

Gynnara Tregarth

Deck the Djinn

L JOURNEYS



Loose Id

DECK THE DJINN

With bonus story

YULETIDE YEARNINGS

Cynnara Tregarth

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Dedication

To my family, my kids, my heartmates, my soulmate, and those who are my adopted family. Thank you for being here when I needed you most. And a special thank you to Emy Naso, wherever he is in the world at this moment. Your blessing, your belief in my writing, affected me more than I can ever thank you for. Blessings on your next wild ride, Emy.

DECK THE DJINN

Chapter One

“I’m going home.”

Marek spun around at the voice, his gaze resting on the one woman who had the power to destroy him with those words. There, before him, stood the dark-haired beauty that he had hoped would help him find a way to stop the pain within himself. Her cerulean eyes were teary, showing him the depth of her emotions. His body mirrored her pain. “You’re leaving?”

“I’m going home through the portal.” Her voice sounded harsh, but then, somehow he had known that one day this would come. His one, his Tahra, was leaving him. He watched her pick up a packed bag. “Sebastian and Mayri are going back to handle her business and hire more help for the Christmas holidays. I have a deadline to make, and since we’re not getting anywhere, it’s time I go back to my life.”

He bit back the words he wanted to say. “You know, I warned you that I wasn’t easy to understand, and it’d take time.”

“No, Marek. You just need to stop wallowing in the pain and heal thyself. Get over it.” Tahra poked him in the center of his chest. “I’m not Mayri, only her sister, who knows about

pain and suffering. Until you free yourself from that pain, you'll be no good to anyone, even lowly me."

As she grabbed another small bag, filling it with some small trinkets, he struggled with a response and touched her shoulder.

Without even a glance backwards, Tahra took the two bags and headed out the doors to his suite of rooms. Emptiness and rejection soared within him, clenching his soul and heart. What peace he had found in the last five months was shattered with her exit. Leaning against a dresser, Marek inhaled deeply, fighting for control and failing to stop the worst of emotions from filling his body and soul.

"I'm such an asshole," he ground out as his body shook with the emotional energy buildup.

"Yes, you are."

Marek's gaze sought out Siraen as her voice filled the large bedroom. *Did she feel my emotional outburst? Did she sense my lack of control over my emotions?* "I mean more than normal, sister mine."

"I know. She leaves and yet you stand here alone. Instead of going after her, you remain here in your negativity and do nothing to fix what's happened. Don't you care about your one?"

"She doesn't have the pendant."

"Doesn't she?" Nadja, his other sister, came through one of the secret doors to his rooms. Her walk held menace and contained anger. "How do you know?"

Marek glared at his sisters, stopping any comment with an upturned hand. "Tahra would've said something. She's never kept secrets from me while she's been here, and all know the pendant vanished during Bast and Mayri's wedding."

"You know for a fact that it vanished? Or are you letting your emotions sway you from logic?" Logron stepped into the room, his short blond hair creating a halo effect around his head.

"Tahra would've said." Marek crossed his arms whilst shooting a glare at Logron.

"She didn't -- to you. She wanted what we all wanted, well, all of us except you," Siraen continued. Placing a hand on Marek's arm, she waited until his gaze met hers. "You've lost your path, brother mine. You've failed your path as the chakera of emotion."

"Thus, you are to be dealt with in such a way to force you to do your job, or to find your replacement, if such can be found." Logron's voice rang clear and strong.

Marek trembled at the words. *There is no way Logron can mean what he says. Can he?*

"What do you mean?"

Geraint, another brother, sat on the bed, his gaze full of compassion. "On Earth, it's Yule. You have two weeks to get over yourself and your pain. Today is the last day the portal is open, until the New Year. You are going to Earth, and you'll either find your path to being the chakera, or you will abdicate."

"There is no other option anymore. For too long, we've pandered to your pain and your slow healing. We know you feel much, Marek," Nadja explained, resting her head on Geraint's shoulder. "But this is too long. What's past is gone; now it's time to do your job. You've let harmful emotions rule you and others in Djinn, and if you don't heal yourself and others, you'll lose everything, including Tahra."

"You can't mean to banish me from Djinn!" Marek shrugged out of his sister's grip and turned to face most of his siblings. "That's not fair. I'm djinn, not genie or jinn!"

"Your behaviour belies that fact. A djinn would never have wallowed like you have," countered Logron. "You aren't banished until the time is up. If you've not made the right steps to recovery, then we will strip you of your power and find a new chakera of emotion. You have fourteen days."

“Where shall I stay for that time? I doubt that Tahra will want me.” Marek didn’t move, his feelings pulsating around him and through him.

“You’re giving off emotions, brother mine,” Nadja whispered. “This is why you must go. You can’t even control your own emotions, beyond the simplest of things.”

Geraint nodded. “Indeed, this is why you must go, so you don’t harm the fabric of Djinn with your lack of control. Sebastian and Mayri have agreed to let you stay at their home. They are waiting for you.”

Bran opened the door and stepped into the room. The tall man filled the doorway, eclipsing the gold and silver trim. “It’s time, Marek.”

“Only those linked can go through the portal.” He tried desperately to cling to anything that would keep him here in his only known home. “I can’t get through without the pendant.”

“Bast and Mayri are opening it for you. We’ve practiced it, so it’s a safe technique as long as it’s not done repeatedly in a short period of time. No more procrastinating, Marek. We need the old you back. If you can’t be what you’re meant to be, then we need someone who can be the chakera.” Bran’s hard tone rang in the room. “Now come.”

Marek stepped forward reluctantly. Siraen and Nadja took his hands. “Come, brother. This must be done. You know it as we do. Without the chakera of emotion, our world will be harmed by negative emotions and emotional hurts.” Nadja kissed his cheek, her tears mixing in with the kiss. “We need you how you were before the accident with Mother. Come home to us healed, brother mine.”

They didn’t give him a chance to even grab any of his belongings, but led him through the doorway and down the twisting halls, to the chamber where the portal opened. Marek’s emotions and thoughts ran hot and cold. Fear and anger warred for possession of his body, while logic tried poorly to assert itself. *Why are they abandoning me? Have I not been a good brother?*

“Yes, you have, Marek, but a poor chakera, a poor ruler over the emotions of the Djinn world.” Siraen sighed as her grip on Marek’s hand increased. “Since the accident that you refuse to discuss, you’ve been a shadow of your true self. It was not your fault. It’s time to forgive yourself and move forward. No one blames you; you’re the only one who blames yourself for what happened that day.”

Before long, they stood in front of the limestone pillars that held the circular portal frame made from silver, gold, and copper. Inhaling deeply, Marek tried to gather his senses. It was true; he was going to Earth, and without Tahra. Deciding that they were determined on this course, he had no choice but to accept it. Marek strode two steps forward, stretching his hand out toward the portal. “Then I go.”

“You have two weeks, Marek. May you find the solace and healing you’ve not had here,” Geraint boomed. He paused a moment while calling forth the mental link to Bast. In response, the arch flared to life, the surface rippling with various colors. Pointing toward the arch, he told Marek, “Now, go and find your way, brother.”

Feeling the pull of another world, Marek allowed it to envelop him, stepping into the portal’s immediate area. Within a purple flash, Marek left the only home he knew and the safety it held.

Chapter Two

Blinking, Marek found himself standing in the center of a living room area. The blue couch, the off-white walls with pictures, reminded him of Tahra. He tried to step forward only to feel a bit weak. “Oy, what happened?”

“A slight side effect of being brought through. The weakness is temporary,” Bast stated as he looked at his wife. “You’re right, princess. It’s bright. I thought you were exaggerating. Sorry, my love.”

“Told ya. Next time you’ll believe me when I warn you.” Mayri stepped up and hugged Marek. “Welcome to our home, Marek.”

“Thanks, though I don’t know what to do.” He slid out of the embrace, trying to find his center. Tugging at his purple and silver silk shirt, Marek inhaled slowly, using the millennia-old method of centering. Finally, when he was ready, he looked at his brother and sister-in-law. “You know of the ruling?”

“Yes, I know that you need to face yourself and your emotions head on. Considering that Earth is filled with passionate people of all emotions, this should help you to see how we master our emotions,” Mayri compassionately replied. “Then you’ll be able to heal others by healing yourself as well.”

"I don't think I remember how to heal anymore." The admission floored him as he heard the gasp from his brother. For too long he had denied that fact -- that while he nursed his emotional wounds, he forgot how to use his talent to heal emotions and souls.

"Well, tomorrow we can start fresh with the basic skills," Bast answered. "Let me show you to your room and get you settled."

Allowing his brother to lead him, Marek felt the squeeze of affection from Bast. Of all the chakeras, only Bast knew the true story of what happened that day. Only he fully comprehended the reason why Marek stood at this impasse. Yet Bast conquered his own fears and problems to be with Mayri. Perhaps all wasn't dead for him. Perhaps.

They left Mayri in the living room as they strolled down the hall. "Mayri and I will help you as much as we can, Marek." Bast stopped at the second door on the left. "We figure if we have you help out at her shop, you'll have some interaction with mortals and their emotions, in a limited fashion."

"You make them sound contagious." Marek smiled as he entered through the doorway.

"They are that, but in a good way." Bast walked into the bedroom after Marek. "They don't act like we expect, and they don't follow the protocols we djinn do." He gestured around the room, pointing out various features. "You've got your own bedroom and the bath is through there."

Marek knew his brother was observing and evaluating his actions, but from Bast, he really didn't mind. Not after everything that had happened. "Thanks for everything, Bast. What's on today's agenda?"

"You are to change into regular clothes," Bast said. "Then we're going out to eat with some of our friends."

"Will Tahra be there among them?" He hated the wistfulness that came out with those words, but the emotion was there. No use denying it. Not now.

"No, she's got deadlines to make. But she'll stop over sometime soon."

He inclined his head in acceptance as disappointment filled his soul. The caged beast within howled at the loss of Tahra, and the control slipped with every disappointment. “She mentioned that before she left. It seems we djinn distract her from her writing, though we also inspire her.”

“Are you upset?” Bast’s brow lifted in question.

“She has priorities,” Marek answered, aware of the beast howling louder with the dismissal of emotion. “Those come first.”

Bast grabbed Marek’s right arm, squeezing it hard. “Dammit, Marek, this is me you’re talking to. Don’t try that bullshit with me. You didn’t answer. Are. You. Upset?”

Marek shrugged, pulling his arm out of Bast’s hard grasp. “Does it matter? Priorities take precedence over the emotions of others.” Slowly he turned away, wrestling with the inner emotions threatening to boil over.

Suddenly he spun around as Bast grabbed him and pushed him against a wall. “Dammit, Marek, you can’t play games like this with me. I know too fucking much. Say what you feel!”

He slid his hands down between Bast’s, lifting them up so they broke Bast’s lock on his shoulders. “What do you want me to say? That it hurts? Yeah, it does, but what does my pain have to do with anything?”

“She’s your one, Marek. Can you really let her go?”

Both men stared at each other as silence filled the room. Anger, resignation, despair, and love floated around Marek, taunting him with the fact there were no easy answers to make the negative feelings leave. When his emotions threatened to explode, Marek turned away, wrapping the sensations around himself, keeping them away from Bast. He wouldn’t let another person be hurt because of his lack of control.

“I can’t force her to accept me. Not like I am now, Bast. You know it and so do I. I can barely handle the overwhelming emotions without them doing damage to someone else. Hopefully, once the healing begins here, I can go to her.”

“What if it’s too late?”

A noise caught both men’s attention as Mayri walked in the room. “It’s never too late for love,” she said, wrapping her arms around Bast’s waist. “If I didn’t give up on you, Bast, then I doubt my sister will give up completely on Marek. But it won’t be easy.”

“Yet, it was her choice to leave me, even if she loves me.”

“She left Djinn. She forced you into a position to do something for yourself that you wouldn’t have done on Djinn, Marek.” Her hand reached out and caressed his cheek. “Find your path, my brother-in-law. Be healed and become whole again. Bast, I need help to pick out my outfit for tonight.”

Marek watched as Bast smiled lovingly at his wife, his one, before swinging her up into his embrace. “We’ll give you some alone time, to think. Be ready in about half an hour, Marek.” He envied his brother the love and obvious affection that Mayri showered freely. To be honest, he could have the same thing, if only he could control the emotions and not let them overwhelm him.

“Not a problem. I might walk around the neighborhood a bit once I’m dressed, giving you lovebirds some privacy,” Marek called out as they shut the door to his room. The couple left, leaving Marek alone with his thoughts, his emotions, and himself. Wrestling with the demonically strong emotions, Marek felt exhausted on some level. Controlling them took more and more out of him. Distracting himself, he pulled at the drawers of the dresser, removing various pieces of clothing to wear.

Divesting himself of Djinn silks, Marek slid on the Earth clothes, enjoying the heavier texture of the jeans and the lightweight, yet comforting, feeling of the long-sleeved purple shirt. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he pulled on the socks and boots that Bast provided. The clothes smelled new and unused, though the boots seemed to be well-made and broken in properly. The leather was soft, yet supportive of his feet. Marek grinned at his brother’s thoughtfulness. Only a master shoe craftsman could have made these boots, and for that, he

was grateful. Standing, Marek looked at his appearance in the full-length mirror on the door of the closet.

The overall look was something he hadn't seen in a while. A fairly tall male, with tanned skin, platinum-blond hair, amethyst eyes, and an air of normalcy that he never seemed to have in Djinn. *A new you, for the woman you love. A new you, for what you should be.* Inhaling deeply, Marek closed his eyes, seeing himself as he and the others wished he'd become. Seeing a happy, smiling, magickal man who coped with others' emotions and his own with ease, Marek exhaled slowly, willing that to happen. Here on Earth, he had the chance to make it happen. There were no others of magick to look down upon him. None to give him pitying looks of contempt. Here, on Earth, he could learn to control the demonic aspects of emotions and become, once again, the chakera of emotions.

Taking one last look at himself, Marek smiled. Even Tahra would have a hard time believing the man standing there was once a broken djinn.

* * * * *

Tahra sighed as she emerged from the portal once again. She had waited as Geraint had asked, then returned to collect some of her other things and get the report on Marek. Shaking her head, moving her dark tresses from her face, she sighed while contemplating Marek's banishment from the Djinn realm. It was for the best, for him, and for her. Right?

"Damn you, Marek, for putting me into this position!" she cried, slamming down her bags. Grabbing the locket hidden under her shirt, she yanked on it, debating on whether to throw it away or not. "Damn this pendant for showing me that I'm in love with a man who can't find his own way to happiness. What good is that for him, me, or us?"

Tears stung her eyes as the emotions she'd bottled up poured out of her. Tahra allowed herself the catharsis, knowing that it'd help her to strengthen her resolve. "I love you, you stupid djinn, but I need you whole. Without that wholeness, we can never be everything for each other," she whispered into her hands as she wept. "Come back to me whole, and we'll

never be separated like this again. Find your strength in your weakness. I need you more than I ever told you.”

The sobs echoed in her apartment, allowing the sadness and fear to fill the area, reflecting back the fear Tahra had hidden for so long. After a while, the sobs faded to sniffles, and sniffles became resolve. Tahra and the others were doing what they could to force Marek to help himself. They were right in putting him in an environment where he could see emotion’s mastery in action. Though only Bast and Marek knew fully what had happened to make Marek fall into this state, Tahra had gleaned enough information to piece it together. Hopefully, here on Earth, among the mortals, he’d find the strength and the essence of his power. Even magick needed grounding sometimes. Even the power of emotional healing.

Pulling out a picture taken of him, naked, Tahra smiled. She carefully placed it on her mahogany desk, next to her computer. “You are a true hero in so many ways, Marek. I just wish you could see yourself like I do,” she whispered, booting up the computer. “Maybe, just maybe, there’s a way to let you know and for me to make deadline.”

Her fingers flew across the keys, typing the story of her heart and soul as she begged the gods to help heal her one.

Chapter Three

The sun shined in the air, though there was a slight chill in the wind that blew around Marek. From Tahra and Mayri, he had learned the history of Silver Springs, Florida, but it hadn't stopped him from forming his own impressions. Walking down the road from Mayri's house, he took in the freshly mowed lawns, the palm trees, and the kids playing in the yards. There was something so innocent, yet profoundly peaceful, in this small mortal neighborhood that called to him.

Lifting his chin, he allowed a breeze to caress his skin and blow back his loose hair. This world had so many climes that it was impossible not to adore it. "Thank you for the breeze." Rejoicing in the elements, Marek didn't notice the little girl in his way until he almost tripped over her.

"Mister, can you help me?"

Beside the skinny redheaded little girl was an empty cage meant for a bird or a small animal. There were streaks of tears on the dirt-smudged face, but her eyes looked ancient, though she was a child. "What's wrong, *chaitara*?"

“My name is Kelly, not *chai-chaitara*. I need help to get my bird down from that tree. He won’t come when I call to him!” She pointed up the pine tree, where in the greenery, Marek noticed a yellow and red bird flitting about.

“What is his name?” Marek stepped toward the tree, keeping part of his attention on the young girl, the other on the singing bird.

“Yugi. You are going to help me, right, mister?”

“Call me Marek.” A hit to his back caught his full attention. “What --”

“Don’t you dare hurt my Yugi! You’re named after the bad guy! Get away from him!” Kelly cried, pulling at Marek’s arms.

He turned slightly, pinning Kelly’s arms at her sides. “Listen to me, Kelly. I am not a bad guy. A bad guy would’ve killed Yugi, not gone to see what he’s doing. As for being named after a bad guy, I’ve had this name a lot longer than the bad guy, I promise. And where is this bad guy from? I bet he’s not where I’m from, either!”

Kelly inhaled deeply. Marek sensed she was wrestling with her emotions. “Marek is the bad guy on the show *Yugi-oh*. You have the same color eyes and almost the same hair.”

“I see. I promise you, Kelly, that I’m not the bad guy. I will do everything I can to help return Yugi to you.”

“Promise?” The earnest tone caught him in his heart, and at that moment, he saw her master her fear with hope. It encouraged him to also be hopeful. His first lesson, and it was from the best source of all -- a child.

“I promise. You can even hold my hand while we rescue Yugi.” Marek smiled at Kelly reassuringly. “That way you’ll know that I can’t hurt him since I’ll be held back by you.”

“But then how are you going to save him?” Kelly’s red brows squished together in confusion as she slid her hand into his waiting one.

“We’re going to call to him.”

“I did that; it didn’t work.” She pouted. “How will he come to us when he won’t come to me?”

“Because we’re going to remind him of how safe and loving you are to him.” Marek began whistling a tune that sounded like a bird singing. Sliding up and down the musical scale, he gestured for Kelly to call to Yugi.

“Here, Yugi. Come to Kelly,” she whispered in time with Marek’s whistling. “Come home and be safe, Yugi.”

For a few minutes, Marek kept whistling, sending the emotions of peace, love, happiness, and safety toward Yugi. The bird inched down the branches, little by little, drawn by the song, emotion, and the words of the little girl who treated him like a Pharaoh. Even the other birds sang the song, encouraging the small bird to go home to the child that loved it dearly. Finally, Yugi flew the last bit of distance onto Kelly’s shoulder.

She released Marek’s hand, gently scooping up her pet and placing him into the cage. “Do you know I was afraid you’d go away, Yugi? I don’t want anything to happen to you. You’re under my special care. I will never hurt you. I promise. Thank you for coming home to me.” With that, she locked the door to the bamboo cage. Done with that task, she turned toward Marek, embracing him in a child’s loving embrace. “Thank you, Marek! He’s back; my Yugi is back!”

Pride and accomplishment filled his core, loosening the grip of fear and the other destructive emotions that had dwelled too long in him. With a sense of wonder, Marek allowed himself this moment of peace and acceptance, returning it in his hug. “You’re welcome. It was my pleasure to help you, Kelly.”

Once they released their hug, Marek knelt beside Yugi, singing to him briefly. “You’re very well possessed for a young mo -- girl.”

“My *oma* taught me well,” Kelly said with great pride. “That means ‘grandma’ in Dutch. She taught me that when something bad happens, it means there’s a lesson to be learned and to treat it as such, not to wail about it not being fair.”

“Your *oma* is very smart,” Marek answered, grinning at Kelly. “She’s right too. Many times bad things are lessons. Sometimes we forget that. Even adults. Did you know that help would come?”

“Of course, Marek,” Kelly answered, sitting on the ground next to him. “I knew I couldn’t do it alone, so I sent out my magick to bring me someone to help.”

Marek blinked as he rocked back on his heels. *Her magick? Could it be that mortals have learned the art in all this time?* “You possess magick, *chaitara*? And *chaitara* means ‘precious child’ in my tongue.”

Kelly nodded, drawing various symbols into the dirt at her feet while she spoke. For all her adult manners, in many ways, she was still a child. “My family has always had magick. My aunts taught me how to use my personal magick, as using the elements is still beyond me. Yet, you *did* come help me.” Her gaze matched his, a smile filling her soul.

“Indeed, I did. Who knew a small child would teach me the first lesson of healing?” Marek acknowledged in a low voice. “Thank you, Kelly. For as much as I helped you, you helped me, too. Who knew the world of mortals once again had magick?”

“Just like who knew the djinn once again walked our world?” Kelly smirked. He shot her a startled look as she laughed. “Two times you said mortal and you have this glow about your aura, Marek. One that’s not mortal in nature. I should know, it’s my special talent.”

“Who told you that?”

“My aunties, especially Aunt Taja. She said that one day I’ll be able to walk in a world where people won’t make fun of me for my talents.” Kelly sighed with obvious longing. “Until then, I have to keep my magick from prying eyes.”

"I agree with your aunt Taja. Not everyone is able to handle magick, especially some mortals." Marek thought quickly, then asked, "Can you keep the secret that I'm djinn?"

"Sure. I don't want you hurt. Some people can be mean. Very mean." Her voice held the hurt experienced by a child who should never have been hurt.

"I'm sorry." She blinked and looked at him curiously. "I can tell that you either were hurt or witnessed someone being hurt who was different."

"My other aunt. They tried to kill her for being a witch."

"At least not everyone is that way." Marek patted Kelly's hand, offering healing, peace, and comfort. It was the least he could do for this remarkable child. "I'd like to offer you a gift for your help to me, Kelly."

"Really? A gift? What kind?" She grinned and her eyes opened wide. "Is it a special kind of gift?"

"Yes. As you know, I'm a djinn. That means we don't grant wishes without asking a price, unless we want to. Well, I want to and you, *chaitara*, get to choose any wish to be fulfilled that's within my power to grant."

"And ix-nay on more wishes, right?"

They both laughed. "Exactly."

She furrowed her brows in heavy thought. "This might take me a while, Marek. A wish like this comes only once in a life, and I don't want to waste it. Can I think on it?"

"How about I give you a week to think on it? My sister-in-law, Mayri Balhan, owns the local fantasy bookstore downtown. Can your mom or your *oma* bring you there, and you can tell me your wish then?"

"Oh! You know Mayri. She's super! Last year, she read the tales of Aladdin to my class. It was awesome. Plus, she has the special kids' books by Emy Naso. Aunt Taja said I can't read his other books until I'm past the age of co -- co -- consent, whatever that is. But his kids' book is awesome."

“So, it’s a date?” Marek waited, allowing Kelly to take control. Sometimes he knew what it was like to be given no choice in how things were to be done. At least, in this, he could be not only generous, but start anew his determination to give choices when possible.

“Yes! I’ll tell Oma and Aunt Taja that Mayri’s family is visiting and that I’ve been invited to the shop to say hi. Maybe I’ll even get the next book in the series,” Kelly replied dreamily. “To own a bookshop, it’s something to think on. I think she was very lucky to have that dream come true.”

“More than you know, *chaitara*. You’d best head home before you’re missed. I need to get back to Mayri and Bast. I told them I’d be taking a short walk, not a journey into learning.” Marek hugged the young redheaded child once more, giving his silent blessing for a fruitful life to her. She had given him a gift more precious than any wish he could ever make come true for her, but it was all he could give -- for now.

Kelly nodded and grabbed the bird cage. “Thanks again, Marek, who is not bad. I’ll see you in a week at the bookstore!” Then she turned and ran down the road, singing at the top of her lungs. “Someday, my prince will come!”

Chuckling, Marek stood up, brushing off the dirt and leaves. Taking note of his surroundings, he headed back the way he came. The world around him felt different and even the demonic emotions seemed quelled for the time being. Hope. That was what was new. He felt and held hope in his hand. *My family might’ve been inspired to do this after all. For once, I feel I have a chance to conquer the demon emotions that won’t let me go. Now to prove I can.*

Chapter Four

Walking up to Mayri and Bast's house, Marek admired the palm tree set off to one side. It stood proud and tall, ready to take on the world, yet willing to bend to survive. *That means something, that palm. One day, I shall be just like it.* As he raised his hand to knock on the door, it flew open and Mayri grabbed his shirt, pulling him inside.

"Where the hell have you been? When you didn't return, we panicked and contacted Djinn!"

"I told Bast I was going for a walk."

"You've been gone over a half hour!"

Marek sighed. He clung to his good mood before it could evaporate. Before meeting Kelly, he might've given in, but he wasn't in the wrong. "Am I not free? Can I not walk around my new home and meet people?"

"That's the problem. Some people could hurt you, Marek." Her voice cracked, and Marek felt her concern and worry pour over him. He needed to make her see reason and realize he was safe.

He took her hand and squeezed it softly. "Am I not an adult?"

"Yes, but --"

“You cannot have it both ways, Mayri. If I’m adult, I can take care of myself, even here. I have my magick, though the djinn are sworn never to kill mankind.” Marek caught Mayri’s gaze. “Look at me, really look. Something happened on my walk that has started my healing. I will not let your worry and concern negate that healing. Trust in me that I know what I am doing when I interact with others, especially children.”

“Children?”

Marek chuckled, releasing Mayri’s hand. “I met the most remarkable young girl today. Her bird, Yugi --”

“Oh, you met Kelly Drevin. She’s a precocious nine-year-old,” Mayri exclaimed. “She’s very mature for her age.”

“Indeed. She’s also well versed in magick basics.” Seeing Mayri’s shocked expression, he recounted everything that happened, ending with the fact that she would come to collect her reward at the bookshop in a week’s time. “So, you see, it was for a good reason that I’m late.”

“Sounds like the first steps of healing to me,” Bast replied, stepping into the foyer. “Ready to get some food? I’m starved.”

“Wonder why, brother mine.” The brothers shared a laugh while Mayri slapped both their arms.

“Why do I put up with you all?”

“You love us?” Bast answered, swooping his mouth over his wife’s waiting lips. “You know that without our kind of love, you’d be empty inside.”

“Or something,” Mayri teased. “Come on, we’ve got people to meet, food to eat, and experiences to enjoy.”

“Sounds like fun,” Marek said, meaning it. “Perhaps this time on Earth is exactly what I need. So far, I’ve not been disappointed.”

* * * * *

“So, you’re saying he is healing?” Tahra asked into the cell phone, as she looked out her living room window.

“That’s what I’m saying,” Mayri answered. “It’s already been three days, and the kids at the shop love him and he’s changing. Go see him.”

“I can’t let him know I’m watching him.”

“Then don’t, but I think you should,” Mayri responded. Tahra heard the happy tones in her sister’s voice. “Marek is like a new man. For some reason, being here on Earth and working with kids has given him insight like none other. I think it’s because there are so few young djinn, genie, and jinn that he hasn’t had the chance to really use his abilities to the fullest.”

“He’s always told me the youngest among us are the most honest in emotion.” Tahra placed her hand on the window and sighed. “I’ll go peek in on him at the bookstore. I just don’t want him to see me. Don’t tell him I’m coming.”

“I won’t. But I think you both need each other. This kind of distance isn’t good for anyone, much less for a chakera and his one. Especially since he’s improving.”

Ringling off, Tahra leaned her forehead against the window. He was doing it -- without her. But he was healing. That’s all that mattered. Now to see for herself if he was really becoming the Marek he should be. She had her job -- including reporting if this improvement was falsely done. The pendant would tell her for sure.

* * * * *

Six days later

“Yo, Marek, what’s happening?” Paolo Antonio called out as Marek strolled into Fantastical Journeys

“Nothing much, Paolo. What’s up with you? Where’s the rest of the gang?” Marek hung up his windbreaker, as he headed toward the back office.

“They should be here shortly. I got here first and unlocked the store. You here alone with us today?” Paolo followed behind Marek.

Marek hid his grin. Paolo was careful about him, especially since Mayri made no bones about him being in charge and having the authority to fire anyone who didn’t do the work. Paolo was a great kid, if a bit unfocused. Hopefully, working the bookstore during the holidays would help cure that lack. “You’re stuck with me. I know it’s a hardship, but let’s see if we can make it work.”

“No problemo, Marek. What’s on today’s agenda?”

“I’m expecting a friend to show up for a gift I promised her and who knows?” Marek laughed. Going to the safe, he removed the day’s starting money. “Let’s do the count and then get ready for opening.”

“Sounds good. Let me make sure the front door is locked.” Paolo rushed out of the room, leaving Marek a moment of peace. He enjoyed the bookstore. There was a moment, that first night after dinner, when he thought the store was a bad idea, but since that first day, meeting the teens who helped out Mayri and reading books that stimulated the mind, Marek realized how perfect the job was, especially in helping young people to control their emotions and helping banish his personal demonic emotions. He finished reading Isaac Asimov’s book *I, Robot* and had begun a new children’s story. There was much to be learned from fiction, he decided, including ways to conquer his fears and worries.

Paolo returned and they quickly made the count, noted the tally sheets, and got the store ready for opening, including stocking the shelves. Jenn, Karen, and Jeff also showed up, getting to work as the latest from Blackmores’ Knight played in the background. Once everything was ready, they unlocked the door and waited for customers. Because of the holiday season, people often crowded the store, searching for the perfect gift. Marek enjoyed

helping find the right book for each customer, making sure that they, too, had something to enjoy over the Yule holiday.

The jingle overhead let him know another customer had arrived. Nodding to the customer, whom he guided to the science fiction section, he turned to see a redheaded girl running full steam at him. "Marek! I'm here!"

Kneeling down, he opened his arms, grabbing Kelly in a hug. "How are you, *chaitara*?"

"I'm good. Aunt Taja and Aunt Reina brought me. They wanted to see you first. Something about not trusting Greeks bearing gifts."

"They're Trojans?" Marek teased.

"Noooo. At least, I don't think they are. What are Trojans?" Kelly asked as they approached the two women. Marek smiled at them, taking in their feral yet controlled manner and the type of magick surrounding them. Acknowledging their nature, he held out his hand.

"Trojans were people who held control of a part of the land that the Greeks wanted. When they wouldn't give it up, the Greeks fought them, then pretended to go away. However --"

"Oh, the Trojan Horse thing," Kelly said, starting to wander off after the dark-haired Jeff. "I'll be right back. I think the aunties will want to talk to you alone." She paused in her step and shared a look of amusement with Marek before she continued her wandering.

Marek waited until the other shoppers were out of earshot. "Yes? Do I pass muster?"

"I thought the portal between Djinn and Earth was shut?" Reina queried, her dark brown brows rising.

"Just as I thought the portal to Helia was closed for another millennium." They took the measure of the other, then Marek smiled, ruining his hard-edged look.

"It's due to open soon, but we weres aren't subjected to the restriction, like the fey," Taja clarified. "What do you want from my niece?"

“To thank her for helping a djinn. Nothing more or less.” Seeing their skeptical looks, he took a calculated risk. “I’m searching for a way to reconcile with my one. She’s mortal, and I’ve neglected my duties, and her, with my own private issues. Kelly helped me to rediscover my path and for that I’m beyond grateful. You’ve taught her well. I doubt I have much to worry over.”

The women shared a look, signing to each other in the quiet language of the were. Marek made out a couple of the letters, but the rest were too fast for him to comprehend. Reina nodded and turned away. Taja stared after the woman and sighed. “Reina worries. Kelly is the first human child born of two shifters. She shows no talent toward shifting. We don’t want her hurt.”

“Understood. I pledge Djinn to her service for protection, if you wish it.” Marek knew what it cost Taja to admit to Kelly’s true status among the were. Emotions were at a high pitch, and he had to lower them before he lost the cautious control he had finally found.

“Thank you. She has fey protection from her uncle Adras, my husband, and the Seelie Court, but we’d welcome the magickal protection of the djinn as well.” Taja smiled as she watched Kelly chatter at Jeff. “She’s a special child, and we wish to see her grow to her full potential. We felt your blessing and thought we’d be able to trust you, but we needed --”

“Proof. Understood. Let me go rescue my teenage worker and find out what Kelly wants. While I do that, perhaps you’d be interested in seeing the two new Emy Naso releases.”

“His family has released more?” Taja’s voice piqued with interest.

“Tell Jenn, the young woman with the Christmas tree shirt, that you’re wanting the two latest. She’ll make sure you get first dibs. Thank you for your trust, Taja of the weres,” Marek finished quietly.

“Thank you, Marek of the djinn. May our people always have peace together.” Taja strode after the young woman as he rushed to save Jeff, who looked flustered.

“Kelly, this way. We’ve got a gift to take care of, don’t we?” Marek ushered the young girl into the back office, leaving the door cracked open so Taja could listen without trying hard. He motioned for the young girl to sit on the blue overstuffed chair while he sat on the edge of the desk. “So, have you decided?”

She nodded. “I wanted to make sure my wish wouldn’t hurt anyone or take away from anyone. My aunts and adopted aunts taught me to think of all things, not just myself.”

“Good. So, what are you wishing for? Remember, this wish is specifically for you.”

Biting her lip, she paused, thinking on the words to say. Marek felt the indecision, and the emotions of wanting, debating with needing. Finally, Kelly spoke. “I wish to be the best I can, and to do my people proud, especially when the Gateway opens between this world and the world where I’ve never been -- Helia.”

“That’s a vague wish, but one I know you’ll fulfill it anyway. How about we narrow it down a bit? What do you want to do when the Gateway is open?”

“To see Helia. To not be in trouble, and to not get hurt because of who I am.” Kelly sounded like an ancient soul with those words. His heart rang with the truth in her emotions and a child’s need to be accepted and loved for who she was as a person, not her heritage.

Placing his hand over her heart and on her forehead where her “third eye” resided, Marek whispered the ancient words of djinn wish granting. “May you find your soulmate, your kindred, and peace in the land that is your home but not your home. Let the blessings of the djinn and the were be yours. May your power come to fruition, so you can choose to be any form you want, not restricted to those you think you should be.”

“How did --” Kelly’s eyes widened in surprise.

“I’m fairly smart at times.” Marek took Kelly’s hand, letting his other fall from her forehead. “Tell me, do you want to be a shifter?”

“I don’t know. Yugi says that flying is fun and that I’d like the freedom, but I like who I am. I’m human.”

“Then be who you are. When it’s time, you can always choose to change to any form, or no form. Your magick isn’t limited to the were magick, Kelly. This I promise you.” Suddenly, the young girl hugged him tightly.

“Thanks, Marek. That’s what I really wanted, but I thought that if I wished only for me, you’d take it away.”

“No, I wouldn’t. The wish was a thank you. Now, let’s go find your aunt and find that children’s book you wanted.” Marek took her hand and led her toward the door, seeing Tahra standing there, a tear rolling down one cheek. “Tahra?”

Kelly squeezed his hand. “Is this the lady that hurt you?”

“No, *chaitara*, I’m the one who hurt her. She had me sent here to get better.” Marek offered one hand toward Tahra. “Tahra, this is Kelly Drevin. Kelly, this is my one, Tahra Balhan.”

Kelly shook Tahra’s hand cautiously, her eyes narrowing. “Don’t you hurt him anymore. He’s a good man, not like that bad Marek. He wasn’t bad either, just confused on how to be good.”

“Thank you, Kelly. I don’t want to hurt him either. My sister, who owns this place, said that he’s been doing much better. Did you help him?”

“Duh! Of course I did. It’s my gift to help, right, Marek?” The young girl looked at him with loving eyes.

“Yes it is, *chaitara*. Now, let’s go get that book, my treat.”

“You stay here. I’ll let Jenn know. You make up with Tahra. And I want to come to the wedding, even if it’s in Djinn, okay?” She left before Marek could grab her arm and make her recant, laughter filling the air.

“She’s an impertinent little thing, but she has helped me. I can’t help but indulge her,” Marek apologized.

"You look different," Tahra noted. He watched her as she took him in from head to toe. "You have more poise. Less lost. Time here on Earth has been good for you so far, then."

"It'd be better with you at my side, Tahra." Marek caught her hand, bringing it to his lips, then cupping it close to his heart. "I hate not being near you. It hurts. They told me you have the pendant. Give me another chance, Tahra. I'm slowly healing, and being around the kids has helped immensely. They show how they learn to control their emotions, and I learn how to test my control, as well."

"How about we start with dinner at my place tonight?" Tahra kissed his cheek. "Mayri told me how well you're doing. I wanted to see for myself. You're amazing with kids."

"They have the truest emotions and the truest acknowledgment of them. From them, I learn the basics, thus healing from the inside out."

"Maybe, one day, we can talk about how you got hurt."

Marek tensed up, his body locking in place. "Maybe. It's not easy. You might hate me."

"I doubt it. I know you. You're the one who has to learn that not everyone will condemn for the actions of a young teenager who didn't know better."

He waited for a moment, seeing if despair and anger would knock over his precious control. When the assault didn't happen, Marek smiled shyly. "Perhaps. It won't be easy to tell, so please be patient. Did my brother come with you?"

"Yeah. Let's go make sure he doesn't scare the customers or cause a riot."

Hand in hand, they strolled to the main part of the store. Kelly and Taja waved as they left, holding their purchases in their hands. Marek waved back. "Have a happy Yule!"

"Happy Yule too!"

He turned his attention to his brother, who picked up Marek's copy of *The Wizard of Oz*. "What are you reading?"

"A children's book. It's called *The Wizard of Oz*. Do you think Oz is actually Djinn?" Marek asked, his voice filling with mischievousness.

Bast glanced up at Marek. "You're joking, right?"

"No, both have magick, wicked bitches, and the floating happy person. Sounds like home."

Both brothers cracked up as Tahra shook her head at their idea of humor. "You two are nuts. I need to pick up my copy of *Covenants*. Then it's back to the grindstone. Be at my place about six tonight, okay, Marek?"

"Definitely." Marek moaned, pulling Tahra against him. With care, he slid his lips over hers, his tongue tracing her teeth as he plundered her mouth's sweet depth. Tasting her, touching her, reminded him just how much she completed him. Another piece of healing fell into place, allowing desire to run free, without worry. Brushing his hips against hers, he pulled back. "I love you, Tahra."

"I know."

"You been watching *Star Wars* again?"

"Come over and find out." Tahra winked and turned on her heel, heading toward the checkout counter.

Both men sighed. Marek's brow rose. "Do I ask why you sighed?"

"Because she reminds me of my Mayri."

"That's my Tahra."

"Yup, passionate and a tease. I'll get you directions on how to get to her house from ours."

"Thanks. Now go home and make love to your wife."

"I would, but she's with Kimberly, that evil hen from Hades."

"The woman who goes through men like water?" Marek recalled her from the dinner the other night. She had an unhealthy need for men in her life, but she ran them out of it when they got too close. There was a woman who needed healing more than most. Hopefully one guy would help her heal and make her his own.

“Yeah, now she’s on an ‘I hate men’ plug. I had to get away. Luckily Tahra was there and needed to escape, too.” Bast hugged his brother. “You’re doing well. I think this plan was best for us all, getting away from Djinn for a while. Our family can be a bit overwhelming.”

“Definitely. Now go. I need to get things done with the shop.” Marek watched as his brother left the store, then turned to see Karen sighing in Bast’s direction. “Yes?”

“You are so not cool.” Karen pointed at the waving Bast. “Now he is cool.”

“Cool, no, I’m hot. You have put up the heat so high that a man would have to wear silk to keep cool.” He felt the teen’s lusts, desires, and deepest desire to be loved as Bast loved Mayri. He had to snap her out of the downward spiral she had placed herself in. An idea popped into his head, and he grinned. It’d take some verbal maneuvering, but it should do the trick. Before he could speak, she took up his challenge.

“So, let’s see the silk.”

“You are underage, my dear. Perhaps Chriso, one of my distant cousins, can come after New Year and play with you.” In fact, Chriso might love visiting this planet and interacting with others around his age. Karen might be a challenge for him that would help them both to mature. For all she wanted sex, she knew she wasn’t ready, and he could prove it.

“I see. So no initiation by the other sex god, huh?”

Marek snorted in amusement. “Uh, no. And Bast wouldn’t have you. Mayri would’ve killed him ... or at least hung his cock over the door in warning to anyone else.”

“Mayri would kick your ass for talking to us like that.” Karen grinned, her downward spiral stopped by the thought of Mayri kicking ass.

Marek tilted up Karen’s chin. “Yeah, but Mayri doesn’t know that you read the Victorian erotica she keeps in the back either. I do. Even?”

“Even.” Karen turned to go back to her job, then stopped. “Marek?”

“Yeah, Karen?”

“You gonna stay or you leaving us like Mayri and Bast?”

He thought for a moment. "There are times when I must go home, but to be honest, I'm growing fond of this city and you all here at the store. Let me see what I can do, okay?"

"Cool. You're the best, Marek." He watched her grab Jeff and Paolo's arms, dragging them off to repeat what he said to her. Somehow, they needed his help, just like he needed theirs. Watching them reminded him of how he and Tahra would often whisper about the others and laugh, while still wishing things were truly lighthearted. Maybe tonight -- they could be.

Chapter Five

Later that night

Marek sat back in his chair, trying not to moan over the amount of food he'd consumed. Unconsciously, he rubbed his belly. "Had I known you cooked this well, Tahra --"

"Don't even think it, Marek," she teased back, swooping in, giving a quick kiss on his lips. "No condescending male remarks."

"I wasn't. I was going to say, I'd have forced you to marry me on day one, and we'd have moved here sooner." The shock on her face was precious, and he cherished the moment. "Ah, you didn't think that a djinn would love your world as much as you do?"

"Well, you've not been to Earth in ages. None of the chakera now have ever been to Earth, except in a couple of brief moments, when someone used magick on the pendant." Tahra finished putting the plates in the dishwasher. Closing the door, she flipped the switch, roaring it to life. "Come on, let's go in the living room and watch a movie or something."

"How about we play *Yugi-oh King of Games* again?" He kissed the palm of her hand as he stood up and joined her in moving to the living room. "I promise not to play Marek again and kick your ass."

"I'm so going to tell on you to Kelly. She'll be very upset to see you as the bad Marek," Tahra teased, poking him with her free hand. "I still don't see how you could've won a damn game you've never played before, when I play all the time and win."

"I still love you, Tahra."

"You don't love me; you love my GameCube."

"I'd still marry you without it."

"And with it?"

"I'll bear the children in our marriage." Marek grinned and winked, pulling her onto his lap. "Well, I would if I can manipulate the genetic code to make it possible."

Tahra chuckled and snuggled close against him. "You like the GameCube that much, huh?"

"It's a wonderful teaching instrument in the hands of a proper teacher," Marek pointed out. "Yes, the games can run the gamut from easy to violent, but if you view them in what they help, limit them, and supplement them with practical experience, they can be wonderful teaching opportunities in putting hand-eye coordination into action."

She tilted her head, looking deeply into Marek's eyes. "You mean that, don't you? You really love this world."

"Definitely. There are things wrong, things that need to be corrected -- famine, hunger, unequal housing, health care, and more. But by the same token, you see things like Live Aid, the emergency personnel who go out in disasters, and others who give of themselves to make the world better, and you realize the true potential of mankind." Marek kissed her nose, warming up to his thoughts. "The future lies with the young. We must make them responsible and teach them the qualities so lacking today -- honor, love of land, and more. The past generation or so have lost their way, and it's reflected in how the world is not working. But we can make it work. It'll take time, even dealing with politics, but we can

make a difference in the future for our children, giving them a world heritage to be proud of.”

Tahra slid her hands under Marek’s shirt, the heat and desire building within them. “Do you know how sexy you are sitting here, talking about living here instead of Djinn? Do you know how much you’ve changed in a week?”

“I’m waiting for the slipup,” Marek admitted reluctantly, enjoying Tahra’s touch. He stroked her cheek. “I know that the time for one to happen is soon. I don’t want to slip up, but it’s normal to fall, though I don’t want to. I like how I feel. Working with the kids at the store, and my time with Kelly, has brought me back to my beginning, remembering how to deal with emotions honestly.”

“Maybe you won’t. Or when it happens, it’ll be mild since you’re on the watch for it,” Tahra murmured as her lips pressed against his exposed neck. “You’re doing so well, I’d hate for you to fall, my love.”

“And you are my one; I don’t want to lose you.” Marek brushed his fingers down her cheek, curving down her jaw, following her collarbone and down the front of her shirt. He moaned in pleasure as her lips sought out his nipple, her mouth wetting the silky fabric, rasping it against his already highly aware skin. “Gods, Tahra, you’re trying to kill me in these jeans with your mouth, aren’t you?”

“Why don’t you take them off?” she muttered as she continued her ministrations on the one nipple.

“Can’t move; you’ve pinned me in place. Though if you keep that up, my cock might just burst through the jeans,” he moaned as she gently nipped him.

“That would be a first. I don’t think any woman has seen that happen, though I do notice you’re about to escape past the waistband.” Her hand caressed the tip of his cock as it moved past the top of his jeans.

“Killing me, you’re trying to kill me,” Marek moaned, grabbing her hands. “Dammit, Tahra, let’s go to bed. I can’t think straight, and if I keep these pants on, I’ll be at your mercy in a dangerous way.”

“I have control tonight.”

“Agreed, just let me take off these damn jeans.” With a quick lift of his hips, he moved Tahra off his lap, and stood up, making sure she didn’t fall. With a loud sigh, he undid the button and zipper, teasing Tahra. “Oh gods divine, thank you. Relief. Now, where were we?” He grabbed Tahra’s hand and pulled her flush against him, his cock hard against her soft belly. “I believe you were taunting me and leading the way, my one and only.”

“You said I could.” She took his hand and led him to the door off to one side. Opening it, she gestured, “After you, Marek. I want to see your ass swing while in those tight, faded jeans.”

With a saucy grin, he walked into the bedroom, making sure his hips swung a bit more than normal. “Like this?”

“Gods, no wonder women fall for the djinn. Sex is in your freaking genetic makeup!” Tahra pushed him onto the bed and crawled on top of him. “You are the living embodiment of sex.”

“No, that’s Bast. I just know how to have hot, erotic sex. And I love sex. But it’s not my specialty.” Marek ran his fingers lightly down Tahra’s arms, barely brushing her exposed skin. “I’m not saying I don’t know how to seduce, just that I’m not Bast.”

“Thank heavens. He’s sex on wheels. I’m amazed that Mayri can keep up with him.”

“I think she deliberately wears him out so she can rest.”

“Hmm, sounds like a plan.” Tahra kissed Marek, her tongue sliding in his mouth, caressing his, merging their unique flavors into something that was their own shared essence. He let her do as she wished, her hands sliding against his chest, her tongue arousing his passion. When she finally pulled back, he kissed her hard. “I’m yours. Do as you will.”

“Oh no, my love. You’re my playtoy, which means you do what I say.” Her grin was infectious. He found himself smiling.

“You don’t say.”

“Oh, I do say. Your goal tonight is to please me as I wish. And if you’re really good, I might let you be pleased, too.” She kissed his chin, before sliding off him. Slowly, she removed her clothing, piece by piece. When he reached out to touch a naked breast, she stepped back, admonishing him. “Um, no. You only touch when I say so, Marek.”

“As you wish, my dear.”

“Take off your clothes and stand for me.” Her voice was strong, and he loved her for taking command tonight, their first night back together. Though they’d only been apart a week, things were different. Perhaps more so than either realized. Without comment, he followed her command, shucking first his shoes and socks, then the jeans, silk boxers, and shirt. When he was completely naked, he turned toward her, aroused and ready for anything she wanted.

“Gods, you’re beautiful, Marek.” She stroked his cheek, down his jaw, down the front of his chest until her hands cupped his erection. “You have no idea how your beauty affects me, or other women, do you?” She knelt down and brushed her lips across the aroused cockhead. “For the past week, I’ve watched as woman after woman tried to get your attention at the shop. Never did you flirt, though you were always polite. But you arouse a need in a woman to not just nurture you, but to also heal you, to do bad things to your gorgeous body.”

“Promise to do bad things to me. Really bad things.” Marek gasped as her mouth sucked on his cock.

She stopped and stood up. “Yeah, right after you get me all hot and bothered.” He watched her as she climbed back on her bed, laying down on her back, tucking a pillow

under her head. "Your job, should you choose to accept it, is to pleasure me until I beg for you to fuck me."

"I accept that challenge." Marek growled, grabbing one of her feet and sliding his hands up her shapely calf, lingering over each curve, caressing it lovingly. "You are unbelievably beautiful. Never in my life had I ever imagined meeting a woman who'd see past the pain and the emotions that controlled me, to the man I truly am." When he reached her mons, Marek bypassed it with his fingers, instead concentrating on going up her soft, rounded belly. With each feather-light stroke, he concentrated on showing her the love and healing he hadn't realized she had given him.

"Yes," Tahra hissed, her hands gripping the bedcover. "Touch me, Marek."

"I am, my one. I am," he murmured as he blew across her belly, his fingers following his warm breath. His questing fingers slowly cupped the bottom of her breasts, enjoying the weight and feel as he stroked them. "Do you like this, my Tahra?"

"You're getting revenge, aren't you?" She moaned as he brushed his fingers over her aroused nipples. Encouraged, he blew across one nipple while circling the outside edge lightly with the tip of his nail. Her body arched at his touch and Marek chuckled.

"I do believe you love having your body softly caressed and revered."

"I'd prefer it if you did other things."

"Like?"

"Oral sex comes to mind," Tahra panted while he licked her nipples one at a time.

"I believe that can be arranged -- with some modifications," he whispered before gently pulling one taut nipple into his mouth. He felt her desire flood and mix with his. Her emotions of love, lust, and more harmonized with his flowing emotions. "Gods above and below, I want you, Tahra. All of you."

"Oh, I'm here for the taking, but ... not ... quite ... yet." She moaned as he lightly bit her nipple. "What do you mean, modifications?"

A deep chuckle filled the room. "I'll be right back, and I'll show you." Marek stood up, turned, then walked out of the bedroom, leaving behind a very curious Tahra. *Hello creativity, thy name is Marek!*

* * * * *

She watched him leave the room, a spring in his step and mischief on his mind. Tahra smiled as the waves of pleasure rolled through her. Things were different. He was healing. In fact, even the way he'd made love to her so far tonight was new. A good thing that was more sharing and healing than anything in the past five months. His loving touch was now bold and unhesitant, something that had been lacking during their time together. She sent a small prayer that the healing continued.

A noise in the doorway shifted her attention. Marek stood there, holding a few things, including a candy cane dangling from his mouth. Quirking a brow upwards, she waited until he placed the goodies on the nightstand next to her bed. "What's the candy cane for?"

"To taste you with, my dear." He wiggled his brows while crawling toward her on the bed.

Tahra blinked. What could she say? How the hell would he taste her? Propping one hand under her head, she looked at him. "What do you mean, taste?"

Marek didn't answer, but slid between her thighs, exposing her to his sight. He licked his lips, and suddenly this new, improved Marek seemed overwhelming, sexy, and a bit dangerous to her sexual health. She watched as he leaned forward, his tongue darting out to trace the lips of her labia. Suddenly the tingle of peppermint hit her skin.

"Oh my gods! What are you doing?"

"Tasting." Then she felt something slide into her. It felt warm, sticky, and yet erotic, as it slowly entered deeper and moved around her. "Did you just --"

“Enjoy.” Marek’s mouth then covered her view as the sensations of sucking on her core and on the candy cane combined into one. Heaven didn’t feel as good as this, she decided as his thumb pressed against her clit. She arched her back, lifting her hips toward Marek as his tongue delved deep inside her, guided by the candy cane.

“Marek! I don’t think I can --” She stopped, gasping for air as he continued his loving ministrations with mouth and candy. His tongue slipped deep inside her, filling her as she felt the cane slide out of her. The dam of emotion that was held back by a small thread burst as two fingers joined his tongue. Tahra’s release came swift and hard, a scream ripping from her soul in happiness.

Her breath was ragged, but started to come in longer gasps rather than the excited pants of earlier. Grabbing at Marek’s hair, Tahra pulled him up, until their gazes locked. “Now. I need your cock in me now, Marek. Please.”

“As you wish, my mistress.” The gleam of mischief in his eyes had her wondering, but only for a moment as suddenly, she felt her hips being lifted as pillows were placed under her. “I want you to have pleasure, Tahra. Pleasure, deep, hard and filling.”

She watched him, as he lifted her legs over the tops of his forearms, placing himself between her thighs. He guided his cock into position, nudging her soaked opening. Meeting his gaze, Tahra smiled. “I do love you.”

“And I’m going to show you the depth of my love,” Marek groaned, thrusting his hips forward, forcing his cock deep within her. Tahra rocked as he filled her, then almost pulled out, only to sink deep within her body.

“If this is love, I’m so not going to let it go,” she teased, lifting her hips to join his. Her gaze never left his face, even when his lips brushed across her cheek. “Why the kiss?”

“Because you’re special.” Marek ground his hips against hers, allowing her to feel how much he wanted her.

Their bodies melded together, the magick created between them linking them heart, soul, mind, spirit, and the emotions binding them tightly together. Marek murmured phrases while kissing her, loving her. Tahra whimpered in pleasure as she climaxed around him. “My one,” he whispered, spilling himself deep within her.

As one, their breathing slowly came back to normal, Marek rolled onto his back, pulling Tahra against his chest. “I still have a week left, but I don’t know if I want to go back.”

“What do you mean?” Inside, she dared to hope, just a tiny bit. Before this, Marek wouldn’t even entertain the idea of coming to Earth to spend time or live, no matter how many times she asked. Though Mayri loved Djinn, to Tahra, it was another place, not her true home.

“It means, I think I’d prefer living here among mortals, than at my home. This is a place I can not only admire, but hone my skills.” She shivered as his right hand lovingly traced down her back. “There is much the djinn need to learn again about the mortals, including controlling our emotions and desires.”

“One week without sex, and you’re an expert?” Tahra traced his lips with her fingertips, enjoying this newly healed Marek.

“Enough so that I realize the power behind waiting and the buildup of emotions.” Marek grinned, licking her fingers, then kissing each one. “Working with the kids in the store has shown me that as much as we djinn need to learn, you mortals need to relearn the path of initiation. Many of the teens suffer from this need to know there’s more out there. They need to find their path, but so often it’s denied them.”

“What would you do here?” Curiosity tinged her words, but she wanted to know. If he was willing to stay, willing to keep on healing himself and others, then in truth, he had accomplished what was set before him. The test would be completed. *Please let this be over. I want him as mine again. This Marek is the Marek they showed me in the memory crystals.*

Chapter Six

One day before Yule

Marek sat behind the counter, rubbing his temples while listening to the cacophony that filled Fantastical Journeys. The emotions that swirled around were pulling at him, begging him to take them in and make them his own. Tahra had warned him about the downside of the holiday season, but he hadn't listened. Now he was seeing it -- no, feeling it -- and it made him ache to do something to help. Fully resisting these swinging emotions from others tested his new strength. A tingle overhead caught his attention, forcing his inward gaze outward.

For the second day in a row, the young woman came into the shop, trying to warm up, while gazing longingly at some books. His gift allowed him to know that she lived in a tiny place, with hardly any amenities, and that this shop was a refuge against the suddenly cold weather that had descended in Florida. She worked two jobs to barely make ends meet, and though she loved to read, there was no spare money in her budget for a new book.

She wandered back to her favorite place, the section with the latest works of crossover authors -- Sage Grayson, Lacey Savage, and others, who wrote not only erotic paranormal,

but also for major science-fiction shows. He had read some of the books there and knew which ones the young woman named Hannah wanted most. Pain flared in his body, refusing to leave as Hannah touched a book that he'd read. The despair, the wish to steal, to possess one book when she owned nothing but the thin clothes she had with her when she was abandoned, filled his soul. His newfound control was severely tested, mocked by this one woman's emotional struggles with right and wrong. Her poverty took options from her that should've been there for all people. What the fuck could he do to make this pain stop?

Suddenly a wave of nausea hit him as guilt filled the room. Marek grabbed at the counter, inhaling through his mouth, exhaling as slow as he dared. *Hannah is going to steal the book. Somehow, she's managed to hide it. Shit. The guilt is biting my soul, consuming me, just as it must be doing to hers. I must do something.* Moving forward, Marek threaded his way between the shoppers and the kid helpers. Finally, when he was behind Hannah, Marek inhaled deeply, then placed his hand on her shoulder. "Hannah, come with me." Seeing her stricken, guilty face, he tried to smile, but it didn't work. "Let's talk in the back office, okay?"

Gently guiding her, Marek led the guilt-ridden young woman toward the office. Waves of guilt flew through him, causing him pain that he hadn't ever felt on his own. The payment for being the chakera of emotions, he thought ruefully. There was a way to help her and stop the pain, but would it be the right way? He gestured her into a chair while shutting the door. "Sit, Hannah."

She sat, her hands folded across her lap as her body shuddered with undisguised fear. Stealing the book had been a desperate attempt at giving herself a Christmas gift, one that would mean jail time -- a warm place to sleep, though she'd lose her jobs. All this, Marek intuited as her emotions and thoughts thundered at him. Tilting his head, he sent a pulse of warmth and caring as he stood at the threshold. She shuddered, then relaxed slightly, the pressure of guilt easing. His brow lifted. *Empathic. Makes sense. But how to help her and not*

fail myself? “I know you have that book. It’s one you’ve longingly touched every day for the past couple of days.”

“How did -- how did you know?” Her voice wobbled, fear lacing each word. The sensation filled his own mouth and he realized something. Stepping closer, he reached for her hand, kneeling once he was beside her.

“I know many things, Hannah. You give off strong emotions, and I’m sensitive enough to pick up on them. Things have been bad for a long time, haven’t they?” *Careful, Marek. Don’t scare her. She’s got talents that normally don’t show this strong in mortals, at least not back in the day. She’s as damaged as you were, if not more. Take it slow.* “You can trust I won’t hurt you.”

“Some of the kids here say that you’ve helped them. That you really understand them.” Her green eyes widened. “You said you’re sensitive. You mean, like an empath?”

“Yes. Why?”

“I -- I thought I was empathic once, but now I feel nothing but my own emotions encasing me, like ice.” Her free hand withdrew the book from under her coat. “Here’s the book. I’m sorry. I just wanted --”

“Shh, it’s okay, Hannah. Keep the book. Consider it my Yule gift to you.” Marek released her hand and went to the desk. As he sat, he felt the guilt ease up and surprise fill the room. “Do you want to tell me what’s been happening lately? I really want to help.”

Her fingers slid in between various pages in the paperback as the young woman told her story about being abandoned by a lover in a town far from home. The struggle to make ends meet and not being in contact with her family made it worse. She couldn’t go back; her parents had died recently, and until she could keep her chin up, she wasn’t ready to face her extended family. “So, you see, life isn’t easy. This place is one of the few refuges I have. Coming here helps me to keep some of my dreams alive.” The voice was soft, desperate, and so very tired.

Thoughts swirled in Marek's mind, each option weighed and discarded. What would help wasn't necessarily an option, yet, the more he considered it, the more it seemed the only thing that could get Hannah back to herself -- healed and whole. "What if I could take you to a place where you could learn to control your own empathic skills, learn a skill -- like writing or creating something that agrees with your nature, and you'd not have to worry about the daily grind? Would you be interested?"

"That sounds wonderful, but it's not real. There's no place on Earth like that."

A voice at the door captured their attention. "No, there's not. But where he means isn't quite on Earth. Marek, we need to speak," Tahra said, her eyes filled with worry.

"You can bring up your concerns here. Hannah has the right to know what I mean."

Tahra entered the room, sensing something different swirling about both Marek and the young woman. "You know you can't go through the portal. How the hell do you expect to take her to Djinn?"

"You."

"What?" Tahra looked at Marek in shock. He had to be kidding. He had to be.

Marek smiled. "I can't take her there, but you have the necklace. You can take her there and place her under my protection. The others will help take care of her until I get there, once Yule passes."

"What about living here?" Tahra continued, heedless of the young woman's startled gaze. "I thought you said you wanted to stay here?"

"I do. We will. But I can make sure Hannah is put into the jinn training program first." Marek gestured to the young woman. "Jinn are people who have half djinn blood and half mortal." He looked back to Tahra. "Can't you feel her emotions? They're out of control. Somehow, I think she's jinn."

Both women looked at him with matching expressions. "What? How is that possible?"

“Easily, with the way mortals replicate,” Marek answered, standing. Leaning against the desk, he explained, “We know that djinn and genies have mated with mortals through the centuries prior to our leaving, and occasionally since that time. However, the offspring carry the genetic tendency toward jinn powers, including empathy.”

“You mean I’m not human?” Hannah asked, her voice tight as panic filled the room.

“Calm down, *chaitara*. That’s not what I mean. You’re mortal with lower jinn powers, thus making you jinn by our standards, the mixed race of djinn and humans.” Marek gestured to Tahra. “Sit, my love, and let me bring Hannah to speed, since you forced my hand sooner than I planned.”

Tahra blushed. “I’m sorry, I thought you had told her all this.”

“No, I was trying to see which plan was better for her. Her emotions are battering at my control. I can only imagine how hard it is for her.” Marek gestured to Hannah. “I know this is a lot to take in, but trust me, among my people there is no shame. You have talents that here on Earth they can’t train, but among my people, who are also yours, they can. But I won’t force you to go. Once touched by the pendant, Tahra or her sister should be able to let you come back through the portal. I would love to teach you control of your empathic abilities, as I sense great potential within you, but I want to live here. I want to help others like you to attain the next level of humanity.”

“You mean the dreams I have aren’t just fanciful?” Hannah whispered. “When I was younger, my mom used to tell me stories about genies and princesses. I used to see people who danced, loved, and were artistic for the sake of art, not for war.”

Tahra saw Marek’s interest pique. “Tell us more about your dreams, Hannah. If Marek’s right, it might be imperative to take you to Djinn. It’s a wonderful place, a place you might prefer over Earth.”

“It started with two women dancing. One had long, curly black hair, the other wavy blonde hair, down to their waists. They were singing ...”

Two hours later

"We must take her to Djinn," Marek stated, looking into Tahra's refrigerator.

"There is no must, Marek. Let Mayri and Sebastian finish their part in this. If they concur, then I'll open the portal for her." Tahra flipped the switch flooding the kitchen in light. "Take the package of steak out. You make the salad while I cook the meat."

"Agreed." Marek tossed her a package, not even looking at her. His mind and heart swirled with the leftover emotions. "She still affects me."

"I see."

"Do you?" Marek turned around, his eyes blazing with emotion. "This is my job, Tahra. This is what dealing with others' emotions does to me. I'm not my own for a while after. All I can tell you is that it takes time to process the emotions through me, while I try to help others learn to control their own emotions."

"So, you're going to be a bastard when you help those who hurt the most?" Tahra slammed the package on the counter. "This is what I can expect?"

"Didn't they tell you anything about my skills? Or what I do?" Marek asked, his voice low and hard. "Have they ever explained how I help others with their emotional problems?"

Tahra shook her head. "Just that you somehow shift the intensity of the emotions. Like a therapist."

Barking in laughter, he turned away, grabbing the makings for the salad. "Oh, it's not quite that easy. Amazing, they sent me here to be judged, and they failed to tell my one exactly how my abilities work, or the consequences of my regaining my position. Just fucking brilliant."

"Talk to me, Marek. Don't talk to the food, talk to me."

Marek ignored her, grabbing a knife from the knife block, then chopping the onion. “Let me cope the way I can, Tahra. By concentrating on this aspect, I can speak without losing the control I’ve regained.”

“What didn’t the others tell me?”

“That the chakera is the embodiment of emotions, all of them. When I heal someone, I have them speak of their pain, their worries, and more. As they speak, the area around them fills with emotions. I gather them inside me, finding the paths to help them heal. With each moment, I feel, sense, *live* those emotions. That’s what it means to be a full empath.” Marek pushed the onion to one side, grabbing a carrot. As he chopped, his words came out in rhythm with each cut. “I help release helpful emotions and lessen the painful ones. When it’s time, the person being helped partakes in lessons.”

“Lessons? On how to feel?”

“No, lessons on coping with the situation, as well as learning how to focus the negative into a positive learning aspect.” Marek shifted his gaze to Tahra, who grabbed a bowl and tossed the veggies in it. “It’s something I failed to do. I forgot to give up the bad emotions. I clung to them. I didn’t use them to learn and move forward. That’s what the chakera does. He helps them to move forward, to learn how to keep control and make a positive experience out of something so traumatic.”

“But you were the chakera. Who was there to help you?”

“No one.” The words were barely heard in the room. “But I knew how to help myself. I failed to do it though. But now, with Hannah, I have the chance to prove myself chakera and give her the help she deserves as a child of both your world and mine.”

“What about your emotions? Or your actions right now? You’re tighter than a whip and worse.” Tahra ripped the lettuce into small pieces, tossing them into the bowl. “How is this making you any better?”

“Because I’m not letting the emotions win.” He gritted his teeth, concentrating on dicing the tomatoes before him. “See, my talent lies in the ability to not just accept emotions, but to shape them into better versions of themselves. However, I forgot when I was hurt that sometimes you must let the emotions go, not keep them to yourself. Now, I remember that and I’m letting them out. The only problem is that my actions are influenced. My family knows this and they normally stay out of my way for at least four hours, letting me shed the excess emotions out of my system.”

“But I’m here.”

“You’re my one. If you’re to truly love and understand me, you need to see this side of me too.” Lifting his gaze, he looked into her deep eyes. “If you can’t accept this part of me, I do understand.”

“I -- I can, I just ...” Tahra looked away. “It’s new; it’s like the old Marek. I’m so afraid you’ll go back to how you were.”

Reaching out, he caressed her cheek. “I am not the old Marek. I’m a new, improved model. But this is part of me you must accept. I might sound like him, I might even engage in old actions while grounding these excess emotions. Yet I’m not that person you first met. You’ve made me better than that, as has this world.”

Her eyes flashed with emotion and a tear ran down her cheek. “Promise?”

“As much as I’m able, I promise that I’m not going to go back to the old way. It almost destroyed me and any hope of love.” Marek smiled. “Get to making that steak so we can eat. While you do that, I’m going to go meditate and try to purge the last of this out, okay?”

“As you wish, master.” Tahra smiled, attempting humor.

“Don’t call me master, unless you’re planning on letting me take charge tonight.” Marek leaned over the counter and kissed her chin. “I love you, Tahra. I promise you, if my family saw me today, they’d realize how much I’ve changed and healed.”

“Oh, we know,” said Geraint as he walked through a blinding light. “Bast and Mayri came to us with a present. Seems someone thinks a young Earth woman should be trained in the ways of the jinn.”

Siraen bypassed the man and went to Marek, hugging him. “It’s good to have you home in the heart, again, brother mine.”

“I’m glad to be home,” Marek whispered into her ear. “Please say you voted to allow Hannah into Djinn.”

Siraen smiled, pulling back. “Actually, Marek, I voted against her. But --” She raised her hand, seeing Marek’s face darken. “-- it was with a condition. I’m giving her one week in Djinn, to see if she wishes to choose this path. You know that not all take to the ways of the djinn or jinn fully.”

“Which is why Mayri and I voted to take Hannah to Djinn. We wanted her to see the place firsthand to make her choice,” Bast commented, stepping forward, embracing his brother while the sisters hugged one another. “You’ve improved so much; you’ve stepped forward and finally made peace with that day.”

“I have. It still hurts, but I know now that I was only in control of my actions, no one else’s. That day ... that day hurts badly, but now I know that I’m only to blame for my own actions, and I didn’t cause her death. How was I to know that Mother would leave? That she couldn’t stay with us coming into our powers and not be diminished further? How was I to know that I was her replacement and that she died because she didn’t care about anything else but herself?” Tears streamed down his face. “Though I blamed myself, I’m not the one who made her leave, or the one who caused her death. I offered to help and she rejected me, her own child.”

Bast hugged his brother closer. “I know. I wish things had ended differently, but it is done. The past. Cling to the good memories now, and know you are loved among us.”

Nadja slid between the brothers. "I voted she stay. I'd like to oversee her healing. She has a beautiful singing voice, Marek."

He wrapped his arm around Nadja's waist. "She is named Hannah, Nadja. I'd be honored if you'd be her teacher. I will be staying here most of the time."

His siblings looked at him, none of the speaking. Finally, Logron stepped past Bast. "What do you mean? You don't want to come back to Djinn?"

Marek motioned Tahra next to him. Taking her hand, he kissed her palm. "It's not that. I just think I can do more here on Earth. We'll make regular visits to Djinn, I can't forsake my place as chakera -- if I've not lost my place."

"You have not. Your change is apparent to all, and you've once again come home to us. But this living here. How will you cope?"

Mayri spoke up. "I think I might have an idea." Whispering quickly in her husband's ear, she told him her idea. When he nodded, she spoke to the family. "I will give Tahra and Marek my store. Then I can come to Djinn full time, visiting to help out where I can. That way, Marek can continue his work to prep others for the return of the Djinn world while also healing others, directing mortal jinn toward us."

The others looked at the small woman in amazement. Marek threw back his head, laughter filling the room. "Oh, gods, Mayri, that's fantastic! I love working with the kids, and I'd love to expand in the building, perhaps forming a special place to learn the djinn path of love and acceptance."

"Done. We'll get the paperwork done, including giving you credentials, birth certificate, etcetera," Tahra chimed in. "You're going to stay. You're really going to stay!"

The room filled with music as the moon clock in the middle of the living room chimed twelve times. "Happy Yule, my one, my love," Marek whispered, kissing Tahra.

"Happy Yule, my chakera of emotions," she answered, her lips brushing his. "I love you."

“And I take you as my wife before everyone here.” Her smile had him chuckling. “Don’t hit me like your sister did to my brother. No decking the djinn. How about some hot sex?”

Laughter echoed through the room. A hand rose up. “Can we watch?” Siraen asked.

“No!” Marek and Tahra said simultaneously. “Why don’t you all join us for a meal before heading back?”

Marek nodded. “And you can explain how Mayri and Bast were able to hold the portal open long enough for you all to come through.” Leaning over, he whispered in his fiancée’s ear, “Later tonight, I’m going to show you the trick I can do with long stemmed cherries, deep in your pussy.”

His eyes took in her blushing cheeks and he grinned, just as her hand connected against his cheek.

Voices behind him began to sing ...

“Deck the djinn with boughs of cherry ... Falalala la la la la

See him getting laid by his lady ... Falalala la la la la

He won’t let us see him getting fucked ... Falalala lala la la

Fuck the djinn and make him hoarse ... Falala lala la dela la la.”

 THE END 

YULETIDE YEARNINGS

“Remind me why I’m going through this torture.” Eileen grunted as the woman behind her tugged on the corset strings, tying them in place.

“Because you’re visiting me in England and you’re going to this masked Victorian ball for fun,” Dr. Riana Sinclair responded, a soft teasing tone giving her words a cheery lilt.

Eileen’s eyes rolled as she shrugged into the gown for the night’s festivities, allowing Riana to help with the fastenings. “I don’t want to wear a corset. These things were responsible for more deaths due to their restrictiveness --”

“I’m in one, and yours is not that tight. Stop your whining.” The blonde woman handed Eileen her mask before taking the now heated curling iron to Eileen’s hair. “Personally, I’d prefer to miss this damn thing, but can I? Nope. This means, if I have to go to this, you do, too. I do promise that we won’t stay too long.”

Eileen gazed around Riana’s home and grinned. Anyone who came here would realize that Riana wasn’t the normal historian that many people thought she was, seeing things through a biased, ethnocentric view, but rather was truly one of the few unbiased, no-holds-barred on the good and bad of all cultures, including the ones that produced her. It was always refreshing to come to Riana’s home, yet ever since her last mission on the goddess’s behalf, there had been sadness in Riana’s eyes. A sadness that Riana refused to speak about with anyone, including Eileen.

“Are you going to tell me why you’re upset about attending Sir John Wayreth’s ball?” Eileen asked.

"I hate being in public among this many people. After that one night --" Riana stopped herself. "I know he's grateful for how I organized his collection and helped him to get money by loaning it to various museums, but dammit, I'm not a pet to any man!"

Eileen nodded. "I do understand, Ri. But honestly, let's talk about that last mission. What happened?"

"It's not discussable, Eye. It's just not. There was a test, and I failed it in my arrogance," Riana replied, winding some ribbons through a set of curls and giving them a fancy flourish. "There, you're done. You look wonderful, my Irish friend. Truly you will be one of the belles of the ball tonight."

Looking at the full-length mirror, Eileen tried to see what Riana did. She was decently tall for a woman, but with her shoulder-length, dark brown hair and dark eyes, she didn't think she looked all that spectacular. "Yeah, right, Riana. Look at you in your sapphire and silver gown; you're the belle."

"No, I'm the dowager; you are the young debutante. And don't you forget it, my fey friend." Riana's smile was reflected in the mirror. "You possess an unearthly beauty that is treasured by many. Why else do the sidhe watch over you at the rath near your home?"

"You know?" Eileen shook her head. She wondered what else her mentor knew about her. "How long have you known?"

"Since the day we first met years ago. Is it that important that I never spoke of your connections to the sidhe?"

Dark eyes looked deeply into green ones, and realization came to Eileen's mind. "Oh, shite, Riana, you're part fey, too!"

"Got it in one. Give the fey a cookie!" Riana glanced at the clock. "Time to go."

"Righto! Let's go have some fun at this Yule party. And I promise not to stir up too much trouble."

"That would be amazing, considering the mischievous part of your nature -- and mine!"

* * * * *

Raking his fingers through his blond hair, Donal Maraigh sighed heavily. He had just gotten to Wayreth's estate and regretted accepting the invitation. It wasn't just that the Wayreths were good friends, but that his older brothers had encouraged him to attend, saying he was getting too isolated from people whom he needed to keep contact with. *They're right, but it doesn't make it easier that this is for a fecking ball!* Straightening up, his reflection in the mirror showed him as a traditional Victorian gentleman with black pants and a matching velvet jacket.

"My brothers would be in a fecking tizzy if they saw me like this," he moaned to himself.

"What makes you think we've not seen you like this?" a voice called out behind him. Donal whipped around to see Miach snapping pictures with a digital camera. "You're such a pretty boy, Donal. The others will love this!"

"Give me the bloody camera before I kiss your face with my fist, Miach!"

"Get up the yard, Donal! You know there's no way you can get me before I go poof."

"Up and shite, you effing bowsie!"

Miach chuckled as he stepped forward to fix Donal's cravat. "Let me guess -- your Irish side is coming out in Gansey-loads, tons, with this event."

"Can you blame me, Miach? Do you expect me to keep myself low-key when whinging loudly and constantly might actually get me out of this bloody effing ball?" Donal tugged at his jacket. "I hate playing dress-up. This is something you or Finn, or even Cuin, would do better than myself."

"Ah, but the Wayreths are your clients, and though I know them well, I wasn't invited." Miach stared at the results of his work, then took a couple of pictures and continued. "Make sure you tidy your hair up, mate. Just find yourself a fine woman to give your attention to and you'll do well. Make sure you pay your respects to the lord of this place

first.” Miach grinned as he took a few more pictures. “Who knows, rumor has it that Dr. Sinclair might be here tonight, Elathan said. She’s the one who got Wayreth to offer up his collection to the Petrie Museum for a small showing. He’s impressed, though he and some of the others agree that she’s a stumbling block when it comes to protecting certain aspects of our ancient beliefs and the way of druidry.”

“Bloody shite, kill me now and be done with it. I’m not up to dealing with that woman. Some say that she’s started major feuds with other scholars to force them to look not at the evidence, but also the way things have developed forward to what’s happening now. I don’t want to deal with her. I don’t.” Donal’s blue eyes looked deeply into Miach’s. “Tell me that you’re bullshitting me, *deartháir*.”

“It’s only rumor. But if she shows, it’d be good to find out what she’s going to be up to next. She disappeared for a while, and when she came back, she was very subdued, according to some of our connections. Wonder what made our lovely part-time nemesis so quiet,” Miach responded as he stepped back from Donal.

“If I have to meet her, maybe I can find out. Don’t count on it, though.”

“Have fun tonight, Donal. You deserve to spend some time in the company of people, not just your security computers. Morganna was a long time ago, and it’s time for you to move forward.”

“Just because it seems like the curse is being broken doesn’t mean it’ll happen to all of us.”

“I know. But you never know unless you keep your eyes open.” Miach sauntered out the wall, phasing through it like a ghost. “Have some fun tonight.”

Donal sighed. *Bloody damnation. He’s going to post the piccies to the damn site for all of the cûntior and our brothers to see!* Brushing his hair into place, he grabbed his mask and declared himself ready to deal with the crowd. Luckily for him, he had enough practice at maintaining his solid form that it shouldn’t be a problem for him tonight among the many

guests at the ball. It wouldn't be good to have someone walk through him while others watched. Being a wraith wasn't easy, especially since he was a ghost that scared people at night as his solidity faded with the sinking of the sun. Now it was a pain in the arse when he had to actually deal with mortals not in the know and where one slipup could cause more trouble than it was worth. Hopefully, he could keep it up for a while, then excuse himself for a bit so he could renew himself for another round before excusing himself completely for the night. Next time one of his clients wanted him to attend one of their functions, he was sending one of the O'Connors who worked for him; this was the last time he'd get suckered into this shite.

Resignedly, he went downstairs for the start of the ball.

* * * * *

The main hall was trimmed in red, green, silver, and gold for the holidays. Eileen's eyes seemed as big as dinner plates, she reckoned, as she took in all of the sights. "This place is jammers!"

Riana grinned as she took Eileen's arm, guiding her past a few groups of people. "Aye, it's packed with stuff and people. His Yule ball is one of the major events people really love to attend. Good food in good quantities and always a unique theme each year. Last year it was a Celtic Christmas. That was actually not too bad since I got to act as one of the *filidh*, bards, at that event."

"You went, I take it."

"Yes. It's how I got the job of cataloguing his collection as well as putting together the show at the Petrie."

"Ah, makes sense on why you'd actually cater to someone you normally would've brushed off." Eileen saw the signs of agitation in her friend and mentor. This wasn't like Riana at all, and she wondered once again what had happened in Belgium. "You hate being

here, don't you? Are you sure we need to be here? We can leave if you're that uncomfortable."

"No, I will get through this just fine. It's just a bit tough after what I went through." Riana's voice lowered as a couple greeted them as they walked by. "I got caught in a stampede of people, and I'm still not sure how I lived through it. I should've died, though, blessing be to Morrigu, she got me past the worst of it."

"Riana! Why didn't you --"

"Enough. I'll get through this. It's not unbearably packed. Plus, there are alcoves where you can sit and not have many people around." Riana brought her friend forward as an older couple, one of the few not wearing masks, headed for them. "Sir John, a pleasure to see you tonight. Lady Wayreth, this place is stunning!"

"I'm glad you made it, Riana. Who is this gorgeous young lady with you?" Sir John asked as he took first Riana's hand in greeting, then put his hand out towards Eileen.

Riana gestured to Eileen. "This is Eileen Collins, a dear family friend and my most accomplished student. I'm hoping she'll keep my legacy going when it comes time."

The gentleman, with a slightly Phantom of the Opera air to him, scooped up her hand and kissed it while Riana hugged his wife. "A delight to make your acquaintance, Miss Collins. I hope you'll enjoy the ball tonight."

Eileen felt herself blush behind the mask. "Thank you, Sir John. This is beyond spectacular. I've never been to a place as sumptuous as this before. Thank you for letting me attend."

Sir John turned his gaze back towards her mentor. "Riana, could we speak on a matter privately?"

Riana's brow lifted above her mask, showing her surprise at their host's request. "Business now? Couldn't it wait until tomorrow morning, sir?"

“Just for a moment. Then I promise I won’t hound you anymore.” Sir John gestured to a small door off to one side of the ballroom.

Riana looked at her, their gazes meeting. “Eileen, you’ll be all right while we speak for a few minutes?”

“I’ll be fine. Go along. I’ll see you later on.” Eileen looked at their hostess, dressed in a pale pink silk gown. “Lady Wayreth, thank you as well for letting me accompany Riana to this beautiful ball. I’m sorry they need to talk business on such a fun occasion.”

“We’re always glad to meet Riana’s friends when they come to London. Come along. I’d not like you to be alone too much. There are gentlemen here who aren’t too sweet, I fear.” The older woman led the way past some couples, greeting them softly before continuing the walk away from the center of the room.

“Just like in the Victorian time, I wager.” Eileen chuckled at the thought of her being ravaged by a rogue gentleman. Her eyes took in the decorated Christmas tree that filled one corner of the ballroom. “That is so beautiful, Lady Wayreth. I’ve never seen such a beautifully decorated tree in a traditional Victorian manner before.”

The hostess smiled at Eileen. “Call me Jessica, please. I’m glad you like it. You’re Irish by birth, not just by living there, aren’t you?”

“Yes, County Carlow, born and raised.” Eileen touched one branch of the tree that had mistletoe hanging from it.

“I love County Wicklow. My sister and I used to go every summer to be with Gram. Some of my favorite times were spent on Irish soil, learning more about my mom’s family. It’s good to meet someone who understands the need to preserve traditions while creating new ones as well.”

Understanding flooded Eileen’s mind at that moment. “Ah, you’re part of Eire yourself and want to bring together kith, kin, and those who wouldn’t otherwise have something beautiful to remember.”

“Yes, exactly. Hold on, I think there’s someone you might like to meet. He’s from Ireland, too.” Jessica stepped away and tapped the shoulder of a fair-haired man at the drink table. She spoke quickly and with a determined smile, though Eileen wished she knew exactly what Jessica was saying to him. As they headed in her direction, she stifled a sigh, knowing that her hostess meant well.

It’s not that she didn’t want to meet a fellow Irish, but it was a matter of being matched up with someone. She wanted to have fun and not be tied down, especially if Riana wanted to leave soon. The slight frown on his lips told her that he felt the same way, allowing her to fill with relief. That’s when how sexy he was hit her.

He was tall, about six feet or so, with slightly tousled blond hair and blue eyes peering at her through a silver mask. His build was elegant and not overly muscular that she could see. The dark clothes looked perfect on him, giving him a slightly roguish air. Though she normally dated dark-haired men, she had to admit there was something very sexy about this blond Irishman that intrigued her.

“Miss Collins, this is Donal Maraigh. Donal, this is Eileen Collins.” Jessica placed their hands together, giving them both an encouraging smile. “Donal, be a dear and show Eileen around while I welcome more people, since John is still busy. Thanks. Ta!”

“Hello, Donal. Lady Wayreth mentioned you’re from Ireland, just as I am. Are you native born?” Her voice sounded instantly huskier than normal, and she cringed inside.

“Yes, I am. I’ve not been home lately, so Jessica and John wanted me to attend this party of theirs before I head for home.” Donal smiled, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “Let me guess, you were born near Dublin, but not quite.”

“County Carlow, actually.”

“Beautiful place. I miss Eire badly when I’m away from it. Which is why I normally hire employees to do the traveling.” He took her hand, guiding her away from the Christmas tree. “Let’s get you a drink, and we’ll wander around for a while. I hate it being so jammed.

I prefer less people, to give everyone a chance to meet each other. But they do this for charity, so I can't complain."

"Aye, I agree with you that less people would make it much more enjoyable. A drink would be bang on." She kept her hand in his as they strolled towards the drinks table, allowing herself to be guided around various groups of people.

Donal chuckled as he handed her a drink, then took one for himself. "Here, this isn't too bad with the alcohol. Would you like to dance after to the music, or perhaps take a walk in the conservatory?"

Eileen grinned as a blush crept over her face, even though she knew he could only see a portion of her face. "A conservatory? Really? That would be most welcome. I love all growing things, not to mention that dancing isn't quite my thing. Well, Victorian dancing at any rate."

"Then please allow me the pleasure of being your escort, Eileen." His voice flowed around her, and she felt both comforted and aroused by his words.

"Thank you, Donal. I'd appreciate it."

Together they walked among the crowd that danced and congregated, talking. Eileen glimpsed her friend's deep sapphire gown with silver trimming as they took a turn out of the ballroom. Riana was deep in a conversation with Sir John, so Eileen refrained saying anything aloud. Suddenly she heard a voice in her mind.

Be careful, Eileen, and enjoy yourself.

Ri?

Yes?

Can you please get out of my head now? A chuckle of assent filled her mind, then quieted. It was not fun knowing that Riana had the ability to mindspeak to people close to her, especially when she used it to irritate them or shock them at the worst possible times. Granted they had to be within a half a mile, but it was quite a feat, a gift from Morrighu.

“Which way to the conservatory, Donal?” She sipped at the cup of mulled cider and sighed happily. “This is truly fantastic cider.”

“We’re not far from it.” His hand caressed her back as he guided her down another hallway, taking them further from the ballroom and away from the crowd.

“You’ve been here often? It seems you know your way around here quite readily.”

“Sir John is one of my clients. They invite me over a couple times a year, so between the visits and installing his security, I’ve pretty well memorized where all the various halls lead in this place. The conservatory area is one of my favorite places to visit when I’m here.” They turned right and stood before a thick sliding glass door. “Here we go. I hope the slight humidity won’t damage your gorgeous gown.”

“If it can survive ironing and whatever else necessary to make it look like this, it can handle being in the conservatory fairly easily.” Eileen waited while Donal opened the door, then stepped through. A rush of warmth and moisture hit her full on, and she sighed happily as her skin tingled with the increased temperature. “Oh, it’s so warm in here! I think I’m in heaven. I don’t enjoy the cold weather too much, even if I am Irish.”

They walked along the small path that meandered throughout the length of the conservatory. Rich, moist air caressed her nostrils as she inhaled deeply before exhaling. Donal pointed out various plants, some in bloom, some unusual to the British climate, as they turned one rounded area of the room. Donal slid her hand into his hand as they spotted various orchids, night flowers, and more. Eileen paused at one particular planting, releasing Donal’s hand before stepping off the path. She cupped a bloom with her hands, then breathed in the scent of the night-blooming jasmine, amazed at the soft petals and the unique fragrance. It was one of her favorite flowers, though only a couple people knew it.

Her voice dropped low as she released the plant and stepped back. “Such a beautiful flower, only seen at night. No wonder why it’s so prized among flower lovers.”

“It’s not the only lovely blossom here this evening, Eileen. I think you’re just as lovely.” His warm fingers stroked one of her arms before capturing her hand. Lifting it to his lips, Donal kissed the palm of her hand before releasing it.

Blushing, Eileen brushed away his comments, though the burning of his touch lingered on her skin. “You’ve not seen under my mask, so can you know I’m not hideous?”

“You move with the grace of the sidhe, you speak sensually, and your lips are the softness of the petals you stroke, my dear.”

“Oh, my.” Licking her lips, she felt a roar of desire, greater than anything she’d felt before flood her from head to toes before settling deep within her womb. *What on Morrighu’s earth should I do?* Should she give in to the growing temptation to touch him? Tonight was different than any other night -- it was Yule, a time to rejoice that soon spring would arrive and a time to allow a moment of sunshine into one’s life.

Reaching up, she stroked where his jaw was exposed. “And you, fair Donal, are truly handsome in both soul and body. Your words are surely blarney, but I am grateful for them all the same.”

His hand captured hers just as his eyes speared hers. “Look up above your head, Eileen.”

As she did, her mouth formed a perfect *O*. Above her head was a bunch of mistletoe, dangling from a golden cord. Her eyes met his again as his mouth descended upon hers. The sweetness of the mulled cider, mixed with a scent that was pure masculinity at its finest, filled her senses.

His body was warmth and solidity against hers, but her thoughts went ethereal as she felt her spirit soar under his expert kiss. His hands pressed her against him as they slid up and down her back, encouraging her to respond. Her hands played in his hair as the kiss deepened between them.

Inside her mind, images of them making love, him naked, thrusting deep inside her, played out over and over. She felt his body slide over hers, his mouth suckling on one breast as his hand covered the other. Just as it seemed impossible to tell the images in her mind from the kisses they shared, his fingers pulled at the low-cut gown, until her breasts spilled from the top. His fingers toyed with her nipple as liquid fire centered low in her belly.

“Touch me, Eileen. Make me feel what you feel.”

Reaching out, her hand brushed against his erection. She stroked it, her fingers wrapping possessively around him. “Like this?”

“Gods, Eileen, yes,” Donal hissed before leaning forward, his lips capturing her mouth, plunging his tongue in desperately. “Just like that, mo dhílis.”

His other hand slid between her thighs, stroking her nether lips. As he slid one finger deep within her core, she bucked against him as they mutually explored each other’s mouths, their hands moving in synchronous time.

Donal slid her hand from his cock, slowly lowering himself over her. “Come for me, Eileen.”

Her body bowed as a rush of sensation overloaded her, her mouth moaning his name as she climaxed. “Donal!”

Matching her movements, Donal slid between her inviting thighs and guided himself to her entrance. “Eileen, Eibhlin ta tu go h-aláinn ar fad Eileen. Open for me, my dear.” With that, he slid into her warm sheath, causing them both to moan.

Eileen arched against his body. “Oh, Donal!”

The heat flared between them as Donal thrust deeply into her. Over and again, they mated with growing intensity. Their labored breathing was the only sign of how intensely they moved, as they seemed to claim each other, kissing, licking as their bodies thrust in time with a song only they heard.

“Eileen!” Donal growled as his body stiffened. “I’m going to come, my love.”

“Yes, Donal! Yes!” Eileen screamed as she suckled on his bottom lip, her legs wrapping around him, urging him to completion. Her body felt on fire.

As he growled her name repeatedly, he let loose, his climax triggering an answering shudder as Eileen joined him. They kept moving, slowing down so their breathing could catch up to their bodies’ satiety.

He stroked her bare cheek. “That was magnificent, Eileen. So bloody damn brill. You’re a wonderful woman.”

“You’re fierce yourself, Donal.” Her lips grazed his.

“Time to leave this beautiful place you’ve created for us, though I wish we could indulge physically what we’ve done in here, my sweet, fine beauty.”

“Leave the daydream? I don’t understand, Donal.”

Reluctantly, Donal pulled back, watching Eileen carefully. She looked slightly dazed. He knew she wouldn’t quite understand what had happened, and he wasn’t quite sure himself, though he knew one of his abilities allowed him to enter the daydreams of someone he touched. Once there, he couldn’t help but manipulate the daydream to their mutual benefit, especially as she seemed to want him as much as he wanted her. This instant attraction was something he wasn’t used to, not on this magnitude. He wanted to know more about her, but knew if he pushed, she might run away and not allow him the chance to explain things.

His body trembled once again at the ferocity of their combined desires. He felt lucky that his jacket overlapped the front of his pants, covering the wetness from having come. Dammit, he wanted to drag her up to his room and complete this physically as they had psychically, but it wouldn’t be good for him or her ... well, maybe it’d be better, but they didn’t really know each other, and this time was a sacred time. Perhaps he could see her

again once he was back in Ireland. Yes, that was a better idea, since he didn't know if she had arrived with someone or not.

"Thank you," Eileen said with a slight tremble in her voice. "That was a lovely Yule kiss."

Donal smiled and brushed back one loose curl. "I should be thanking you, Eileen. Your lips are truly as soft as I thought."

"We probably should return to the party before they send the troops to hunt us down." She moved towards the path, her gaze never leaving his face. "A friend of mine brought me tonight, and I don't want her to get worried if she can't find me."

Nodding, he reached up and broke off a small piece of mistletoe, attaching it to the ribbon that hung near her breast. "Here, a slight remembrance of our Yuletide kiss."

Standing on her tiptoes, she kissed his bottom lip, a shock coursing through them both. "*Go raibh maith agat*, Donal."

Hand in hand they walked out of the conservatory, almost running into their host. Donal recovered first. "You okay, Sir John?" Donal asked.

"Yes. Miss Collins, your friend is wondering where you scampered off to. She's about had enough of this party, I think."

"She hates large crowds when she feels there's no place to get away from the crush," Eileen said knowingly. "I'd best go to her, then. Donal, thank you again for showing me the conservatory. It was beautiful and you were very knowledgeable about the plants in bloom."

Eileen took Sir John's proffered arm and left Donal standing there, watching her swaying backside as they retreated to the ballroom. She was definitely one of the sexiest women he had met in a long time, and she had made a good portion of the night fly by with her presence.

“Dammit, I need a cold shower.” Donal swung around and headed to his room. “If only we had more time, Eileen. We could’ve done more together, and not on a dream level, *mo dhílis*.”

* * * * *

“I’m sorry to take you away from the ball, Eye. I just couldn’t take it. Once Sir John and I finished our business --” Riana tossed the keys onto the table inside the door of the apartment. “It’s not that I don’t like people, but I know that it’s not the usual thing either of us prefers when it comes to having fun.”

“Tis quite all right, Riana. Tell me, have you ever had a dream feel so real that you felt it happening to your body though you knew it had to be only a dream?”

“Yes. But why don’t we get out of these clothes first before discussing metaphysical things.”

Eileen agreed and headed to her room. Her thoughts returned once again to the kiss and the vividness of her daydream. Her body shook as though it were spent after indulging carnally, and when she changed it was obvious to her that her body had reacted to more than just the kiss between her and Donal. Sheepishly, she changed her panties as well, grateful that at least no one could see how much he had turned her on.

Finished changing, she returned to the living room, where Riana sat on one couch, drinks on the table for them both. Eileen sat across from Riana and asked, “Is it possible for a dream to be more than a dream? Can a dream be shared by two people who aren’t fully sleeping?”

“Sometimes, yes. I know of dream walkers who can walk your daydreams and nighttime dreams. They can play in those dreams and our bodies when we’re dreaming. We don’t know if they’re happening or not, so our bodies react as if what we dream about is real. Why?”

Eileen waved her hand. “Nothing. Just something a man I met at the party said to me. I was curious to know if it was really possible.”

Riana smiled at Eileen, and Eileen knew her friend didn’t fully believe her. “It’s rare, but yes, it can happen. If you’re talking dream sharing, that’s even rarer.” Riana rewrapped the tie around her silk robe. “Why don’t we put on a good movie and eat some junk food. I have some of your favorites.”

“I’ll pick the movie this time. You go get us some food to go with these drinks.” Eileen scampered to where the movies were stored while Riana went to the kitchen. Selecting a few DVDs, Eileen thought on the mysterious Donal. *Maybe he is a dream walker. That could explain how it felt we both shared my daydream. It felt so damn real.*

“Got us drinks and tons of food. I know we missed supper there, but I’ll make it up to you,” Riana called out from the kitchen. “How about we go to Piccadilly tomorrow for lunch?”

“Deal!”

When her friend returned, bearing a tray filled with various snack foods, Eileen held up three movies. Riana looked at Eileen’s choices and her blonde brow raised in question. “Your call, Eileen. I can see where your mind is tonight, and I doubt anything I say can sway you.”

“Good. We’re going to watch this one.”

* * * * *

Donal undressed and stepped into the cold shower, rinsing his body off. Images of him and Eileen came unbidden to his mind as he realized just what he had done. Dammit, he hadn’t found out where she lived or anything. Wait. *What did she say? She’s from County Carlow. Maybe when I have time, I can find her, and perhaps, if she’s willing, we can go out.*

When he was done, Donal debated redressing in costume or just in a regular tuxedo, as several other guests had worn. He had promised Lady Wayreth that he'd attend the meal before dodging the rest of the evening at the ball, thus ending the debate. Dressing quickly, Donal considered many ideas on how to find his impromptu date. In the end, he figured he'd ask his hosts about her. Maybe they could fill in the blanks.

Whistling, he went downstairs to mingle, knowing no one else would tempt him like the woman with the chocolate-brown eyes and curves that called for his touch alone.

"Happy Yule to me, happy Yule to you," he sang to himself. "May this coming year be better than the last two thousand or so."

 THE END 

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Born in Chicago, currently living in the Peninsula state, aka Florida, Cynnara loves to write, has always been writing or telling stories. Unfortunately for her, it means that her sense of direction sucks on occasion, but she can tell you all about ancient history. She always writes hot, but on occasion, delves into various other genres. Yet her first love is paranormal with various other genres tossed in for good measure.

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