't want to go if I won't feel safe. I won't feel safe with Frank."

All Rath's instincts rose with a roar. "Then don't go."

"But Frank—"

"I'll make sure that Frank won't be a problem. If you are afraid to do this dance, then just don't do it."

"That's just it. I promised I would do it. I have to, but I'm still afraid." She laid her fingers over his lips to keep him from interrupting. "I'm not really afraid of what Frank will do, but he told me that if I don't do the dance his cousins, who I owe everything to, would be in danger. I can't let someone hurt them if I can prevent it."

His chest burned and he realized he was holding his breath, hoping for a better option. He carefully relaxed his hands and let his breath out in a slow sigh. "Just tell me what you want me to do, and I'll do it. Anything at all."

Destiny looked up into his eyes. "Will you watch Angel while I dance? It will only be for a couple hours, and I'm sure she'll be good for you." "I... That wasn't what I had in mind."

"Please, Rath. You have to. I just couldn't deal with this if I had to worry about Angel too, but if I know she's safe I'll be strong enough to handle it."

"Destiny..."

"Please." She reached up and whispered the word against his lips.

And he was lost. The heat of her kiss and her small hands pressed against his chest undid any resolve he might have attempted. He was at her mercy, even if what she asked for was unwise. He let his arms enfold her, pulling her even more flush against his body. The smooth flesh of her bare back singed his fingers as he stroked up and down from her shoulder to hip. He caressed her lips, soaking in the feel of her and the scent of her rising arousal.

Chapter Fifteen

Two men in their late twenties walked into the bar. They were dressed in faded, stained jeans, boots and stretched, thin T-shirts. Dàn didn't recognize either man as the one they needed to find, but there was something else about them. Not both, but one was not very nice. The older one.

Dàn focused slightly on the stream of vision that flowed past him. The older one had just left his wife unconscious from a beating and was looking for another fight. The younger brother was here to try to calm him down. He had already sent his own wife to tend the sister-in-law. It was something they had done often.

"Is that him?" Grant asked.

"No."

He laughed a short, humorless laugh. "Then why are you boring a hole in the man's head."

Dàn bit down on his lip, ignoring Grant while he focused on examining the situation, to seeing what needed done. After he had seen enough, he answered, "He just beat his wife nearly to death."

"Oh. Do you see shit like that all the time?"

"Yeah, I do. Did my father?" Had his father dealt with seeing all the horror of the world during his every waking moment?

"I don't think so. Not all the time anyhow. How much do you see?"

If his father hadn't possessed the prophetic visions, who then could he find to help him control them? "I see just about anything, just about

everything.”

Grant gave him a skeptical frown. “What did I have for breakfast?” Grant shot at him as a test.

“Tequila,” Dàn answered while still sending his energy out to deal with other problems.

“I’m not impressed. You could probably smell that.”

Dàn closed his eyes as he felt the urge to show Grant a little of what he could see. “You ordered toast and eggs—scrambled—and orange juice. You sat down to eat in your robe, spilled the juice on your plate and lap, and got irritated. Then dressed and started to pour a glass of tequila with lime. Looking at the mess at the table, you thought, ‘Hell of a way to start the day,’ and drank straight from the bottle.”

“Well, showoff, you just freaked me right out. Hope you weren’t watching last night with the girl.”

“Girls. And no, I wasn’t watching. I’m not into that. But if I was, I would have some serious questions for you about flexibility.”

“Not watching? You voyeur,” Grant muttered with a grin. “So what do you plan to do about said asshole?” He waved his mostly empty glass toward the wife-beating man who sat at the bar.

“What do you mean?”

“Look, I haven’t known you long, but we’re sitting here with a purpose, and I can guess that you want to change the world. He is one of the things you would change. So how will you do it this time?”

He wished he had a better answer for Grant, but he wasn’t sure what the demon was asking. “Was it a trait my father had?”

Grant paused before answering. “Sometimes.”

The pause had been significant, awakening his rarely needed curiosity. “But not always? Tell me.”

With a sigh, he said, “Jerdin was often disappointed by humanity. There were times he was less than caring for them. Many times.”

Dàn could certainly understand that sentiment. He often wondered why anyone bothered to try to make the world better when so many seemed bent on its destruction. Why bother to save a child when he would grow up to hate like so many others.

But, with his powers, he *had* to be different. He *had* to care. And when he couldn't feel compassion for those around him, he pretended to. Otherwise he could—*would*—become his own worst nightmare. The one possible future that terrified him. The one that haunted his dreams with promises he could never wish for, that on most days he had nothing but dread for.

"What are you planning to do?" Grant asked.

"I already did." Dàn watched Grant's brow creep upward in question. "The man's brother is trying to talk him into getting counseling. I helped him be a little more receptive to the idea."

"Is that all?"

He had to agree. It really wasn't much. "In this case it is enough."

"What about the wife?"

Dàn closed his eyes in concentration, checking on the woman's improvement under his distant ministrations. "She is much better, not hurt nearly as bad as they thought."

"You healed her? From here?" Pleased shock filled Grant's tone.

"Damn, boy. You have style. And talent."

He wasn't so sure about that. He just did what he could. "Maybe."

"So what are you going to do with it?" Grant shot out, catching Dàn off guard.

"What do you mean?" He already did try to help out.

"How will you change the world? Make it a better tomorrow? You know the commercial. You could actually do it. How will you?"

"I don't know. I see things that could be changed all the time but usually not where I can make a significant difference. Just too many events in too many places. I wish I could do more, especially with disasters and such."

"Why don't you? Many of your kind get involved in saving the world as soldiers or cops or even more interesting careers."

"I wouldn't know. I've never met another of my kind, but I see what you mean. Really see it." For several minutes, Dàn relaxed against his seat as he focused on the many possibilities brought by Grant's words.

* * * * *

"I don't like it," Rath said again. Not that it mattered. Destiny felt she needed to do this, and he understood. But that didn't mean he had to like it.

She paused while packing a small bag. "It will be okay, Rath. I know that you and Grant were worried about this guy, Karl, but all he wants is for me to dance for him."

"I just wish I could go with you."

She came to him, pressing her hands to his arms. "Just a couple hours and then we can all laugh about this."

"I hope you're right." He folded his hands around her petite waist, letting his fingers brush over her exposed back where her blouse had pulled up from her skirt.

"Oh Rath, I love that you're worrying about me." She slid her fingers up his chest to claim his shoulders before pressing close and leaning up on tiptoe. Her body touched his from thigh to chest, and then she was kissing him. Her beautiful lips caressing lightly over his sent a burst of desire through him. She drew back enough to whisper, "After the dance...can we go out somewhere quiet?"

"I'd like that very much." He lowered his head enough to reclaim her lips. And he would have happily gone on kissing her except for the sound of Angel's chatter.

Destiny pulled back and straightened her clothes.

Kita's hands were full, Angel's hand in one and one of Angel's dolls in the other. "I was just saying hello to Angel here, and we think it would be great if you two went out and left us to play games by ourselves."

"Hello, Kita," Rath said as neutrally as he could manage. "What trouble are you up to tonight?"

"I admit, I was eavesdropping on you two, and I might have a solution."

That was when Rath noticed that Kita was dressed more maturely than before. Tonight she wore a silk button down blouse that she'd tied in

a knot at her waist and jeans with what looked like new sandals. There was no sign of her oversized T-shirt or flannel jacket.

"I can go with Destiny to watch while she dances for this guy." When Rath did no more than shake his head at the idea, Kita turned to Destiny. "I know you don't know me well, but I'm a friend of Grant's. I know how much he's been worrying about you and this dance you've been asked to do. I can go with you."

Destiny reached out and slid her hand into Rath's. "I don't know..."

Kita pushed on. "The way I figure it is that even if these guys are bad apples, they aren't likely to try anything if they know they have witnesses. I'm sure they will let me come with you as an assistant or something."

He still didn't like it, but it did beat having Destiny go in alone. "Kita does have some good self defense moves."

"I'm sure we won't need any self defense moves, but I do like the idea of having someone go with me."

Just then a knock on the door interrupted them all. "Destiny? Are you ready to go?" Frank asked without coming into the room.

"Just about. Come on in, Frank." Destiny reached up and pressed a brief kiss to Rath's cheek. Then she turned and zipped her bag closed.

Frank stopped when he saw Rath and waited beside the door.

"I hope it's okay, Frank, but I asked my friend Kita to come along as my assistant dancer."

Rath almost growled as Frank ran his gaze over both girls. He must have been satisfied, because he nodded before stepping back into the hallway.

"Wish me luck." Destiny squeezed Rath's hand as she walked past him. Then she knelt to hug Angel. "Be good for Mr. Julf."

"I will Mommy."

And then Destiny was out the door.

"Come on, Angel. Let's go watch some TV while your mom dances." Anything to make the two hours pass, because he was sure he wouldn't take an easy breath until Destiny was safe.

* * * * *

Rhys waved off the bartender. He didn't need any more alcohol. Not that he was drunk this time, but he just didn't want to meet Karl with anything but a clear head. His cousin had sent a note down inviting him up to the penthouse to talk.

As if that wasn't a slap down to the poor side of the family.

He tucked the note in his pocket, picked up the old journal, and headed for the elevator. It was huge waste of time. Karl wouldn't have any proof about their fathers' deep dark past. Hell, Jonathon Wynne hadn't even been Karl's real father. Still, at one point according to the journal, Karl had been involved in all of it, so he might be able to offer some information. Hopefully, he'd at least know a good place to sell all the crap in the vault.

Rhys sighed. What had his father been thinking? All the weapons and weird technology must have cost a fortune to develop, yet what good was it? Since werewolves and vampires didn't exist, it was useless. And he'd inherited the worthless vault full of shit. Or at least it would be worthless until he found a buyer nutty enough to want it.

He guessed he couldn't blame his dad too much. After all, he'd almost become a believer after meeting the strange guys the day before.

The elevator slid smoothly open on the top floor. Was it called a penthouse when there was more than one suite on the floor? This one had three doors on the wall facing the elevator. He pulled the note out to confirm which one he'd find Karl behind. *Meet me in my Penthouse suite, room 501. Don't waste time. I have plans for my evening.* Room 501 was the left hand door.

Rhys straightened his jacket before knocking on the door. Shit, he hadn't seen Karl in probably ten years. This was bound to be awkward.

The door opened but was blocked by the biggest damned henchman he'd ever set eyes on. Jeez, the man must be six-two and at least three hundred pounds.

"Mr. Wynne?"

"Ah...yes. I'm Rhys Wynne."

The guy stepped back enough for Rhys to enter then relocked the door. "You are expected. Please, follow me." He led the way back into a sunken living room decorated in all white.

Karl was waiting on one of the three white camel-skin sofas. He stood when Rhys entered. "Welcome, cousin!" Karl's arms were outstretched in expectation of a hug, which was much friendlier than Rhys wanted. But he was about to ask favors from the man, so he moved into the hug with a stiff back pat before drawing back.

"It's good to see you again, Karl."

"Damn, it's been far too long. Did you ever finish that college degree?"

Rhys was proud of his accomplishment and amazed that Karl had even kept track enough to know he was in college. "Yes. This year."

"Congratulations! What was it in again? Thought I remembered it being some frivolous thing."

His smile stiffened. "Criminal Psychology." His doctorate to be precise, but somehow he figured Karl wouldn't be interested in the details.

"Wonderful. You must get a ton of laughs from that." Karl slouched back down into the soft cushions of the sofa. "Hans, can you get me a refill and one for my family here, too."

"Yes, Sir."

"What is it you needed from me, Rhys? Surely you didn't look me up just to reminisce." Karl was as blunt as ever.

Rhys took a deep breath, trying to remember the questions he'd been planning to ask Karl. Nothing came to mind.

"Well? You said on the phone it was about your father's death. I was real sorry to hear that news." Karl ran his hand over his hairpiece like a favorite pet. The motion was almost a nervous twitch. "You know, I told him to stay away from Cleveland."

"You did?" Rhys hadn't even known Karl had kept in touch with his father.

"Oh yeah. I tried to tell him. The ones in Cleveland are...well, too

strong and far too violent for him and his two hunters. I tried—”

What? Karl spoke about them as if he believed. “What are you saying?”

“The...the animals he was hunting in Cleveland. They were, and are, way out of his league. I wish he would have listened.”

“You knew about the trip to Cleveland? Did you know what he was hunting?” he asked, trying to get Karl to be more specific.

“Sure, I knew. I told him about the clan in the first place. I never thought he would go after them despite my warning, though.”

Rhys shook his head in an effort to clear it of the buzzing that was drowning out all reason. “You sent them out to chase...to hunt...”

“Werewolves.”

“But that’s crazy! There is no such thing as werewolves. He went out there and was killed by some wild animal.”

“Rhys, open your damn eyes. Look around. This club is owned by the same clan that killed your father. I work for them, and I can tell you that they are honest to God, fucking werewolves.”

He was wrong. He had to be wrong, or crazy, or both. Werewolves didn’t exist. His father had been killed by wild animals. Rhys let the facts circle his mind and offer the comfort of their lies. Because what it all came down to was the simple truth that Karl’s story added up better, and made a hell of a lot more sense, than what all the science books in the world would tell him on any other day.

And if Karl was telling the truth, werewolves existed. Werewolves had killed his father. The same werewolves owned this club. “You work for them?”

“Yes. I’ve known for a long time that the monsters walk among us, and I decided to be on their side instead of foolishly trying to fight them. And I say that you should do the same. There is no profit in opposing them.”

Pain burned through Rhys’ chest. He gasped in breath after breath, trying to grasp at the terrible knowledge Karl was forcing him to hear. Through it all was one ringing phrase... *My father was right.*

Dad had tried to tell him. Over and over he told him the truth and

never, not once in all those years, had Rhys believed him. No, he had laughed and mocked him, calling him a liar and a nut and worse.

His father was right.

Werewolves existed and hunted humans. His family had hunted evil and helped to protect people for generations. And he had laughed at their struggle.

My father was right.

And he was a fool.

"Listen, Rhys. Don't do anything stupid."

Stupid? Yeah, he'd been stupid. But he was through with that idiocy. He needed to get another look at what was in the vault. And he damn sure wasn't going to offer one piece of it to Karl. "I'm leaving," he said and turned to leave.

"I thought you knew it all. If this is news, take your time and really think about what you seem to be planning. If you go after them, you'll just get yourself killed."

Yeah, he might. But somehow that didn't seem so dishonorable. In fact, it might even make up for his betrayal. Well, it might if he could take some of his father's killers out first.

"Rhys. You don't know anything about them."

"Then I guess it's time to learn." He made his way to the front door, stepping past Karl's goons and leaving without another word.

They owned the club. The bastards who'd killed his father owned this building and all the enterprising business within. Surely some of them would be here on the property to watch over the club. But how could he tell who was a monster and who was just here for the games?

The elevator pinged before he pressed the button. It opened to reveal a beautiful young woman and a pale man.

And behind them was the little thief.

They started past him without comment. The doors started to slide closed and, with a single motion, he grabbed the loose jacket of the thief and dragged her back into the elevator, letting the door close behind them before she had time to do more than utter a startled yelp.

"What did you do that for?" She yanked free and spun about to

face him. "I need to be with Destiny. Why did you— Oh, I remember you."

"Do you now? Good, that should save us some time. Do you remember the big guy with the other pocket watch?"

"Maybe. What about him?"

"I want to know where he and the other one are. "It might not be smart, but it was a step in the right direction to make up for some of the past.

"Why?"

"Because they're monsters, and I intend to kill them."

She gaped at him. "What did Karl tell you?" She turned around and started punching the buttons on the control panel. "I've got to get out of here."

"You knew!" He grabbed her. "You know what they are! Are you one of them? Are you?" He lifted her clear off the floor, shook her hard. She refused to answer and then the moment was lost.

The elevator settled on the next floor down and the door opened. The girl twisted her legs up between them and kicked out from him, freeing herself and flying out into the corridor. With a rolling landing, she jumped to her feet and took off, faster than any normal human could.

Rhys ran after her. He would start with this one. If he caught her, he could learn more and use that to get the others.

Chapter Sixteen

She was in trouble. And dumb blonde or not, she knew it. Even before Frank left, she had wanted to run. It was just all wrong from then on. Karl had asked his men to help her with her things, which meant take her extra bag and make sure it was well out of her reach. They had set up her player and started the music, then retreated out of Karl's view. Inconveniently, that placed one squarely in each doorway. They weren't very subtle.

Once the music started, she felt her body relax against her will. She had once, a very long time ago, been a nervous wreck about dancing in front of others. Some of the other dancers had taught her a relaxation technique to help get over it. She had done the same exercises for so many years that her body thought her fear was just more nerves to calm.

So she danced.

There was still the possibility that she could get out of this with little or no damage. If she danced well enough and satisfied Karl, maybe she could leave in one piece.

All she wanted was to hold Angel and have everything be okay.

At least Angel was safe with Rath. He would take care of her. Grant would probably take Angel back to her family if... She couldn't think like that. She changed a move of the dance to wipe the rising moisture from her eyes.

How was she going to get out of this?

* * * * *

Dàn relaxed back as he thought about all the possible ways he could actually make a difference and how his visions could be useful on a larger scale. Why had he never seen it before? Grant's words were the snowball before the avalanche. He could see the many people who would join him and help him to make the world better and safer.

"You seem to like the idea."

"I do." He more than liked the idea. The chance to do so much good left him choked up with emotion. This felt like a purpose, a reason for his existence, and a goal for him to achieve.

"You really will create a group to do the greater good?"

"Yes."

"Have you thought of a name yet?"

Dàn ignored the smug look that covered Grant's face. "I'm not sure about the name yet. It should be something understated though." The name hadn't revealed itself to him, but he was sure it would come soon enough.

"I'm sure it will come to you, eventually. Hey, do you think our guy will be here soon? If not, I think I'd like to call and check on Destiny and Angel."

Dàn expanded his senses to feel for the one they needed. He was nearby and getting closer. Thank goodness his visions had given enough clues to find him here before he could start on his deadly trip.

The door opened with a gust of cool air, and a lone man stepped inside. *He is the one.*

"He's here." Dàn wasn't sure how to change this one. Not exactly, anyhow. This man had to be stopped from being on a certain highway tomorrow morning when a certain bus full of children would be put into his path.

"Are you going to do something?"

"Yeah, but I haven't figured out what yet," he admitted.

"Oh. Well, I could just kill him and save the children."

Right. Grant might be a bit of a surprise for a demon, but he wasn't

the kind to kill an innocent man, even if that man would be responsible for killing other innocents. "I'm thinking there should be another way."

"Why does he look so miserable?"

"Good question." He reached across the room and opened a connection to feel what was bothering the man. *Love*. It's always love that drives people to be stupid. Was it even worth the pain to open a heart and offer a trust? "His girlfriend left him for another."

"Can you get her to take him back? Then he would be too busy to cause the accident."

"No. She wasn't good with him. But perhaps he could be 'busy' with someone new to keep him from his fateful drive."

"Good idea. So you're a built-in cupid too?"

He shook his head and grinned. "I rather hoped you could help with this one. You being in the business and all."

"Whoa. I'm not in that business. I'm only into the business end of that racket. You know, the hot and heavy having a good night kind. Not the happily ever after kind. Can't you just tinker with his head and make him too sleepy to drive home?"

"I could, but he would wake up then rush to get where he thinks he needs to be."

"Okay. Well then, I suppose I could put a whammy on the guy. That would take him out of action for at least a few days."

"It would also ruin his life. Everyone would think he's mentally unstable, and he would lose his job. No, that won't work." Dàn sipped his soda. "Maybe we're making this harder than it needs to be."

"What do you mean?" Grant asked with an arched brow.

"It's not that he needs to be off the road. He just needs to not be there when the bus is, right?"

"Right. So if he goes home now, it would break his timeline and keep him from that bend at that time."

"How do we get him to go home early?" Grant asked.

"We call him. Actually, you do. I can't change my voice." Dàn smiled at Grant's confused look. "Go down the street to the pay phone and call here. Ask for our boy. His name is John Crowley. You tell him that

someone broke into his house, and he will rush home now."

"Good plan. What will you be doing?"

"I will be messing up his house and watching to see what difference our plan makes."

"Okay, and why do I have to change my voice and into who?"

"His neighbor Susan Hill would be the best choice. He actually likes her, so we may get a romance out of it anyway."

"And how will I know what she sounds like?"

"I can show you." He reached over and touched Grant's forehead, allowing Grant to hear how John Crowley thought his neighbor sounded.

"Will that do?"

"Yeah. That should do," he said in the woman's voice.

"Let's do it then, so we can get back."

Grant nodded then stood and left the bar. Minutes later the phone rang and the waitress answered. She turned to the room calling, "Hey, is there a John Crowley here?"

John answered, "Yeah," then he took the phone. He spoke a few rushed words then hung up and ran from the bar.

Dàn searched for the path to the vision of this new future and found that John would rush home safely and spend the night searching his house for missing items. He wouldn't be on that road tomorrow. The children were safe.

He let a sigh out and sagged back into his seat. He was still there when Grant returned.

"It worked," Dàn told him when he slid back into his seat.

"Wonderful. Can we start back? I have a bad feeling about the club. Something isn't right."

Dàn shifted his attention to Destiny. He could easily pick up the threads of her future. He shot up in his seat. "You're right. Something's wrong."

"Shit."

"I need to call Rath, and we're too far away for his telepathy."

They moved quickly to the bar and asked for the phone. Grant dialed the number to Rath's suite since that's where he and Angel were

supposed to be. Then he handed the phone to Dàn.

Rath answered on the second ring. "Hello."

"Rath. It's Dàn. You need to get to Destiny now. Something's gone wrong. Do you know where?"

"Yes. I'm going now." He hung up the phone.

Dàn felt again for Destiny's strand of fate. Instead of reassurance, he saw her sobbing over a small grave. Angel's grave. *Oh no.* "Dial it again, Grant."

Grant said nothing, but the tenseness around his eyes showed how hard this was for him too.

Dàn held the phone up, waiting for Rath to answer.

Angel's small voice said, "Hello?"

"Hi there, Angel. It's Dàn."

"Hi Dàn. Is Grant still with you?" Angel's voice was a happy squeal that did nothing to reassure him.

"Yeah, he's here. Is Rath there?"

"No. He left. He said he was going to get Mommy. Is my mommy going to be all right?"

Dàn didn't know, but he didn't share that with the child. "Yeah, she is. I need you to do something special for me, honey. I need you to find a place to hide."

"Like hide and seek?"

How could he explain it to her? "Yes, just like when you play with Grant. There are some men coming and they might hurt you if they find you. Do you understand?"

"Yeah. I can fit under the bed. Is that a good place?"

"That one is not so good. It's the first place bad guys look." Dàn stretched his mind trying to find a place for her to hide, where she would be safe, but he simply couldn't tell which would be the best, or if any would be good enough.

"Oh, I can hide in the closet too. Or maybe in the bathroom cupboard."

Maybe... "That's a good place. You should hide there and stay just as long as you can. Will you do that?"

"I can do that. Will you tell Mommy where to find me?"

"I sure will, and we will be coming back as quick as we can. Go hide now and be real quiet. Bye, Angel."

He hung up the phone once again. "We need to go."

"I should have been there," Grant growled savagely.

"We will get there soon. Let's go."

Then with the suddenness of a crossbow bolt, another voice shot into Dàn's mind. *I have found you. Why do you hide? I only wish to help you grow up, teach you to be strong.*

Who are you?

I am the one you will learn to obey. I will teach you all about your duty and responsibilities.

No! Get out of my head. I don't want your control. I want you to leave me alone! Alone! Alone!

Each word was a new pain driven like a spike into his skull. He felt strong arms shifting his weight to a nearby booth bench.

Listen, child. You will learn whether you wish it or not. I have left you alone long enough. My patience with your temper tantrums is at an end. Now that the companion has found you, I will take you back under my wing.

No more! Dàn sank into himself and fought to push out the voice. He'd had this intruder barge in before but always as a light contact and not this painful attack. He tried to build a shield but each attempt ripped away, leaving him in agony.

Chapter Seventeen

Grant shouted across the bar, "Barkeep! I need a glass of tequila, pronto. No, not a shot glass, I mean a beer stein."

"Yeah, right." The bartender slammed a glass down. Grant claimed it and the bottle of tequila.

"Get it now. Another bottle and the cherry syrup, too."

"Just let me know when to call the ambulance."

Grant carried it all back to the dark corner where Dàn slouched with his arms over his head. *Jeez*, the boy must really have it bad. "Here, drink this." He pushed the large mug in front of Dàn and waited for the argument.

Dàn picked it up and swallowed twice before the taste choked him. "No more. I can't."

"I thought of that." He squeezed a generous amount of syrup into the glass. "Try now."

This time he downed the whole glass and shoved it back toward Grant. "More."

He complied. "You ready to tell me what that was all about?"

"No." He downed another glass and poured himself the third.

Grant had only seen this kind of reaction once before. And unfortunately, there had been no tequila around to ease Jerdin through it. "You are more like your father than I first thought."

"How?"

"He was a stubborn ass, too." Grant pulled the bottle back from

Dàn's reach. "And he had an unwanted voice in his head as well."

"Is it you? Did he find me through you?"

"I didn't know he had bothered you before this, but I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. Given time he would have thought of that but no, I don't believe he used me this time."

"Then how? I thought I had slipped from him." With a wave of his hand the bottle pulled from Grant and Dàn refilled his glass again.

Grant wondered how much to tell the boy. How much could he handle? "Where did Dearth come from?"

"I don't know." Dàn took another deep drink. "She says she doesn't know."

At this rate Dàn would be sloshed again before they could even begin their trip back to the Nevada Club. "She lies to you. She's Jorm's pet, his informant. I've met her and her hiiskyn brethren before."

"That's impossible. Dearth saved my life. She doesn't mean me any harm." His glare was weak at best. "You're why she disappeared?"

"Probably that, and to tell Jorm about me." They didn't have time to deal with Jorm right now. How did he always know the worst possible time for his intrusions? The only way to get on their way would be to tell Dàn as much as he could, just as fast as he could manage. "Look, Dàn, Jorm is another, much less pleasant of your relatives. I have never exactly understood his methods, but eventually he will try to force you to do things you probably won't want to do. Everything he does up to that will be geared into teaching you to obey him."

"He just told me to trust you. What are you to him? Another informant like my pet?"

Why would Jorm say that? It didn't make any sense. "That surprises me. I guess he thinks he still has some control over me. He is an egotistical bastard. Probably thinks he can use me to control you."

Dàn sat up straighter in the seat. "And can he?"

Hell no. He wasn't about to return to enslavement if he could avoid it and, after thousands of years of rebelling, he was damn good at doing as he wished. "Only if we choose to let him. I for one have no plans to return to his service."

"Do we really have a choice?"

Grant pulled back the bottle. They didn't have time for this. "Yes, we have a choice. But for now, we need to head back to the club."

"Okay. I guess you get to drive."

* * * * *

Rath didn't bother to wait for the elevator. Instead he ran up the stairs to get to the penthouse. Once there he pounded on the door, nearly busting the lock while waiting for someone to open the door. The second it opened he slugged the guy who chose to open it armed only with a pistol. Then he shifted and scared the other bodyguard into pissing himself. Both ran from the room.

He shifted back to human form. "Destiny!" There was a muffled cry from down the hallway. He ran that direction.

The last door was open and inside he found Destiny. She was battered and only barely conscious. He knelt and pulled her into his arms. "Easy, love. I've got you." She moaned and tried to push away as he lifted her and laid her gently on the bed.

"No." A tear slid down her cheek, and a protective growl slipped out before he could swallow it.

"It's all right now. I'll take the pain away. Just rest easy while I look at you." He moved her gently. She had two cracked ribs but no other broken bones. She was badly bruised, especially around her face.

She fought him, still too confused to understand that he was helping her. Her pain filled him. He sat on the bed with her and moved her once more to cradle her in his arms.

He centered all his energy on healing her many cuts and bruises. At first she kept up her light struggling but slowly, as the pain receded, she relaxed into his embrace, accepting his warm hands and brushing lips.

"Rath." His name was a soft sigh.

"How do you feel?" he whispered.

"Better. I don't hurt so much. What did you do? Did you give me something?"

"I can show you later, but we need to get back to Angel now."

"Oh God! Karl went after Angel!" She moved slowly, but got up with only a little help from him.

He kept one hand under her elbow to be sure she was steady on her feet as they moved down the hall and back to the room where the party was held.

"Glad you could join us." Three men waited there for them. "I was beginning to wonder if you were coming out or deciding to move in."

Rath shielded Destiny with his body and moved forward. The urge to tear these men into very small pieces was almost overwhelming. They'd let this happen to Destiny, perhaps even helped. They would pay. "Get out of our way."

"I don't think so." The first spoke with cocky assurance. He was armed and confident.

No matter what weapons the man held, he was nothing but prey to Rath. He ached to sink his teeth into the man's tender flesh. Not for food, but for vengeance. "It would be wise if you let us leave."

"It has never been wise to ignore my boss' orders before."

Rath met the fool's gaze with an easy smile. He was so going to enjoy the battle to come. "It will be this time. Trust me."

The second man spoke up from flank position. "Stop talking and just shoot them."

The first pulled a handgun with a silencer out of holster at his side, and Rath knew there would be no more talk. He pushed Destiny behind a sofa and charged the one with the biggest gun. He punched him hard in the jaw, hard enough that he fell and didn't move. He was the lucky one.

The second guy ducked his fist and would have shot him. Rath shifted forms and knocked the man to the ground. He bit savagely into the man's arm then crushed his hand, thrilling in the feel of bones breaking beyond repair.

A short scream brought his head up in time to see the last man dragging Destiny toward the door. He was using her like a shield. In two leaps, Rath had the exit blocked. The hair bristled at his back as the gun pushed into Destiny's still healing ribs.

She cried out in pain and sagged to one side, away from the gun.

The man swung the gun toward him and fired twice before being crushed under more than two hundred pounds of enraged wolf.

Rath attacked, flinching once when he was shot, then he ended it by tearing out the man's throat and covering the white carpet in bloody gore.

* * * * *

Destiny staggered into the hall. What had she just seen? Dear God, she had just seen a man turn into a wolf and watched him kill another man.

It had been Rath. It couldn't have been. Rath was a nice man who she felt good around. He couldn't be what she had just seen. He couldn't.

She leaned weakly against the wall trying to get her breath.

A door clicked closed behind her and she jumped, turning to see who or what had come out. She almost expected to see a wolf there, but it was Rath. He moved stiffly toward her. She stepped back when he would have reached for her.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

She shook her head, even though she hurt everywhere. How could any of that matter after what she had just seen?

"We need to go to Angel."

She nodded and moved off slowly toward the elevators. She needed to hold Angel. Having her daughter safe in her arms would make everything okay. Even seeing a werewolf in a killing frenzy. Even that she could handle as long as Angel was safe.

As they finally reached his room, he stopped her with a hand to her shoulder. *Don't flinch. It's only Rath.* She tensed anyway. He was more than the guy who had been so nice to her and Angel. He had turned into a wolf and killed a man.

"After Angel's safe, we need to talk."

"I know." She couldn't meet his eyes. The light brown color wouldn't look so appealing now, not so soft and drawing, not so safe.

He unlocked the door and swung it open. The room was wrecked.

"Angel!" Her daughter's name tore out of her throat. Where was she? What had happened?

Rath pushed by her and checked the other rooms. The bitter look on his face told her all too well that he had found the same in the other room even before he spoke. "She's not here."

"Oh, my little Angel." She choked back a sob. He reached for her, but she backed away from him to the door. "I have to call the police. I have to get her back."

"Destiny..."

Whatever he would have said was lost as she ran back down to the elevator and slipped between the closing doors.

Chapter Eighteen

Rath watched her bolt away from him. Her fear kept him from following, but he knew that even the police wouldn't be enough this time. Where the hell were Dàn and Grant? Dàn could stop this from going any further if he got back in time. Until then he needed clues or a scent to follow.

He started to turn back to the room when Kita nearly flew around the corner and darted past him into the room. Wynne, the drunk who was no longer intoxicated, was on her heels and would have had her cornered except for Rath's arm shooting out to block his path.

"What the hell is wrong with this place? Seems people are being hunted all over."

"She's not people. She's not even human. But then you know that, don't you, since you're not either."

"Whatever you think you know isn't worth your life. I have enough people on my list to kill for the day. You're not on the list, but keep trying and I'll look for a pen to make the addition."

"I'm not afraid of you. My family has fought your kind for centuries and will until there are none of you left to scourge the world."

"Won't that put you out of a job?"

"I look forward to the chance to retire."

"What did we do to you?"

"Besides being a plague on humanity, your kind wronged and divided my family. Beside being evil and deserving death, I'll kill you all

myself for murdering my father!"

"Well, as the plague I am, I'm throwing you out of my room. I, for one, have had enough people here who don't belong."

"You can't protect her. I'll catch her, then I'll come back for you."

"Whatever." He shoved Rhys back and closed the door in his face. Turning to face Kita, he tried to find some reason to care about her condition. "Why are you here? More importantly, why weren't you with Destiny?"

"Fine welcome that is. Despite your rudeness, thank you for sending him on his way. I was getting quite sick of him trying to 'hunt' me. Especially since he's terrible at it. All he managed to do was keep me from getting to you sooner."

Rath didn't care. Kita was supposed to help watch over Destiny, and she'd better have a good explanation for not being there.

"I was going to tell you that I wasn't with Destiny, but I guess you know that already. After I saw Karl and his goons on the move, I tried to follow them, but Van Helsing out there got in my way. Last I saw Karl and his men they'd collected the limo and were heading west."

He glared at her and dug through his clothing, which was scattered about, some of it torn to shreds.

"Hey, what happened?"

He pulled off his tattered shirt.

"Shit. That looks bad. Is that a gunshot wound?"

"Yeah."

"Let me clean that up before you put on the other shirt."

She ran into the bathroom and returned with a warm wet hand towel. He lifted his arm and she gently wiped the slowly healing edges of the wound. She really was careful to not cause him any unneeded pain. Her touch was so light that his side was clean and ready to finish healing in seconds.

Then she ruined it by splashing salt water on the wound.

He let out a yelp of pain and his human form flickered with power spikes as his magic rebelled against the foreign energy. "Shit, shit, shit." He ran into the bathroom and turned on the shower full blast, ducking

under the flow while still dressed in his jeans.

"I'm, ah, sorry about that."

Rath splashed and scrubbed at the crusting salt. The water had abandoned the crystals and his magic was tangled over the tiny grains.

"Why did you splash me with salt water? What the hell did I ever do to you?" The fresh water and soap finally removed most of the salt.

"I didn't know it would be a problem," she mumbled, barely loud enough for him to hear over the water. "Salt water helps me heal faster. I thought it would help you, too."

He grunted. Hard to hold it against her when all she'd tried to do was help. Rath peeled the soaked jeans off while still under the water.

"I really am sorry."

"It's fine." He hung the jeans over the towel rail and turned off the water.

"How did you get shot?"

Rath plucked up a towel and dried off, carefully avoiding the wound that was now not healing at all. The puckered flesh was tender and raw. "Our friend Karl beat Destiny nearly to death then sicced his men on us."

"Is she okay?"

He stepped from the shower with the towel wrapped modestly around his waist. "As okay as a woman who's had her daughter kidnapped can be."

"Oh shit! They have Angel? Grant is going to be pissed."

"Yeah, and I'm none too happy either." He searched through the small cabinet over the sink but didn't find anything useful.

Kita tapped his shoulder. She had a small first aid kit open. "Here" Kita handed him a makeshift bandage made from a washcloth and medical tape. "No salt. Promise." She smeared antibiotic cream over the center and placed the bandage in place. "How are we going to kick his ass and get her back?"

"Thank you." Rath stretch slightly to be sure the fit was good.

"Once I can control my magic again, I'll track them down and bring Angel back to Destiny."

He followed her back into the main room where they found Destiny sitting on the sofa. Her arms were wrapped tightly around her drawn up knees, and she was sobbing into Angel's stuffed toy.

Destiny lifted her head long enough to glare at him. Her stare held a hopelessness that tore at him worse than any gunshot or salted wound could.

Kita touched her arm and spoke soothingly. "Don't you worry about it. We'll get her back, and she'll be just fine."

He wanted to take Destiny into his arms and whisper much the same thing into her soft hair. Never before had Rath lacked in courage, but he didn't have the strength to risk her rejection. She was afraid of him now. All he wanted was to keep her safe and happy, and she was afraid of him, pulled away from his touch. He slipped into the bedroom to dress while still listening to Kita's soothing words.

He came back out dressed in his woodland leather and waited for Destiny to meet his probing gaze. When she finally pulled back from Kita's arms, he said, "I am going to get her back."

"Rath..."

"I know you fear me now, but I will bring your daughter back to you safe and unharmed." He searched through his things but didn't find any of his weapons.

"And what about Karl?"

He bit down on the growl that clawed at his throat. "Karl will regret his actions, at least for a few seconds."

"Oh, my god. Please..."

He hesitated, not sure what she was asking. "Please, what?" The tears that trembled on her lashes froze him in place. His body quaked with the need to comfort her.

"Please don't kill anyone else."

How could she ask that after what the bastards had done to her and what they were planning to do to little Angel? "Destiny, they deserve it for this."

"Maybe they do, but I don't want Angel to see you kill them. I want her to know the law will catch them."

"Destiny —"

Her chin lifted and her blue eyes were filled with steel. "Rath, I mean it. Don't you kill anyone. The law can handle this. Promise me you won't kill anyone."

"Can the law really handle this? Will you risk Angel's life while we wait for your police to not find her?" He knelt before her. "I won't wait when I can be out there finding her. I can't risk it. I know if you lose her, I'll lose you both. That is a future I won't risk facing."

Destiny shook all over from trauma and fear, but her voice was firm despite the irrational request. "You promise me before you walk out that door."

Her demand didn't make much sense to Rath, but if this was what it would take to win back her trust, he would do as she wished. "I promise." The moment he spoke the words, Destiny relaxed.

Kita headed for the counter. "I think I'll go make some tea. Maybe you should tell Rath what the police said."

"I talked to security but that was a waste, then I called the police. They said they would come check out the club and see what they could find out."

"That sounds good."

"Will you wait for them?"

"No. I will begin tracking them right away. I don't want to risk losing the trail. You can wait here for them, but I'm going now." The truth was, he didn't want her to follow. He might have to break his promise to her, and he didn't want her to know. "We'll think of something. I need to be going."

"Bring her back safe."

"I will. Lock the door behind me. And stay with Kita."

* * * * *

Dàn held onto the seatbelt he had fastened to keep from bouncing about the rocketing car. Grant was racing back. He was tense and terrifying while worrying about the girls' safety. They might have been in

less danger if Dàn had driven, despite the alcohol he'd consumed.

He reached lightly to tap into his visions, while wondering if he would survive the trip. He focused on Destiny and Angel. Destiny was mostly out of harm, though she was very scared. Angel, on the other hand, had been found in her hiding place. Karl had taken her.

Dàn reached for the future. Rath was there and should be able to rescue Angel. That had been the original plan, but now... Now the vision was gone. He couldn't see what was coming. Every time he reached, he found only the scattered threads that should have woven the future. "We don't have time to drive. Pull over here."

Grant shifted a turn signal on but kept up his high speed. "What for."

"Pull over. I can move us back to the hotel room."

This time the car slowed sharply and wove to the side of the road. "You can?"

The moment the car was stopped, Dàn started drawing his power. "We need to be there." And he hoped he had enough control to get them back safely.

* * * * *

Kita locked the door behind Rath. "Did he really kill a guy?"

"Yes."

"Cool! I didn't think he had it in him."

"W-what?"

"I mean, he seems to simper to whatever that Dàn wants. I was beginning to wonder if he had any wolf in him, or if he was more of a golden retriever."

"Don't you get it? He killed a man. That man will never be again. He *killed* him."

Kita sucked in her breath. Of course Destiny would be having some trouble dealing. She wasn't exactly the kind to accept violence easily. "Did he have a choice?"

"We all have a choice."

"Knowing that he would protect you no matter what, did he really have a choice?"

"But he tore his throat out. There was blood everywhere."

"And what would have happened if you had been shot instead of him?"

"He was shot?"

"Yeah he was. If you had been hit like he was, you wouldn't have survived, and then who would Angel have to tuck her in at night? How do you think Rath would have taken your death? I'll tell you, if he's a wolf of any honor, he will hunt them down and tear them limb from limb. Wolves protect their own."

"You say that like I belong to him or something."

"Or something. You just don't get it, do you? You don't see the love in his eyes when he looks at you. You don't see that he would happily die to keep you safe and happy. It's all there in his freaky golden eyes. All you have to do is look. I'd give a hell of a lot to have a man look at me that way. That man loves you."

"Why?"

"Why! I can't believe you just asked why. That is the hundred thousand dollar question, isn't it? Why is the grass green and water flow downhill? Why does the big idiot love you? I think the more important question is how do you feel about him?"

"I'm scared of him."

"I don't have any idea why. That fool would beat himself to death with his own big toe before he would ever hurt you."

She laughed. "I'm still scared, but I see what you're trying to tell me."

"Scared is not a bad thing. After all, you came into this not even knowing about his kind, and now you're almost mated to him."

"What exactly does that mean?"

Kita hesitated. She didn't know all that much about the Valàfrn except for the Kodiak Clan, and she figured that Rath and his kin didn't seem much like them. "Well, it's different for every clan. I would guess that his is probably a pretty good group."

"You said clan...is that like a pack?"

"No, it's more like an extended family."

"So, he doesn't run around the woods and howl at the moon?"

She laughed. Rath in his woodcutter garb certainly looked about as wild as any man could. "Rath might, but it's not like all the stories."

"Oh?"

"You really should talk to him about it."

A terrible zing-pop of wild energy filled the room. Then suddenly, there was Dàn with his arms around Grant. Both looking a bit flustered."

Dàn dropped his arms and stepped back even as Kita jumped up and raced to Grant. With a leap, she landed against his chest, her arms wrapped tight around his neck.

Grant gripped her in the air and *umphed* at the impact of her small body.

She homed in on his lips and ravished him in welcome. With all the tensions running so high, she dumped all her fear and nerves into a fiery passion. Her tongue zipped against his teeth, caressed his lips asking permission and getting it.

Then she was swamped in his response as his reactions caught up to the moment. His hands owned her. His lips demanded her submission. His tongue plundered over the new territory.

She welcomed his dominance for the space of two heartbeats, then she made her own demands. Her hands loosened his long hair and sank into its lush, silky strands.

The room was silent behind her.

Too silent. *Uncomfortably silent.*

Kita pulled back and met Grant's searing black gaze. "Hi."

"Hi back."

Dàn spoke up. "Grant, we're already late. We need to go."

Grant settled Kita the rest of the way to the floor without taking his gaze from hers. "Yeah, ah...okay. Go where?"

"Go where? We have to go help Rath get Angel back. I can't see how it's going or if we're needed."

The demon shook his head, sending his hair out in a sexy flutter.

"Right." His eyes had an odd blankness.

"Grant, are you okay? We need you to zone in on Angel so we can find them. Can you focus a little here?" Dàn looked really annoyed.

"Good grief, Kita, what did you hit him with?"

"What did I hit him with?" She started off indignant then stopped. Grant still looked out of it. "Can we start off without his help and hope he gets straightened out as we go?"

"Good idea. I was able to pick out that they are heading for a boat on the river, I think." Dàn materialized a small dagger and sheathed it at his hip. "Grab your coat, Destiny. You're going with us."

"My coat isn't here."

"Then take Rath's spare." Dàn passed her the black leather coat that had appeared hanging from his hand. She'd seen that coat in ruins earlier, but now it was intact and perfect once more. "Let's go. Kita, keep track of Grant until he gets unmuddled."

Kita was glad to have someone take control for once. Although, there was something off about Dàn's demeanor. "I think I know where Karl would keep his yacht. There is a resort and dock up on the lake. I'll bet that's where they're heading."

"Then that's where we are too."

"Can we all take a short cut like you and Grant did to get here?"

"No. I can only go places I have already been."

"With that kind of skill you should travel more."

"Probably."

Destiny was keeping her distance from all of them. She nervously watched Dàn and moved a little closer to Grant. "Should we call a cab or something?"

"We left Grant's car behind, so yeah, we'll need a car."

Destiny lifted the phone and called for a cab to meet them immediately.

Kita guided Grant out the door and toward the elevator. She didn't have a car, so she wasn't much help. "Do you know if Rath took his?"

"Yes," Dàn answered.

"He took the car?" Kita paused. "I didn't know he could track them

from a car." When the elevator arrived, they all climbed in and rode it down to the lobby.

"He can't. At least, he can't track them very easily from a car." Dàn led the way outside to the curb, but the road was empty of helpful taxis.

"He tracked them to some people who he convinced to tell him where they went."

"Oh." Kita kept a grip on Grant in case he had plans to wander off. "How are you holding up, Destiny?"

"I'm okay. I just want to get Angel back."

"We will." When Destiny moved closer to her side, Kita reached out and caught her hand in a reassuring grip. "Where is the car? How long did they say it would be?"

"It should be here by now," Destiny whispered.

Dàn glanced nervously up and down the street. "We don't have time for this."

"What choice do we have?"

"There is always a choice, and I choose to have a car here, now." Grant's car appeared parked at the curb before them. "Kita, you will have to drive. I've had a bit too much tequila."

"You can suck cars through space and you've been drinking teki juice? Wow. That's a lot of power you play with." She fished the keys out of Grant's jacket and then shoved him into the passenger seat. Dàn and Destiny piled into the back, and they were off.

Chapter Nineteen

The boat floated gently at the dock. Rath watched as the men moved slowly around on deck preparing to launch. He would have to move soon. How was he going to stop them, save Angel, who he hadn't even seen yet, and not kill anyone?

He shifted his wolfish body closer. He saw Karl as he stepped onto the deck to yell orders at his men. They untied the mooring rope.

It was now or never. And never wasn't an option.

Rath bolted from the shadows and lunged at the slightly drifting rail. He caught it and pulled himself over, nearly knocking over one man with his crash landing.

The easy way was to kill him and move on to the next one while still undetected, but that wasn't what Destiny wanted.

He turned as the man scrambled to keep his balance. His snarl was enough to send the fellow vaulting the rail and splashing into the cold lake.

One down. A few more to go.

He came face-to-face with the second guard. He snapped in his direction, hoping to scare him overboard as well, but no such luck. The guard let out a short scream and ran toward the dubious safety of the cabin. The second he turned, Rath shifted back to the man, grabbed the guy, and knocked him out with a hard right hook.

Angel cried out from somewhere below.

A red haze filled his vision. She had better not be hurt. Not even

bruised. He ran the length of the deck, encountering one other man who he tossed over the rail. The cabin door flew open and two more came out. The first flew into the water and the second took five blows before he went down and stayed there.

"Hello, Karl," he said as the asshole opened the cabin door to see what was going on. The flash of fear that crossed his face told Rath that he was now alone on the boat.

The sweet scent of Karl's fear wafted to Rath and it damn near made him howl with pleasure. "You know why I'm here."

"Yes."

"Where is she?"

Karl made as if to back into the hold. "She's resting. I can bring her out." Before he could close the hatch, Rath caught it and forced his way inside.

"I'll go get her." He pushed Karl onto a bench, intending to break a few bones if possible. "Stay."

Rath moved to the door at the other end of the room. On the other side, he prayed, was Angel, safe and unharmed. "Please..." He opened the door with a slight growl. Angel lay bound and gagged on the bed. Her eyes glistened with tears. He took off the gag and freed her by dissolving her bonds.

She climbed into his arms with a happy cry. "I knew you would come. You or Grant. I knew he wouldn't get away with it."

"Come on. Let's get out of here before I do something your mommy wouldn't like."

She snuggled into his embrace. "Okay. What would mommy not like?"

"She asked me to not kill anyone." He carried her outside. Karl wisely stayed where he'd been put. Perhaps he had broken a few parts. Once outside, he found that the boat had drifted away from the dock and was too far out to jump off.

"That won't do." He summoned his ability to control the weather and built up a gentle breeze that rocked them back to the dock.

Angel clung to him like a nettle. Safe and secure in his arms, she

pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Thank you for saving me, Rath. Did you kill anyone? I don't think I'd mind if you did."

"No, I didn't." That was when he saw the car pull up and Destiny jump from it and sprint toward them. He was almost jealous of the love he saw shining in her eyes just before she pulled Angel into her arms.

Almost, but not quite. What he saw as Destiny hugged Angel was too beautiful to be sullied in any way. It was pure and perfect. And he wasn't a part of it.

He stepped past them and walked away.

* * * * *

Kita watched as Angel ran into her mother's arms. They clung together with a sweetness that made Kita want to find a phone and call her own mother just to say she loved her. Not that she and her mom had that kind of relationship anymore, but the perfection of the love on Angel's face left Kita aching to feel even an echo of that emotion.

Over their embrace she saw Rath slip past and walk away without saying anything to anyone.

Angel must have seen him, too. She turned in Destiny's arms. "Where's Rath going, Mommy?"

But Destiny was oblivious to anything other than holding her daughter. "Rath... Oh, I don't know." She didn't look up. She didn't see Rath's stride break or his hand rise to wipe at his eyes.

"Mommy, he looks sad." Angel's voice was filled with childlike innocence and a purity of truth that few adults could still sense.

"Sad?"

Angel moved as if to free herself, but Destiny stood holding her off the ground, preventing her from going after Rath. "Mommy? Yeah, sad, and sort of hurt."

"He was hurt?" Destiny asked.

Kita was fairly sure that Angel didn't mean hurt like that. But it wasn't her place to interfere. She led them back to the car and listened as Angel tried to explain.

"Not his body hurt, but inside hurt. Did you have a fight with him, Mommy?" Angel looked frustrated. But also tired. She yawned and snuggled deeper into Destiny's arms. "We should go thank him, shouldn't we?"

Destiny kissed her daughter's cheek and shushed her quietly. "We'll thank him later, honey. Right now, we need to get you home."

Grant caught hold of Kita's arm. "Kita, how did we get here?"

She raised her eyebrows and grinned. "You've finally decided to join us?"

"What?" Looking puzzled just didn't suit him.

"No more of that confusion stuff. You have a perfectly good upstairs. It's time you turned the light back on."

He scratched his head, messing up his neat hair. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about you walking around like you're stoned or something. What's up with that anyways?"

"Since our kiss..."

Since our kiss, our deep, arousing, mind blowing kiss... "Yeah, about then."

The clouds were clearing from his gray eyes. He shook his head and when a strand of his black hair fell forward, he took the time to finger comb the thick hair into his usual neat style. Then he went on to neaten his suit. When he did finally answer his voice was low and subdued.

"Hormonal backfire, you could say."

"What exactly is that?" When he started to fidget with his clothes again, Kita slapped his hand lightly and gave him a pointed look to get him back on the subject.

"Put simply, my animal magnetism bounced back on me. Which is very interesting. I don't believe that has ever happened before."

"Those girls weren't stoned out, space cadets."

A faint blush crept over Grant's high cheekbones. "I didn't use those talents on them."

"But you used those talents on me?"

He took a step back from her. "I didn't mean to..."

"Well, doesn't that beat all? I'm happy to see you, and you try to manipulate me. I will tell you this: you are very lucky it backfired because if you had drugged me like that, I would have to kill you."

"I didn't intend to do anything. You were the one who attacked me, not the other way around."

"Don't worry. That ain't likely to happen again anytime soon." But Kita wasn't really all that angry with him. In fact she was more interested in when she would have more time alone with him to conduct some experimentation on the subject.

* * * * *

Destiny climbed into the back of Grant's car, leaving Kita and Grant up front. She ignored their tense silence and hugged Angel tight in her arms before carefully buckling her seat belt. Dàn had offered to ride with Rath back to the Nevada.

"Mommy?"

Thank God she was unharmed. If anything had happened to Angel... It was too much to even consider. "What is it, honey?"

"Are you mad at Rath?"

He was all Angel had spoken of since he saved her. She guessed that was to be expected. To little Angel, he would seem very heroic. "No, I'm not mad at him."

"Because he did what you wanted, Mommy. He kept his promise."

"What promise?" Surely she didn't mean...

"That he wouldn't kill anyone."

"He told you that?"

"Yeah. He even left Karl."

Destiny couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Oh." He hadn't killed anyone. He'd kept his promise. But was he the killer he seemed to be? Had he only held back this once? What did it all mean?

"So you shouldn't be mad at him. He saved me and did it how you wanted."

Kita looked back over the seat and winked at her. Then she

mouthed the words 'big toe' before turning back.

"Okay, Angel. I'll talk to him."

But what would she say? She had feelings for a werewolf and was scared of what he was. It wasn't the kind of thing he could change. Yet, he had rescued Angel. Did it make a difference if a vicious animal were on your side? Could he ever be trusted, or was he nothing more than a predator? She needed to know more about them.

What did she really know about him? Almost nothing, except that she liked being with him and felt safer when he was close. Oh, he was very handsome and also had a wry sense of humor that often took her by surprise. He was loyal to family and friends. He was protective. He liked Angel. Angel liked him.

She knew a lot, and all of it favorable.

What she needed to know was about his kind. Maybe Kita would have some answers. With Angel already asleep, now might be the best time to get some answers.

"Kita, can you tell me anything about the werewolves? I think it's time I learned more about what Rath is."

Kita smiled back over her shoulder and answered, "Valàfrn, not werewolves, though most don't bother to argue the point."

"Valàfrn?"

"Yeah. Similar to people and sometimes part human, but not werewolves. More like shape-shifters."

"Um, okay. So why do they turn into wolves?"

"I don't know exactly, but it's more like they can turn into people. When I look at them, I see the wolf."

"Oh, he's not even a human..."

"Actually, he is closer to the Jotun of Norse belief," Grant said.

"Jo-what?" Kita asked.

"Destiny, Rath is close enough to human in all the ways that matter. I don't know all the specifics either, but one guy a long time ago was cursed into the body of a wolf. Eventually, he found a way to use magic to control his shape and a few other things."

"He's a man."

"Sort of."

Kita glared at Grant. "Trust me, he's a wolf. But most of the time that's better than a man anyhow."

"You really should give him a chance. Valàfrn make excellent mates," Grant added.

"How would you know?" Kita asked.

"My best friend mated one. They were perfect together."

"Are they still together?" Or would he leave her like Angel's father had? Even if Angelo had left her by way of dying, the thought of losing another was almost too much to bear.

"No, they are not together now."

"She left?"

"She died. We shouldn't talk about that around Dàn just yet."

"Why?"

"Because he is their son and still misses them terribly." They pulled into the club parking lot.

"Does that mean that they can have children with humans?"

Grant leaned close as he opened Destiny's door. "Dàn doesn't have any human in him, but yes, they can cross-breed, if you will. I suppose they're probably quite good at it if you're into doggie style."

"What?"

Kita punched Grant in the arm. "Shut up. Destiny, he's kidding."

"Oh." She lifted Angel, trying to not wake her. Her efforts were wasted as two motorcycles revved their engines next to Rath's parked car.

Dàn leaned against the car while Rath approached the two bikes, which turned off with a grumble of complaint. The bikers swung off, and one pulled Rath into a quick backslapping hug. The other looked her way and said something.

In a breath, Rath's posture changed and his fist slammed into the biker's face, knocking him over the bike and onto his rear.

The biker stood and shook himself in a very dog-like way. He again glanced her way then shrugged at whatever Rath said. Then he and the other one walked over toward them.

"Hello, ma'am. I'm Molach. You can call me Mo." He held out a

hand as if to shake, and all she could think was that maybe she could block Angel and keep her safe inside the car. "Look, ma'am, I know you don't know me, but if you don't shake my hand like a friend, Rath is going to kick by butt."

"Rath sent you over?"

"Yeah. I said somethin' stupid when I caught your scent on him."

"And he hit you?"

"And told me to come apologize. I am real sorry about that. My mouth always runs before my brain."

"Oh. Okay." She held a hand out and waited for the worst. He shook her hand with a single friendly pump then stepped back to make room for the other biker.

"Hi, Destiny. My name's Romach, but everyone calls me Romie." His hand clasped hers with a short drop. "I hope you'll forgive Mo. Last time Rath tried to teach him manners it took a month for him to be well enough to hunt with me."

"It's all right."

"She forgave me," Mo yelled over his shoulder to where Rath stood glaring. Mo's broad grin showed off his boyish dimples, which made him look harmless. Yet they had admitting to hunting, and it sounded very wolf-like the way Romie had spoken.

"Thank you. Being on his good side will make this a lot more fun."

"Make what more fun?" Grant asked?

"Dàn said we get to bust the casino."

"Hey, that was my plan," Kita yelled.

"Seems to me there's enough casino in this club for all of us, doll."

She grumbled and crossed her arms over her chest. "Fine, but it has to be according to my plan."

"Yeah, I know. That's the best part. We get to frame the Kodiak for it and cause disorder, chaos and mayhem in their ranks." Mo did a little hip swinging happy dance.

"Great plan, by the way," Romie said.

The twins were a bit endearing for werewolves. "Who are the Kodiak?"

Kita answered her question. "Damn wolf bastards. Not like you guys, of course. The short of it is that the Valàfrn are divided into clans."

"We're of the Eagle Clan," Romie said.

"They, the worthless dogs, are nothing but a bunch of honorless criminals. They call themselves the Kodiak Clan."

"As in the bear?"

Mo's grin slipped a little. "As in, barely worth the time it would take to skin them."

"Hey, I like these pups," Kita said.

Both grinned identical smiles then said, "Thank you."

Dàn joined them. "Not that I want to break up all this chatter, but we should get some rest and do some planning."

"I need to get Angel home." But somehow the thought of their small apartment seemed like terrifyingly inadequate protection.

Dàn's hand touched her shoulder. "Destiny, I think it would be safest if you would stay with us in the hotel. I reserved three interconnected suites, so you will have your own rooms and still be close enough for us to protect."

She fell into Dàn's pale blue gaze and knew that he would protect them. He would keep Angel safe. Staying with them here in the hotel was the right choice. "I... Do you think they will try something?"

"I think that if you leave, you and Angel's futures could be at risk."

And she believed him. "Okay."

"Rath, can you carry Angel?" Dàn asked. "She really is worn out."

Grant leaned over, brushed the dark hair from the little girl's forehead, then lifted her. He passed her gently to Rath who cradled her like a man who cherished the burden. Why had Dàn asked Rath to carry her when he was the one who had been shot earlier? Surely one of the others could have done so and saved him any more injury. Maybe that meant he hadn't been shot all that badly.

The group went to the room and Angel was settled onto Rath's sofa where her toys were now neatly piled. The rest of the room was also tidied up.

"Can we get some grub? It was a long cold ride up here," Romie

said as the twins moved around the suite, obviously wanting to touch every button in the place.

"Rath can show you where the hotel restaurant is," Grant suggested.

"No," Dàn said.

"I can show them," Kita offered.

"No," Grant cut in, but was ignored. He rested his hands on his hips and glared in turns at Kita and the twins.

Kita was already moving off with the twins. She called over her shoulder, "I'm hungry too, and I just can't think on an empty stomach." She blew a kiss Grant's direction.

"Kita..." Grant began, but he didn't bother to finish since obviously no one was listening.

The three rushed out of the room while promising to be back before too long. They were the picture of wild teenagers anxious to explore their world. The door shut behind them with a click.

"The little witch," Grant grumbled.

"You could go after her," Destiny said. The irritation on Grant's face made her smile. She wasn't the only one with a difficult relationship.

"No, she can do as she wishes. I just wish she wanted to be with me."

"Give her time. She's young, but in time, she'll get the idea," Dàn reassured Grant.

"Yeah, right. So what's the plan?" Grant slid off his jacket.

"Kita explained it to you, didn't she?" At Grant's nod, Dàn continued. "That plan is as good as any others. We can start as soon as the casino opens today."

"And how exactly are we going to win enough to bust the casino? I haven't that much luck, though I have been trying for months now."

"I'll tell you what will win, and you will play it."

"Won't that be a little obvious?"

"You will also share the information with as many others as you can, while being sure to say that you overheard Karl telling his men."

"How deliciously devious," Grant said with a grin. "So it will look

like he set it all up to fall and he'll be the one to pay up for it."

"Yes," Dàn said smugly.

"You know who I heard is their enforcer now, don't you?" Rath tucked a blanket around Angel and continued. "They'll be sending Díon."

The way Rath spoke the name sent a shiver of fear down Destiny's back. She knelt beside Angel and pushed a stray strand of her hair back from her face. "I take it you guys know this Díon? Who is he, and what will he do?"

Rath answered while backing away to give her more room. "Díon was of our clan. The Kodiak accepted him after he was exiled. He will be sent to either kill Karl and his men or take Karl back to Bequlf."

"I see." She couldn't hold back the bitterness. "I see that Rath did no favors by not killing him when he rescued Angel."

Rath turned away, moving through the room, absently putting things back in their place, even though the room seemed to be back in order before they'd returned.

Dàn caught Rath by the arm when he moved closer once more. Only then did Dàn answer Destiny. "No. Karl's fate was set long ago. It is the way of the clans to be less than forgiving for this kind of betrayal."

Destiny swallowed back the bile rising in her throat and tried to accept what he was saying. "What will happen when money starts pouring out of the casino? Will they close it or call the police?"

"They should do both, but instead they will try to find Karl and get him to fix whatever is rigging the games."

Grant settled into a chair and stretched his long legs out before him. "And how will we know what will win?"

"I will tell you." Dàn said.

"But how will you know?" Destiny asked. That was the part that didn't make senses to her.

"I probably couldn't know enough all at once to win at so many games. I will make the games win on a set of numbers. I will make sure the dice games all pay out to whoever plays. I will also set the card games. All of the automatic games will cash out every play. The wheel game will hit seven, nine and eleven. Play those and pass the word. When people see

the numbers hitting, the wagers will hit maximum allowed very quickly.”

Destiny just didn’t understand how they could make it work. “If you can really do this, it could work.”

Chapter Twenty

Rath watched quietly as Dàn and Grant moved to Dàn's suite to talk privately. He tensed as he felt Destiny's gaze.

"Rath?"

"I can let you and Angel have this suite. I'll stay with Dàn or the twins so you can have your privacy."

"Wait, Rath." She looked uncomfortable. "Can we talk?"

He wasn't sure he was ready for this talk yet, but he wasn't about to tell her so. Instead he delayed. "Yeah. You want something to drink?"

She didn't exactly smile, but there was a softening in her expression that offered hope. "I think a drink might help."

He moved to the bar along one side of the room. "What would you like? It seems that Dàn requested a full bar."

"White wine would be fine."

He poured and passed the drink over the bar to her. After pouring his own drink, he stayed back to give her space. Whatever she wanted to speak about, he didn't need to crowd her.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

The silence stretched out as they both busied themselves sipping the wine. He shifted slightly, impatient to get to the part where she explained all the reasons he needed to stay out of her and Angel's lives. How he was too different, too violent, too much a monster.

"Rath, I am sorry..."

He flinched from the expected blow. Even though he understood, it still hurt that she couldn't accept what he was. "I understand." His head dropped in defeat. If she wanted to walk away from a possible relationship, he would let her.

"I overreacted in the penthouse. I should have seen that you only did what you had to so we could get away. Kita said you were shot during the attack. Was it bad?"

His breath caught. "No, not bad." Was she really all right with what had happened or was this just her way of softening the blow?

"Kita implied it was bad enough that it would have killed me."

"Kita talks too much."

"Will you show me?"

"It's almost healed now. It would be healed if Kita hadn't tried to help." He lifted his T-shirt and showed his side.

She gasped. "It must have been horrible. I can see the scarring goes the whole way across your side. How can you heal this quickly?"

"It's all magical. I actually have very little control over the healing."

"It's amazing."

"It simply is part of who I am."

Her fingers brushed over the puckered skin and a tingle of energy shocked them both. "Oh!"

He let his shirt fall back into place. "That happens sometimes." Part of him wanted to step back and give her more room, but the rest of him wanted to get much closer.

"It was like a shock. Was that from the healing?"

"Somewhat. The healing focuses my power in that area. Your touch releases something like static electricity. But not enough to hurt you. I don't have that much power."

"You don't have that much power?" She laughed, but the sound had a nervous edge. "You seem powerful to me who has none."

He smiled, trying to ease her fear. "I really don't have very many skills compared to others. What I have is strong though."

"What are you best at?"

He opened himself to her emotion, looking for a way to set her at

ease. What hit him wasn't fear. It was much closer to anticipation. The surprise left him wondering what had changed and if he could trust it to last. He held himself still, waiting for her cues, taking his time answering her questions. "I can control the weather very easily."

She frowned up at him, but a small smile tipped her lips. "Control it in what way?"

"I can level a county with tornadoes, rain out a whole city, or caress your cheek with a breeze."

The smile spread. "Wow. I guess I'll have to wait for a demonstration until we're outside. Do you think we could tomorrow?"

"Sure, but I can do some here." He poured a glass of water, then lifted the particles and formed them into a tiny cloud. He moved the glass in front of Destiny, then blew gently on the newborn cloud. It drifted lazily over the glass then slowly rained back in without spilling a single drop.

Her eyes went wide with wonder, and it made him feel as if he'd created a miracle.

"Oh my! That is so neat! I can't wait for you to show Angel what you can do. She will think it's wonderful, I know she will."

She didn't seem afraid of him anymore, but had anything really changed? Her eyes no longer darted away when he looked her way. She willingly reached out and touched him. Even his powers sparking hadn't sent her running. Still, he hesitated before asking, "You don't seem to be as afraid of me now."

"I...don't think I am. I was just overwhelmed by everything happening at once. It was so scary, and then you suddenly weren't what I thought."

Searching her eyes, hoping to see something he wasn't sure he ever would, he whispered, "I haven't changed, not in any way that matters."

"I know that now. But when you turned into a wolf... It was too much."

"I guess it was a lot, especially with Angel missing. I'm sorry the timing made it so hard to explain."

"I didn't mean to hurt you." Her fingers slid over his arm with

heart-melting heat.

He ached to kiss her face so prettily upturned to his. Instead he laced his fingers over hers. "I was the least of your worries."

"Maybe at the time, but I think you're pretty important to both me and Angel. I'd like to have you be part of our lives...if you want to be."

"I would like to be part of your lives." But he couldn't expect her to just accept him and what he was after all she'd been through.

Her hand caressed over his. "I should know more about you, though."

A surge of hope rushed through Rath. Was she ready to know more? "What would you like to know? I have nothing to hide from you."

"Do werewolves date? Wait, Kita and Grant said your kind are called something else...um...Valàfrn?"

Damn. The sound of "Valàfrn" on her lips did something to his insides. It took him a moment to refocus on her question. "Right, and yes, we do date, though I've been told we are more loyal than most humans."

She laughed. "Hey, I'm a human."

Rath couldn't stop the grin. "Sorry. I was just repeating what our young Record Keeper says. I don't know enough humans yet to have an opinion."

"You don't know many humans?"

"No, only a few, including you."

"Why is that? I would think you would have to know plenty just to hold down a job or anything."

"I don't really have a job except for watching out for Dàn." How could he explain the clan ways when surely their clan would seem even stranger than any other? "For a couple hundred years we avoided people. All the ones I knew from before died of old age, and I haven't met very many in the last few years that we have been back among humans again."

"You did not just say a *couple hundred years*. Did you?" There was another tremor of fear in her.

"Yes." He wasn't sure how to make the truth any easier for Destiny to accept.

"How old are you, Rath?"

"I'm about four hundred years old," he answered.

She didn't pull away, but she did look at him with a slightly glazed expression. "You are in remarkable shape for a man that old. I take it you don't age like humans do."

Just how shocked was she? He took her hand gently and led her over to the sofa across from where Angel slept. Once she was seated, he sat down beside her. "No, we don't really age past maturity until we get close to a thousand years old. And then only if we are unmated."

When he would have released her hand to give her space, she laced her fingers through his and held on. Her eyes lost their glaze and took on a curious tilt. "Unmated? What does that mean?"

"Destiny, we mate, marry, if you want to call it that, for life. The bond that forms is a reflective magical link. As far as I know, it is completely unbreakable even by death."

She smiled. "I have no idea what you just said."

This was one of the hardest parts to explain about his people. "When I come to care for someone, I unconsciously share my magic with them. The sharing reflects between the partners and increases the power that we both can use." It was a side of the magic that they had little control over.

"So your mate would have magical abilities?" She relaxed a bit more. Her shoulder brushed against his as she drew her legs up under her on the sofa. "What would she be able to do?"

"It varies some, but usually the mate can do some or all of what the Valàfrn can. So probably my mate will be able to control the weather like I do."

"How does that happen?"

Rath sighed. Her body against his felt so right. "I don't know exactly. I've never been mated. I feel very strongly for you, though. I may have started sharing my magic with you already. Would you like to try an experiment?"

"With me? But I don't... Yeah, let's try." She giggled. "What should I do?"

"How about turning on a light. That is pretty easy and simple to

get without much practice." He tugged her hand gently until they stood in front of a small desk lamp.

"How?"

"First, think about what you want to happen. You want the energy to flow over the wire inside."

She pinched her eyes together in concentration. She was trying so hard that even her nose wiggled, which was very cute. She relaxed. "It's not working."

"I think you might be trying a little too hard. Relax and just imagine that you can see the power brightening the room." The bulb flickered and Destiny jumped back, hard into Rath's front.

"You did that!"

He smiled down at her. "Nope, it's all you." The reality of her using his magic affected him deeply. She was truly his mate. After four hundred years, he was now bound to this woman and the thrill of the moment was one he'd never forget.

"I really did it?"

"You really did."

She looked at the bulb and it brightened almost at once. She spun in his arms and leaned up to kiss him. Her excitement was hot and liquid as it hit him, and it quickly burned into passion. He carefully accepted all she wished to give without asking for more. They'd made far too much headway to scare her off now.

She pulled back slightly. "Wow."

"Yeah, wow." Her perfect body pressed against him, forcing all but his desire from his mind. His head lowered enough for his lips to brush over the top of her head.

"Does that mean that you care for me?"

"I care." He more than cared, but for now, those words would do.

"You said the magic was shared when you care for someone. That it is the way between mates. Are we mated now?"

In truth that was just what it meant, but he didn't want to scare her with the depth of his feelings. "I think this falls under dating."

"Dating, huh?"

"Yeah, we are able to date just like humans."

"But?"

Could it be that she was already able to read his mind? Most mates could do so after they've been together for a short while. "But why should we waste the time, when we know what we want at first glance?"

"You talk about wasting time when you have a thousand years to find the right person to share your life with."

"The number of years makes no difference." This was another part of the magic that he wasn't really able to explain. It just happened and sometimes it never happened at all.

"But how can you mate for life to a human who will grow old and die?"

"The magic that keeps me young is shared. If I don't age, then neither will my mate, neither will you." He brushed his fingers over her smooth jaw, letting the pad of his thumb follow the shape of her lower lip. "There is a down side."

"What's that? Eternal youth sounds pretty good to me."

Eternal youth with the one you loved was a dream come true, but in this case the down side was just as powerful. "Others grow old around you. The humans I was friends with in my youth are all long dead, as are their children and grandchildren. A dozen generations and I am still the same. There is a cost to youth."

"I guess you're right. I hadn't thought of it that way."

"It's not all heartbreak, especially when many people live more than human life spans."

Destiny's body tensed under his hands, and her gaze jumped up to his. "But what about Angel? I don't know if I could bear to watch her grow old and die before me."

"Usually our children are filled with their own magic passed to them from the adult. I don't know what would happen with Angel. She may even have magic of her own from Grant's blood. Too much is unknown about her still."

"From Grant? What do you mean? Is Grant Valàfrn? Why would Angel have his magic?"

Her fear beat at him. His empathy picked it up and drove it through his mind. "No, Grant is not Valàfrn. I thought you knew."

"No. What is he?"

Shit! He'd thought she knew about Grant and Angel, but the demon had never told her. At that moment Rath wanted nothing more than to beat Grant for his cruelty. Now that he had let some of it slip, it was his responsibility to help Destiny understand the truth about her own daughter. "It's hard to explain."

"Try."

Rath tried to counter her fear with a soothing empathy, but that wasn't one of his stronger skills. "Grant is a demon, but not like what you would think."

"He's a demon? What does he want from Angel?"

When she would have jumped to her feet to move to Angel's side, Rath caught her hands and held her in place, forcing her to hear him out. "To watch over her. She is his descendent many times removed, through her father."

"So she might have magic? Demon magic? I don't think I like the sound of that." She trembled but made no effort to escape his hold.

"It's not so bad. I was worried about him, too, when I learned we were coming north to find a demon, but he seems to be as honorable as any of my clan. Dàn says we can trust him and that is good enough for me." He wanted to know more about Angel's father. Knowing more, he might be able to help her understand better. "What do you know about Angel's father?"

"Angelo..." Her expression softened, and her eyes grew damp with emotion. "He was bigger than life. This means he was a demon, wasn't he?"

"Yes."

"I guess I should have wondered what made him different. Maybe I would have asked him, if only we'd had more time."

Her sorrow tore through him. "What happened?"

"He died. There were men after him and, when they found him in my hometown, we ran. We made it as far as Buffalo before they caught

us." Her lip trembled and tears swelled over and trailed down her cheeks. "I watched him die and would have been killed too, except that Angelo—I ran and the men attacked him while I got away."

He pulled her fully into his lap and rocked her while she cried quietly into his shirt. Her pain was his, but he couldn't help but be glad that Angelo was gone. Her tears passed, and she eased out of his embrace to sit beside him. He let her go, understanding the need to collect herself, but he claimed her hand with his. He wasn't about to give her up to memories.

Destiny stared at her daughter thoughtfully. "Dàn and Grant just appeared in the room after you went to find Angel. Can you do that, or was that Grant?"

"That was Dàn. No, I can't move matter."

"Dàn can, though?"

Rath relaxed his hold on her hands. Destiny was trying so hard to understand, but how could he explain Dàn? "Dàn is very powerful. He can do a lot of things I cannot do."

"But he is Valàfrn like you, right? I don't know how many different kinds I can absorb all at once."

Rath sidestepped her question, which he didn't know how to answer. "Has Kita told you what she is yet?" The tactic worked perfectly. "She wouldn't tell Grant, and I think it's driving him crazy."

She shook her head. "I thought she was just a young girl. Let me guess, she's actually older than you?"

"As far as I know, she is the nineteen that she claims to be."

"Just not human... You know, a week ago I thought all people were human. And now even my daughter isn't what I thought."

"It doesn't change anything. You need to understand that these different kinds of people have always been around you. They haven't changed. Only the knowledge you now have has changed."

"I know. I just think it might take me a little time to get used to the idea."

He watched Destiny watch her daughter sleep. The love still showed in the softness of her expression. His biggest fear was that she

wouldn't be able to accept that Angel carried demon blood. Maybe it hadn't been his place to tell her, but Angel's future mattered, and he couldn't risk it coming out at a worse time.

She gently pulled her hand free of his grasp. "I just thought of something."

"What?"

Destiny looked up at him with a wry grin. "When she says she can see Grant's wings and horns, she really can, can't she?"

"Probably. I don't see them, if it makes you feel better."

"It does. I would feel like the blind among the seeing if I was the only one who saw Grant as a human-looking guy."

Rath stood and offered to help Destiny to her feet. She didn't need the physical help, but he wanted her to willingly take his hand once more. If she could after learning all she had during this long night, then maybe he could trust her not to bolt from him.

She slipped her slim hand into his, and he pulled her up to stand in front of him.

His heart jumped and raced. What did it mean? He wove his fingers through hers and reached out with his other hand.

Destiny caught his hand and slid the hot contact upwards over his forearm and bicep, pausing at his shoulder where his woven shirt separated their skin. At some point in the motion she had moved forward. The barest of spaces waited between their bodies.

He wanted to drag her into his arms to obliterate that space. He wanted to disintegrate their clothing to let their bodies touch, connect, be one. He wanted to claim her as his with a dominance fitting his clan and his lineage.

Instead, he waited.

She had to be the one to take the next steps, even if the waiting tore him into shreds.

Destiny had to decide...and she did.

She took the final step, closing the distance between their bodies, rose up on her tiptoes, and pressed her mouth to his in a short, hot kiss. Before he reacted, she was drawing back.

"Thank you, Rath." Her gaze dropped, avoiding his, and her hands withdrew while she eased her body back, away from his embrace.

Her nervous reaction jumped to him and danced over his senses. He fought back his instincts, which identified Destiny as prey about to flee. Always, he had iron clad control over his animal instincts. He wasn't about to let them hurt Destiny. Not now...not ever.

He cupped her shoulders, keeping her from moving forward or away.

Destiny couldn't believe the wonder that covered Rath's face. There was a gentle adoration glowing in his golden eyes that offered everything she'd ever dreamed of, even while the perfection of it terrified her.

She reached up and trailed her fingertips over his strong jaw. Sparks ignited between them, and Rath's lips opened on a sigh.

Angel shifted restlessly and jerked upright with a scream. "Nooo!"

She let go of Rath and fell to her knees beside her daughter. "Angel... Shhh... It's all right." Angel awoke from whatever nightmare was scaring her and clung to her. "You're okay now, honey. You're safe."

Typical of Angel, she was back to normal within seconds of coming awake. And Destiny was more than thrilled to have such a resilient daughter. Was that because she was raising her well or because some small part of Angel was a demon? And more important...did it matter?

"I'm okay, Mommy." Angel pulled back from her embrace. "It was just a dream."

The connecting door opened and Grant walked in. "Is she all right?" Behind him was Dàn and the two walked over to the sofa.

"She just had a nightmare," Rath explained.

"Maybe we could move her to the bed—"

"But I'm awake, Mommy. I don't want to sleep now," Angel said. "Can I stay up a while? Can I, Mom?"

"I don't know..."

"Can I watch *The Fox and the Hound*?"

"We don't have the movie here, honey. It's at home."

"But I want to see it, Mommy. Please can I?"

"I'm sorry..."

"Look at that. I seem to have a video called *The Fox and the Hound*." Dàn held up the tape in question. "Maybe she could come watch it with me and Grant."

"I don't want her to be a bother."

"No bother."

"Can I, Mommy?" Angel jumped off the sofa and ran around Dàn excitedly, only stopping to grab Grant's hand.

"I guess so. We can all watch the movie."

"Why don't you let us watch the movie with Angel, so you and Rath have a little more time to talk?" Dàn offered.

Grant swung Angel up into his arms. "In fact, let Angel stay next door tonight. She can sleep on the sofa when she's ready to sleep."

"I don't know..." She started to object, but Angel was being carried through the door before she could do more than stand up. It seemed so strange now to be letting Angel leave with a demon. How could she trust him to watch over her baby? For months she'd been fine with Grant, but now... Had anything changed?

Rath's strong arm came around her in a comforting half embrace. "We can go with them, if you want?"

"Will she be all right with them?" The simple fact that he understood her fears helped her to push them back.

"Yes, I'm sure there is no safer place she could be than with Dàn and Grant." His arm tightened. "But if you're still worried, we can go with them."

He was offering to watch a children's movie just to ease her fears. She had to get past this. Grant would watch over Angel just like he always had. There was nothing to fear. Angel was safe.

"Would you like another glass of wine?"

"Maybe half a glass."

"Your glass is still half full. How about I top it off for you?"

"Thank you, Rath." She smiled, as he crossed the room. The man had such broad shoulders. And he happily seemed to care for everyone around him. How could she have thought of him as dangerous? She knew

he could be, especially after seeing his wolf side in a fight, but Rath was, at heart, a protector. "I don't mean just for the drink, but for everything. I don't know what I'd have done if... Well, thank you."

Rath returned with their glasses. "You're welcome, Destiny. I hope you know I'd never let anyone hurt you or Angel if it was in my ability to keep you safe."

"I know that now."

Rath took her hand, sending sparks of awareness over her skin. With a gentle tug, he led her back to the sofa. "Will you sit with me for a while?"

Oh, yeah... Destiny's knees turned to pudding. Angel was safe, and she had a little time for herself. How long had it been since she'd spent time with a man? *Too long*. She couldn't remember even having a serious date since Angel was born, since before that. *Since Angelo*. She'd always been too worried about making ends meet and providing a good life for Angel to enjoy her own.

She sank down beside Rath, gasping when her leg brushed his in electric contact. Contact that was so sexual in nature that the tingles slipped deep into her, leaving her wanting so much more. But at the same time fearing where it all might lead.

"I don't want to pressure you into anything, Destiny." He stroked her hand between his two palms. "I can feel your fear and hesitation, and I want you to know that no matter what choices you make, I will never force you to do more than you want."

His kindness was a balm to her concerns. "Even if I want to date for years?"

"Even then." He pulled her close and pressed a kiss to her temple. "From the first moment I saw you, I wanted to be with you and to protect you. That hasn't changed. I still want that and to be given a chance to love you."

"I don't know what I feel for you, Rath, but it is powerful." Was she lying to him, to herself? What she felt for him was already more than she'd felt for Angelo. He was the kind of man she'd always dreamed of, except for the whole werewolf side. But his being different didn't really

scare her. She'd known from the beginning that Angelo was different, even if she never would have guessed he was a demon.

"Is it something about me?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I seem to fall for men who aren't human. Is it something about me that draws men like that, like you, to me?"

"First..." He tilted his chin up and kissed her lips. "I am so glad to hear you might be falling for me. And second, if anything besides you being you drew me, it might be the way I want to protect how delicate you appear. If he saw you as I do, he might have felt that need the same as I do." He kissed her again, lingering a moment longer. "Don't think for a moment that it is any kind of fault. I just hope you give us a chance to see what might grow between us."

She wanted that too, but still needed time to adjust to all the changes. "Can we just talk for a while? I'd like to know more about your life and all that you've done."

"We can do that."

And they did. Together they sat on the sofa and spoke of the past, and each revelation was accompanied by light touches and shared kisses that promised so much more. Eventually the long day wore them both down, and Destiny snuggled into Rath's arms, falling asleep within his sheltering embrace.

Chapter Twenty-One

Rhys was tired of watching the closed hotel room doors. No one was coming in or out. The only thing he was gaining was a stiff back and a slow death by boredom.

At least he'd brought along the journal and read a large chunk of it with his newly believing eyes. His father and other ancestors had included more than enough education in the journal for him to learn from.

The werewolves were the threat they'd been most concerned about. But there had also been information about identifying vampires, demons, fairies, and many other paranormal beasts that walked around pretending to be human. There was even one account of a dragon sighting, though the notes said those were almost certainly extinct.

Werewolves traveled in packs and at least part of the time lived like humans. Some of them even blended in, living in cities, working in offices, looking human. But when the wolf took them, they became nothing but animals. They hunted and killed and were almost unstoppable. There was quite a bit about the Cleveland pack in the recent notes. Also included were news clippings of murders and obituaries.

Rhys opened the book once more to the most disturbing of the bunch, which included a series of little girls who were found raped, murdered and mutilated almost beyond recognition. How could anyone do such terrible things? Even his education hadn't prepared him for the atrocities he'd found documented in the journal.

Damn them.

The one photo was etched in his mind. The little dark haired girl's face had been intact, her horror-filled eyes frozen in the terror that her captors had been inflicting. He wouldn't think about anything other than her face. Only her face. Everything else had been torn apart, seemingly eaten by what the police claimed to be wild dogs.

Bullshit. It had been werewolves. And the police were doing nothing to stop them. The police didn't even admit they existed.

Someone had to stop them. Now Rhys understood his father's almost insane passion for his work. Who else would fight this battle if not him? Who else...?

No better time than the present.

Since nothing was happening here in the hotel part, Rhys crept back down to street level. Once there, fortune was on his side. He caught sight of the little, strawberry blonde bitch with two big boys who looked like twins. He trailed after them.

After two turns the girl disappeared. He followed the twins through the darkened streets.

Were they werewolves or not? How could he tell for sure without getting close to the monsters? The journal hadn't said much about identifying from a distance. It recommended surveillance until identity could be confirmed.

He followed them to an all night dance club and slipped into a corner booth with a drink to continue his watch. The two men acted like teenagers loose on the town for the first time. They danced with every girl and even laughed off the occasional rejections.

They couldn't be werewolves. More likely they were frat boys on Christmas break from some local campus. Surely not dangerous creatures of the night.

But how could he be sure after seeing them with the little thief?

He couldn't.

So he'd wait and watch. He motioned the waitress for a refill of his Coke. Once she left, he flipped open the journal once more to study how to hunt and kill these creatures.

Werewolves could be killed with silver, but only if the silver

inflicted a mortal killing blow and at least some of the silver remained in the werewolf's body until it was completely dead. Silver knives would hurt them but, once removed, the creature would be able to heal its wound.

Without silver, they could still be killed, but the damage inflicted must be an immediate killing blow and, even then, it would only work if they were separated from their pack. It seemed that the pack could heal the injured members if found in time.

In the same section were notes on how Uncle Jonathon had died. It seemed he killed one of them in hand-to-hand combat but had been driven off by the rest of the pack. The creature had been healed and came after Uncle Jon for vengeance.

A little farther on, Rhys found an explanation for how his great-aunt Emma had died. She had tracked a small pack back to their camp but, before she could return for help, she'd been attacked. They knew because the creatures hadn't killed her. They had let her be mauled by their pups, to teach them the taste of human flesh. Uncle Thomas had found his sister left for dead. Soon enough she had been.

All of his family had given their lives to stop these monsters.

Now it was his turn

He watched the twins dance the night away. It seemed such a waste to keep watching them when he wasn't even sure if they were werewolves or not. Maybe he could use his silver cross to somehow test them... Yes, that could work.

Rhys tucked the thick journal back into his coat. Unhooking the silver chain his father had given him, he slowly made his way across the room, skirting around the edge of the dance floor. When he was no more than a few feet from one of the twins, he shifted the chain to his left hand and maneuvered to brush that hand down the bare arm of the man in question.

"Hey!" The man let out a yelp and jumped away, rubbing his hand over the slightly red skin of his arm.

"Sorry about that," Rhys said and hurried off.

He must be one of the creatures. And if one twin was, surely the

other was also. He worked his way back to his booth, slid in, and pulled out the journal.

It was time for him to start adding to the journal. He wrote in the description of the two men and how he'd tested them. He wouldn't be able to do anything about them tonight, but soon... Soon he'd retrieve his father's weapons and return.

Soon...

* * * * *

The dim morning light cut into the room, leaving Rath blinking into the sudden brightness. Destiny was in his arms. Even the stiffness from sleeping upright on the sofa was well worth the joy of waking with such a delightful armful.

Destiny's sleepy motion pushed her lush breasts against Rath's arm. His body reacted at once. The rush of arousal tightened his leather pants uncomfortably.

Even asleep she was wrecking havoc on his restraint. His instincts all demanded he reach out and claim the woman. She was obviously right for him in every way. In the best sense of the word, she completed him, made him whole. He'd told her the truth about his dreams, but the reality of reaching them with her as his mate overshadowed anything he'd been bold enough to wish for.

He closed his eyes, picturing the children he might have with Destiny. Their clan would welcome any children they had as the miracle they would be. It had been too long since the Eagle clan could claim strong numbers. Perhaps the coming century would put that in the past. Already his sister Adhar had little Solas, and now Athair and the Keeper had their daughter, Faith.

Destiny was wonderful with Angel. Surely she would be happy to have more children if they were so blessed.

And then his thoughts rolled back to how he would so enjoy getting her pregnant. Oh, yeah. Now that would be a pleasure. Rath ran his fingers through Destiny's long hair. The silken strands flowed across

his palm, caressing, tickling, tempting.

He continued the motion, relishing how his body reacted.

Then Destiny awoke, stretching languidly in his lap like a sated kitten. She shifted, rolling slightly to wrap one arm around his waist. The other hand slipped under the edge of his woven shirt and skimmed lightly over his stomach and up to his chest.

"Mmm. For some reason I thought you would have a hairy chest," she murmured sleepily.

It took a minute to catch his breath after her touch. Her fingers left trails of fire in their wake, and her cheek rest against his abdomen just above his throbbing erection. Her words sank in, and he smiled.

"Disappointed?"

"Oh no... I like your chest just as it is." She moved to press a kiss to his chest, and his wayward dick jumped alert under her. "Oh!" Destiny said as she slowly eased away from Rath.

"I'm sorry."

"Ah...don't be. It's flattering." She chuckled. "Very flattering."

"Glad you think so." He caught her wrist before she could complete her escape. With a tug, he pulled her back down onto his lap, using his other hand to cup her chin and guide her lips to his. Rath had meant the kiss to be short and tempting, but the moment she came across his lap, with her lips against his, they ignited.

The kiss took on a life of its own, drawing them both into the waiting pool of desire and long repressed need. His arms enclosed around her, one hand tangling in her hair, holding her close.

She was just as aggressive. Her head tilted and her mouth opened to him, offering him the pleasure of delving between her soft lips, dancing with her slick tongue.

She straddled his thighs. The thin blanket was torn from between their bodies.

She turned her head, freeing her mouth with a gasp as the most intimate part of her cradled his arousal. "Please..."

"Please what, Destiny?" His abandoned lips sought other prey, trailing down the smooth column of her neck to her defined, fragile

looking collarbone, where he pressed a kiss, licked her creamy flesh, then nipped at her. "Tell me what you want."

"Please slow down..."

"I can do that." It might kill him, but he could do it.

She was still straddling his lap and the heat was burning him alive. One of the many skills that his kind had was the ability to change the shape of material they came into contact with. It wasn't an easy skill but he was very, very tempted to part the thin material that she was wearing and melt away his leather so they could touch skin to skin. So that with a single motion he could lift her to ride him until they both came in completion.

But Destiny wasn't ready for that. She wanted him to go slow, and seeing as he planned to spend the next several millennia with her, he would find a way to be patient.

He lifted her hand and pressed slow kisses over the fingertips and, with slow seduction, led his lips and tongue to the center of her palm where he licked her flesh, devouring her slightly salty taste, nibbling his way over the curve of her thumb and up to her wrist.

He looked up to meet her gaze and found her just as aroused as he was. But he also saw hesitation and fear lurking behind the desire.

He couldn't ask this of her when she wasn't ready. He couldn't, and he wouldn't.

His raging hormones said otherwise. For her own good, he'd better get some space between them, or he might cast aside his good intentions, dissolve their clothes, and take right here on the sofa.

"I think..." He released her and clenched his hands at his sides to keep from reaching for her again. "Maybe you should check on Angel." Just as he expected, she shimmied off his lap and started for the connecting door at once. He stood and turned a little away to adjust himself. "I need to get a shower while everything's all quiet."

"Okay, Rath. Take your time."

Take his time? He didn't have much choice, considering he was walking across the room like an old human. Had he ever been this aroused in his life? He'd recently been told this was what a cold shower

was for, but since he'd grown up before heated bathing was much of an option, he wasn't about to forgo the pleasures of warm water.

He closed the door quietly behind him. Maybe if he could get his mind on something other than Destiny's delectable body, he might have a chance.

In seconds he was out of his clothes and standing under the warm flow of water, waiting in vain for his body to be distracted. Instead of relaxing his arousal, his mind turned the spray of the water into the gentle touch of Destiny's fingers as she explored his body. His dick bobbed in excitement. Rath caught the erection in his hand and let his imagination run away.

Destiny slid the shower curtain open with the clink of the hooks and shuffle of plastic. She was naked and every bit as gorgeous as he expected. Her full breasts were already puckered and needing his attention.

She stepped under the spray of water, sliding over his front, running her fingernails down his chest, over his abdomen, then withdrawing. Fragile butterfly hands pushed him back against the wall of the shower. She lowered her mouth to nibble at his chest, starting on the left nipple and nipping her way to the right. Her long hair became a silken web, tangling his hands and giving her control. She soaped up her hands and caressed them over his neck, shoulders, and down his chest and sides.

This time she didn't slow her attention. Her hands swirled over his hips and abdomen, retreating to just fingertips, drawing lower to sink into the crisp hair around his cock.

His breath caught, waiting for her to finally touch him.

Her fingers wrapped around him, caressing, stroking...

He wanted her harder, but the soft stroke was so damn good. He wanted her faster, but also wanted this to last all day. She obliged, continuing, varying the rhythm. Stroking him almost to the brink of orgasm, then retreating. The torment was so sweet, he would not utter a complaint if he died in her hands. Once more he

was about to come when she drew back. He sagged against the wall, fighting the urge to thrust into her fists and take back control.

Destiny pulled back and soaped her breasts. Her hands slid over her own body, offering all she had without offering any. Her nipples were puckered so nicely but when he would have reached for them, she pushed his hands away, continuing her own ministrations.

He couldn't take much more.

And then she sank to her knees before him.

Her hands returned to cradle his cock once more, but now she feathered kisses over the length as well. Slipping the foreskin back to expose his sensitive tip, she explored him and devoured him with her touch and her hot gaze. And with her warm lips and slick, hot tongue.

He was dragged back to the moment of orgasm at an almost painful pace. Her lips enfolded him. Her hand cupped his balls from beneath. The pleasure and pressure built and blended until all that was left was release.

He was lost and found.

And no longer suffering from unsatisfied arousal. Rath finished his shower without imaginary lovers and focused only on washing the scent of his satisfaction from his body. He wasn't ashamed, but Destiny might not understand. He didn't want her to feel uncomfortable around him.

Now he could go back out, face her, and resist his urges to push their relationship forward before she was ready.

He pulled on the satin hotel bathrobe and went back out to the living room. There he found the TV quietly running some news program, and Destiny sound asleep on the sofa.

This was ridiculous. They had a perfectly good bed and there was no reason they couldn't share it. He scooped Destiny up and carried her into the bedroom without waking her. In moments he had her settled under the blankets and was curled up behind her. And there he let all his

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cares run free, leaving his mind content to stay here in this moment and bask in the feel of holding Destiny in his arms.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Dàn stared out the window at the busy world rushing around below. As he so often did, he wished he could be as oblivious as the carefree people he watched over.

But he wasn't.

He'd foolishly believed that Grant's idea about him leading a group and using his powers to protect the world might have made a difference. That just maybe they would end his dreams.

While awake he was submerged in a rushing stream of visions, but when asleep he only had one. Each and every night for as long as he could remember, he dreamed about the end of the world. And he didn't know if it was a premonition, a warning, or just a dream.

This dream had included Grant, which had made him wonder if his decision to trust the demon was a good idea. The dream also included two men and a woman. One of the men was a replication of Grant's descriptions of his father, Jerdin, but the other was hidden in shadow. The woman was strange; pale with wild eyes. She clung to Jerdin, but she was not his mother.

Not every dream was the same. He'd never seen the woman or his father in dreams before, though he had often seen the man in shadows.

They stood around him, talking but not understood. Then flames burst out from under him, driving them back moments before all four leapt into the air, racing for the sky.

How could they all fly? Did it mean there were three others like

him?

In the dream he turned his long neck, looking back over his sweeping wings, and watched the world burn. The others were chasing him, but Grant stayed below. He appeared to be rallying the demons and, in his demonic form, he and the demons swept over the land, killing the all the people.

With that knowledge, he had awakened with more questions than ever.

Perhaps it is only a dream.

Maura told him she believed it was only a dream brought on by his fears. She was the only soul he'd shared the dreams with. She tried to understand his burden. She too saw visions and premonitions, but hers were controlled and she sought them out, while his came whether he wanted them or not.

Just the fact that she tried to understand was enough. She'd never been afraid of him, even when they'd first met. He couldn't say the same even for his family. They were often afraid of him. They feared his strange powers, but feared his visions even more.

It hurt to have them distance themselves and avoid him when most of what he did was for them. The beast inside him didn't understand how they could use him and not accept him. It wanted to punish them for their failings.

Dàn pushed back the beast. He was better at controlling it now than he'd ever been. The funny thing was that he had gained control by releasing the beast on vacations. With occasional releases, it was easier to leash. The idea had come from Díon of all people. Just before Díon had left for the Kodiak Clan, he'd said, "Sometime you have to let the beast out, or it will eat you alive from the inside." At the time, Dàn had thought he was speaking of Sgrios' violent nature, since that was who they'd been discussing, but now he wasn't so sure.

Did Díon know he was a dragon? If he did, was it going to be a problem?

Surely not...

* * * * *

Destiny was in heaven, encased in warmth, snuggled in security. She awoke by the tiniest degrees, letting her senses take stock of the wonderful moment.

Rath and his hard body pressed against her back. His arm wrapped around her waist in a loose embrace. His warm breath blew lightly into her hair. His spicy scent reminded her of the woods in autumn.

The last thing she remembered was curling up on the sofa to wait for him. She'd checked on Angel and found her asleep on the loveseat, with Grant sleeping next to her on the sofa. Angel was fine, and she'd decided to...she'd decided to make love to Rath.

She wanted him. She loved him. Why should she fear taking their relationship to the next level?

While sitting on the sofa waiting for him, she'd realized how much he'd come to mean to her. Maybe it was because he seemed too perfect, too much like the man of her dreams, which made her cling to her fear. Whatever the reason, she was ready to move past that fear and truly be with Rath.

The thought of taking that next step, of making love with Rath, sent warm tingles through her body. She couldn't get enough of kissing him. He kissed amazingly well, better than she'd ever felt before. Was it because he was a werewolf? Was kissing part of his magic?

Maybe not. Maybe kissing was a natural ability for him. Either way was to her benefit.

And as for his body... Wow. He was manly perfection. Downright scrumptious. When she noticed his sheer size, she was a bit intimidated. He might not be as tall as Dan or Grant, but he was certainly tall to her. And he was so muscular, almost bulky, but he wasn't overweight. There was just a lot of him. Earlier on the sofa, she'd found out he was definitely proportionate. The man was gifted in the family jewels department.

What would it feel like to sink down onto his shaft, taking him all in, one inch at a time?

Embarrassment made her want to run once more. She carefully slid

from the bed and hurried into the bathroom. She expected to look into the mirror and find her face flushed pink at her bold thoughts about Rath, but instead found only her face with a healthy glow. No, not healthy, but happy. And a large part of that happiness came from Rath.

The truth was she wanted him, and she was adult enough to act on that desire. Now a light blush crept to her cheeks.

Was she really bold enough to make love to him after only knowing the man—er—werewolf, for three days?

Heat pooled through her, warming her, drawing out a languid arousal. She pressed her thighs together, hugging her moist center, enjoying the tingles of her body growing ready.

Oh yes, she was definitely bold enough. She slipped from her clothes and picked up the satin bathrobe, sliding the cool fabric over her skin. With a last glance in the mirror and a light fluffing to her hair, she switched off the lights and returned to the bed where Rath was waiting.

She crawled back under the covers with him, moving slowly so that she didn't wake him just yet.

She wanted Rath, and here he was. So why not take him? Share the pleasure they both wanted? Her timid side wanted to hesitate or even flee once more, but this time she shut that side up by sliding her hand down her belly and over her feminine mound to stroke over her smooth, damp folds.

All that remained was action—taking what she wanted, offering what he needed.

Even now, while he slept, she felt Rath's arousal pressed against her backside. Slowly, oh so slowly, she turned to face his sleeping face.

She let her fingertips wander over his body, dancing over his satin robe and under the edge to his bare chest. Her hand strayed lower to his half erect penis. A few feather light strokes brought both Rath and his sex awake. He tensed and reached a hand out for her.

She laid a finger over his mouth before he could object or comment. "Shhh... Let me."

His hand relaxed. His eyes said, "I'm your. Do as you wish." And his smile said he was happy to offer her the control and trusted her to not

run this time.

She drew back the blankets and rolled him to his back, sliding one of her legs between his thick thighs. She bent to kiss his lips, drawing back before she lost control, trailing kisses down his neck, over his chest and lower, where her hand stroked over him.

He was so hard under hand, her body clenched in response. She explored him and teased until her own needs would wait no more.

Then she shifted astride him, guiding his shaft into her waiting heat. With a single smooth motion, she joined them.

Rath's hips jerked upward. He caught her waist, holding her still as he thrust up into her hard, fast and rhythmic.

"Destiny." His whisper roared through her mind, shattering her, bringing her pleasure like no other ever had before.

She gasped as her body gripped his in a fierce orgasm just as his pleasure rushed to catch up with hers. He came, dragging her forward, crushing her in his arms, groaning endearments in her ear.

As their breath returned, she felt him hardening once more before he'd even withdrawn. She rocked her hips ever so slightly and pleasure shot through her once more.

"Destiny..."

"What is it, Rath?" She used her body to stroke him again, and he responded with a growl. But he didn't bother to answer her question. Instead, he rolled her beneath him and showed her what he wanted, what he needed...

* * * * *

"Are they back yet?" Grant glared at the door. They were about to head out to start their plan, but Kita and the twins hadn't returned. Where were they? What were they doing?

"They are coming now," Dàn answered.

Oh hell! Did Dàn have to imply that Kita was doing the twins? He already knew how upset he was that the little minx had left him to hang out with them. "That might not be a good way to phrase that..."

The door slammed open. "We're back!" one of the twins yelled, but Grant didn't know which. The damn pups looked the same to him. After the door slammed behind the second one, the first twin said, "Hope you all didn't wait up for us."

Before either twin finished shedding their jackets, Dàn threw a duffle at one of them. "Glad you made it back, Romie. Now get changed, we need to go back down."

The second twin, who must be Mo, tossed his jacket to the sofa. "But we thought we might get a chance to sleep some before we had to work."

"This is the part you'll enjoy."

Mo sank onto the sofa and stretched his legs out. "You said that about roofing Ella's house."

Grant almost laughed when the relaxing Mo was suddenly standing and dressed in fresh clothes. Dàn was grinning at the boy's stunned look. "You will get to gamble and win."

"Really? Cool!" Romie said "Can you change me too?"

No sooner had Romie asked, he was neat in his new clothes too.

"We'll have good luck whammies? Awesome!" Mo rubbed his hands together in obvious happiness. "Can we go now?"

Grant glared at Dàn for his antics. He was having a hard time with humor when the twins were here and Kita was still MIA. "Where is Kita?"

"Little Chikita left after she showed us the restaurant. Didn't say where to though. Why? Should we have kept her with us?" Romie answered.

"She didn't come back here." So where was she? "Dàn? Is she alright?"

"She's fine."

Fine? Then why didn't she come back with the twins? Where did she spend the night? "Where is she?"

"She is in your suite, Grant." For a moment he thought he must have heard Dàn wrong. Why would Kita be in his rooms? Before he could ask, Dàn added, "She fell asleep waiting for you."

Romie and Mo were both laughing at Grant. Romie got control first

and asked, "Maybe you want to go check on her and then meet us downstairs?"

"Maybe I do." He stood and left, while Dàn chuckled over them missing each other.

Why had she gone to his room? What did it mean? Had she forgiven him for the hormonal backlash?

The obvious reason for waiting in a synn demon's room was certainly possible and appealing. He opened the door quietly. If she was still sleeping, scaring her awake would be a bad way to start a conversation. Did he even want a conversation?

The rooms looked as he had left them, except for the spots of wet carpeting around the Jacuzzi and leading to the bedroom.

There, curled up in the center of his king-sized bed, was Kita looking small and delicate. She had a bath sheet draped over her but must not have used it much. The bed was wet, very wet.

She turned over, taking the towel partway but exposing her smooth back to his gaze. A moan slipped out, and he bit down hard to stop a longer, louder sound.

She rolled back with a stretch, her eyes opening and lighting. Her back arched and her chest rumbled with some purring satisfaction. "Hello, Grant."

"Hello." His words were low, giving away his arousal.

"What time is it?"

She was waiting naked in his bed, and she asked him what time it was? The girl was nuts. What did she think it was time for? "Almost two."

"I thought you would be back sooner." Her lower lip stuck out in a sexy pout.

"I stayed with Dàn to make plans and watch over Angel. Why didn't you go back there?"

"Because I thought you would be here." She stretched again, arching her back and pushing her small, perfect breast up into the air. "And your room has a better tub."

"Which is why the bed is all wet? You really could have used a towel."

"You object to finding me waiting in your bed?"

He almost sputtered, trying to draw breath as her hand slid down her body. "No. I object to finding the water in the bed." There was no way he would ever object to finding her in his bed. The troublesome girl was evaporating quickly from his memory and in her place was this sexy creature who he was fairly sure he couldn't say no to.

"Perhaps we could find a way to dry these sheets."

He paused. "What do you suggest?"

"Friction."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Dàn smiled when Rath and Destiny joined them. Rath was more relaxed than he'd ever been before, and Destiny had a definite mussed look to her. They must have had a wonderful night.

"Dàn, can you start without us? I want to drive Destiny and Angel back to their home so they can change. Destiny has to dance this evening, too."

"I don't think that's such a good idea, Destiny," Dàn said. "You shouldn't dance tonight."

"But I have a schedule to follow. The other girls count on me."

"I'm sorry, Destiny, but tonight will be too crazy for any of the dancers to risk being on stage."

"You mean the girls might be in danger?" Destiny asked. "If none of us will be dancing, I'll have to tell them and make sure they are safe during whatever you have planned."

Her logic was good and, as Dàn touched the stream of visions, he saw that she would be needed. "That's a very good idea. Rath, if you hurry, you both can be back and in position before any of the major action happens."

Rath nodded, and the three of them left.

Mo fidgeted in place. "When do we get to gamble?"

Dàn gave in. "No time like the present." He waved at the door and they headed down the hall to the elevator, which had just left.

"We really will win, right?" Romie asked.

"You're not teasing about that, are you?" Mo repeatedly pressed the elevator call button as if pushing it more than once would make it hurry.

"I'm not teasing. You will win. Maybe not every time, but enough to have a very good time. Now, don't forget that you need to spread the word that Karl is the one behind your luck. And be sure to share the luck around plenty. The more they lose, the faster we can be through the hard part."

"What's hard about winning all their money?" Mo asked.

Romie slapped his brother in the head. "He means when the people realize what's happening and freak out."

"Oh, right. Will we get to win any after that?"

Dàn glared hard at Mo, even though Molach probably wouldn't care how much he glared.

"Fine. It still ought to be fun," Mo grouched as the elevator arrived.

Romie grinned at his brother. "Hey, Mo, cheer up. If we win enough, maybe we can build our own casino."

The image of the front of the casino flashed into his mind but instead of 'North of Nevada' on the sign, there in brilliant gold was 'Totally Loki.' They would own this casino before all was said and done. And this would be the new base for Low Key Project. The names of the hotel and his good will group came smoothly together in his mind. "Not a bad idea, Romie. Not bad at all."

They got off the elevator and headed around to the casino side of the club. He waved the twins away and let his own magic flow out to touch the people and machines in the room. He watched as the twins moved through the crowd to find a game to start on. Dàn moved off to the side and waited for all the pieces to fall together.

Within minutes, cheering rose from the other side of the room and a cluster of people pushed that way. It was begun.

Then the twins popped back out of that area and moved on to another.

An hour later the building was roaring with noise and excitement and panic. The panic was all from the staff. The casino was falling. They

were asking people to leave and closing games that were losing them the most money. But none of it helped.

Through it all, Dàn watched from his quiet corner. Karl arrived, and his screams of innocence were barely heard above the noise.

Dàn stayed back so he could watch and be sure of everyone's safety. Destiny and Angel had come back, and Rath was with them in the back. It looked as though all dancing would be canceled. Still, she was better off out of the nearly rioting crowd. Grant and Kita had come down looking very satisfied. Together they had helped on the gaming floor. Kita also helped herself to a few extras.

Where are you? The blunt question was welcome and expected.

Northwest corner.

Seconds later, Díon moved silently toward him. There was a hard edge to Díon that always surprised him. That darkness had first fallen on him after their clan was attacked almost four hundred years before. Díon had denied any difference, but that had been the beginning.

"They sent you," Dàn stated.

"You knew they would." Díon moved into shadows nearest to Dàn.

"I did. I take it your promotion is proof that they begin to trust you." Dàn hated that Díon was an assassin for the enemy. How had it come to this?

"Something like that. I did it so I would know who they planned to kill and could stop at least some of it." Díon made it sound simple but in a pack like the Kodiak, promotion was given through battle and bloodshed.

The reasoning was honorable, but somehow the position of assassin fit Díon. Perhaps too well. "Good plan. Stay in touch, and I will help when possible."

"Thank you." Díon shrugged aside the compliment. "I do as I can. So what is going on here?"

"We are taking this place from the Kodiak."

"Oh? That puts me in a difficult situation, doesn't it?" Díon eased around the end of the abandoned bar and helped himself to a bottle.

"That depends on your orders." Dàn watched as Díon opened the bottle and took a long drink of tequila. "You should watch drinking that

stuff.”

“I’ve been drinking this shit for years now,” Díon growled and took another drink. “I was told to take care of Karl and see to their interests.” Díon held out the bottle in offer.

“No thanks.” He waved off the vile liquid. “Karl you can have, but seeing to their interests could prove difficult. We will be keeping the hotel and casino.” Dàn tried to read Díon but couldn’t see past the defensive shell. Was this how he managed to hide the truth among the Kodiak for three years? All he could sense was a well of darkness that boded ill for Díon’s moral safety. “If taking the hotel will put you in danger, perhaps it is time for you to return to the clan.”

“I am not yet ready to come home. There’s still much I can do among the dogs. To start with, I will try to keep this from becoming a territory dispute. Niagara is technically not part of any clan’s territory so it shouldn’t be too hard.”

Dàn hadn’t thought of that. “You do much. Already you have saved many.”

“Not enough.” Díon leaned back against the bar and continued to drink his bottle down.

“But more than would have lived without your sacrifice.” Would Díon be able to continue undercover for them? From the way he was drinking, perhaps he had done as much as he could. “We can make it so you will go back to them, but not with full success.” Or maybe he should try to force Díon to return home now before it was too late.

“I am used to that sort of thing. Losing to win is beginning to make perfect sense. If you think I should go back, I will.”

This was the part Dàn hated. Even if he didn’t consciously look into the future, he still saw what waited for Díon when he returned to the Kodiak with less than full success. “Do you trust me?”

“With my life.”

Díon’s immediate answer might not be a surprise but it did weigh heavy on Dàn’s responsibility. “Do what you can and take care of Karl.”

“And?”

At least he could see to it that Díon could return without looking

guilty, even if the means to do so was distasteful. "And try to not hurt Rath too badly."

"I see." Díon nodded. "I'll let him drive me from here."

There was so much more Dàn wished he could say to this hard man who had once been a scared, lonely child. They had so much in common. It hurt to even seem to be on different sides.

"I best take care of my duties." With that, Díon moved quietly off, slipping through the crowd almost without notice.

They'd both been denied loving parents. Both had spent most of their early years in the clan's crèche with no true home to call their own. Dàn, being slightly older, felt the affection for Díon that others must for a younger sibling.

Some dark part of Díon had always kept him from putting the feeling into words. Díon held himself apart from everyone else. It was a feeling that Dàn had heard spoken of the legend of the shàdoman warriors who hunted the worst of the Valàfrn criminals. His detachment suited his role. He was now the assassin for the banished clan. *An assassin.*

Guard your thoughts. You share too much. Díon's silent words came through loud and clear.

I worry for your welfare, Dàn replied. *Is there anything I can aid you with? Offer to make it easier for you to maintain...*

What soul I have left? Good question. Let me think on it.

Dàn kept his light touch with Díon as he caught several of Karl's men and explained that they were required to pay for the situation going so badly. He felt Díon read each of the humans deeply and judge whether to turn them over to Bequlf or to accidentally let them go. Those he judged unworthy fared badly under the combination of his powers and his fists; one didn't survive the interrogation. The two he allowed to escape were encouraged to leave their current professions and, if possible, the country as well.

How do you know?

Díon obviously understood what he meant because he answered, *I may not, but I err on the side of forgiveness when I can.* Díon threw one of the men into a closet with two others before going after Karl.

Dàn couldn't imagine acting like someone he wasn't for so much of the time. How did Díon even keep track of what was real and what was part of his assumed role? And when it came to going against the Kodiak to do good, Díon risked so much with his every decision. *It must be very hard to cover your actions.*

The choice is often hard. I could save more if I could hide their rescue more easily.

Maybe...if you could pretend their deaths...

You mean pretend to kill those that I am trying to save? That would help. Especially now that I often work alone. He caught Karl by the back of the neck and dragged him into the security room for privacy.

I can show you how to hide their survival from any who watch, but you will still have to convince them to stay hidden.

There can be no second chances. You know the risk. This was said aloud to Karl, but also to Dàn. Karl begged and pleaded, thinking his life was now at an end. To Dàn, Díon asked, *Can you help me get some of the more fragile ones to safety?* "Shut up, Karl. If you want to live long enough to speak with Bequlf, be silent." He had beaten him, but not much. Together they walked calmly to a waiting car outside.

Yes. Will it be enough? Dàn felt the impact as Díon knocked Karl unconscious.

It never is. He returned and carried the unconscious men out, throwing them into the trunk.

Moments later Díon was back at Dàn's side.

"You handled that smoothly."

"I've had practice." Shame rolled off him in one wave of empathy. Then that was gone and he was back to the blank being that he always kept as his shield. "So what can you offer me that I can use to help more people? I thought maybe something that makes them look dead? So that I can set scenes around them."

"That might be possible. I know I can move people, and that might be useful."

"I can't do that," Díon reminded him. "It would be easier on the people I'm trying to help if they could sleep through it. Awake they are

terrified, convinced they are about to be killed. When I have to work with others from the clan, the victim's panic drives the others to more violence. Once the other hunters go into a blood frenzy, I can't save any of them, let alone all who deserve saving."

A particularly brutal attack that Díon was thinking about filtered across their connection. The horror of knowing what Díon had to deal with on a regular basis left Dàn gagging at the images. "I know someone who can put people to sleep. I think he would help us with this."

"Can he be trusted with my life?"

"Yes." *Grant, Can you come here? I need a moment of your time.* Dàn called out mentally to Grant. "I trust him. He was friends with my father."

"Father? Who is this guy?"

Grant walked up to Dàn but froze when he saw Díon. "Who the hell is that?" the demon said with more hostility than Dàn had heard from him up to this point.

"He's a demon." Díon's words were a violent accusation and he tensed, his body crackling with energy.

"Wait. Both of you stop. Grant, this is Díon." What had set the two off? The immediate distrust and mutually negative reaction was a puzzle.

"The traitor," Grant said.

Díon growled.

Dàn reached out to reassure Díon with his physical touch, but Díon stepped back out of his reach. "Yes and no. Díon works with us against the Kodiak to save as many people as we can. The others don't know."

Díon never took his gaze from Grant. "The others can't know. Too much is at stake. Why are you here, demon?"

"None of your concern," Grant snapped.

"I think it is."

Dàn cut in. "Look, we don't have time for this. Díon, I came here to find Grant. He can help us with the problem we were talking about if you will let him."

With visible effort, Díon appeared to relax. He moved to the side so he wasn't so obviously blocking Dàn from Grant. "Fine. What can he

offer? I'm almost out of time."

"Grant, is there any way to show Díon how to make people fall to sleep like you do?"

Grant nodded. "Yeah, it's not difficult. But I have to get rather personal with him to do so." He made a show of taking off his jacket and carefully laying it over a nearby chair. "I will have to drink his blood."

Díon jerked back a step as if he'd been slapped. "Fuck, no."

"Díon, please. Think of all the people you can save with this skill."

"Only for a worthy cause. Drinking your blood is the only way. Díon, I have to get into your head and show your magic the right buttons to push."

"Oh, hell." Díon slid out of his leather jacket and motioned to the darkest of the shadows in the corner. "I will kill you if this goes badly," Díon warned in a growl.

Grant shrugged. "You may try."

Díon hesitated. "Not try. I will kill you. Know that before we go forward."

"Whatever. Let's get this over with."

"Fine." He stepped forward and relaxed all his guards to Grant. Oddly, Dàn could still feel guards keeping him out of Díon's space.

Chapter Twenty-Four

"Relax. Good." Grant pulled Díon into his arms in one smooth motion and sank his long fangs into his throat. The blood was rich, but bitter, the power amazingly strong. This was no wolf. He felt Díon tense, reminding him to get to the business intended. He opened a link to Díon, one that could never be broken.

Díon, feel the center and see what I focus on.

Yes.

The tiny light that is quiescent. That is peace from within. Feed it with your power and the person will relax into sleep. Be careful to take back the power and ease the person awake, or they could sleep for years or die of starvation.

Yes, I understand. Now get the hell out of my head.

The flavor of this one's secrets held temptation. You do keep many secrets, don't you?

They stay kept.

Don't worry. Your defenses are good. I saw little. It was the truth, but he didn't bother to pry either. If he had tried... Few could hide from blood knowledge.

Dàn can't know. Some of the knowledge would kill him.

You guard him. It wasn't a question.

But Díon answered, Yes. I stand between him and the darkness.

The temptation got the better of Grant. He let the taste of the blood tell him the truth. The whispered secrets filled his mind and the surprise almost left him choking. *I know what you protect him from. I can help you.*

Perhaps. Have you taken enough of my blood?

It is strong—

“Get the hell off me.” Díon shoved himself free, tearing a long rip in his throat before punching Grant.

Grant took it in stride. Few were strong enough to pull free of a drinking spell. He hadn’t taken much blood, but what he’d taken allowed a connection to form and built a link that was almost unbreakable. It also gave him a glance into the donor’s memories, and Díon’s were not very pleasant. Most were vague and obscured by haze that could deceive some into thinking that the memories were forgotten. But Grant felt the effort that kept those thoughts and memories hidden. It was no accident that most of Díon was impossible to read. What he could see was dark and full of pain.

Díon had suffered greatly and accepted that more pain would come. The stench of the land of the dead was almost there, giving away the truth of what Díon protected Dàn from. He truly was the shield between Dàn and the darkness, and that darkness went by the name Jormungand. The boy needed help even if he never admitted it.

“I understand.” Your secrets are safe with me.

They had better be, Díon snarled mentally while pulling on his jacket, despite the still bleeding neck wound.

I will take up my mantle as companion and aid you in keeping him safe from the serpent. I owe that much and more to his father.

Díon nodded.

Then Rath was there, shoving Díon back, away from Grant and Dàn. One hard push nearly knocked him from his feet. “Dàn, are you all right?”

“Yes, Rath. I’m fine,” Dàn assured him.

“You don’t belong here, dog,” Rath snarled. “Take your Kodiak ass and get out of here.”

Díon took the hits and never raised his hands in defense. This was just another cover for him. His shame before his family was what would keep his acceptance among the Kodiak.

But Grant also caught the honest anger that flared against the abuse

he took. Nothing showed on his face or posture, and no empathy leaked that could be sensed by those sensitive to such things, but Grant clearly felt the anger through his newly formed connection.

Dàn turned away from them and, with a last punch from Rath, Díon scrambled from the scene, through the door, and was gone.

* * * * *

Destiny couldn't believe how smoothly it all went. She and the two girls, who were part of her routine, stayed in the dressing room and used the time to organize a series of holiday costumes. After picking out three outfits designed to look like a sexy Santa and two elves, they practiced several choreographed moves.

Even the difficult moves caused no pain and, if anything, were easier than ever. Whatever Rath's healing and loving had done, her body certainly approved. Every few minutes Rath checked in to make sure they were all right. He also kept them up to date on what was happening.

Apparently the plan was proceeding well. People were yelling loudly and dancing around. Slowly they were closing the games down and escorting the lucky players from the club. Rath had told her they had already taken care of the owners and were now in control of the business.

Mary, one of the other dancers, ducked into the room. "Des, you've got to hurry. The games have gone wild! Everyone's winning! I'm going to win big tonight. I can feel it."

"But..." And Destiny was left talking to empty air. Didn't the girls understand how dangerous it could be? She had to go after Mary and make sure she was okay.

"Lacy, will you watch Angel until Sandy or I get back? I won't be long."

"Sure, no problem."

Destiny made her way back to the main room, where she caught up with Mary. She tried to talk Mary into returning to the dressing room with her but knew the case was lost when Mary won on her second try.

When the crowd saw Mary's machine paying out, more than a

dozen people rushed her way. "Come on, Mary!" She tried to pull Mary away, but the crowd managed to shove them apart and Destiny was pushed back at the edge of the floor.

There was no way she could get Mary out of the crowd. The best she could hope for was that no one would be hurt in all the chaos.

And until it was all over she wanted to be in the back with Angel. She hurried back down the hall toward the dressing room.

When she reached the broken door, her heart skipped into overtime. The door hung at an odd angle and the latch was ripped out, as if it had been pried open.

"Angel!" She raced inside. Dear God! Where was she?

The room was mostly the same as always, except for one chair being overturned and a few costumes knocked from their racks.

And the smear of blood on the old white tile of the floor...

A quiet moan cut the silence. Destiny followed the sound to the costume closet. Her hand froze for a heartbeat over the edge of the mostly closed door. What if it was Angel? What if she was hurt? What if she... Destiny threw open the door and there on the floor lay Lacey, curled into a fetal position, with a pool of blood spreading out from where her arms crossed over her abdomen.

"Oh no..." She knelt at her friend's side. "What happened?" By lifting one limp hand, she saw the knife wound. "Oh, Lacey, I'm going to get you help. I'll be right back." Destiny shot to her feet and ran from the room. She wasn't even sure Lacey had heard her, but she had to get help for her. And then she had to find Angel.

She saw Kita just inside the main floor and raced to her side. "Kita, thank God!"

"What is—?"

"Listen to me! Lacey, one of the dancers needs an ambulance. You're going to have to call them. Get help for her. Angel's gone. I have to find her."

Kita's mouth fell open, but she didn't stick around to explain more. She knew Lacey would get help. Now all that mattered was finding Angel.

But how could she find her?

Maybe Rath or Dàn could help? Or Grant? Or anyone... Tears sprang to her eyes at the helpless feeling.

Mommy... Angel's voice filled her mind just as clearly as if her baby stood right next to her.

Her tears spilled over.

Mommy, help me.

"Baby, where are you?" Destiny never expected her question to be answered. After all, she was only imagining her daughter's voice out of desperation.

Mommy, it's Frank. He's taking me across the parking lot. I think to his car.

"I'm coming, Angel." She shoved her way through the crowd and sprinted for the front doors.

Hurry...

By the time she reached the gate to the parking lot, Frank's car was pulling out of its space and speeding toward her.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Rath paused to watch Destiny run through the room and out the exit. The stark fear on Destiny's face was enough to tell him something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

He turned and grabbed Dàn's arm. "What's wrong with Destiny?"

"Destiny?" Dàn closed his eyes for a moment. "Frank's taken Angel and Destiny."

"Where's he taking them?"

"To the Falls. He plans to cross Rainbow Bridge to Canada."

"Shit." The sudden, terrifying silence ripped Rath's heart out. He hadn't been truly aware of the mental connection growing between he and Destiny until the very second when it was severed. And the sudden emptiness left him gasping.

"I just called Grant. We are going after them now."

Rath gripped Dàn's arm in a painfully tight grip. "Can't you just grab them from there and bring them back?"

"No."

"Damn it, Dàn, I've never asked you for anything. You have to do this for me. Save them for me."

Dàn made no effort to shake free of his tight grip. "Rath, I would if I could. I can't risk grabbing them while they're moving. Not when I can't see them and don't know exactly where they are."

Just then Grant and Kita came up. Grant asked, "Did I hear you right?"

"Yes. I just asked Romie and Mo to watch over things here. We'll get the girls back," Dan said as they all jogged through the lobby and past Emmett to the street out front.

"Tell them to make sure the ambulance gets to the dancer in the back, too," Kita added.

"I'll drive." Grant pulled out his keys just as his car appeared at the curb. "You'd better watch that shit, Dàn." Grant shot Dàn a glare as he jogged around to the driver's side. "What if someone had seen?"

Dàn slid into the passenger side and while Kita and Rath jumped into the back. "I was watching. No one saw the car appear."

"I don't mean to lecture you, but you have a lot of power that could really freak the humans out if they witnessed it." Grant drove the car toward the Rainbow Bridge that led over the river into Canada.

Rath couldn't contain his frustration. "As far as I'm concerned, you can argue about subtlety all you want, but can we worry about Destiny and Angel for now?"

"Easy, Rath. We aren't far behind them and should catch them closer to the bridge. The traffic is always slower there."

"We're nowhere near close enough." Rath reached out once more, trying to feel Destiny, trying to open the connection to her, and once more was met with blank darkness. The car ahead of them slowed and turned. That was when he noticed that nearly all the cars ahead of them either turned or pulled off to let them through. "Is that your doing, Dàn?"

"Yes." The answer was gruff. The effort to control so many at once must be taking quite a toll on him.

"Thank you."

"She's important to us all, Rath. They both are." Kita caught his hand and squeezed it. "I already feel like I know you all and belong. Like they're family. Like we're family."

Rath almost snorted. As much as he liked Kita, he couldn't imagine her being family. She was odd, even among them, and mixing her thieving ways with the clan honor was like dynamite and a match.

Rath stared out the window. What was he going to do if... No, he couldn't think like that. They *had* to get them back. Both girls had to be

saved.

"Grant?" Dàn asked.

"I see. We'll have to get out here." Grant pulled to the side before the bridge, where traffic was at a near standstill.

"Are we that close? Do you feel where they are?" Kita asked as they ditched the car and rushed forward on foot.

"Frank only made it halfway across the bridge. When traffic stopped, he abandoned his car and is running for it."

"What about Destiny?"

"He has Angel. I don't see Destiny," Dàn said.

Rath raced forward, looking in the cars as he ran. Finally, he reached Frank's car and there in the backseat was Destiny. He ripped the door off and leapt inside. *Let her be alive, please...* He reached for her pale throat and found the weak flutter of a pulse. A quick examination showed she was in very bad shape.

When the others paused, he shouted, "Go after Angel. I'll take care of Destiny." No matter what, he wasn't about to lose her now.

* * * * *

Kita didn't wait for anyone to comment on Destiny's condition. She turned and sprinted further across the bridge behind Dàn and Grant. They hadn't gone more than fifty feet before Frank came into sight carrying Angel over one shoulder.

"Grant!" Angel screamed.

Frank stumbled and spun around to face them. "You stay back!" He had a gun pressed against Angel's side. "I'll shoot her. I will!"

"Dàn?" Grant asked quietly.

She wasn't sure what he expected Dàn to do from this distance.

Dàn lifted one hand as if to reach out and pluck Angel away from the gun-wielding jerk. Then his expression changed from concentration to pain. He dropped to his knees beside them, clawing at his head with a groan of agony.

"Dàn, what is it?" Kita asked him. Not that it really mattered. All

that did matter was that Dàn wasn't in any condition to do the rescuing they needed.

"Jorm..." Dàn said the word or name or whatever.

"Oh shit, not now." Grant squeezed Dàn's shoulder.

"I can't... I won't—*Nooo!*" Dàn's low cry sounded agonized.

"Damn it, Jorm, not now!" Grant shouted.

Dàn writhed in agony. "I—it hurts... Make it stop—"

"What the hell is wrong with you people?" Frank screamed. "I'm out of here." And he threw Angel over the bridge railing.

The child's cry of terror fell away as gravity dragged her toward certain death.

Kita didn't think. In three bolting strides and a running leap, she cleared the railing, diving after the falling child.

* * * * *

Rath focused all he had on Destiny. He would heal her even if it took his life to do so. His energy flowed out and soaked into her, glowing golden over her chest where the worst of the injuries were.

He wasn't the best healer, but everything he had, he poured into her. His energy flooded the interior of the car and surely glowed brightly out into the dark of the night. He didn't care at all that the humans watching might wonder at the strange lights. His only thought was to save Destiny.

Rath revived her with a cry of triumph.

Her eyes fluttered open, and she seemed to meet his gaze for a moment. Then she sagged back into his arms once more.

Dear God, was she too far gone? Already he'd used so much of his energy that his hands were burned and his body felt weak. What if he wasn't strong enough?

"Dàn!" he called out hoarsely, but there was no answer aloud or in his mind. Dàn wasn't there to help him. All he had was his own powers.

Already her body glowed dimly with all the energy he shared. He felt her body knitting back together under his touch. The internal bleeding

stopped. The broken ribs were straight and strong. And the punctured lung was clearing and drawing air into her body. But her breath was ragged and her pulse still a weak tremble under his fingers. Why didn't she awaken? What else could he do?

He shifted her body, tucking her pale cheek against his chest. A lullaby from long gone days filled his mind and he hummed the tune into her strawberry scented hair. He rocked and hummed and prayed. He'd give anything. The seconds became years of aching emptiness. Without her, he had nothing. Even if they saved her child, he knew he'd never be whole enough to raise her on his own.

Was this what poor Sgrios felt as he watched his mate die? Was this pain what had broken him so badly? He'd been among those to criticize Sgrios for not raising Leth and Lasair and never being a proper father to them, but now... Now he understood. To lose a mate was to die without the chance of rebirth. Trapped between life and death with no foothold on either side.

A living death.

A breathing body without a heart to rule it.

He thought back to the last time he'd held her and all the hope he'd felt with her in his arms. Now he was lost. "My Destiny... I love you so much," he whispered. "Please don't leave me."

He willed his life into her. If she was to leave this world, he would be at her side wherever she led.

The brush of Destiny's fingers over his cheek was a shock of joy. "Don't cry, Rath. I'm here. I won't leave you." Her thumb wiped under his eye, and he broke.

"I thought I'd lost you." He crushed her close and let the tears flow however they fell. "I couldn't—" He choked back the emotions. "I love you so much. Don't ever leave me. I'm not strong enough without you."

"Rath..." Her hands cupped his face, and she pushed up to brush her lips over his. "I love you, Rath." She snuggled in his arms for a moment then tensed. "Did—did you get Angel? Is she okay?"

Chapter Twenty-Six

Grant looked up in time to see Kita jump. "Holy shit!"

Angel was gone. Kita was gone. He tightened his grip on Dàn, hoping beyond hope that he could do something to make this right. But Dàn was still too occupied with the torment that Jorm insisted on dishing out.

They were gone. And the bastard who had caused it was getting away. Grant let go of Dàn and stood. He felt his powers surge. His usual abilities were more than enough, but he wanted more. He wanted all his powers back. He wanted to unleash them all on *Frank*. He wanted to destroy the man, destroy his soul. He wanted to tear his heart out and crush it while the man still watched.

And for once, he didn't give a shit what rules he broke.

He summoned up all his darkness. All that had been taken, all that had been stolen. It swelled up, filling him, opening him to the pain of what he'd lost.

He heard Jorm's angry cry as the powers were torn free of his grip and returned to Grant, returned in a white lightning surge that burned an agony that almost eclipsed what he already bore.

All around him the world darkened. All that remained was the man who tried in vain to flee, but no one could escape death when it decided to come for you. Frank fell to the concrete. The bridge rolled under Grant until he stood above the pitiful human.

How could something so puny cause so much pain?

You will die now.

He lifted the man and fed on his weakness, gorged on the life that flowed through him. He allowed his powers to awaken, to meld him with the source. He felt the fear of those who ruled. He felt their entreaty, and then their reprimand. And finally their acceptance. And there, in the dark where so much had happened, Grant became more than a Synn demon. He took the life of a task by feeding on blood. He was now Cyvampis and rose among the ranks of all demons.

And then he held nothing but dust. The darkness faded back to normal night, leaving Grant with a strangeness that was beyond loss. Kita and Angel were both still gone. Nothing had changed. Even his powers couldn't bring them back.

"Thank you." Dàn stood shakily beside him. "You hurt him. I didn't think anyone could do that."

"All I did was to take back what was mine. He has used my powers for too long."

"We need to check on Destiny," Dàn said.

Grant looked away, staring off toward the safety rail over which Kita had dove. "You go. I can't face her just yet."

"What do you plan to do?"

"I'm going down to the river. I have to see."

Dàn nodded and turned to head back past the row of slow moving cars, leaving Grant to deal with what he might find on the rocks below the bridge.

Grant cloaked himself in darkness once more, this time to allow him the privacy to take his true demonic form. The change in size and shape ravaged his clothing but left him with long wings to make the descent to the river easy and direct.

No matter his form, he ached with the fear of what he would find. His mind formed images of Angel's tiny body broken on the rocks and of Kita, drowned and carried away on the current. Both images were an agony he'd never before known.

The pain over losing Angel he at least understood. She was like a daughter to him. Her smile filled an empty place that he hadn't noticed

until he'd found her. But Kita he barely knew her. He could string together the list of truths she had shared and still have not enough to tie his hair back. She was a mystery and yet... She had wormed her way into his emotions.

Was it because of the pleasure they'd shared?

No, not that. He had shared beds with many others and never felt more than the briefest of connections to them. This was something more. Something deeper. Something that he wouldn't name and might never feel again.

What was the point, when the chance to identify it was now gone?

He jumped the rail and let his body drop slowly through the rising mist. Where he thought he'd find their broken bodies over the harshness of the rock tumbles, Grant instead found a clear path into fairly deep water where the river had cut away the river bank.

Was there a chance they'd lived? Could either have survived the long fall and not been drowned by the rush of water? He let his eyes scan the water but kept a tight hold on the blossom of hope. Even if they missed the rocks, there was almost no chance...

"Grant! We're over here!"

His heart froze in the chilly mist then raced as he caught sight of two figures on a rock that jutted out from the shore into the frothing water.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Rath held Destiny in his arms, watching as Grant lifted a damp Angel over the rail at the side of the bridge. Behind him, Kita, who was tucked inside Grant's oversized trench coat, climbed over on her own.

Somehow, they'd all made it through.

Together they walked back to where Dàn was waiting with the car. "You all right now, Dàn?" Grant asked.

Dàn nodded but wouldn't meet his gaze. Rath knew that look of guilt. He'd seen it plenty before. "You did all you could and it all worked out, so what's the problem?"

Grant interrupted them. "You wouldn't understand."

He'd been Dàn's best friend for four hundred years. If he didn't understand Dàn by now, who would? "And I suppose you do?"

"Yeah." Grant gave Dàn a gentle push toward the backseat, then settled Kita in the front. "Now get your family in the car. You'll have to hold Angel on your lap."

Rath chaffed a bit at taking orders from the demon, but Destiny pulled free to slide into the middle of the backseat taking the decision from him. He hated to admit it, but Grant was right. He slid in beside Destiny and lifted Angel onto his lap.

Even before he closed the door the whole way, Grant was pulling away, taking them back to the club.

He slid one arm behind Destiny, and she cuddled against him while wrapping an arm around her daughter. Terrible as the day had

been, this moment felt...right. He looked over their heads, meeting Dàn's gaze.

His friend nodded and smiled, but the strain didn't leave his eyes.

"You're not my responsibility anymore, are you?" He'd watched over Dàn since the massacre, but that was all about to change.

"You have others to watch over now."

Taking care of Destiny and Angel would hopefully be all pleasure. "And you have Grant."

"Yes, I now have a companion." As he said it, Dàn reached up and tapped his shoulder. Even without the shift of energy, Rath knew that Dearth had returned.

Grant must have felt Dearth's arrival also. He kept driving but asked, "Are you sure you want her hanging around?"

"There is no point in sending her away now that he's found me. Whatever else Dearth may be, she did save my life once. She stays if she wishes."

Dàn now had a demon and a dragon, tiny though she was, to guard him. He didn't need Rath.

"I still need you, just not for the same duties," Dàn said, answering Rath's unspoken thoughts. "How would you feel about running the North of Nevada club for me? For the clan?"

"I don't know." He had to think about more than just himself now. He looked down at Destiny and Angel where they were both tucked against him.

Destiny glanced up. "I think that would be nice, Rath. Could I help you with that?"

Joy filled him at the thought of sharing this new adventure with her. "Of course. What do I know about running a gaming club?"

"How soon will we be able to open it again, Dàn?" she asked.

"I think we can probably find someone to handle all the paperwork in the next day or two. You should be able to open it again within the week."

"Then we can plan a big New Year's Eve party?" When both Rath and Dàn nodded, she continued. "And maybe a private Christmas party,

too? I always dreamed of having a large family. Do you think your clan might come for a party?"

"Oh, I think they would like that quite a lot, and I can't wait for you to meet them." Rath hugged both his girls.

Dàn turned away, facing out the window, staring at the passing landscape, whispering, "I have a feeling you will be the perfect team for the job."

Epilogue

Niagara Falls, December 25, 1983

Solas looked around the huge room and couldn't believe all that she saw. All the shiny machines were exciting, and the decorations were great. But what she found really cool was the gigantic tree right in front of the stage. And the pile of presents underneath it.

"Are they really for me, Mom?"

"Some of them. Not all," her mom answered. Mom was busy helping Dad into his seat. He was having a bad day because of a cold he just wasn't getting over. "Why don't you go over and help little Angel sort the presents?"

"Okay, Mom." She hated it when Dad had bad days. There wasn't anything she could do to help him, and she sometimes forgot and used magic around him. Not that she could use much, but even a little bit hurt him, and then she felt bad.

She ran over to the tree. "Hi, Angel." They'd met the night before. It was kind of cool to get to hang out with another kid, even if she was much younger.

"Hi, Solas."

"Mom said we can sort the presents before they bring out breakfast. Want to help? Will your mom let you help?"

"Sure, I'd like that. My mom and Rath are somewhere kissing. They won't mind."

Together they sorted through a bunch of the boxes and bags. Angel was pretty nice and even had good manners. Before long they had all the presents sorted, including the two biggest piles, which were for them.

"Hey, Solas?"

"Yeah?"

"What's wrong with your dad?" Angel pointed to where Dad was having a coughing fit. "Is he human like my mom?"

"No, Dad's pureblood Valàfrn."

"Then why's he sick? Rath said you guys can heal each other and

everything.”

She’d known about her dad’s problems for as long as she could remember. He just wasn’t like the others. Mom said he had a hurt heart, but never explained why it couldn’t be fixed. “He just gets sick.”

“Why doesn’t one of the others heal him? Rath says I might even be able to heal others someday. Maybe I can help him—”

“No. You can’t help him. Don’t ever use any magic around him. It hurts him and could even kill him.”

“Okay. I just thought it would make the best Christmas gift, if we could make him well.” Angel picked up a small box and shook it.

“That would be a great gift for Mom and Dad.” Things were changing in the clan now. Maybe since they weren’t hiding anymore, they could get him help. “Hey, Angel. I saw on TV that they cut humans up and fix things inside without using magic. Do you think humans could do something like that for my Dad?”

“I bet they could.”

“So how can we put a bow on an idea?” She looked around and found a box by the stage that had the stuff they’d used to wrap the presents. Within a few minutes and after several attempts, the two girls had a note rolled up inside a box and wrapped with a big bow.

On the note were these words:

To: Mom and Dad

Christmas is about giving. If I could give you anything it would be to make you well. My idea is to have the humans do it. They can fix you. I know they can and that would be the best present ever.

Happy Christmas!

Love you! Solas

And it was the best present ever.

The End

Author Bio

L. Shannon came into existence in June of 2004. In the time Shannon doesn't spend bothering her hubby, she shows dogs, gardens, and watches over her four Butterfly Koi ponds. Writing started as a battle against insomnia and has steadily grown into a war against reality. Her friends kindly say reality never stood a chance.

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Chapter One

Warren, Pennsylvania August 26, 1980

If Life Bites, Bite Back

Hope

Obviously she, Hope Carter, was insane. She sighed and shifted her weight away from the rough brick wall. What else could one call a person hiding outside her place of work at three in the morning? The word *coward* might fit, too. She'd ducked out the door only minutes after calling her best friend to come pick her up. Steve, her pity chauffeur, would be here soon. Despite the brisk night, she was waiting outside. She was *not* going back into the veterinary clinic just to be shanghaied into another shift.

She limped to the corner of the building where a small bench sat hidden from the doorway. She sank to the bench and buttoned up her light jacket against the cool air.

Steve's station wagon pulled around and parked illegally right in front of the bench. The car's engine purred in the eerie quiet, until it too

became silent.

"Hey, why are you lurking back here?" He swung from the car entirely too energetically for the time of night, and Hope felt even more worn out by comparison.

"Sandy wanted me to work another shift," she explained.

"But you've already worked a double. She's taking her title a little too seriously. That's crazy!" Steve picked up her small bag.

"I thought the same thing." His cologne swamped over her, making her sneeze. *Steve needed to learn the word moderation.* She sneezed again and fanned the air with her hand. "Joe never showed up, so they're short handed again."

"You could have told them no and waited inside." He frowned at her and shifted his weight from heel to toe, then back again.

"I almost agreed to do the shift. If it weren't for the weather being so crummy today, my legs might have held up for a while longer."

"No way. You shouldn't even have done the double and I'll tell Sandy exactly that."

"You don't have to do that, Steve. I'm fine, really. Let's just go." What was with him tonight? He was wired and almost dancing in place.

"Is Julie on tonight?"

"Yeah." So the receptionist was the cause of his excitement. He was more than a bit sweet on the new girl, and she wanted them to hit it off, but not while the romance kept her from reaching her much desired bed.

"Great! Go start the car. I'll be right back." He bolted for the front of the building.

"Steve—" Hope broke off. He paused in his fast escape, but she could see he was already mentally browsing through his stock pick-up lines. She could go with him and ask the girl for her phone number, but then she'd have to listen to Steve gripe the whole trip home. So instead, she frowned. "Please hurry. It's late."

"I know." He halted and glanced longingly at the clinic. "But this is my best chance to talk with her. She's mostly on nights and I really want to ask her out."

"Oh fine, just hurry. It's been a long day." *To say the least.*

"Thanks, Hope!" He tossed her the keys and jogged toward the front of the clinic. Soon he was out of sight. She juggled the keys and dropped them to the sidewalk.

Damn. She glared down at the keys, then over at the car, which surely glared back at her. She would be warmer in it than sitting outside in the cool night air, but she couldn't force her legs to carry her toward the evil beast. She'd rather wait until Steve returned before getting in for the drive home. She choked back a laugh. Nothing like more evidence to support her insanity plea. She relied almost completely on him to drive her places.

She slouched on the bench and focused on stretching her cramping legs. Fifteen years ago, a car accident had left her a mangled mess. Her body had never properly healed, and she hadn't yet recovered her trust in the everyday machine most people took for granted. As far as she was concerned, cars were her enemy and she only held a tentative treaty with the dangerous beasts.

She picked up the keys and debated the rudeness of shouting for Steve, when she saw movement in the alley across from the clinic. With only a glimpse, she had the impression of some large dark animal, a fast moving shadow, and a flash of dark fur.

Please, not tonight. All Hope wanted was her warm bed. Instead, she was about to chase off after a stray. The poor thing was probably someone's house pet that wandered off. She *had* to try to catch it. No animal should be left loose to starve, reproduce, or be hit by a car.

Hope placed her weight on her aching legs and limped slowly across the street toward the alley. Here, alone in the dark, she had no reason to camouflage her uneven steps. She slipped Steve's keys into her jacket pocket and pulled out a flimsy kennel lead designed to slip over the heads of small dogs. *Big as the critter seemed, he'd better be gentle.*

She peered into the alley, looking for the dog, or any sign of which way it went. Light from the full moon filtered through the clouds, doing little to cut the deep shadows caused by the crowding buildings.

There, about thirty feet away, another movement caught her eye. She made out several elusive shapes.

Not a stray. A pack.

Four large dogs moved toward the other end of the alley. In this urban area, a pack of scavenging, possibly feral dogs would be a menace. A shiver slid down Hope's spine. The animals crept forward with a stealth that felt threatening and dangerous, as if they were hunting.

But hunting what?

She felt helpless. Tracking a pack was the responsibility of animal control. Already the dogs were far down the alley, nearly out of sight at the other end. With a shrug she turned to go back to the clinic. Her feet froze when she heard a short, cut-off scream. *What the hell?* She spun back, dropping the lead in shock at what she saw.

The dogs were gone, and in their place were men.

The scream had come from a terrified woman who continued whimpering as she was pinned against the wall by the biggest of the brutes.

Three others surrounded them.

Hope followed her instincts and yelled down the alley, "Hey, you! Stop!" She had to help the woman any way she could. *Oh, shit. Damn her misleading instincts!*

All eyes turned in her direction.

Hope's heart slammed painfully in her chest, while time seemed to hold the world within the moment.

The man holding the woman slammed her violently against the wall and dropped her on the ground in an unmoving heap, then stalked toward Hope. In the darkness of the alley, the shadows seemed to cling. They were too far away and too dark. The men's features were blurred beyond identification.

The man kept coming.

She stepped back. Fear shivered through her. *She wasn't getting out of this one.* Tonight, her legs barely managed a walk. She gasped as each jarring step drove shards of pain through her leg from knee to hip.

What would he do to her? Somehow she knew he wasn't simply planning to chase her off. She could almost feel his cruel intentions in the touch of his angry gaze. He'd hurt her, kill her, or worse.

Still forty or fifty feet from the clinic door, she halted. Her breath caught in her throat.

"Help!" Hope yelled. *No one will hear you.* The streets were empty, and the clinic was the only all-night business on the block. But she screamed again anyway. She also turned and quickened her awkward steps, praying to at least reach the road with its slightly better lighting.

She looked back. Two of the other men now flanked the first. The fourth stayed with the woman, kneeling beside her, doing who knew what.

Strange. They'd yet to make a single sound. There were no threatening words. No heavy breathing. No sound of footsteps. *Hell*, not even their damned clothing rubbed together. The only sounds she heard were her own pounding heart, gasping breath, and dragging footsteps.

She limped away from them, looking back several times, trying desperately to see the man's features so she could identify him if she did get away. Not if, *when* she got away.

Almost to the road! The leader's stalk turned into a languid jog. The other two men froze in place.

The rumble of an engine cut into the quiet. Headlights and relief flooded over Hope as the car drew closer. She stumbled onto the edge of the road, waving her hands and yelling to get the driver's attention. With his or her help she'd scare off the men, and then call the police and an ambulance. The woman on the ground needed medical attention.

Hope glanced back down the alley to see which way the men went so she could tell the police. But they hadn't left. They'd only sunk back into the shadows, into near invisibility.

The Buick slowed at her waving, and then went right by. The driver and his passenger stared at her out the window.

How could they not stop?

Shit. She'd have to take a rain check on salvation. Just her kind of luck. She'd have to save herself, so she'd better keep moving.

Only the leader continued toward her. The others were gone. No. They'd gone back to the woman. One threw her limp body over his shoulder. Was she unconscious, or dead?

At the other side of the road, Hope wondered why the man only walked, as if to taunt her. As if he had no doubt about his ability to do whatever he wished to her or to anyone.

And, to be honest, she believed it, too. *It's all too creepy.* The confusing facts didn't add up. The men's intensity. Their lack of sound. The *damned* shadows that clung to them.

The man, not more than fifteen feet away now, walked directly at her, yet she still couldn't make out any facial details. He was tall and broad shouldered, but like a shadow, he lacked any details to identify. All the features the police would want. She couldn't tell what clothes he wore, his face, eye color, or even his hair color.

Even if she got away they'd never catch this man. Self disgust filled her at the thought of being a helpless victim all because she chased after a stupid homeless dog. She stumbled forward another step, then another. She had to make it to the clinic. She had to...

She didn't. The attacker's massive weight slammed into her back, knocking her from her feet. Hope grunted when she hit the pavement hard, face first. She let out a strangled cry as her attacker rolled her over, straddling her. His weight trapped her in place. Her scream was cut short as he slammed his fist into her face. Horrible pain shot through her head once, then again. Black peace clouded the darkness around her. Pain and a burning need for air finally cleared her vision and brought her back to her senses.

He lifted her easily onto his shoulder and started back toward the alley. Hope sucked in the cool night air and began to struggle and scream again. There was no way in hell she would go down without a fight. Frustrated by not being able to kick hard enough to hurt the bastard, she flung herself sideways and pounded his back with her fists, managing to throw him off balance.

He growled and threw her back to the pavement. This time when he fell on her, he followed his punch with a painful, fierce grip on her hair, pulling her head back.

His breath blew hot and foul into her face. "That's right. Fight me." The crazy psycho licked up across her cheek. He followed it with a biting

nip to her jaw. "Humans are the best prey for so many reasons," he growled in a dry harsh voice as he tore his hand across her chest. Her jacket and blouse ripped open easily and his nails clawed her flesh.

If the asshole wanted her to fight, she'd oblige him. She braced her arms and heaving her body upwards in a sharp arch. When his forearm brushed her face, she turned into it and bit him deeply, tasting the copper of his blood.

He yelped and pulled back, and she kicked him with her stronger leg, solidly connecting with his groin. Surely she caused him no lasting harm, but his pain was enough of a distraction to give her another chance to scream and crawl the few yards back onto the road.

The clinic door slammed open and Steve stepped into sight calling, "Hope? Are you out here?"

"Steve! Help me!" she cried. What a wonderful man. She'd never tease him for being late again. His timing was perfect.

The man's grabbing hands let go of her and his weight disappeared. She looked up, but her attacker was gone. Just gone. She lay on the edge of the street, alone.

No, not alone. Two eyes in the shadows glowed malevolent green, feral eyes promising all the agonies of hell. They were the eyes of her attacker, no matter how strange they seemed now. She'd remember them even if she never saw another feature of his face. Those hate-filled, glittering green eyes.

Steve reached her side, firing questions at her. "What happened? Did I hear you scream?" He squatted down and wrapped his arm around her. "Did you fall? Are you hurt?"

"Steve, look," she said, trying to draw his attention to the deep shadows of the alley.

He followed her gaze, but the man was no longer there. All Hope saw was movement and a quick glimpse of black fur and a bushy tail. If she didn't know better, she would have said it looked wolf-like. But must have been the stray dog.

Had the dog been with the man? Had there been more forming a pack? What had happened to the woman? What could she tell the police

to help them catch this man?

Steve tried to help her stand, but her weak leg buckled. He more than half carried her back to the clinic. As they reached the dim light at the front of the building, Steve let out a gasp. "What the hell! Who did this to you? What happened?" His fingers brushed her tangled hair back from her battered face.

She knew she must be quite a sight. Suddenly, she was too tired to explain. Her whole body ached and her head throbbed.

"You're going to the hospital. No arguments."

Hope didn't argue. She barely nodded before slipping into the welcoming black of unconsciousness.

* * * * *

Despair crawled over Athair's skin and tore at his heart. He knew this fog-shrouded clearing and was sickened by the sight of the ravaged village before him. The acrid smell of their smoldering homes burned his senses. Dead sounds echoed through his soul, crying out the last emotions of many who had died. His family and friends had been killed here only hours before he returned. Sorrow rooted his feet to the ground, holding him in this moment, drawing out his pain.

On the verge of an anguished howl, Athair pulled himself sharply from the dream. The same dream, always the same. But it wasn't just a dream. This nightmare was a memory from the day the clan had been torn apart. He and his two brothers were the only adults of the clan left alive after that horrible day. Barely into maturity, he'd become the second eldest of what remained of the Eagle Clan.

They'd been unprepared for the Irish hunters. No one had expected them to find the clan's village despite their regular hunts. The humans never understood the truth, only believed what they saw in the few who were deranged and dangerous, or drunk on power. Their fear exaggerated the lie behind the legend of the werewolf. The common man saw wolves as evil and a man-wolf as an abomination that stole children and fed on human flesh. If they saw the more noble side of the canines of the world, maybe his clan and the rest of the Valàfrn could someday be accepted.

Athair dreamed of the day when he and his family could live without fear.

A discreet cough drew Athair's attention to the doorway, where a young man stood. Young was a relative term; the man was nearly three hundred years younger than Athair.

Rath tensed, his body motionless but rippling with discomfort. His golden eyes flicked towards the exit, showing his desire to be done and away. *What could be so important?*

Quietly, Athair asked "What is it, Rath?" He hid the strain the nightmare always brought and willed the tension from his own body. He extended his empathy. Yet from the sympathy Athair felt in Rath's emotions, his effort was wasted.

"Romie and Mo are trying to kill each other. Dàn said to come get you," Rath answered in Gaelic, their native language.

"What?" Athair shook his head, *He must still be asleep. Only in a nightmare would the light-hearted twins turn on each other.* "Where are they? What happened?"

"What do you think happened? Romach walked in on Molach and Allaidh," he said with a snort. "She is not always clear about when she has moved on to her next partner." Rath was the oldest of the children saved from the village massacre of Athair's dream. Nine children were found hiding in a cave with his brother, Sgrios' mate, Cairistione.

In the past two hundred years, Allaidh had shared her beautiful body with the young men of the clan. For a time, her actions helped to keep their wild libidos at least somewhat spent, but recently, the urge for long-term bonds overrode their good sense and caused bickering and bloodshed. *Why didn't they realize that Allaidh would not bond with any of them?*

"How serious do they fight?" Athair's words were muffled as he pulled on a lightly woven shirt and followed the younger man from his small lodge.

"Rather, Father. From what I saw, the fight began nearly an hour ago. Allaidh must have run before it started."

The children called him "Father" as a show of respect and appreciation for raising them as his own. Several of the younger ones

didn't remember their parents and he tried to fill the role as best he could. Only his stories kept their lost families close, but that would never be enough. Valàfrn thrived within the clan, but suffered greatly without the strength of an extended family.

Growling and snarling pierced the quiet before they reached the front of the dugout lodge the twins shared. The sounds came from the back, so Athair and Rath jogged around the brush that covered one side of the roof. Athair spotted two gray wolves circling each other, each looking for an opening to attack. Their large bodies were both marked by small cuts and bites, but they were not yet badly injured.

Athair stepped between them before either used his appearance as a distraction to initiate another attack. "Romach and Molach! I am ashamed of you. Brothers should strengthen one another, not weaken each of you. Never should it come to this." Although he'd said their names in a low growl, the rest of Athair's words flowed in his usual quiet, firm voice. The two wolves stood still, their flanks heaving, panting and bleeding, but no longer snarling as the anger faded from their identical, flashing blue eyes. "Blood is too precious to ever fall to the ground between brothers. You will heal each other and come find me this evening to explain your actions."

He used his empathy to read them deeply. They were done with their fight. Both were feeling hurt, but not angry. The only reason their fight had continued so long was because neither of them had wanted to give in first.

Athair gave the brothers one last chastising frown, which encouraged them to drop their hostility and begin licking their wounds clean. A moment later he caught their remorseful emotions as Romie began licking a nasty cut on Molach's cheek. Satisfied the incident was under control, Athair considered their deeper underlying problem. The young men needed mates. At nearly four hundred years of age, they needed emotional attachment more than simple sexual release. Unfortunately, their sheltered, secluded lives didn't offer much choice. The time had come to consider other options.

"Rath, do you know where Sgrios is?" Athair asked.

"No, but Dàn does. He's down by the stream."

Of course Dàn would know. "I would like to thank him anyway."

Athair wondered if the other clans held to the old traditions. They'd lost so much with the deaths of their elders. *How were the other clans dealing with changing times?* Perhaps they would soon find out.

He and Rath walked down the slight hill toward Dàn's favorite spot by the stream. Athair worried about the strangest of his adopted sons. Lately, Dàn had pulled further away from their group, wanting to stay by himself most of the time. While raising the others had challenged Athair, Dàn had always been lost to his care. There was some element Athair could not provide, no matter how hard he tried.

"You should speak English now, Rath," Athair said, remembering Rath's use of Gaelic during their conversation.

"Why?" Rath shrugged in frustration. "We don't see other people often enough to bother. Why speak another language when we are among ourselves?" He said this in Gaelic, of course.

Calmly, because Athair partly agreed with the younger man, he said, "Because, it is safest to be prepared for the time when we must deal with humans." This was his usual answer to this question, but it might take on new meaning if his brothers agreed with the drastic measures he was about to suggest.

As expected, Rath had no verbal response for Athair's often repeated reply, other than a low grumble as he turned to leave. He continued with a few choice Gaelic phrases, descriptive enough to make Athair smile.

Such lack of respect. Still, it was only stress that made Rath speak so. Rath, like the others, needed a true mate with which to bond. Allaidh leaving him for the twins had brought the lack of a mate into focus. Her loss was even more difficult because it wasn't in their nature to give up possessions easily, even uncomfortable ones.

Athair walked down to the small woodland stream, where he found Dàn staring at the water as it bubbled peacefully past.

Dàn nodded in deference. His expression remained impassive when he looked up and greeted Athair, "Father."

"Thank you, Dàn, for having Rath awaken me."

Dàn's gaze dropped back to the stream. Athair reached out with his empathy and tried to read Dàn's feelings. He looked so uncertain. Athair felt fear, and then nothing as the boy's defenses fell into place. Being able to read emotions and sometimes thoughts of the younger clan members made Athair's parenting somewhat easier. But some, like Dàn, had learned how to block being read. It had been quite some time since Dàn had allowed his emotions to be felt without immediately withdrawing behind his wall of protection.

"Dàn, do you know where I can find Sgrios?"

"He hunted to the west last week, but is with Acair now. You'll be able to find them both behind the meeting lodge cutting firewood." Dàn continued to stare at the stream. "He plans to leave soon. I'll have Lasair ask him to wait for you." Only Lasair dared to speak with Sgrios telepathically, so only she could convince him to wait.

"Thank you." Something was definitely bothering Dàn, but Athair knew better than to push him. If he needed to know, then Dàn would come to him with whatever problem had appeared in his visions.

He could have mentally contacted his twin brother, Acair, but he hesitated to do so. He wanted to offer his plan to both his brothers at once and Acair was so strong Athair would be unable to hold back information from him. If he connected with him, Acair immediately would know why he wanted to meet. This impromptu meeting could change everything for them. So much of the clan's future depended Acair's experienced leadership of and Sgrios' violent distrust.