

# DRAGON in DARKNESS



MARIE TREANOR

Changeling Press

# **Dragul In Darkness**

## **Marie Treanor**

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The isolation of the Dragul is over for good. In an effort to live in peace with their human neighbours, King Vasil has called a conference.

Eve, beautiful, clever, visionary -- and mutant -- leads the delegation from the Dome. Mistrusted by her colleagues, regarded as a renegade by her old friends in the City of the Damned, Eve is determined to achieve what is best for all humanity. She is used to succeeding, but she has never before come across an opponent like the King of the Dragul.

Dark, brooding and overwhelmingly powerful, Vasil walks a lonely path, dedicated to serving and caring for his people. He is happy to battle Eve with wits, sex and ultimately love, for a prize that turns out to be larger than anyone had previously imagined.

## Prologue

While the king recovered from his orgasm, Arlen fell asleep with him still inside her. A satisfied smile lurked around her swollen lips. Streaks of pale blond hair tumbled across her flushed face.

Lying between her legs, the king gazed down at her. It wasn't the first loving of the night, and it wouldn't be the last. His cock was still bone-hard in her, responding to the faint, lazy contractions of her pussy around it.

Caught unawares by her arrival outside his window, he had given in to a moment of weakness, a raging lust that had long gone unsatisfied. She had been stalking him for months, knowing, as everyone knew, that she was not the One of the man she lived with. It was no excuse. Aurel was his friend.

But the king craved release, just a few moments of respite from the increasing bouts of unbearable knowledge and prescience that consumed him. And Arlen's adoration brought balm, even hope to his gnawing guilt and anxiety, his fear of what he was becoming. So he had let her in and taken her to bed -- and yes, she was worth a little extra guilt. Wildly passionate and inventive, she had known precisely how to add fuel to the fire. And that fire was far from quenched.

He began to move inside her, circling. She moaned a little in her sleep, so he spoke inside her head. *You didn't come here to sleep, Arlen.*

He drew back and thrust harder inside her. Her smile widened. As he continued to move, she opened her eyes and arched up into him. *More?* she asked, almost purring. *Are you always this insatiable?*

*Always.* He drew up his knees, kneeling and grasping her ankles to place them around his neck. She cried out as he reached even deeper inside her. The world began

to recede once more. It was easy, so easy, to bury all the pain in the drugging heat of her body, to lose himself, his very essence, in blind, physical ecstasy.

Then foreknowledge exploded in his mind with all the power of his orgasm. Much further than before, he saw into the future of his people. He saw his children in the sun, young and promising and achingly beautiful -- and knew beyond any doubt that whoever would be their mother, his One, she would not be Arlen.

And he knew that tomorrow he would pay the price of his pleasure. He suspected they all would. He and Arlen and Aurel.

What he didn't know, even then, was how high the price would go.

## Chapter One

"The delegation from the government of the Dome City!" intoned the splendid winged creature at the doorway. "Welcome to the conference." He bowed to them with incomparable grace before standing aside to let them pass.

Eve lifted her head a fraction higher and walked ahead of her colleagues into the room. Every nerve shrieked with excitement. She felt sharp and clear and ready to take on the whole world. Even the amazing winged beings known as the Dragul, whom everyone assured her were so superior to man, mutant or otherwise, that humanity was mere dust beneath their elegant bare feet.

"Which one is the king?" Ross hissed in her ear, anxious to the point of panic.

It was a big, gracious room, with a high glass ceiling through which you could watch the darkening of the sky. Lit by large glass lamps and bracketed torches, it was all stone walls, finely decorated tapestries, and beautiful people. Beautiful winged people. They all wore the same, simple style of tunic, some with more decoration than others, often heavily embroidered and set off with jewellery of gold and gems. And nearly all watched the delegation's progress across the room. Eve's confidence didn't flinch. She had learned long ago the advantage of looking her best -- not to impress others so much as to be comfortable in herself. And so she had tied up her night-dark hair in the elegant style she knew suited her best and wore a long, simple dress of black silk. Her feet were bare, in the custom of the Dragul, though again mostly for her own comfort. The formality of the Dome and its footwear was irksome to a lupi -- whose soles were hard pads, like flexible leather, from running beneath the moon.

The Dragul were shifters. They understood that.

"The king?" she repeated casually now. "I don't think he's here. Beth said we'd know him immediately."

"Why isn't he here?" Irvine demanded. "This reception was billed as our chance to meet him informally. Is he slighting us?"

"No," said Ross triumphantly. "*That's him!*"

Eve followed the direction of his gaze to a very distinguished-looking Dragul in black. He was blond and beautiful and certainly radiated a power that was obvious even to humans without her heightened sensitivities. Beside him stood a pretty blond girl in turquoise -- not completely human but certainly not Dragul. In spite of herself, Eve smiled. "No," she said simply. "That is Aurel, Keeper of the Laws."

"How do you know that?" Ross demanded suspiciously, as if wondering if she'd had secret meetings already without involving her colleagues.

"I know my friend," Eve said dryly. And she was fairly sure her colleagues would be shocked by the emotions radiating from Beth as she glanced up at her lover. It made Eve smile to see her friend so happy. Beth, of all the mixed-race children in the City, had found it hardest to come to terms with what she was. But now there was a new peace about her. She was comfortable with herself at last.

A faint tinge of electricity tugged her gaze to the left of Beth, warning her, before she met his gaze, of another mutant human. Michael, leader of the delegation from the City of the Damned, her opponent. Her colleagues would never know that this encounter took more courage than any she would need to meet an alien king.

He smiled at her, a spontaneous smile of pleasure and Eve's heart ached with the loss. But none of them would ever know that. Not Ross or Irvine, not even Beth. And certainly not Michael himself. She smiled back and he came toward her with the same panther-like grace she used to love.

Typically Michael, he wore jeans with his Dragul tunic.

"Hedging your bets, Michael?" she said lightly, reaching up to kiss his cheek. Just for an instant his scent brought a rush of memory and regret. She had always thought she could go back, that when she was ready she could just pick him back up. But Michael had moved on. Her rock had gone.

"Foot in either camp, that's me," he said amiably. "You look stunning."



"That's because I am, remember?" she said, and when he laughed, she introduced him to her colleagues. "Councillors Ross and Irvine from the Dome. Gentlemen, do you know Michael, the City's Assistant Chief of Police?"

Michael was amiable, the councillors polite. No one trusted anyone. Eve said, "So who else is with you from the City? Beth told me about Aaron, but who's the third of your group?"

"Well... in the circumstances, he felt he shouldn't be here in person, but to all intents and purposes, our third member is -- Will."

Will. Of course it was.

"My father," she said, for the benefit of Ross and Irvine who were just waiting for her to try and hide something about her connection to the City. She could feel their eyes on her, accusing, suspicious, but at least their diplomatic training kept them quiet.

"Glass of water?" Michael offered, wandering off before anyone could answer him.

"Why do they send a bloody cop on a diplomatic mission anyway?" Irvine demanded, staring at his back.

Eve shrugged. "Best man for the job."

"As you'd know?" Ross challenged.

"As I'd know," Eve agreed calmly. "I grew up with him. And Aaron. And Beth, the Dragul Law Keeper's wife."

"I just hope your loyalties remain -- unconfused."

Eve turned deliberately to look him fully in the face. "Nothing about me is confused, Ross. Ever. I suggest you bear that in mind. As the Council does."

And with that, she walked away from them without a backward glance or an invitation to follow. She went to Beth, both because she wanted to and because it was right that she should meet Aurel, the second most important of the Dragul.

In fact, after ten minutes in his company, it struck Eve that the king could well be a mere cipher. This lover of Beth's was more than capable of governing, and he had that

air of confidence in his own power that was all the more overwhelming for being quite natural.

Of course, he was several thousand years old. One must learn a little self-knowledge, a little wisdom in that amount of time! The only mystery to Eve was why a being like him was drawn to someone as relatively immature as Beth. Or Michael, who also had a lover among the Dragul...

Her gaze fell on him once more, as he gave large glass goblets of sparkling water to Ross and Irvine. With him was the loveliest female Eve had ever seen -- tall and willowy with flawless skin and bone structure to die for, and long, dark red hair flowing past her flexible, sexy hips.

Eve caught Beth's eye. "Is that...?"

"Danna. Yes."

"Oh well, at least I wasn't dumped for a lesser being."

Beth opened her mouth to answer, then abruptly closed it again and transferred her gaze to Aurel. "What?"

Telepathy. Aurel had spoken and only Beth had heard. And yet she, Eve, was the stronger telepath.

"Avram," Aurel said aloud, grimly. "He's back. Excuse me." And the Law Keeper strode away, his wings rustling gently behind him.

"Avram?" Eve repeated, watching Aurel's back disappear through a curtain at the back of the room. For the first time since hearing the first rumour about the omnipotent Dragul, she sensed a chink in the armour, a weakness.

"Once Aurel's assistant," Beth said slowly. "He left when I arrived... so opposed to any human contact that he betrayed his people's existence to your pals at the Dome -- who then tried to kill me to prevent me giving the information to the City. Avram believed the Dragul would then flee back below ground to avoid the inevitable conflict."

"Didn't quite work out that way then."

"No. Only Avram fled."

"So why has he come back?"

"That's what Aurel will find out," Beth said grimly.

She seemed about to go after him, so Eve said quickly, "Beth?"

Beth paused, eyebrows raised.

"They were hardly my friends if they tried to kill *you*." Eve had grown used to the suspicion of friends in the City, now that she advocated unity with the Dome. It didn't even hurt anymore. Or not much.

"Oh, I know!" Beth snapped. She glanced at Eve, a rueful smile beginning to form in her eyes. "It just seems odd *you* representing the Dome's interests..."

"Not just the Dome's," Eve said. "All of us. You know what I think, Beth: we need to unite, to maximize our potential, to deal with other countries which are slowly rebuilding as we are."

"Well, why can't we unite under the City?" Beth demanded stubbornly.

"Because the City is weak. And isolated. And too few."

"And mutant."

"Some of us," Eve said evenly. "But that's hardly one of its disadvantages."

"Except in the eyes of the Dome."

"They're hardly as prejudiced as you think, Beth. Look at me. I'm a lupi leading what's probably the most important delegation since the war."

Beth said brutally, "You're a lupi with friends on the City's delegation. Did you never think that is why the Dome sent you? They're using you, Eve."

Eve stared at her. "Of course they are. I am here to be used, that's my purpose. You have to use every advantage. But I am precisely that, Beth: an advantage. To all of us, I hope."

"Because you see the larger issues, the big picture -- I know, you've told me all this before. And I know you're bloody clever. Just don't..."

"Don't what?"

"Don't... don't upset the Dragul." Beth gave a slightly embarrassed laugh, and Eve smiled back.

"Or what? This king of theirs will lock me up and cut off my head?"

"I imagine a lot of girls might lose their *own* heads locked up with him!"

Eve smiled. "He's a pretty boy then?"

Beth expelled a breath of laughter. "Oh, he's pretty all right. But don't be fooled. He really isn't someone you want as your enemy."

\* \* \*

As he had known he would, Aurel found the king below, in the newly built conference room. He knelt on the floor by the far wall, his fingers splayed out across the stone. As Aurel entered, he glanced up.

"He's alone. Two feet below." The king spoke silently, succinct and business like as usual.

"Ill-will?" Aurel asked. He was the Law Keeper, but the king's senses were more powerful.

"I'm sensing none. It doesn't mean it's not there. Shall we get him out?"

"Surprise him."

"I'll move the rock," said the king. "You -- er -- nab him."

The king was amused by human slang. Right now, there wasn't much about this situation that amused Aurel at all. He knelt by the royal side, watched carefully as the king adjusted the position of his hands. Aurel flexed his arms and waited very still.

Beneath the king's hands, the floor shimmered. A crack appeared, and all but exploded apart. At once, the king threw himself sideways, holding the rock back only with his mind. Aurel delved his arms inside, found a hairy head that screamed when he touched it, and yanked the whole body using the force of his mind as well as his hands.

As soon as the writhing body was clear, the cracked rock sprang back together.

Just because he wanted to, Aurel shook his captive like a rat.

"Aurel," said the king in his mind. One word and it made no difference to how he felt. Yet as always, he found himself obeying, throwing the abject figure onto the nearest wooden chair.

The king sat down in the one opposite, with the width of the big conference table between.

When Avram stopped spluttering and pulling bits of rubble out of his mouth and his hair, the king said, "What's up, Avram? Wouldn't the Elders have you either?"

Avram glanced at the king with a weird mixture of fear and triumph. "The Elders would have all of us. They sent me to tell you that. The king, your father, forgives you and invites you back below."

\* \* \*

"Do you believe him?" Aurel asked abruptly as they walked away from Avram's prison.

"I believe his words, as you do," said the king. "And as you do, I doubt his motives."

"Also -- he's hiding something."

The king nodded, neither doubtful nor surprised. Aurel glanced at him. Although they worked together well, the days when they could talk as friends were long gone. So it was with unusual difficulty that Aurel formed the words: "What will you do?"

For an instant, the king's eyes turned bleak. It was worse, much worse for him than for Aurel. Aurel's parents were dead. Vasil had to choose to turn his back on his father a second time.

The king smiled faintly. "I shall woo the humans, of course. What are they like?"

"Prickly."

"Of course."

"Divide and rule should be a piece of cake. The Dome men are jealous of the mutant girl who leads them. They don't trust her, possibly with cause, for she has her own agenda. The City delegation doesn't trust her either, even though she was born one of them and is, in fact, Michael's ex-lover."

"So the girl is the centre of this maelstrom? Lead me to her."

\* \* \*

Meeting Michael again, even in this odd situation, had been so much easier than she'd expected. So when she decided to make the acquaintance of his new lover, she wasn't quite prepared for the unpleasantness.

Not that Danna was rude. She was charming and friendly. She didn't even ooze Dragul superiority as Aurel and some of the others did. Instead, she seemed a little diffident, almost shy.

Michael introduced her at once as Danna the Dragon Dancer. "What a charming title," Eve observed, presuming the shyness to come from the fact that the Dragul woman knew about Michael's past with her. Well, whether or not she wanted Michael back, she certainly wasn't about to fight over him, so she smiled brightly, willing at least to be friends. For now.

Michael said, "It's more than a title. It's a profession. Danna is vital to Dragul ritual as well as their arts and culture."

Eve, whose knowledge of dancing was restricted to stuffy formal affairs among the Dome's upper echelons, or sleazy nightclubs in the City of the Damned, lifted her eyebrow politely. "Why Dragon Dancer? I have heard the Dragul described as dragon people. I thought you could all shift."

Danna cleared her throat. "We can. I simply dance it."

"Not 'simply'," Michael protested.

Danna shrugged. "I hope you will see it for yourself. But you are also a shifter?"

Eve said, "I am a lupi." Something distracted her then -- a shiver of knowledge, the approach of some power she had never encountered. Yet before she could glance toward its source, she caught the expression in Danna's eyes.

The dancer masked her thoughts perfectly, seamlessly. But it seemed she couldn't control her facial expression. Eve wished it was jealousy she read in Danna's eyes. Anything was better than the pity of the woman who now possessed Michael's heart.

*I am a lupi. Like wolves, lupi mated for life. Not this lupi.*

Now, because it was unbearable not to, she wrenched her eyes from Danna's face and sought out the approaching telepath with all her senses.

He -- definitely a he -- approached from beyond the curtained doorway. A profound and troubled spirit, clever, determined, rebellious, overflowing with knowledge that made Eve's head ache. And strong. The strongest telepath she had ever encountered. Just for an instant, the force of his personality swept her breath away. The contradictions made her dizzy.

And then, like the closing of a door, it had gone. Eve blinked, steadying her vision, just as the curtain parted and a Dragul male stepped through it.

Was this then the rebellious Avram who had returned at this crucial moment and so disturbed even the great Aurel? This man was certainly sure of himself: his proud stance and frowning brow, the casual sweep of his dark, brooding eyes around the assembled guests all proclaimed it. Long, raven black hair was tied back at his nape, and he wore a dark red embroidered tunic with some sort of decoration on one shoulder.

Another figure stepped through the curtain and stood beside him. Aurel, the Keeper of the Laws. It seemed to bear out her guess that this was Avram... the force she had already sensed? She knew one thing. She badly wanted that force as her ally.

And as the dark Dragul's face cleared, the faintest smile forming on his sensual lips, she became aware of wild butterflies in the base of her stomach. She hadn't yet encountered a Dragul who was not beautiful in his or her own way, but this man... Just looking at this man made her as wet as an adolescent with her first crush.

Some communication passed swiftly and silently between the two Dragul at the doorway. Eve couldn't read it, but she knew it had happened. And then, throwing her completely, Aurel bowed his head and stepped back in an instantly recognizable gesture of deference.

*Not Avram, you idiot*, she lashed herself, even as the occupants of the room began to bow around him. *The king*.

## Chapter Two

She had no sooner thought it than his sweeping gaze settled on her. Still moving across the room among his people, accepting their respect as his due, yet he managed to keep her in focus.

Eve didn't mind. It gave her an excuse to look back, and God knew he was worth the scrutiny. Tall, even among his own large race, with the sort of dark, brooding beauty that was the stuff of poetry rather than real life. He moved with the practiced yet casual grace of one used to being in the public eye, which somehow made Eve think of her own pleasure -- of seeing how his body moved without the tunic, of how it might feel pressed closely to hers. As a lover, surely he would be spectacular...

Hastily, Eve pulled herself together. This was hardly the time for erotic fantasies, and the King of the Dragul was hardly a suitable object for them at any time! She had never been quite so grateful for the strength of her telepathic barriers -- how embarrassing would it be for the king to have read her mind just then? Or anyone else for that matter. It was a salutary reminder to keep those blocks rigidly in place among this powerfully telepathic race...

"OK, you're on," Beth said in her ear, taking her by the arm.

"On?" Eve repeated blankly, dragging her gaze reluctantly from the king, who had, in any case, turned his attention elsewhere. To Michael, whom he greeted as an old acquaintance.

Eve felt irritated. Michael and the City already had the advantage here. Well, her job was to turn that around. No one had expected it to be easy.

"Time to meet your host," Beth said drily. "You've been summoned. Where are your boys?"

"Already edging toward the great man. How was I summoned?"



"By the king, through me," Beth said casually.

Eve glanced at her, unreasonably annoyed. "He looked right at me. Couldn't he have asked himself? Or come to me?"

"It's not how things are done. You're introduced to the king. And he wouldn't think of invading your mind without permission. He's too strong for that to be anything but rude."

*But, Eve, she added in a rare moment of telepathic communication -- presumably because they were now too close to the king not to be overheard. That doesn't include what your mind leaks. You won't know you're doing it, but to them, trust me, your thoughts, or at least your feelings, leak.*

You *might* leak, Eve returned dryly. There was no time for more. They stood a little to one side of the king and his current "audience" who were Michael and Aaron from the City of the Damned. Eve hadn't seen Aaron enter the room and in spite of herself and the opposing camps they were now in, she found herself warmly delighted to see him. They had grown up together in the same commune and her friendship with him now was wonderfully uncomplicated by adult emotions. Catching his eye, she winked, very faintly, and saw his spontaneous grin in return.

Michael stopped talking, and the king turned graciously to Beth, who stepped forward, saying, "Sir, this is the delegation from the Dome City -- my friend Eve, and Councillors Ross and Irvine... King Vasil."

Though Eve was better prepared now, the direct assault of the king's amazing eyes still sent a frisson spinning down her spine. They were beautiful eyes, large and darkest brown speckled with minute flames of gold. Ancient eyes which had seen thousands of years of life and held a world of tragedy as well as knowledge frighteningly beyond her grasp. And no one could doubt the power they veiled.

This, without doubt, was the spirit she had glimpsed so briefly, yet so vividly...

*Christ, he's gorgeous!*

As Beth recited their names, the king inclined his head to each, and then turned his attention back to Eve.

"You are welcome in the Kingdom of the Dragul." The deep, bone-melting voice sounded intriguingly quiet for the huge personality she sensed. Unexpectedly, he stretched out his hand to her, and there was nothing she could do but lay her own in it. His fingers, cool and long, closed around hers. She could almost feel the throb of latent strength. "Eve, daughter of Will and Lara."

*But quite my own woman.*

Partly, it was instinct, habit, to state her own independence from her wholly remarkable parents. But it was a calculated experiment too. To see if her telepathy could reach him. To impress him, even provoke him if it would let her see her way more clearly.

The faintest smile tugged at his lips, reflected in his dark, oddly tragic eyes.

*No one is wholly their own.* It was the same voice, melting her mind like a caress. But with the words seemed to come explanation and understanding -- telepathy like none she'd come across in the City...

*Not even you?* she challenged. There was a pause, while she held his gaze without flinching.

*Not even I. Thank you, by the way. I am honoured by your thoughts.*

Eve blinked. *That I claim to be my own woman?*

*That you think of me as a spectacular lover.*

The blood swept through her body and into her face so quickly it made her dizzy. Worse, the king lifted her lifeless fingers to his lips. The faintest touch of his mouth, light and brief, sent a fierce stab of electricity straight to her core. And then he released her and turned to Ross.

Beth dragged her back out of the way, clearly desperate to talk to her. "Wow, he looked quite taken with you, Eve! What did he say?"

Eve gave a slightly shaky laugh. "He said I leak."

Out of the heat of his amazing eyes, she could pull herself back together, forget the embarrassment of her discovered fantasy -- for he wasn't offended by it, he was flattered. Why else bring it up?

Someone -- Aaron -- thrust a goblet of cool, clear water into her hand, and gratefully, she took a reviving sip. No wonder, she thought, her friends were so fascinated by the Dragul. They were overwhelming, mind-blowingly exciting just to be around...

It came to her, quite unexpectedly, that she was bloody lucky. Here she stood with her best and oldest friends -- just for the moment she could forget that they no longer trusted her. And given this chance of meeting and influencing the Dragul for the greater good, she had caught the attention, however briefly, of the most powerful of that amazing race.

When she could no longer endure not knowing, she turned her head and glanced casually round the room. He had moved on from Ross and Irvine and appeared to be having one of his silent conversations with two respectful Dragul at his side. She would have moved her gaze onward, only at just the wrong moment, he looked up, directly at her.

For an instant, even across the crowded space between them, his eyes blazed with something she couldn't quite read. Triumph? Interest? Lust?

*Lust.*

The word came softly inside her head -- amused yet intense -- catching at her breath.

*I heard you were too principled to read minds without permission. Mine doesn't leak that much.*

*Yes, it does. Like a rusty pipe.*

The unexpected humor brought a breath of laughter that she hid by drinking some more water. *I've never been compared to rotten plumbing before.*

*Plumbing can be fascinating. In the right setting.* While his mind spoke to hers, he nodded at one of his companions, then glanced at the other.

Abruptly forgetting the witty repartee at the tip of her telepathic tongue, she blurted, *Are you holding two conversations at once?*

*Four actually.* He sounded vaguely apologetic.

*So much for vanity! What does a girl need to do to get your undivided attention?*

*Are you speaking hypothetically?*

*What difference does that make?*

*All the difference in the world, for obviously it would depend on the girl. Danna, for example, has my undivided attention when she dances.*

*Well, I can't compete with Danna.* Following the king's example, she looked away, pretending to watch the movement of people about the room. There was a short silence during which she had time to wonder if her mind had leaked hurt or resentment instead of the light humor she'd been aiming for. Something brushed her cheek, making her jerk instinctively toward the touch.

No one was anywhere near her. She had stepped back from her friends and stood quite alone.

*Not in dancing,* said the king. He was looking at her again, and her eyes widened.

*How did you do that?*

*If you come with me, I'll show you.*

*Do you think I'm mad?*

*I thought you might like to learn a little about the Dragul.*

*I'm learning plenty from here.*

*Very well. We could have a telepathic affair instead.*

*Can you have four of those at the same time too?*

His surprised laughter in her head enchanted her. *You are delightful.*

His companions, apparently dismissed, bowed and moved away from him. He began to walk away, toward the curtained door once more. Disappointment rose so fiercely in her that it felt like panic. And then he spoke silently once more. *In answer to your first question: to have my undivided attention, you normally have to catch me at the right time and place.*

*Indeed?* she managed. *And where and when might those be?*

Already gripping the curtain in his hand, he glanced back at her over his shoulder. Again, his lips tugged upward. *You choose.*

\* \* \*

The Dome delegation had been given quarters in the king's palace. It had meant little to Eve at the time, except convenience. Now, pacing the length of the spacious floor from curtained door to massive window, it felt weirdly exciting to be in his house. Nearer to him than Michael, who slept at his dancer's house, or Aaron, who slept at his own girlfriend's. They had friends and lovers among the Dragul. But she was living with the king, and that was a huge advantage.

Especially because he wanted her. It didn't matter that neither of them would really do anything more about it than the light, telepathic flirtation they'd enjoyed that evening. It was still exciting on any number of counts! Flattering, of course, because he was gorgeous. And even though she wasn't stupid enough to take him up on his offer, just being around him when he'd made it was pleurably arousing.

Besides which, she could use this. Eve scorned to use sex to achieve her aims. She was too intelligent to have ever needed to before, and she wasn't about to start. But leading the king by the nose a little, softening him to her point of view... that was different.

Big as it was, the room was constricting now. She needed to be outside, to bury her thoughts and plans and confused emotions in sheer hard running. She needed to be the wolf...

Hastily, she undressed and crouched on the floor to will the change.

She never got used to the pain, but she had learned to cope with it, to use it to make herself stronger. And when she leapt out of the door, streaking past the communal living space she shared with her colleagues, she felt she had never been so strong.

She meant to run out of the Dragul village and across the hills, exhaust herself to the point she would have to sleep. For tomorrow she needed to be sharp. Tomorrow, the three-way negotiation between the Dome, the City and the Dragul began. Tomorrow, Michael would be the enemy, Ross and Irvine her allies, King Vasil her quarry...

She didn't get very far out. She became fascinated by the sight of Dragul flying across the sky. One actually landed at a window above her and disappeared inside. Through the semi-lit glass, she saw the melding shadows of two lovers.

She found the massive, wild gardens of the palace, and the many bubbling streams that coursed down the mountains and into the village. The Dragul lived largely on energy it was said, on the wind and fast-flowing streams, and the warm blood of the living. Dome dwellers would be shocked by the last, so, learning it from her father, she had kept it to herself. For now.

Eve trotted out of a thick grove to discover a small lake, fed by several more Dragul-diverted streams. Their water was amazingly fresh and clear and free of the chemicals she was used to, for the Dragul had apparently purged their land of the radiation poisoning still affecting most of the country to some extent. She loped across to the water's edge, and paused for a moment, listening, watching the reflected moon ripple across the dark pool. Then, dipping her head, she lapped some of the cool, delicious water.

She felt him before she saw him. A faint echo of the energy she had sensed at the reception, calmer, definitely more veiled. Lifting her head, she stood very still.

King Vasil emerged alone from one of the paths. He still wore the red tunic, his feet bare as they paced the grassy path. As Eve had done, he paused at the water's edge, gazing over it. Awed, she realized he had not yet sensed her. There was no disguise this time -- this was the king's true face. No less beautiful, it looked, if anything, more sorrowful. With her wolf's night-vision, she could see that the frown between his brows was deeper, the outline of his lips in repose curiously tragic. Whatever else, the king was a troubled being.

Slowly, he turned his head and saw the wolf.

*Eve the lupi.*

She walked over the grass and stones toward him, until she could meet his eyes.  
*I didn't mean to disturb you.*

*I'm not disturbed.*

*Then you don't object to wolves?*

Slowly, he stretched out his hand to her head. Under his caress, her eyes closed of their own volition. She heard his breath catch and hastily opened them again.

*To wolves? No.* Before her eyes, he shimmered. Even as she blinked in shock, he had turned impossibly quickly into a large, black wolf.

*I -- I thought you were dragons,* she stammered.

*We are anything we care to be. As are you. Run with me.*

Eve stared into the wolf's dark, glowing eyes. As confused adolescents, she and Beth had run together for safety and protection. Once or twice before they had parted ways, she had run with her father. But for years now the wolf had been the solitary part of her. She wasn't sure she wanted to give that up, not to this being who was so central to her work and ambition...

Flirting was one thing. This was another.

*But still fun,* the king said, nudging her with his shoulder. Mouth open, he nipped playfully at the fur of her neck. Eve pushed him back, and then loped past him, beginning to lengthen her stride into a run. It was oddly exhilarating to feel him running silently at her side, despite the effort it took to keep up with him. He was a bigger wolf, and he knew his way around.

Now at last, she ran in the open, leaping over hillocks and streams, racing over hills and valleys, pausing to catch and gather the scents of all the animals and Dragul who had passed before them.

But curiously, the king's scent was the most intriguing of all. It was all she had unconsciously picked up and remembered from their brief contact at the reception, clean, fresh, earthy, with just a hint of more dangerous spice. Now, either through his senses or her own, it was magnified to something altogether stronger and headier.

Yet he sought no physical contact with her. So she had no need to avoid it. Until at last, he brought her back to the palace gardens, and they stood looking at each other, panting, watchful but not unfriendly.

Before her eyes, the king's wolf grew wings. He reared up briefly on his hind legs and shimmered gracefully back into his own form. There was an instant of stunning revelation when he stood totally naked before her, smooth, newly hairless skin gleaming in the moonlight. She had no time to take in the perfect beauty of his big, strong body. She gained only a hazy impression of his breadth of shoulder, the narrowness of his hips, the eye-catching length and girth of his huge, semi-erect cock between his powerful legs.

Yet her mouth felt suddenly dry. The urge to change back became so strong that she had to fight to prevent it happening. And then he bent to retrieve his fallen tunic and the play of his rippling muscles sent her heart racing wildly.

The tunic was torn, ripped asunder by his speedy change. Eve scarcely knew whether to laugh or cry. So they would both be naked if she couldn't get herself away from here before she changed back...

Apparently not. The king shook his tunic once and when he dropped it casually over his head, it covered his gorgeous body perfectly.

Eve closed her mouth.

*How do you do that?* she asked him silently.

*The tunic? Or the shift?*

*Both!*

*Much the same way, actually.*

*And... you feel no pain when you shift?*

*None.* Compassion lit his extraordinary deep, dark eyes. *If you talk to Beth, she will help you to change without pain.*

*Beth?* Beth had a stronger gift than she did? When had that happened?

*When she became Aurel's One.*

*Will you stop doing that?*

*When you stop -- er -- leaking.*

*Can Beth show me that too?*

*No, but I can.*



*I'll hold you to that... some other time.* She turned away, and that made it easier to bear. Looking at him made the urge to change increasingly hard to resist. *Good night...*

*You are going already?*

*I need to shift.*

*Be my guest.*

Bracing herself, she turned back to face him. *I have no clothes with me.* She meant it to be dry, sardonic. And yet it sounded hotly embarrassed in her own head, however it came over in his.

His lips quirked. Taking something from a hidden pocket of his tunic, he began to walk toward her. Instinctively, she backed away. He shook out a bundle of what looked like shimmering red threads. In one jerk of his hand, the threads became a tunic, much like his own, but smaller.

Like one that would fit her human form.

"If it makes you more comfortable," he said aloud. "I want to show you something. In return for your sharing with me the pleasures of the wolf."

Eve hesitated. An intimacy was growing here that she was sure had to be a bad idea. And yet she was curious. And she wanted the means to influence him. How much of that did he know or suspect?

And most of all, the change was pressing on her, making her skin prickle with the sweat of effort to keep it back.

"Please."

Eve gave in. Lying down on the soft grass, she let the agony engulf her, twisting her body and her internal organs, reforming her limbs, her head, her face, her eyes. The change back to human was always worse for her than the other way around, but as always, she bore it in silence.

She knew it was over when the prickling of her scalp stopped. It meant her hair had stopped "growing." Yet something wasn't right. Something still weighed on her head, something light and not unpleasant, but she knew it shouldn't be there.

Quickly, she lifted her head. The first things she saw were the king's bare, strong feet planted firmly on the ground inches away from her eyes. Looking up the length of his calves to his bent knees, she saw that he crouched beside her, his hand softly stroking her hair. As if she was still the wolf. Or a hurt child. The strength of compassion in his eyes took her aback.

"I'm sorry. I should have taken your pain."

"Why should you do that?"

His lips curved slightly. "Because I can."

"How?"

"So many questions." His hand fell away, and stupidly she felt the loss like a grief. He held out the red tunic, actually slipped it over her head before holding out his hand commandingly.

She took it, because it would have seemed churlish not to, tried to fight down the rising excitement of his touch.

*Who's in charge here?* she asked herself furiously. *I am! And if that leaked, good!*

However, he made no sign of having heard her thoughts, so she asked grudgingly, "What is it you wanted to show me?"

"I thought you might like to fly."

Eve remembered to close her mouth. "Fly?"

Behind the king, his wings slowly unfolded and spread out behind him. The movement was natural, graceful, the wings themselves incredibly beautiful, a merged shading of dark red and black.

"I have the means," he observed.

Eve smiled a little sadly. "I don't. I can't shift to what I like. Only the wolf."

"We'll talk about that some other time. For now, only one of us needs to fly. I'll carry you."

It was another of those moments, another decision to be made without time for proper thought... Again, she knew she was getting deeper in without knowing where it led. But when else in her life would she ever get the chance to *fly*?

"All right," she agreed cautiously. "What do I do?"

"Turn round."

Obediently, she turned her back on him. A moment later, his arms slid around her waist from behind, drawing her back against his hard body. She felt his erection instantly, no longer the semi-hard-on she'd glimpsed when he was naked, but a full, massive, rock hard stiffy pressing into the soft flesh of her bottom.

Before she could either worry about that or glory in it, the beating of his wings vibrated through his body to hers and her feet lifted off the ground. Instinctively, she clutched at his arms around her, holding on as they rose higher and faster into the air.

Speechless with awe, Eve went with it, the wild exhilaration of actually flying through the air, held beneath the body of a winged god-like creature she had never met before this evening. She accepted the arousal of his body, as she accepted her own, and the joy of actually flying, of seeing the world from this vantage point, merged with the sexual excitement of his nearness. Of his control...

*Who's in control of this situation, Eve? Oh, he is and I don't care. I don't care at all...*

## Chapter Three

It was only when they landed back down on the Earth that the fear of what she had done hit her, adding to the powerful confusion of mind and body. That she had lost control terrified her. That she had voluntarily relinquished it and revelled in it, appalled her.

His hold on her didn't immediately loosen. On the other hand, he had made no effort to grope her on their flight. She wondered if she was piqued.

Slowly, listening to the wild, thudding beat of her own heart, she became aware that he was gazing at her averted profile. He said aloud, "You are beautiful. Even more beautiful like this, with your hair free and your body wild."

She gasped. "My body is not *wild*!"

"Of course it is. I can feel its heat. I can hear your heart, sense your excitement. Because I feel it too."

Eve swallowed. She couldn't deny it. Her body was raging with desire for his, had been all through the flight. And his words, forcing her to acknowledge it, made it worse...

"Eve... would you like to make love with me?"

A new flood of moisture cascaded from between her legs, running down her inner thigh. Jesus, could he feel that too?

At last his hand moved upward from her waist, slowly, brushing the underside of her breast, making her gasp again before it slid further up and settled. Her pebble-hard nipple pressed into his palm, begging for more.

Eve closed her eyes. "I can't," she whispered.

"Because you're afraid of me?"

"No! Well, yes, maybe. But mostly, because I'm here for a serious reason..."

"We're all serious. It doesn't mean we can't enjoy each other. And because I am stronger than you in every way you can imagine and a few you can't -- doesn't mean you should fear me. You shouldn't. Loving never hurt anyone."

His hand no longer cupped her breast. Instead, it lay flat, his palm only just touching her, as they both watched her nipple grow and stretch into the fabric to meet him. The pleasure was astounding. If he hadn't been holding her up, her knees would have given way.

She turned her head, desperate to explain to him why she couldn't make love with him, and instead her mouth encountered his and was ravished.

He kissed with intensity, consuming her mouth and, through it, her whole body. Aflame, Eve no longer looked for a way out, only the means to keep his mouth on hers, a means to stay in his arms, take him inside her and ride him to oblivion.

He broke the kiss, ignoring her little mewl of protest, and when she reached blindly up to take his mouth back, he placed his finger on her lips. "You can keep control," he whispered. "Do whatever you need to. But we both crave the pleasure, the release..."

Eve's labored breath caught further. She stared up into his amazing, alien eyes, and slowly, she began to smile. "I'll keep you to that," she warned.

"You make the rules."

"All right. We go to my quarters, not yours."

"Very well."

"And I control when and how..."

"Until we each know an orgasm."

"All right. And then you leave..."

"Unless you ask me not to."

Excited laughter spilled out of her trembling lips. "Done."

\* \* \*

Doubt came back only once, as she considered the mind-boggling possibility of encountering Ross or Irvine as they entered the Dome delegation's quarters. But the king solved that issue by simply flying with her up to her bedroom window.

Standing on the sill, he held her in one powerful arm and kissed her. His kisses were like drugs, blinding her to everything but his mouth. Somehow, he opened the window for the next she knew she was flying into the room, held in both his arms now and lowered with infinite slowness onto the big, round bed.

His wings beat lethargically, falling with her as she sank deep into the bed's softness. His eyes held hers, fire burning deep inside them, turning the golden flecks to flame. He was incredible, beautiful... and terrifyingly alien. She had no idea where his physical or mental strength ended, only that both were mind-bogglingly greater than her own.

Eve had never encountered a stronger being than herself, not even Michael, or her father. But this Dragul, this "king" she had been prepared to despise just for his title... he was about to invade her...

As his wings folded in behind him, his big body came to settle on hers, the weight of his hips seducing her, the hardness of his cock pressing against her pubic bone arousing her to breaking point and yet melting her to helpless weakness. His lips closed on her throat, kissing. She felt the flicker of his tongue, the gentle graze of his teeth and she gasped. For an instant terror fought with blazing desire, a need so strong it shattered her.

And the fear was not just of him, but that part of her actually *liked* the novel feeling of powerlessness. That scared her more than anything.

Then, he lifted his head to look at her, and mercifully, her intellect resurfaced through the heated confusion. "I'm in control," she said breathlessly.

"I thought you'd forgotten."

Almost experimentally, she pushed at his chest. At once he rolled off. Relief flooded her, even as that unknown part of her cried out in distress. He would play by her rules.

Eve sat up, looking quickly around her. She had spent barely half an hour in this room since her first arrival, and most of that had been either preparing for the reception or pacing up and down with her mind full of plans and calculations as to how to use the king's desire for her own ends.

Well, she hadn't thought of going quite this far, but what the hell... There was a stone shelf above the bed built into the wall. Glancing below it, she saw that the bed itself was carved from the same stone, as if its shape had been hewn out of the massive rock when the room was first made. A narrow shaft of rock now joined the bed to the wall, almost like a pipe.

"Back to plumbing," she murmured, slipping out of the bed. The king watched her silently, amusement in his still glittering eyes as she rummaged inside her travelling bag which she had dumped unceremoniously by the far wall.

She found what she wanted quickly and turned back to face him. New excitement filled her now, anticipating his reaction. "Do you know what my mother does in the City?"

"She is the chief keeper of your laws. In fact, she brought the first order to the chaos of your lawless City."

Eve smiled, walking back toward the bed. "Well, it's not lawless anymore. My mother is a strict disciplinarian. Law breakers are punished. And occasionally, need to be restrained. Take off your tunic."

The king's lips quirked. Without taking his eyes off her, he tugged at the tunic and drew it down over his hips.

*Christ, he's gorgeous...*

Eve knelt on the bed, her eyes drinking in his full glory as he lay on his side, his head propped up on his hand, gazing expectantly back at her. From his broad muscled shoulders to his long, powerful legs, he was a perfect physical specimen. To say nothing of the massive cock jutting upwards over his flat stomach. Or the strange wings twitching languorously at his back.

Eve said, "Spread out your wings and lie down on your back with your head *here.*"

His wings opened with alacrity. He moved, lying where she specified with his wings spread out on either side. Fascinated, Eve reached out and touched one. The back of it, the part seen in repose, was like soft leather, yet fine and flexible. She could feel the veins beneath, the deceptively fragile bones.

"These are amazing," she murmured, running her fingers along the bone to the tip and over onto the side facing her. The king's breath drew in sharply.

Eve smiled, watching his expression as she caressed this softer, more sensuous side. His eyes closed. A low growl began to form deep in his chest. His cock twitched once convulsively. Eve laughed softly. "I think you like that. Interesting..."

"Don't stop," he said.

"Who's in control here? I think you need a reminder." She brought her left hand up at last, showing him what she had found in her bag. A pair of old-fashioned police handcuffs. "These are what my mother used for restraining unruly individuals in the City."

Something changed in his eyes -- a little amusement, and something else that made the golden flames dance hectically. Eve bent over him, reaching behind the bed to link the cuffs around the narrow stone shaft. The side of her breast brushed his cheek, sending electric sparks straight to her core.

"Give me your hands," she commanded. At first she thought he wouldn't, that she had gone too far. After all, this was the king -- and if she didn't know him, well, neither did he know her. He had no cause to trust her. And yet, slowly but inexorably, he lifted his hands, wrists together. His gaze never left her.

Eve slid the rings over his long, slender wrists, and snapped them shut. The most powerful being she was ever likely to encounter had just delivered himself into her control, simply in order to have sex with her. Had anyone ever wanted her that much before?



The idea was overwhelming, flooding her with strange feelings that added a whole new dimension to lust. And yet, to keep that control, she had to keep her own rules. Give him pleasure, steal a little for herself -- *oh God yes please!* -- and leave him wanting more. She had to lose nothing and gain... who knew what?

Catching her breath, she turned to the exquisite body and began to explore it, first with her fingertips, and then with her tongue and lips, brushing caresses across his shoulders and chest, teasing the muscles, flicking his stiff nipples.

His chest was lightly scattered with surprisingly soft, black hair. She laid her cheek on it, skimming her face downward to his hard stomach, letting her fingers trace the tantalizing line of tummy hair downward until she encountered the swollen, dark head of his cock. Not touching it, she caressed around it, smiling as it twitched as if trying to get to her.

Instead, she turned determinedly back, the way she'd come, following his muscled arms all the way up above his head to the cuffs, testing them.

"You're not even trying to escape," she observed.

"There's nowhere else I'd rather be."

"Good reason," she agreed, caressing the rim of his wing, feeling it tremble as her fingers slid over to the sensitive underside. He groaned, from deep inside, muffled yet all the more intense for its suppression. The sound brought a fresh flood of moisture to Eve's aching pussy. She realized that even the soft fabric of the Dragul tunic was hurting her over-sensitive nipples, and with conscious bravery, she sat up and slipped it off.

The king's eyes narrowed. The golden flames darted and darkened. Startlingly, she caught a glimpse of her effect on him, a brief surge of raging desire, an urgent admiration that amounted almost to worship. She stared at him. "Did you let me see that? Or do you leak too?"

"I showed you it," he whispered. "I want you to see it."

"More," she said, climbing across his body so that she straddled his hips.

"You can't handle more."

"I'm a lupi. Haven't you heard about our sexual appetites?" Slowly, she lowered herself to meet his body, settling her pussy over the rigid column of his cock. She gasped with exquisite pleasure.

"Of course," he said. "But if you want to keep control, you don't want to feel what I feel..."

"Is that a compliment?"

"Oh yes." He shifted his hips, so that his cock rubbed her clitoris. In response, her weeping entrance contracted, as if to draw him inside -- which was something she had no intention of allowing. Besides, who needed him inside when she was liable to come in about five more seconds if he did that again...

Before he could, she lay down on him, breast to breast, brushing her nipples with his, loving her obvious effect on him. He gave another of those semi-silent groans, and she excited herself impossibly by wondering if he would actually shout with abandon when she made him come... Would it bring Ross and Irvine? The palace guard?

Catching her breath on a laugh, she skimmed her lips across his. Immediately, his mouth opened, ready to take hers, and she drew back, instead tracing the cords of his throats with her lips. Reaching out to either side, she caressed both of his wings, teasing his throat with her teeth when his hips bucked beneath her.

"Wings and throat," she murmured. "What else is erogenous on your extraordinary body?"

"Right now," he said breathlessly, "everything."

Using only her legs and body, she wriggled lower, almost bringing herself to climax against the rigid shaft of his cock before she slid too far down. Instead, she clamped her legs around his thigh and kept sliding until she came to eye-level with his cock.

When she touched it, he gasped, his head lifting right off the pillow. The handcuffs grated against the stone. Eve smiled and wrapped both hands around his pulsing shaft, watching with fascination as two large drops emerged from the head like tears. Slowly, she lowered her lips to it and tasted.

She wasn't prepared for that. His taste overwhelmed her, like a concentrate of his strong, earthy scent. Instead of teasing as she'd meant to, she took him into her mouth and sucked, absorbing him like the best wine. A groan rumbled through him. His hips moved, pushing into her. She let him, sucking harder, and began to move the silken skin of his shaft up and down in time to the rhythm of her mouth.

She let one hand slide round his balls, felt them tightening, and realized, almost with shock, that he was going to come. Somehow, she had imagined he would force it to last longer. And yet the knowledge that she had brought him to this so quickly filled her with a triumphant excitement she had never known before.

Her thighs squeezed tighter around his leg, grinding her clitoris into it, making herself gasp aloud with pleasure. Desperately, without releasing his cock, she pulled herself higher till she was over his knee. He bent it upward, pressing into her, circling it against her. The waves began to roll before she was ready.

Involuntarily, she sank her teeth into his cock. He groaned again and thrust harder. She sucked wildly, bucking on his knee, and cried out as she fell into the wildest orgasm of her life, sharp, intense, violent. As her mouth released him to scream, his cock followed her, thrusting back in just in time to shoot his seed deep inside her mouth.

Eve drank him, swallowing him down as she writhed in her own ecstasy. His great shudders of pleasure shook her, but it was her own voice she could hear making the inarticulate, unstoppable noises of bliss. Her eyes closed, she extracted and gave the last drop of pleasure she could -- and she had never known it could be so much.

She felt his hands in her hair, lifting her mouth off him at last. He bent her backwards, so that she lay under him now and nothing in the world had ever been so exciting as his weight, his strength, his cock against her thigh. His hands tangled in her hair, holding her steady as his mouth began to ravage hers...

*His hands?*

Her eyes flew open. *Your hands... you moved! I cuffed you! How...?* She fired the incoherent babble straight into his mind, desperate for answers.

He pushed his tongue deeper into her mouth. *We each knew an orgasm. According to your rules, there is nothing now to bind me.*

*Except the handcuffs!*

He sucked her tongue into his own mouth and slowly released it before lifting his head. His eyes blazed down into hers with amusement as well as triumph and a lust that didn't look as if it had just been very well satisfied. Her heart beat wildly. Her pussy ached for him.

Aloud, he said, "Don't be silly. Handcuffs can't bind me. I gave you control because you wanted it, not because I had no choice. And now your time in charge has passed with the first orgasm."

*The first? Oh Jesus...*

"Unless I tell you to go," she said desperately.

Only, of course, she had no way to make him go. By her own foolish behaviour she had delivered herself into his power.

"Unless you tell me to go," he agreed. Almost casually, his hand settled on her breast. She swallowed, trying not to wriggle with the pleasure, especially when his thumb began idly stroking her nipple while he talked.

"In which case, I *will* go. With regret. Your mouth is amazing and brought me huge pleasure -- rather more, I suspect, than my knee brought to you. But I want this." His other hand slid between her thighs, brushing her hot, wet pussy, making her gasp. "I want to sink myself in there, make you scream with pleasure..."

"I already did," she said shakily.

He dismissed that. "A little gasp. You'll find my cock gives a little more. Unless you tell me to go."

She stared at him. He was still awesome, unknown and for those reasons frightening. She had pleased both of them, and if she told him to go now, she left him wanting more, just as she'd planned.

But her body was on fire. Her orgasm had left her more incomplete than satisfied. And he was still the most desirable being she had ever encountered.

He could have escaped her bonds any time, but he'd chosen not to.

What sort of game was this anyway? Had she really been trying to win this conference with sex? Perhaps. But only because she wanted him. She'd wanted him since before she even saw him. And now he offered her...

"A night of pleasure," he whispered. "Or more loneliness. You choose."

She swallowed again. "Put like that, I would be foolish to send you away."

He smiled and brushed leisurely lips across her nipple. As if distracted by it, he took it into his mouth and rolled it around his tongue. Without meaning to, Eve arched her hips upward into his.

"So ask me to stay."

He gathered up her hands, kissed them and stretched them above her head, holding them there on the pillow in one of his. His other hand swept down across her breasts to the juncture of her thighs, cupping her pussy. His mouth hovered over hers. "Ask me..."

"Stay," she whispered. She didn't care now she was in his power. She wanted to be. She wanted him to hold her like this and fuck her to insanity. His mouth came down on hers in a deep, consuming kiss, while his hand held steady on her pussy, preventing her instinctive rocking. She didn't think it would matter. She knew she would come anyway.

Lost in his mouth, she only moaned. He lifted his head slowly. For a moment she looked into his hot, fathomless eyes, read some sort of conflict raging there, some sort of *anger...*

"Thank you for asking," he said regretfully. "But I can't stay." Eve could only gape as he slid off the bed and reached for his tunic. "Another time, perhaps."

"But..." Christ, he really was going. He had...

He had played her at her own game. And won.

It was like a bucket of cold water thrown on her body's desperate heat.

Somehow, she managed to say coolly, "I really don't think so. It was a once in a lifetime offer, *sir*. And as you say -- a knee really isn't everything. Close the window on your way out."

She stretched luxuriously, treating him, if he cared to look, to a very tempting view. And then she caught up the tangled sheet and drew it over herself as she turned on to her side and closed her eyes.

She forced herself to count, slowly, to twenty before she checked. He was gone. She'd never even heard him go.

## Chapter Four

The king flew through the window of his own bedroom and paused for a moment, leaning back against the glass with his eyes closed.

There was still so much blood in his cock that the lack of it elsewhere made him dizzy.

Playing him. She'd been playing him.

Of course, he'd known that from the outset. But there had been genuine attraction there too. He'd felt it and returned it. And deliberately let her see it and use it.

So why be so hurt that she'd taken it so far? *Winning this conference with sex*. That much had leaked from her mind, resoundingly. She was poison. No one trusted Eve. Not her own people, not her adopted people. Not even her own friends, her own lover.

But Vasil... Vasil had wanted to trust Eve.

No, Vasil just wanted Eve.

Opening his eyes, he walked across to the fountain in the centre of the room and drank from the bubbling pipe. Then he sat down by his harp and gave one distracted strum.

There was more than Eve to deal with here. More even than the conference. Below, in the secure room, lay Avram the traitor. Returned to remind them that they were *all* traitors and yet would be forgiven. All they had to do was leave the light.

On impulse, he stood up again and walked through the curtained doorway. He took the stairs lightly, three or four at a time, leaping downwards into the bowels of the hill and only slowing to a semblance of dignity as he approached the secure room.

Beyond the glass, Avram lay asleep on the solitary mattress. Though there was little light down there, Vasil could see perfectly in the dark.

So could Avram. With a jerk, the traitor awoke, and swung his legs off the bed, staring up at the king with fear and defiance. Those expressions quickly faded before the king's silence, but still Vasil didn't speak.

Avram taunted, "It's good to see you without your bodyguard."

"I didn't know I had one."

"You don't. You don't even have a decent Law Keeper."

"I didn't come to listen to you reviling better men."

"Then why did you come? Without *him*?"

"We're not joined at the hip."

"You're not joined at all. Everyone knows you only keep him around because of your guilty conscience. And if you think he isn't just waiting for the moment for revenge, you're even stupider than I took you for."

The king sighed. "Avram, let's move on -- you won't drive a wedge between me and Aurel."

"No, you did that yourself."

"Well, when I'm the one in the secure room, you may berate me for it. In the meantime, tell me what it is you expect me to do?"

"Come home," said Avram. "Aurel is the one who won't leave. He has nothing to come back to. You do, and you owe Aurel no loyalty just because you took his One."

*I didn't take his One. She wasn't his One.* In spite of everything, he still recited the agonized defence in his own head. Avram couldn't hear it, and it didn't matter anyway. For once in his life, Vasil had lost control and caused a lot of damage. It wasn't a mistake he intended to repeat.

"Why does he stay with you?" Avram demanded,

It was a question Vasil had often asked himself. He shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I'm not going back, Avram."

Avram stared at him. "He's dying. The king, your father, is dying."

It was hard to keep his aloof expression. What he really wanted to do was smash his fist into Avram's face for daring to mention it.



"I know."

Avram blinked in disbelief. "You can't!"

Vasil just gazed at him, unblinking.

"Goddess, have you no compassion left? For your own father?"

"What is between my father and me is not your concern."

"Then that's your last word? Truly?"

"Truly," said Vasil deliberately. "I am not going back."

Avram's breath shuddered. "Then let me out of here and let me carry the message back."

Vasil stepped forward, reached out to the glass. It was time to send the weasel away.

He paused, his hand halfway to the glass, listening. There it was again -- a faint, almost imperceptible disturbance in the Earth. He kept his gaze on Avram, who began to frown with impatience. And Vasil caught something else: Avram checking a powerful mental block. The traitor was hiding something. Of course he was.

Vasil let his hand fall back to his side. "No. Not yet."

\* \* \*

"How do I keep him out?"

The question burst immediately from Eve's lips as she threw herself onto the sofa beside Beth. Beth paused, blinking at her, a spoonful of raspberries halfway to her mouth. "Who?" she asked at last.

"The king." Eve glanced at her, frowning impatiently. Then, with a reluctant smile, she admitted, "I leak."

Beth grinned. "I know. But don't worry -- he'll have caught your wavelength by now and block your leaks getting in. They all will."

"You said that before. I had the same story from Michael, and Danna. I don't think your king follows normal rules of politeness. I don't think he even just picks up 'leaks,' I think he's reading me."

Beth's eyes widened. "You feel him?"

Impatiently, Eve shook her head. "No. But he lets me know he's done it."

Beth opened her mouth to speak, then clearly thought better of it and closed it again. She finally spooned the raspberries into her mouth, chewing them thoughtfully. When she had swallowed them, she said apologetically, "He's teasing you."

"No..." He wasn't teasing. He was playing with her. And she couldn't even complain because she'd started it. "Beth, I need to know how to block them -- not for any dishonest purpose, just to keep my own sanity."

Beth laid down her spoon. "Look," she said briefly, and Eve felt her friend's mind open to her. It was a rare enough event, even in the heyday of their friendship, for Eve to appreciate the gift. Beth guided her to the barrier, showed her how to close it and how to lift it.

"So simple..." Eve said in wonder, experimenting with her own mind. "Hit me."

Beth probed, hard and fast, but her mind barely glanced off Eve's.

"Thanks." Eve gave her a quick, distracted smile.

Beth seemed to hesitate for a moment, her fingers playing with the spoon handle. Then, "Yes, well, it should work against the Dragul in general, but against the king -- I don't know. He's... different."

Eve frowned. "Different? In what way?"

"In a 'stronger' way. He's king for a reason, Eve, and it's not because of his beautiful eyes, gorgeous though they are."

"I thought the reason was family. Inherited monarchy."

"Well, yes, it seems to run in families. Aurel's family -- and Avram's -- have always provided the Law Keepers, assistants and administrators. Vasil's were always the kings. It's like they adapted to their roles, evolved into them, if you like. The king knows things, can do things... and if you ask me, even Aurel doesn't know what his limits are. Maybe Vasil himself doesn't know."

Reluctantly, Eve felt the parallel with herself... the exhilaration of stretching, the terror of where it would lead, of discovering a limit, or worse, discovering there wasn't one. He had recognized loneliness in her -- because his own was probably even greater.

But she wouldn't pity him. And she certainly wouldn't be embarrassed by him. He was the one who'd been handcuffed to the bed. It was an image to keep in the forefront of her mind -- provided she could concentrate on his helplessness and not on his gorgeous body in the throes of passion, his deep, arousing scent, his strong, spicy taste...

Eve sprang to her feet. "I've got to go, Beth -- meet the boys before the conference starts. But -- thanks!"

"Eve?"

Already at the doorway, Eve glanced back over her shoulder. Beth stood now too, looking at her, frowning. "Eve, the Dragul are important..." She broke off, shrugging, as if embarrassed.

"To you?" Eve suggested gently.

"Just -- important."

\* \* \*

Eve, wrapped in a smart all in one pantsuit, plain, black and impersonal, held her head high and sailed first into the conference room ahead of Ross and Irvine. Her face was a cold, beautiful mask, her eyes veiled, deliberately steady as she nodded to Vasil and Aurel.

As the Dragul murmured their greetings aloud, Aurel spoke inside the king's head. "Why are you reading her?"

"I'm not."

"But you have been. She's on to you."

"I know." The ghost of a laugh drifted with his words.

As the Dome delegation took the seats shown them by the Dragul secretary, Aurel said silently, "I have a message for you from Beth. She wants you to -- er -- go easy on Eve. She says Eve is not so tough or so brash as she pretends."

Vasil, who had held her trembling body helpless and pleading in his arms, was well aware of it.

"Beth says you've rattled her."

"I meant to. Can you hear anything, Aurel?"

There was a pause. "Like what?"

"Like anything... unusual."

"You mean apart from the incessant chatter of human voices?"

"Which is not so unusual now, it seems."

Another pause. "No, I hear nothing."

"Let me know if you do."

"Of course." Aurel sounded slightly surprised, as if anything else wouldn't have entered his head.

Vasil didn't look at him. He gazed at Eve, who was staring expressionlessly at the doorway as Michael and Aaron entered the room. There was more hurt, more regret there than she had ever let on to Michael. And yet anyone could see that Michael was not her One.

As Michael and Aaron took their seats, the king rose to give the formal welcome.

"First of all, thank you for coming all this way to talk with us. Despite difficulties, this seemed the most sensible place to meet. We met informally last night, so I see no reason to go through introductions again. We all know each other."

He glanced at Michael, who sprawled in his usual casual fashion across his chair. "Is the third member of the City's delegation present?"

Michael grinned. "In spirit. Or at least mind." He lifted his eyebrows at Eve. "Will says hello."

An involuntary choke of laughter spilled from Eve. "Hello, Dad."

"Then let us begin..."

"Wait a minute," Ross interrupted. "If their third member is Will, the leader of the City, is it not important that we know his opinions first hand? The Chief of Police -- with respect -- could tell us anything he liked! We'd be none the wiser. It's not even clear to the rest of us that he's in any kind of contact now."

"He is," Eve murmured.

"Can you tune into any -- er -- important pronouncements from your father?" the king asked. Without looking at him, she nodded, reluctantly.

"Then honor should be satisfied. I propose we begin by laying our cards on the table, each of us saying what we want from this discussion. Let me say at the outset that the Dragul wish to live in peace. Here. Above the ground. That is our bottom line.

"Eve, will you speak for the Dome City?"

In crisp, clear tones, Eve said, "The Dome is the dominant human power on the island. We also wish for peace, and unity among the races. Only with this unity will we find the wealth and strength to negotiate and hold our own with other countries -- countries which *will* challenge us in various ways as the recovery proceeds."

Concise, reasonable, unemotional...

"Michael?"

"Guess what? The City of the Damned also wishes for peace and friendship. Provided we maintain control of the tether and the land immediately surrounding it, we are more than happy for the Dragul to carry on living where they are. *Our* bottom line is that we will not give up independence to the Dome."

"Why not?" Irvine demanded.

"Many reasons. One of them is, we don't believe your attitude toward mutants is enlightened enough to protect a significant minority of our people."

"Including you?"

"Including me."

"I think you're behind the times, Michael," Eve said quietly. "I have lived there for years now."

"Well, let's not dwell on our differences," Vasil suggested. "We have enough in common to move forward. Whatever relationship grows between our peoples, I take it no one has any objection in principle to our living here."

Michael threw his pencil down on the table. "None at all."

They all looked expectantly at Eve and Vasil saw with amusement that she was going to make him sweat for it. "That depends," she said at last.

"On what?" Vasil asked solemnly.

"On whether you are as peaceful and trustworthy as you portray yourselves."

Her colleagues' faces fell ludicrously. Clearly they'd had no idea what she was going to say. Vasil sat back, watching her, waiting.

Aurel said sarcastically, "I believe it wasn't the Dragul who destroyed most of the Earth."

Eve shrugged. "We're still living and overcoming the consequences of that. But how do we know that what you say now will always be the case? By your own admission, you are rebels who left your people below in order to make a new kingdom above the ground. You're immortal, but not necessarily stable. Nor is all sweetness and light in your own kingdom. For example, tell us about Avram."

Straight to the gut. Now she looked at him, full in the eye.

*Nice one, he said admiringly. I didn't even see it coming.*

*I know. You thought I was too overcome with lust for you to think properly.*

*No, he said ruefully. Never that.*

Aloud, he said, "The Dragul have long been opposed to any contact with humanity. It's why we went below to live in the first place. Avram was our Assistant Keeper of the Laws. He believed our peace was over when Beth first came here and he betrayed us in order to force us back below. It didn't work, and he was sent away. He recently reappeared here with a message offering us forgiveness from the Elders if we returned below."

Michael whistled in awe, causing Ross and Irvine to frown at him. "But you won't go," he observed.

"Of course not."

Eve stirred. "But why should Avram, or those who sent him, imagine that you would?"

For once, Vasil hesitated. Then, without looking at her, he told the truth. "Because the king, my father, is dying."

## Chapter Five

Having splashed water on her face in the privacy of her own room, Eve returned to the sitting room where Ross and Irvine were waiting to berate her. "You antagonized them pointlessly!" Irvine accused.

"It wasn't pointless," she said tiredly. "If we're to win any of what we want, they have to acknowledge that their society is no more perfect than ours is. They have to see an advantage of uniting with us, now that total isolation is no longer an option. Namely that with unity comes one law and a greater chance of stability throughout every community. I have to go. I'll meet you back in the conference room."

Abruptly, she left them, making her reluctant but determined way to the king's quarters.

A polite Dragul servant showed her the way in the end. She expected to be announced, but to her surprise, the servant stopped at a curtained doorway saying only, "Please go in."

Taking a deep breath, she did.

Strange, haunting music assailed her ears, twisting her already confused emotions. She found herself in a large, bright room with woven tapestries on the walls, rugs on the floors and a surprising amount of clutter scattered around -- large books, paintings, carvings, colored glass goblets, objects that looked like musical instruments...

At one of the latter, resembling a harp, sat the king, looking directly at her. No wonder the servant had not announced her. There was no need. He had known she was coming. His long, sensitive fingers stilled on the strings and the music died away to silence. It felt like a loss.

He stood up. "Eve."

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to intrude. I just wanted to say I'm sorry."

His eyebrows lifted. "For what?"

"For your father. I didn't realize using Avram would lead there. It turned out to be below the belt."

He came to a halt in front of her, close but not touching. "Thank you. But you are not responsible for my father's state."

His nearness was overwhelming. In spite of the past, in spite of her barriers and the tragedy of the present subject, her body responded. Before the heat could rise into her face and betray her, she turned quickly away from him. "Well, I'm sorry anyway."

"Avram believed he was bringing me news," the king offered. "In fact, I already knew. I tell you this in case you are imagining me overcome with shock."

She knew he expected her to, but she did it anyway. "How did you know?" she asked and turned back to face him.

Politely, he indicated a dark-covered sofa. "I feel things. Distant things."

Eve sat, cautiously. "You mean you are still in communication with your Elders?"

"No. That would not be possible."

"Not strong enough?" she enquired innocently.

He smiled and sat down beside her. Beneath his tunic, his bare legs stretched long and powerful. She avoided looking at the knee that had given her pleasure the night before.

"My father doesn't permit it."

"I -- I thought your people were immortal."

"We can be. Occasionally, for one reason or another, we choose not to be."

"Your father is choosing to die? But why? Oh." The idea that the betrayal of his son had something to do with it hit her like a blast of cold water in the unexpected warmth of his company.

"I daresay I contribute to it," the king said calmly. "But the chief reason is... there is no *life* down there. We need open spaces, the air, the light. Many had already chosen death before we left. They were too afraid to come, too bored to live."



Eve stared at him. "But that's..."

"Yes."

He looked away, but she had already seen -- not in his mind but in his eyes -- the grief and the guilt that were part of his daily existence.

"You had the courage to bring them out, to bring them here. You're saving your people..."

The words tumbled out with awe, but without permission. He glanced back at her, and now there was a faint, sardonic smile behind his dark eyes. "From the heart, Eve?"

She flushed. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. You should do it more often."

"I don't need to take criticism from a man who's holding four conversations at once -- no doubt all from the heart."

"It wasn't criticism, it was a compliment," he said surprisingly. She met his humorous gaze and reluctantly let her smile escape.

"I don't know why I like you."

"Neither do I."

She took a deep breath. "*You* certainly don't like or trust *me*. You've been reading me since I got here."

"Don't take it personally. I read everyone."

Somehow that made it worse. At least she had wanted to stand out, to be special. Her smile a little twisted, she taunted, "I thought the Dragul were too polite."

"I don't have the luxury of politeness. I'm the king."

"Is that your best excuse?" she said contemptuously.

"I don't need an excuse."

"Because you're the king?"

"Yes, because I'm the king. And, Eve?"

She had been about to stand up, with every intention of sailing from the room. She just hoped it wouldn't look like a flounce. But at his word, she glanced round at him again.

His lips quirked. His gaze shifted briefly to her mouth, making her stomach lurch, then back up to her eyes. "I do like you," he said and leaning over, he kissed her lips.

Shocked surprise let him in, sheer desire let him stay, for his mouth was devastating, turning hers over, blatantly seducing. And though he didn't touch her with more than his mouth, she *was* seduced, soaking wet and aching for him. Yet from somewhere she found the strength to break it, to draw back. "I told you," she said huskily. "Last night was a once in a lifetime offer."

"Doesn't everyone deserve a second chance?"

She smiled and stood up. "No," she said briefly and walked across to the door.

"I can talk you into it."

She laughed derisively, lifted the curtain and went out.

Her heart inexplicably lightened by this odd encounter -- all her encounters with the Dragul king were odd -- she made her way back to the conference room. She knew she was early for the next session, but she had no real desire to spend more time listening to Ross and Irvine belittling her efforts.

However, the conference room wasn't empty either. Michael stood by the table, impatiently tapping his pencil on his own notes. He glanced up as she came in and gave the rueful smile that acknowledged they were on different sides.

"Michael..." Slowly, she went and stood beside him. "So -- how do you think it's going?"

"I haven't a clue. We're all calling it a conference, but really it's you and me competing for Dragul favour."

"Well, they certainly hold the balance of power. And... Beth says they are special."

He looked at her. "Don't you feel that too?"

Eve shifted restlessly, moving toward the bubbling fountain at the foot of the table. "They're certainly overwhelming. What do you mean by special?"

Michael shrugged. "I don't know. It's like they're part of the Earth, *are* the Earth even." He gave a quick, half-embarrassed laugh. "And they encourage such fantasies, even in a down-to-earth old cynic like me. When the truth is they are too strong for either the Dome or the City to oppose."

"But are they?" Eve flung over her shoulder. "Everyone *says* they are strong, but in what ways? We don't actually know. All we *do* know is that humans drove them below ground once before and now they're afraid of contact with us... Michael, why is there no Queen of the Dragul?"

The question came out of nowhere, but having asked it, she waited impatiently to hear the answer.

Michael shrugged again. "I suppose because the king hasn't yet met his One. Or recognized her."

"I don't suppose he's short of offers, though."

"I don't suppose he is."

Eve smiled, tugging uselessly at a strand of hair which had come loose from its bonds. "Does he hang out with the young single Dragul at whatever their equivalent of the club is, and pick up women?"

Michael smiled faintly. "He gets laid, just not in public."

"What, Aurel picks them up for him?" She didn't want that to be true. It was too sleazy for words. And yet if it *was* true, maybe she could shake this growing obsession...

*There is no obsession. Don't acknowledge it and it isn't there.*

"Absolutely not Aurel!"

Eve blinked. "I thought they were bosom companions."

"They work together. But they're no longer close."

"No longer?" Eve pounced. "They fell out? When?"

"Ages ago. Over a woman. Aurel's woman."

Eve stared. "Aurel had a One before Beth?"

"Only in the sense that I had you. Even the Dragul make mistakes. I understand she got restless and discontented and set her sights on Vasil."

"Aurel was jealous?"

"I imagine so. Anyway, there was a fling of some kind, a one-night stand, but she wouldn't believe she was not the king's One either and in the end she killed herself."

Eve dropped into the nearest chair, staring at him, but before she could ask more questions, Aaron came through the curtain, closely followed by Ross and Irvine.

The afternoon session barely seemed to concern the Dragul at all. Instead, the king and Aurel behaved like arbitration counsellors, trying to draw the Dome and the City's irreconcilable viewpoints closer together.

Eve barely needed to listen to this stuff. Ross and Irvine were perfectly capable of representing the Dome. While keeping half an ear on proceedings in case "her boys" came over as unreasonable or prejudiced, Eve let her mind and her gaze dwell on the Dragul at the head of the table.

Vasil said, "Would you consider joint control of the tether?"

His profound dark eyes travelled expectantly between Michael and Aaron, and Eve remembered them filled with heat and lust as she'd kissed her way down his lean, hard body to his even harder cock...

Moisture pooled between her legs at the memory. She remembered him coming, remembered the tender pressure of his knee sending her over at the same time...

Michael and Aaron said, "No," in perfect unison, although Michael added thoughtfully, "Not without safeguards."

Eve let her mind wander on to the moment she had realized he'd freed himself and held her captive in the same way she'd previously held him. She imagined a far better continuation where he licked and kissed her breasts, rubbing his big, long body along hers before parting her legs with his knee, pushing his massive cock straight inside her.

Her mouth went dry. Her nipples strained against the fabric of her suit and her aching pussy tingled with longing.

"What sort of safeguards?" asked the king.

*My God, the sound of his voice is enough to drive me over the edge.* She had to end the fantasy before... Hastily, she tried to focus on the discussion.

"More than the Dome can provide. The Dragul would need to stand guarantors."

It didn't make any difference. Her body was on fire. She felt as if she were being caressed from the outside in, a wonderful, ghostly stroking inside her pussy, a flutter of butterfly wings on her clitoris, a tender pulling on her breasts. The pleasure built in intensity and she couldn't stop it. Christ, she didn't want to stop it. She needed it, she wanted it...

But this was impossible. There she sat, glued to her chair, unmoving -- *please, God, let me be unmoving!* -- and yet hovering on the edge of a mighty, earth-shattering orgasm. Just because she'd been thinking of...

Her eyes flew to Vasil.

*I can talk you into it.* That's what he'd said, barely an hour ago...

"What would that entail?" Vasil asked Michael. He didn't look at Eve.

*It is you, you bastard! What are you doing to me?*

*Less than we'd both like. And I wouldn't be so cruel as to stop now. Unless you tell me to.*

Eve was incapable of telling anyone anything at all. Her throbbing pussy was sending wild pangs of pleasure and need to every corner of her body. Yet still he didn't even glance at her.

*Come for me now,* he whispered. *Let me hold you together while you fall apart...*

Desperately, Eve reached out before she lost all control, grabbing the goblet in front of her and lifting it to her mouth with shaking hands. Anything to hide what she could not stop, what she could not bear to stop.

*It should be my cock in there, stroking over and over, driving into you until you contract and squeeze me -- yes, like that -- and fall over into the abyss of pleasure that is almost pain. Feel*

*it, ride it, the greatest gift of the Earth. Oh yes, I could make you come all night like this, better than this...*

Eve sat there totally helpless in the throes of orgasm. As her body convulsed, silently shrieking its joyful release, she saw him through the thickness of her glass, at last turning his face toward her and smiling. She wanted it to end before she made a fool of herself -- so that she could kill him... She wanted it never to end, because it was so good, and joyful and just plain bad.

When she could move, she raised her free hand to her face, drawing the shaking fingers across her eyes as if tired. She laid the glass down just a little too hard.

"Well?" said the king. "What do you say to that?"

\* \* \*

Eve didn't need a servant this time, and she had no intention of announcing herself. Bursting into the king's room, she pulled up with shock.

He stood at the far end of the room, his back to her, arms outstretched on either side, while an unknown Dragul woman of typical beauty caressed his shoulders.

Clearly *not* short on offers.

Her lip curling, Eve had already half-turned to leave when the king said, "It's a fine fit, Grania. Thank you."

He didn't need to speak aloud. That was for Eve's benefit. The knowledge made her pause. The Dragul woman bowed her head in thanks, picked a large, colourful bag off the floor and walked toward Eve. She inclined her head politely as she passed, though the quick, piercing glance held more curiosity than civility.

Only then did the king turn his head, and Eve could see he knew exactly what she'd been thinking. His eyes mocked her, but his voice was perfectly serious as he said, "What do you think?"

Eve barely glanced at his tunic. "It's exactly like all the others."

"You don't look closely enough," he chided.

"I'm not looking at all. I only came to say one thing. If you *ever* pull a stunt like that on me again, I'll..."

"It wasn't a stunt," he interrupted, walking toward her with a slow, predatory stride.

"No?" Furious all over again, she lashed him with her tongue. "It wasn't to try and keep me unaware of the schemes you and Michael were cooking up for control of the tether? It wasn't to discredit me in everyone's eyes including my own?"

His eyes widened at that, but he kept coming. "No," he said simply, and since she refused to back off, he came to a halt very close to her. Her body began to melt all over again and that made her even angrier. Something snapped inside her. She lifted her hand to hit out at him with all the force of her lupi strength.

She didn't see him move, but her hand met his, hard, felt his fingers close around it, holding it still. She opened her mouth to yell her frustration instead, and quite deliberately, he covered it with his.

Her shout became a muffled gurgle. For an instant, she strained everything against him, and yet rejoiced when she couldn't break free. And though she clamped her mouth shut, she all but moaned when he teased it back open and deepened his kiss.

*No schemes, no jokes, he said inside her head. No one but us knew anything about it. Just a little fun. Stop fighting me, Eve, and we can have a little more...*

He released her hand, and she thrust it upwards at once, but not to hit now, to seize him by the hair, pulling him closer to caress and hold him. She melted into him, glorying in the feel of his hands on her back, tracing the line of her spine downwards to her hips and buttocks where they settled, kneading her into his bone-hard cock.

A small sob of sheer desire struggled up from her throat. She writhed over his cock, trying to fit it between her legs.

*Your clothes are too difficult.*

He swept her closer into his arms, lifted her off the ground. She heard the flutter and beat of his wings, felt the muscles contract and loosen in his chest as they left the ground.

Without breaking the kiss, he flew with her across the room to another doorway. Heedless, she began to tug at his tunic, desperate to feel his silken skin against hers.

She fell back on something soft -- a round bed like the one in her own room, only larger -- and made an inarticulate sound of protest as he left her. Standing by the bed, he pulled the disordered tunic till it fell around his feet. His cock stood up dark and huge against his stomach. She sat up and reached for him.

He caught her mouth in a deep, consuming kiss. Then, kneeling on the bed, he released her mouth and turned her so that he could reach the back-fastenings on her suit. His fingers fumbled at her nape for an instant, then, impatiently, they simply tore the fastenings away. His hands were inside the fabric, pushing it down her shoulders, and his mouth found her nape, kissing, sucking, grazing with his teeth.

Eve moaned, twisting her neck in ecstasy. She leaned back into him, shrugging out of the suit so her breasts fell free. His hands swept round to cup them as he ground his cock against her bottom. His fingers played her breasts, stroking the long, hard peaks of her nipples, caressing the soft underside, softly squeezing. When she whimpered, he swept his hand down from her breast to cup her pubic bone.

Arching into it, she cried out.

"Soaking wet," he whispered. "I could bathe in you."

"What are you waiting for?" she gasped. "Come inside me. Come..."

Still holding her between the legs, he slid his cock along her openings, sending wild shafts of pleasure coursing through her. She twisted her neck around, reaching with her mouth for his.

He made her wait, his gaze on her pleading mouth as he slowly slid his cock through her tight, slick entrance. She moaned aloud, and he fastened his mouth on hers, slipping in just a little further. But Eve was in a frenzy of lust such as she had never known before. She seized his thighs, pushed herself backwards until his whole cock filled her, reaching impossibly far inside.

Shuddering, she knew she could do nothing to slow the orgasm which galloped down on her. His hand tightened between her legs, and she fell apart before he even moved inside her. His tongue drove deep into her mouth.



*Oh yes, hold that thought*, he whispered in her mind, and began to move his cock inside her, in slow, rhythmic thrusts that intensified the astounding pleasure and kept it there. Only as it began to die did he move his hand again, his fingers moving among her soaking folds to discover her over-sensitized clitoris. She gasped when his fingers pinched it, sending sharp pleasure-pangs shooting through her whole body, reigniting the flame and then he held her by the hips and pushed into her hard.

She cried out and he pulled back against her wildly contracting pussy, only to drive into her again and again. As one orgasm flowed into the next, she fell forward onto her stomach, helpless in the throes of the wildest, most violent pleasure she had ever known. He followed her, lying over her as he continued to thrust.

Just when she could stand no more, he lay still upon her. She felt his lips on her nape. His hands caressed her arms, drawing them up above her head to the end of the bed. Something snaked around her wrists. He moved, kissing her back all the way down to her hips and thighs.

She began to smile, languorously. He lifted her hips and turned her over -- and that was when she realized her hands were tied. Astonishingly, she felt lust begin to resurface from the haze of contentment. Especially when he parted her thighs, stretching first one leg, and then the other. She couldn't move them either.

"What are you...?"

"My turn. If you want the pleasure to stop, you have to say. Otherwise, it just keeps going."

He moved, lying between her legs so that she could feel the ferocious hardness of his cock. Desire flooded her, the excitement all the higher for being held helpless and unable to move, even to hold him. Yet it never entered her head to ask to be freed. It was a fantasy she had never admitted, even to herself, until last night when she had wanted -- this.

"Come this time," she whispered.

"Maybe..." His eyes blazed down into hers, massive lust behind the teasing in his dark eyes. Slowly, the humor faded. A faint frown furrowed his brow and his breath

caught. Leaning on both elbows, he cupped her face in his hands, staring at her. Fascinated, even beyond her body's desperate need, she watched the golden lights in his eyes flame and burn brighter.

"Eve." Just her name, and yet something in his voice shook her to the core, sending her pulses into overdrive, flooding her pussy all over again. He took her mouth in a fierce, wild kiss that had her bucking her bonds. His hips began to move on her, gyrating, grinding. A groan that was almost a growl began to rumble in his chest while his mouth ravaged hers, demanding the submission she fought against even while she gloried in his utter domination of her body.

Only when she grew dizzy from sheer lack of breath did he break the kiss. His ferociously blazing eyes filled her with a new, fearful excitement. She felt as if something in him had been unleashed, something terrifying and intoxicating.

He moved, positioning his cock directly at her desperate, welcoming entrance. Eve gasped at its touch, trying to arch into him.

"Now, Eve," he whispered, like a promise. "Now..."

## Chapter Six

Her mind battered against his. Her fierce lust and need consumed him, feeding his own desire to the breaking point. And now he would take her, truly take her in the wildest coupling either of them had ever known...

An instant longer, he paused, his cock nudging her soaking pussy, feeling it open for him in want and delight. He stretched the moment, anticipating the delicious pleasure of pushing into her hot tightness. She would close around him like a glove, crying out as he filled her. Maybe she would come immediately again. It wouldn't matter, he'd make her come many more times as he pushed into her darkness, hard and fast, hammering her; then long, slow and sweet, all while her body convulsed around his cock, writhed beneath him, helpless in the throes of the passion he had conjured in her. The same passion that rocked him now, that was robbing him of every last vestige of self-control...

Self-control.

*Oh Goddess, what am I doing?*

Awareness slammed back into him. He of all creatures on this Earth could not lose control again. The last time, he had caused the death of one of his people, broken the most important friendship he had ever had, hardened the soul of one he valued. Still the repercussions of the damage he had caused resonated throughout his kingdom, and here he was about to lose his all in the human girl who somehow bore the future of all their people...

Vasil squeezed his eyes shut. Prescience was a gift and a curse and it always, always came at the wrong moment... He didn't want self-control, wisdom or knowledge of the future. He didn't want to save his people. He wanted sex, wild, abandoned, delicious sex with Eve.

*Please, just this once...*

"Fuck me," she whispered, writhing under him, trying to arch into him while her bonds held her fast. "Vasil, Vasil, fuck me..."

Vasil opened his eyes as the moment of foreknowledge retreated. There was something about this girl... something about her strong, generous spirit that called to him, that was almost familiar. Her loneliness filled him with compassion and understanding. She was a beautiful soul trapped in a beautiful, too-clever shell, and he had never wanted anyone or anything as much.

And he couldn't have her. Not without *knowing* that it was right.

*Pay the price, Vasil. Bland meaningless sex, a polite, clinical release, is not such a terrible cost...*

*But not with her. Not now.*

And yet how could he punish her by a decision he had made many years ago? He had brought her, deliberately, to this apex of desire. He couldn't just walk out on her as he'd done last night...

Well, there was much pain in his life. He could handle a little more. And let's face it, the torture would be so sweet...

With a massive effort, he adjusted the position of his cock. She whimpered in frustration, digging her nails convulsively into his flesh. Soothingly, he brushed her mouth in a glancing kiss, trailed his lips at once down her throat, pausing to absorb the feel and scent of the pulsing blood in her veins, and lingering over her small, full breasts. Then, gradually, he slid lower, teasing her navel with his tongue, and lower still till she gasped with delighted anticipation. His fingers found her first, exploring and caressing the petals of her flower before seeking the way in.

She grasped at him, contracting around his finger so that he felt the agony of his loss all over again. But he determined she wouldn't.

"Nectar," he said breathlessly, withdrawing his creamed finger and licking it. "You taste divine." He bent his head to her pussy and found her lower lips in a sweet, gentle kiss.

Eve moaned, beginning to move her hips. Delighting in her instant response, torturing himself with the infinite possibilities of breaking his word, he slid his finger back inside her, this time with a companion. He flicked her swollen bud with his tongue, swirled around it. He sucked harder and felt her orgasm explode. With fierce triumph, he thrust his fingers inside her, holding her trapped in climax once more. She bucked furiously, but the bonds held her steady while he ravished her with mouth and hands, accepting his pleasure only in hers.

\* \* \*

Eve awoke to the strains of music. For a moment, she kept her eyes closed, just listening, stretching like a beautiful, contented cat, and smiling. Even the music, unbearably sad, only served to contrast other people's sorrow with her own happiness.

Propping her head on her hand, she looked across the sun-flooded room to the music's source. Vasil sat at his harp, playing intently, and for a few minutes she lost herself in observing the play of expressions across his beautiful, haunted face. A creature of contradictions: sensitive and forceful, mischievous and serious, passionate and tragic. Also ruthless and calculating... And just looking at him made the butterflies dance madly in her stomach.

His fingers stilled. He glanced over to the bed and an expression of such misery crossed his face that her silly happiness shrivelled in her naked breast.

"I have to go," she muttered, rummaging wildly around her, as if she would find her clothes among the rumpled sheets. The whole night was coming back to her with a different interpretation that made her cringe. And now she had to worry again about how much she had given away, about what advantage her surrender had given him...

The mattress sank under his weight as he sat beside her. "I have to thank you," he said gently, "for a beautiful night."

"Yeah, right," she muttered. Pushing her hair out of her face, she scanned the room with increasing desperation. But his fingers caught her chin, forcing her gaze back to him.

"You don't believe me?"

"Of course I don't," she said dryly. She hesitated, then: "Look, Vasil. I'm not stupid. You made love to me for hours last night and not once did you come. You weren't even tempted."

"Tempted?" For the first time since she'd known him, she had the impression that he blurted. His eyes darkened, losing the dancing gold flecks. "That would be laughable if it wasn't so..."

He broke off, touching his forehead to hers. "Eve, never believe that. You are -- special... but I'm weird, even for a Dragul. I like sex as much as anyone -- maybe more than most -- but my own sexual climax isn't always what's most important to me. Last night, yours was."

"Why?" she flung at him.

"Why? Because... because things are happening, Eve, and I have to keep control of them. I can't let any one individual -- you or me -- muddy the big picture. You understand that. Until I see the way ahead clearly..." He broke off again, drawing back to look at her. His gaze drifted to her naked shoulders and breasts, then deliberately came back up to her eyes.

With difficulty, she made herself smile. "Well, you've run out of time on this one. Tomorrow, I'm gone."

Something changed in his eyes. It might have been pain. She hoped it was pain. But before she could be sure, he bent and retrieved her fallen clothes from the floor.

"But tonight is the Night of the Dragons. Anything can happen then, and for once, I hope it does."

\* \* \*

"I'd like to say something."

Eve's voice, clear and sharp, broke into the brief silence of the conference room. Everyone seemed tired and there was beginning to be a feeling that things should be wrapped up and finished. Eve herself, strictly in work-mode, was increasingly frustrated.

Everyone looked at her in faint surprise. The king inclined his head. "Please -- go ahead."

"We've been talking for nearly two days now. Tomorrow morning, I believe, we have a brief round-up session, and then we go our separate ways. So we're almost finished here. And I ask myself, what have we achieved? A little more understanding, perhaps, between the Dome and the City on our respective positions. Which can't be bad. But do you know what this has all felt like to me? Like the Dome and the City justifying themselves to you, the Dragul."

Beside her Ross muttered something that could have been, "Shut up, for God's sake." But she had Michael's attention, and the king's.

"Why are we doing that? Because when it comes down to the wire, neither of us wants a war with you. We want to find a way to live in peace -- albeit one that is the most satisfactory to our own long-term aims. But what do the Dragul want? Apart from isolation, which you can never have anyway. If you didn't know that, this conference wouldn't be happening. So what is your agenda? And how far are you prepared to go to achieve it?"

Eve stopped talking and sat back. Her heart beat too fast, but it was something that needed to be said. Vasil's eyes were thoughtful, serious as they gazed at her.

He said, "As far as you."

Impatiently, Eve shook her head. "No, you're too cryptic to be straightforward. I know Michael and Aaron trust you, and I know my father wants to. *We* want to. But frankly, we don't know any more about you now than we did when we arrived."

The king's gaze was steady. "An issue of trust... It's a fair point. The ones we trust are not always the ones we should."

Beside him, Aurel's arm twitched. How much trust truly existed between these two? After what Michael had told her...

The king said, "Aurel, let's have our friend Avram up here."

There was a short silence. Eve knew they were communicating. She only wished she knew what they were saying. But after only a few seconds, Aurel said, "They're bringing him."

"Thank you." The king looked around his re-invigorated but puzzled conference members. "Avram, as you know, came back to us with a message from the Elders below. What you may not know is that neither Aurel nor I trusted that message."

Michael said, "Then your father is not...?"

"Oh, my father is certainly dying. I have that from -- another source. But Avram is not trustworthy." He flickered a glance at Eve. "Avram too has his own agenda, which is to reunite the Dragul below the ground."

"Why?" Eve asked, just as the curtain swished and Avram walked into the room, followed by two large Dragul who stood by the door, waiting.

"Good question," the king agreed. "Avram, be so good as to explain -- aloud -- why you're so desperate for us to go back below."

"It is where we belong," Avram muttered. He was searching the room, with his eyes, an expression of unease and bafflement on his face.

"What he means," said Aurel drily, "is that he never fit in above the ground. Although he was the elder, I became the Law Keeper and he my Assistant. He didn't take to life in the sun, and his position was not improved from that he held below. He hankered after the good old days, as people of all races do. The grass is always greener. Well, when he fled -- or was banished, depending on your point of view -- below, he discovered that it wasn't green at all down there. That other people held the positions of Law Keeper, *and* Assistant. I kind of doubt anyone welcomed him back with very open arms, because a man who can betray once can do it again."

Avram snarled, "We all betrayed once, just by coming above the ground!"

"Point," the king allowed calmly. "But you are making a bit of a career out of it. You betrayed us, nearly causing the death of Aurel's One and who knows what other damage. And now you're betraying the Elders. Again."



Avram laughed, a high, unpleasant sound. "How could I do that? I'm carrying messages from them, that's all! And for that, you imprison me!"

"Messages?" the king repeated gently. "'Come back, and by the way your father's dying'? Where's the message in that? I already know these things, and they know I know."

He leaned forward. "You have a skilful mind-block, Avram. But you couldn't keep from Aurel that you were hiding something. He is the Law Keeper."

"He's a fool who's leading you by the nose through your own guilt!"

The king didn't smile. His eyes were suddenly hard, like flint, and Eve was reminded forcefully of the many warnings she'd heard that one didn't want the Dragul king as an enemy.

"You forget something else. I am the king."

Avram let out a scream, falling to his knees, clutching his head. Quite suddenly, Eve was bombarded with his pain, with a welter of twisted, bitter emotions that made her slam down her own barriers against it.

"No, it isn't pleasant," the king agreed. "But I think you'd better look. To maintain the trust between our peoples. Michael, you should look also. Follow me."

It was weird, like holding a party in the Dragul's brain. The powerful, shining light that was the king held open the door to Avram's most secret thoughts. She and Michael stood, hesitating before the swirling darkness, and then passed inside.

The darkness thinned, became noise and chaos, a battle in the sun, fought over the hills and the tether by men and guns on the ground and by Dragul in the sky. The Dragul as dragons, thousands upon thousands of them, burning armies of men, burning cities that were unclear and unfocused because Avram had never seen them. But she knew them to be the Dome and the City of the Damned. Among others.

And then, victory complete, the dragons breathed more fire on the ground, making huge holes and trenches. Returning to their normal shape, they walked into the trenches, lines of them, thousands of them, marching below the ground. The rest flew north, back to the Dragul Kingdom, where a few Dragul remained with Aurel. The

king, resplendent in his red tunic, walked into the Earth, to take up the crown of his dead father below...

"No!"

With a huge effort, Eve yanked herself out of Avram's mind, panting, appalled. Instantly, she felt Vasil there, comforting, soothing without words.

Then he spoke aloud. "What Eve and Michael have just seen is the message Avram was meant to bring. That the Elders would bring the rest of the tribe above to help us fight and defeat any menace from humanity. In return for this favour, which would fulfil my responsibilities to those I led above the ground, I would return below to rule my father's kingdom, taking with me any who wished to come.

"Ah -- the carnage you witnessed came purely from Avram's interpretation, not the Elders'."

Calmed more by the gentle caress of Vasil's mind than by his words, Eve demanded, "Why wouldn't he tell you? Why keep it secret?"

"Because no Dragul would return below and he'd gain nothing. But he couldn't refuse them when they asked. So he came. At worst he'd have made a gallant effort -- so far as they knew. At best, he hoped to persuade me, through my sense of duty and undoubted guilt, to return with him."

"Will you?"

It came out hoarsely. Unspeakable, unthinkable that he should leave the light, leave here, leave all possibility of...

Eve closed her eyes and her mind, waiting.

"Of course not." His voice was light, almost amused, aimed at everyone. Her eyes snapped open, staring at him, understanding. "My guilt is something I have to live with. The rest of my people don't. We are never going back."

He moved his eyes to Avram, who still crouched on the floor. "That is the only message you may take to the Elders. My answer is simply 'No.' There will be no war, and we are never going back." His gaze lifted to the Dragul guards by the door. "Return him to the secure room, if you please. Let him drink. Then send him on his way."

As Avram was dragged from the room, the king stood. "And I think that concludes our business for today. I suggest we save our summations and resolutions for tomorrow morning. Tonight, you are most cordially invited to our Dragon Night celebration. Aurel tells me I should warn you that our rituals are overwhelming to telepaths, and may be shocking to humans. Bear in mind that they are as old as the Earth and harm no one. Thank you!"

As Vasil strode from the room, his mind already clearly on something else, Aurel lifted his eyebrows in a humorous way that included all of them and then he followed his king.

"Bloody hell," said Ross with awe, turning to her. "They're weird, Eve, there's no getting away from that! But he didn't need to tell us what he did. In my judgement he was perfectly sincere. We have to trust him or we get nowhere..."

On her other side, Irvine was nodding sagely in agreement. Eve gave a slightly shaky laugh.

"Oh yes, I'm sure you're right. On the other hand, we also now know the possibilities. What the carnage could be if it came to war. In the midst of a demonstration of Dragul trustworthiness, we have just been shown their power. From above and below. Oh he's good. He's very, very good."

## Chapter Seven

The mass of dragons circling in the night sky was incredible, possibly the most beautiful thing Eve had ever seen. Huge and graceful, they breathed rings of fire that made patterns in the sky like ancient runes.

And at the centre, one dragon actually danced, its whole body undulating as it flew, spinning, diving and climbing, its tail swishing in rhythm.

"Is that...?"

"Danna? Yes," said Beth beside her. Together with the other humans and many Dragul, including the king and Aurel, they were watching the display from the palace garden. "Apparently, on this night every year, all the able bodied fly as dragons. It'll go on all night, long after this lot have finished..."

"Beth?"

"Yes?"

"Can you really change -- shift -- without pain?"

Beth glanced at her. "Yes. I've had no time to show you."

Considering where Eve had spent most of her free hours, this wasn't surprising. Passing swiftly on, Eve said, "It's not really important. The king also told me -- or at least implied -- that we could be -- other than the wolf."

"Ah. That's a trickier one."

"Is it true?"

"Yes..."

Eve felt her eyes widening. "Have you done so?"

"Sort of. A couple of times. I'm not very good at it. I usually end up just as a different wolf! Once I became a wolf with wings, which was interesting. I was trying to be a dragon."

Possibilities, endless and exhilarating, rose and clamoured for attention. Ruthlessly, Eve squashed them down till later. "Then they believe all mutants can be dragons too? Does Katia know this? Beth, does this mean we share some of their DNA? How is this possible?"

"Because," said the king's deep, quiet voice behind her, "we used to be the same race."

Both women stared at him. Glancing from one to the other with faint amusement, he said, "It's not, your people might say, rocket science. We all come from the Earth. We all share DNA. Many species grew and separated in evolution. Humans -- some humans -- still carry recessive genes for characteristics that are normal to us. Shifting. Telepathy. Living on blood. When your scientists tampered with genetics during the war, it revived some of those recessive genes. I suspect radiation helped.

"Shall we go inside? You must be cold and hungry."

Eve swallowed and obediently preceded the king back into the palace hall. "He hasn't a clue, has he?" she muttered to Beth. "He explains our pain and our gifts -- and our parents' -- as if it was just the rules on a board game. Without a clue what it means to us."

"What does it mean to us?" Beth asked faintly.

Eve choked on what might have been laughter. "I haven't a clue."

\* \* \*

The hall was set up for a major event, decorated in masses of flowers and foliage, brightly colored streamers and dragon symbols everywhere. The brightness of the room didn't seem to penetrate the upper reaches, so through the high, glass ceiling, stars shone brightly among the dragons streaking across the velvet sky.

Torches burned on the walls, dragon lamps on the tables which had been set up all around a central arena, where musicians played joyous music that sent Eve's spirit soaring. And not just hers. She knew everyone felt it.

Seated at the high table, between the king and Michael, listening to the music and letting the rush of everyone's exhilaration wash over her, Eve found she could

forget her mission -- along with her nagging pain and ever-growing obsession with the person of the king. Tonight was for simple celebration, enjoyment without complication.

"Aurel."

It was the king's voice, speaking to his Law Keeper, but so that Eve heard it too. In fact, so that all telepaths heard it.

"It's time, I think past time, to tell Arlen's story. To honor her and move on."

Aurel, who was halfway to the central arena, actually paused. Then, without turning he said only, "Very well," and kept walking.

Michael spoke in her ear, "To the Dragul, law and history are closely entwined. Aurel is keeper of both. But be warned, he's a storyteller like none you've ever come across. It'll be right in your head, Eve..."

Eve was enchanted. No wonder Beth had fallen in love with this man. His voice was big in every sense, resonant, beautiful and charged with emotion all the greater for its sensitive understatement. He began with a story of dragons and how they had saved the races of the world by lighting the suddenly darkened sky with their fire. When it was finished, Eve thought that the story told of an eclipse of the sun, but at the time, she just felt the terror of the Earth creatures, and the courage of the dragons, the uplifting relief that came with their light.

And then came a different story, the one the king had commanded, and one Eve began to recognize. To help tell it, Aurel lifted his hand, and Danna left her place beside Michael and went to join him.

Though she should have been exhausted by her recent sky-dance, Danna's body was the perfect complement to Aurel's voice, beautiful, evocative, creative... adding to the imagery in Eve's head and making the story at once more real and more tragic.

Two beings little more than children fell in love. Somewhere at the back of her mind, Eve wondered what Beth and Michael made of their lovers' gestures here, for they were acting out the story, he with his voice, she in the dance, but together...

Together, Arlen and her lover rebelled and followed a new young king into freedom above the ground. But somewhere in the joy of making a new life together, Arlen grew restless, unsatisfied. For she knew in her heart that Aurel was not her One. Her roving eye fell on the young king, and she desired him. Though he didn't look at her, her obsession grew. She pursued him actively until one night she flew to his chamber and he let her in.

And though he hadn't meant to take her, his lust was strong. He lost control and coupled with her all night.

Eve's body flooded with heat. Aurel, now in his role of the king, held the dancer's hips hard to his as if glued, while she gyrated and danced into him. His hips moved, thrusting into her, graphically explaining the story, which was all the clearer in Eve's head.

There, she saw not Aurel and Danna but Vasil and the beautiful Arlen, writhing on the bed, joined in the hot, wild sex that Eve herself had so longed for with Vasil. Well, Arlen had got it, and loved it. Brought many times to completion, with a womb full of the king's seed, she rose from his bed with great joy and went to tell Aurel that their relationship was over, that the king was her true One.

Aurel glossed over his own misery, for this was Arlen's story. Arlen returned to the king the following night, believing it would be forever. But even young, despite his momentary loss of control, the king was wise. He knew Arlen was not his One, nor he hers. He sent her away, not cruelly but irrevocably. And Arlen, in a fury of grief that Danna portrayed with spectacular tragedy, took her own life. She stopped her heart forever with a large, sharp wooden stick.

No one could revive her. Not Aurel who found her. Not the king with all his power, and not the healer. They gave her back to the Earth, and as the grieving Dragul stood back from her grave, her two lovers remained, locked separately in their eternal guilt and grief.

Eve was devastated. And not just by the emotional rollercoaster of the story which left her throat aching. She knew Vasil was explaining last night to her. He had

given, yet refused to either take or receive, because he would not lose that control again. She was different enough for him to lose himself in, and that thought alone brought anguish, providing as it did wild hope, even while squashing it.

Hope for what, she couldn't, wouldn't, think. For there was another person hurt in all of this, who had seen her lover loving another and felt his massive grief at her loss. Almost blindly, Eve reached across Michael to Beth.

Beth seized her gratefully, gripping her hard, sobbing into her shoulder while Eve stroked her hair and felt the silent tears course down her own cheeks.

It was a few moments before she realized she felt the grief of all the other Dragul pressing on her too. Tentatively, she reached out, looking for his. Nothing.

Slowly, she turned her head. He sat beside her, perfectly alone, gazing ahead of him at the arena. His thoughts, his feelings, were locked up tight.

On the arena floor, Aurel helped Danna to her feet, and began to talk again. This time, his voice was quite different -- light, ironic -- and with awe, Eve realized he was telling a Dragul joke.

With a watery laugh, Beth sat up. "Thank you," she whispered, and for some reason, Eve wanted to cry again.

But already the mood was brighter, as if the tragic story had actually exorcised a demon. "*Honor her and move on...*"

When it was finished, Aurel took his bow and made his way back to the high table. However, he didn't take his place there; he went up to the king's, which was right beside Eve, and gracefully knelt.

The king stared at him in silence. After a moment, Aurel's lips twitched into a smile. Then the king leaned forward and bent his head to the side of Aurel's throat.

Eve gasped, involuntarily. Her hand reached to her own neck, feeling the sharp prick of -- teeth. The king was drinking Aurel's blood.

"It's ritual," Michael said quietly. "Neither is harmed by it."

*I would be harmed by it. I want his teeth in me, sucking my life-blood, taking me in any way, in every way...*



Dragging her eyes away from the strangely sensual sight, Eve glanced up at Michael. His dark eyes were glinting. "Fancy a bite for *auld lang syne*?"

Eve's breath caught on a laugh. Michael was half vampire and although he had never drunk from her or any other unwilling person, the urge was strong in him. And for an instant she was tempted.

The glitter died in his eyes and he grinned. Affectionately, she took his hand and turned back to the arena.

Danna began to dance. And Eve, already turned on by watching the king feeding from Aurel and by the couples leaning into each other all over the room, kissing and biting, began to overheat.

Seeing the sensual stories in her head, Eve felt with them. Desire rose quickly. Her body throbbed with it, her pussy wept with it. She felt herself straining toward the king who sat so close, once again alone, and immediately pulled herself back. That way lay madness. Instead, she watched the dance and burned.

As Danna described orgasm, Eve rose, gasping, and began to push blindly through the tables.

"Eve?" It was Michael, catching her hand, pulling her up short. A couple lay on the table beside them, languorously fucking. The woman was biting the man's neck at the same time.

"What?" she whispered. "This is doing my head in, Michael..."

"It does my body in," he confessed. "That's why the Dragul men don't wear pants. They'd burst out of them with this sort of thing going on all the time."

She glanced down at his impressively bulging jeans and felt another surge of desire. "I see... it's orgy time here."

Michael smiled. "Take your pick, Eve. The Dragul are passionate and you need release."

Slowly, with a trembling hand, she reached down and stroked his erection. His breath hissed between his teeth. She stepped closer, lifting her mouth to his, brushing his lips. "I choose you, Michael. Fancy a fuck for *auld lang syne*?"

His arms came around her. Just for a moment, his crotch pressed into hers, granting her some kind of comfort. He kissed her mouth, once, while he spoke inside her head. "Eve, it's not me you want. It's *him*."

She saw him in her mind too, dark and powerful and tragic. Abruptly, she broke free. "Oh hell, who needs any of you?"

Stumbling a little, with no idea where she was going, she pushed past the couple squeezed together in her way as they watched Danna.

Danna. Turning, she looked beyond Michael's still back and saw the dancer still spinning across the floor. His One. She had had no right to ask, no right to want.

It was just a man she wanted. Any man.

Unbidden, Vasil's face swam back into her mind's vision; Vasil's face clouded with passion; Vasil's hard muscled body moving on hers, in hers...

Banishing the vision, she searched for him with her eyes. But his place at the table was empty.

Gone, she thought dully, pushing on through the tables to the back of the hall, avoiding the wings of some Dragul in the throes of sexual excitement. He was a passionate being. Even familiar with the rituals, he couldn't have been unmoved by Danna's dance... but the king didn't fuck in public -- he must have found someone to indulge his favoured brand of bland, polite sex...

Bland, polite sex? Where had that come from?

*From me*, said his voice in her head.

She paused, closed her eyes. *Are you making an offer?*

*No. I can't have bland, polite sex with you.*

*Is that an insult or a compliment?* She opened her eyes, looking around her, behind her. She couldn't see him in the crowd.

*Compliment.*

*Where are you?*

"Here," he said aloud, and seemed to materialize right in front of her. She paused, her heart lurching into her throat. Christ, he was just so beautiful... Her heated

body seemed to burst into flames. Moisture flooded from her pussy, soaking her panties. She could smell the musk of her own arousal and that made it all the worse.

For an instant, his eyes blazed down into hers, reflecting the flames of the nearby torch. Then, without warning, he seized her in his arms and she rose up off the ground. His wings beat above them and she clung to him as they swerved up into the shrouded darkness above the revelers.

He said, "I don't want bland, polite sex anymore. I don't want loving friendship. I don't want to be gazed at with hope and disappointment by every bed partner for aeons. I think I'd rather take celibacy. I want you, Eve. I want wild, long, uninhibited, uninterrupted sex with you. Continually."

His words pierced her, churned her. His lips hovered over hers without touching.

"And I want more than that, much more. I want you with me, you and everything that goes with you, good, bad and hidden... I want you."

Hanging in his arms, clinging around his neck, she said shakily, "You just don't know how many human women dream of meeting a man who isn't looking for meaningless sex."

"Don't play with me, Eve. Don't tell me you're not one of those women. You've already won whatever game we were playing. I know you want me, just tell me it's more than passing lust."

"I don't know what it is." Her voice broke. She was crying and didn't even know why. "You fascinate me, obsess me... and none of it matters because you need to be with your One..." She stared at him, aching, letting the truth through at last. Reaching round from his neck, she took his face in both her hands, whispering, "And I hope you find her, Vasil. Very soon."

His eyes searched hers, one to the other. He didn't smile. He rarely smiled. But slowly, he bent his head to hers, and took her lips. She opened for him at once, every fibre of her reaching and responsive. His wings beat above her, holding them hovering in the air, their sound in rhythm with the arousing movement of his mouth.

He shifted her body, holding her so that she lay between his legs, feeling his erect cock against her pussy.

*Once, Vasil, just once to remember...*

*Never, never once, he said with rare incoherence, not with you...*

She had no time to misunderstand or be distressed. In one tug, her dress was above her hips. In another, he shoved aside the flimsy fabric between her legs.

"Yes, oh yes," she whispered. And had no idea if she said the words aloud. She didn't care. He lifted her leg over his hip, held her with both hands on her buttocks to position her over his cock. She felt the velvet softness of its head brushing her sensitive folds, finding her hot, slippery entrance. Then he paused, gazing down at her.

*Don't stop, don't stop now, I'll die...*

*We'd both die, he said and lowered her onto his cock.*

She moaned, long and blissfully as he slid all the way inside her, filling her, stretching her, setting every nerve-ending on fire. She felt utterly weak with need, helpless in the grip of pleasure, and yet she couldn't be still. Arching into him, clinging to his neck, she lifted herself high, gasping at the wondrous sensations, only to plunge down on him again and cry out.

He growled deep in his chest, the way she remembered, and began to thrust into her, hard.

*Oh God, it's coming again. I just need to see you and I come...*

*Don't worry, we'll make it last...*

Without warning, he dived, and the sensation of leaving her stomach behind sent her completely over the edge into orgasm. It was massive, intense, and she was barely aware of him climbing again. From her flight of ecstasy she vaguely felt cool, rough hardness at her back. The wall.

His wings still beating, he held her against the wall with one arm, one thigh, while he pushed into her, keeping her at climax while his other hand freed her breast.

As the rhythm of the orgasm fell back, he granted her a moment's respite. She realized he had her pinned to the wall, high above the hall. Panting and sated, she watched him roll her nipple between his sensitive fingers, and smiled hazily.

"Again?" he whispered.

"Again..."

"Let me drink from you?"

Her breath caught. Even Michael had never... With a vivid flash of memory, she remembered Vasil feeding from Aurel, and God, she wanted that too. "Take anything from me you want."

"I want it all. This time, I want it all."

His mouth sank into her neck, seeking and finding the spot that pleased him most. She angled her neck for him, pressed upwards with her hips as she felt the strength of his suck. He drew his cock back, piercing her skin with his teeth at the same time.

She cried out with the sharpness of the pain, even as she welcomed the thrusting of his cock inside her. He ground into her, sucking strongly on her neck and she felt the weird, flowing pleasure of her blood into his mouth. It mingled with the raging pleasure in her pussy, and she found herself pushing back into him, writhing on him, squeezing him with all the strength of her internal muscles.

"Let go," she whispered, "let go."

He pounded her, changing angles with every thrust, stopping every so often as deep into her as he could get to gyrate and grind within her. She held his hard, muscled buttocks, pulling him into her, digging her fingers into his flesh as the intensity of pleasure kept growing. She tried to wait for him, to bring him with her. But the whole situation was too much for her. Orgasm swept her away again. And yet as she contracted helplessly around him, she became aware of a strange noise emanating from him. Not the low growl she remembered, but an ever-growing rumbling groan. He lifted his head from her throat, blood trickling at the corner of his parted lips, and the groan became a shout.

*At last!* Smiling, through her sweat and ecstasy, she reached up with her mouth for his. He gave it, wildly, fiercely. She tasted his excitement, his joy, her own blood. One last thrust and his seed shot into her in hot jets. His whole body shuddered around her.

His legs bent, his feet reached around her to the wall and pushed them off into nothing. Still coming, they fell through the air. Only the beating of his wings kept them from crashing to the ground. But he kept her mouth and he kept fucking her, though slowly now, and hard as the joy tore them apart.

As if the pleasure battered down the door, his mind opened to her, quite naturally, letting her feel his joy. She could do no less for him, and suddenly it was as if the cycle of intensity would kill her. She didn't care. If the alternative was never seeing him again, she wanted to die. Like this. Just like this.

*Oh Jesus Christ, I love you. I love you, how can I love you?*

*Because you're my One,* he said. And then his mouth left hers. For an instant longer he stared at her, and then his eyes rolled back in his head and he cried out in pain.

## Chapter Eight

Vasil had never known joy like it. Lost in the sheer physical ecstasy of achieving this union at last with his One, the onslaught of prescience hit him like a blow. It was the strongest, longest insight he had ever received -- and the weirdest. He didn't understand how his pleasure-drugged brain was capable of absorbing everything thrown at it in this state, though he was sane enough to hope he remembered it.

The "attack" began to fade along with his sexual climax... He was still flying, still holding her. Understanding and relief washed over him, justifying his sixty years of rebellion. At last, he saw his way clear.

"Vasil, Vasil! Don't die!"

It was Eve's voice, terrified and urgent. He became aware of her fingers pulling at his cheeks, holding his head. And her jumble of appalled, fearful thoughts, already starting to mourn him.

"I can't die and fly at the same time," he said, opening his eyes.

"You're alive! Jesus... are you all right?"

He hugged her closer to his chest. "I've never been better... Come with me, let me show you my world. I want to make love to you on a hilltop."

Her eyes, glazed with relief, still managed to laugh. "You like heights, don't you?"

"On the Night of the Dragons, it's the only place to be. Hold tight."

He swung her round so that she had to cling to his back. "What...?" she began, although she went willingly enough. He felt her wonder as he became the dragon. With his much larger wings, he climbed higher, remembered to speak the ritual words to all his people before he adjusted the matter of the roof, and flew through it into the open sky.

*On the Night of the Dragons, and all nights, let there be light.*

For the first time in sixty years, he was confident that there would be.

\* \* \*

Drawn to the conference room, Vasil was there long before anyone else. He hadn't slept. He had flown, exhilarated, until he could stand the wait no longer, when he had landed on a hill, returned to his original form, and made abandoned love with Eve until dawn.

It delighted him that she had met him demand for demand, that even the inevitable soreness of her body gave her pleasure. They had watched the dawn break together, wrapped naked in the pocket of warm air he had created, her head on his shoulder, her hair tickling his cheek and neck. And later, as they had flown home, she had said, "It's weird. When we came up here, I passed all these same places, and never noticed them. There's so much beauty in the world that I've never stopped to see."

"I hope there will be so much more..."

And now he stood, listening, feeling, waiting...

*Vasil? It was Aurel, speaking urgently in his head, his anxiety plain. Vasil, something's happening! I can feel it... Where are you?*

*I'm in the conference room. And you're right, something is happening and it's big. Come down before the others...*

Vasil continued to watch the space in the stone through which they had dragged Avram three days ago. Excitement simmered within him, tempered by the necessity of playing this one to its best conclusion. Best for everyone.

Aurel strode through the curtain into the room, rattled as Vasil had rarely seen him. "What is it? What's happening?"

"The Elders... Goddess, we're running out of time. Michael and the others are on their way down. Aurel, I need your support today more than ever."

Aurel looked surprised. "You have it."

"Things are changing, Aurel. I'm changing them, but if you're not behind me in spirit as well as deed --"



"I trust you," Aurel interrupted and it was Vasil's turn to look surprised.

"Even now?" he said ruefully.

"We made oaths. From the heart. Mine has never changed. Even when you withdrew from me."

Vasil stared. Is that how it had seemed to Aurel? That Vasil had withdrawn his friendship? He said slowly, "Guilt is a terrible thing. I wronged you -- and Arlen -- in a moment of weakness. We all paid the price. But I never withdrew my friendship. I never would."

Aurel met his gaze, a rueful smile forming slowly in his eyes, curving his lips. "You never needed to be so alone, Vasil. I would always follow you."

"Even back below the ground?"

"You'd never go."

It was said with such certainty that Vasil smiled. A rare enough event to bring pleased surprise into his friend's eyes.

"You're right, I never would. The conference begins..."

\* \* \*

Eve felt as if she was floating on air. Everything that had happened last night seemed to have straightened her crooked life. Besides providing the best sex of her life - - or even her imagination.

Vasil had somehow become the most important thing in her life, despite her fighting against it, despite the outside odds stacked against it. And the fact that her loyalties now pulled three ways -- to the Dome by her political beliefs, to the City by her family and friends, and to the Dragul by her heart -- didn't daunt her.

She was still prepared to use every intelligent fibre of her being to bring about the unity that alone could save the people of this island in the future. And she knew she made her case brilliantly in her conference summation -- far better than Michael, who got bogged down in local issues such as safeguarding the mutants and keeping control of the tether.

And finally, they all looked to Vasil. Her Vasil. Pride in him soared. Dark and handsome and serious, he looked every inch the king. And to think she had arrived here ready to despise a silly figurehead...

Vasil gazed thoughtfully around the table. Beside him, Aurel was gazing fixedly at a point on the floor.

Vasil said quietly, "I have enjoyed hearing everyone's point of view over the last few days. I have learned a lot more about your people, and for that I am grateful. The Dragul have been... too rigid, in their opinion of humanity. Like us, you have grown, and even your war that nearly destroyed everything in the Earth has taught you much. I believe it will take time and work, but I do believe we can all live together."

Eve breathed a sigh of relief and sat back in her chair. Opposite her, Michael smiled.

Vasil continued. "It is, of course, a question of how. I think we have agreed that at least in the beginning the best way forward for all of us is a loose federation, working for our common interests and representing us in any dealings with the outside world. The sticking point is the authority of each of us within this federation -- namely, the power of the Dome. How autonomous from the Dome should the City be? And should the Dragul defend the City's position or the Dome's...?"

"Don't you think it's all a little too complicated?"

Startled, Eve blinked at him. Now where was he going?

"Let me give you a slightly different scenario. A federation where we all keep the rights we have. We all run our own affairs, and in matters that concern us all, we discuss and act together in agreement. But the Dragul will eventually lead."

Eve shut her mouth. *Where the hell did that come from?*

*From a vision -- a knowledge of the future.*

Ross said angrily, "Impossible and unfair! You have less population than either of us! And you have no means to enforce it."

"Actually, although we have no intention of using force, you are wrong on both counts."

There was silence in the room. Michael and Aaron stared at each other. Ross and Irvine glared at Eve and she looked at Vasil. Vasil gazed at the same spot on the floor as Aurel.

Something moved below the ground. She felt it strongly enough to seize the table's edge in instinctive search for stability. "What's happening?" she demanded in alarm. "Vasil, the ground is opening!"

"There are people there!" Michael exclaimed, sensing them at the same time as she did. "Dragul!"

"Don't be alarmed," Vasil said calmly, as a huge crack in the floor opened up into a hole just where he was gazing. "They are peaceful..."

Michael leapt to his feet to see better. Ross and Irvine dragged back their chairs, gawping. Eve felt suddenly dizzy with awe, with the knowledge that this moment defined everyone's future.

Amid a flap of wings and a cloud of dust, a dirty-looking Dragul emerged from the hole. Behind him came another, and another.

"There are Dragul all over the Earth," said Vasil. "Under the Earth. This is Iann, one of the Elders of my people. They have come to visit us, to see the sun for themselves for the first time in more than two thousand years.

"The truth," he went on calmly, as increasing numbers of Dragul filled the chamber, "is that the Dragul are dying below the ground. We are immortal, and yet no one can bear to live underground anymore. Eternity is too long for that. Increasing numbers of Dragul are losing the will to live. Aurel and I saw the writing on the wall when his parents died. We couldn't persuade the Elders then, and so we took only those who chose to come. But now it's worse. Even the king needs the light, so they have brought him here.

"This is what they didn't tell Avram. Because they don't trust him either. They sent him ahead to convey my father's forgiveness, to ensure their welcome here."

As he spoke, two Dragul lifted a third through the hole and, carrying him between them, pushed their way through the others who stood blinking in the light, narrowing their eyes and squinting around the room in wonder.

Vasil rose abruptly to his feet. The tall, thin Dragul who stood slumped in the arms of his companions smiled through the dust layering his face.

*Vasil. My son... They have brought me to die in the sun...* His silent words were broadcast to everyone who could hear them.

Vasil moved across the space between them and dropped to his knees, seizing his father's hand to his lips. "Not die," he said hoarsely. "Not die. The sun will revive you. Forgive me, I had to do something..."

The old king's wavery hand stroked his son's head. "I know," he whispered aloud. "I know."

Vasil's eyes closed for an instant. Then, leaping to his feet, he turned back to the gawping conference members.

"There will be more Dragul kingdoms across the world. My father's kingdom won't be here but across the sea, and there will be others, smaller, scattered throughout the world but bringing unity to the Earth. *Not* domination, only a means of unity. And we can begin it, here and now."

He reached out to Eve and without thought, she stood to take his hand.

"We are all of the Earth, all part of her great cycle. Once we were the same species, and now we are reuniting. It was begun in the City of the Damned, when a human mutant containing recessive Dragul genes mated with a pure human to produce Eve. Eve is my One and carries my child, the child who will do more than any other to unite the Earth."

*You can't know that!* Eve exclaimed, startled from her awe.

*Yes, I can.*

Through her wonder that contained terror as well as burgeoning joy, she realized Vasil was looking from Michael to Aurel and Aaron as he continued. "From other unions between our species, greater trust will be born. But we here all have our part to

play in that trust. Change is coming, change for the better, and it begins here. Go home and tell your people what has happened, and let us build it, slowly.”

Abruptly, he dropped Eve’s numb hand, and turned back to his father, scooping him up into his strong arms and striding to the curtained doorway. “One way or another, we have all lived in the darkness too long. I’m taking my father into the sun to *live*.”

## **Marie Treanor**

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