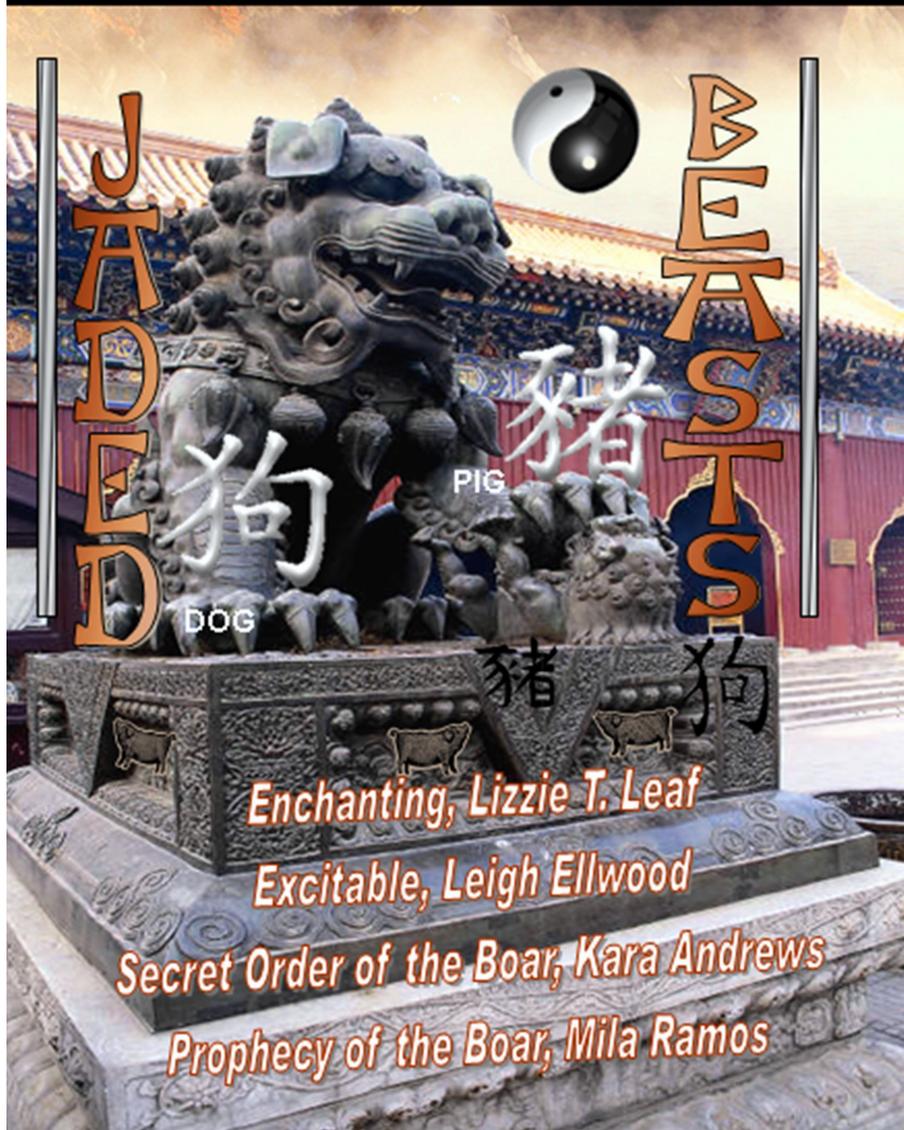


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Jaded Beasts 6, Dog-Pig

MIDNIGHT SHOWCASE
Special Edition Vol. 06-30

Jaded Beasts VI
Dog & Pig

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Jaded Beasts 6, Dog-Pig

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Jaded Beasts VI, Dog & Pig

Dog – Exceptionally smart and truthful, these silent and steadfast creatures can be relied on by their loved ones, despite their tendencies to be overanxious. Besides their bad habit of find fault, they are victorious in their dealings with life.

Pig – Wonderful friends to have the boar is a truthful and heartfelt creature that often shies away from other beings. Despite its impulsive nature and quick temperament, they tend to forfeit their existence for the betterment of another's.

Enchanting, Lizzie T. Leaf

Transformed into a dog, Cayde MacAllister is taken home by bewitching vet Dr. Amanda Livingston. Now if he could only get the spell reversed!

Excitable, Leigh Ellwood

Werewolf Chandler Van Horn is hexed into a vicious, fang-baring...Chihuahua! Will Attorney Lindy Harris cure his infliction by mating with him?

Secret Order of the Boar, Kara Andrews

Jonin Lee is content with his life and job at the space agency, until meeting Sabine Morgan , who treats him like a swine.

Prophecy of the Boar – Mila Ramos

As the last of her kind, Ailsa must fulfill a sacred prophecy with the one man she believes betrayed her.

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

Enchanting
By
Lizzie T. Leaf

Chapter One

Randall McAllister pulled his car into the driveway and leaned back against the headrest letting sounds of Barry Manilow's *Mandy* wash over him as he studied the house. Goddess only knows what he would find waiting for him on the other side of the red double doors. The havoc his twin sisters created during the course of a few hours alone made him wince, but a whole day left to their own devices...he shuddered as he imagined the possibilities of what the two fifteen year olds could get into.

Usually, Granna Lila stayed with the Demon Duo when their mother traveled. This time his luck didn't hold and Jorgia, their mother, made a frantic call to him last night asking for his help.

Jorgia held the position of High Priestess of the witches' council. She intended to put a new proposal to a vote before the general membership at convention this year to add a Member at Large to the council. Anticipating objections from some of the council members who felt this diluted their power, she'd her asked her mother to come prior to the two-week conference and lobby the more liberal individuals for support. Lila had retired from the governing body several years earlier, but still carried considerable influence with the council as well as the general membership.

Sighing, Rand flipped the lock release and climbed out of the car. Opening the back door, he lifted the pizza box from the back seat and felt his stomach respond with a rumble when the scent of pepperoni tickled his nose. He'd missed lunch because of a conference call and

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survived the afternoon on a pack of stale crackers he kept in his desk and coffee strong enough to eat the plating off a spoon.

Silence greeted him when he entered the house. "I'm home." His announcement received no response and he cast his eyes around in nervous anticipation. The hairs on the back of his neck tickled, a sure indication that Charmela and Charisma were up to something.

Muted voices drew him toward the back of the house and the kitchen. "Mel? Riz?" Still no answer, just the sounds of an argument in progress, which was their normal way of communication. "Mom should have named them Imp and Spawn," he mumbled as he neared the entrance to the kitchen. Sadly, even Simma the giant black cat that was the family's familiar had more common sense than his sisters.

Standing in the door, he ran the fingers of his free hand through his short black hair as he watched the dual mops of carrot curls bent over a book spread out on the counter. By the powers, they had dragged their mother's *Book of Enhancements* out of the cabinet above the refrigerator. The trouble the two could create from that book would be anything but enchanting.

How could the three of them come from the same mother? He shook his head in wonder as the thought drifted through his mind. Granted they had different fathers, but both male parents had been human. Maybe it was a good thing their mother fell in love with non-magical beings. The thought of the potential powers that could be brought into play if the twins weren't half human was terrifying. Even so, they seemed to have inherited not only their share of their mother's abilities, but his also. His limited magic abilities, which he didn't consider magic, consisted of the occasional feelings of problems or doom when the hairs on the back of his neck stood up and unfortunately, that usually happened when he was around his half sisters.

"Look, stupid. I told you, that's wrong. You didn't pronounce the last word correctly." Green eyes glared at the mirror image standing beside her.

"Did too. You don't know what you're talking about. Just because you're two minutes older doesn't make you the boss." Riz's resentment of being the younger of the duo had always been a sore point and she brought it up often.

Rand rubbed a hand across his brown eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose between them. A migraine threatened to erupt. Maybe he could distract them with the pizza and then they'd discuss why they

had the book out in the first place. Both girls knew this particular guide to magic was off limits to them unless their mother or grandmother used the enormous volume in their training of the ever curious pair.

“Here, I’ll show you.” Rand knew the superior tone used by Mel, the elder of the two, would set off another heated argument, but watched in fascination as she raised her hand and pointed her index finger toward a plant in the corner to the left of the door.

Words spilled out. “You will breathe the air as animal. Come alive as I direct. Shamba-Ha...”

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Rand bellowed and watched in horror as Mel’s finger turned toward him.

“Loh.” Mel’s head followed the direction her finger pointed at the sound of her brother’s shouted question.

Rand felt a jolt of power flow through his body similar to an electrical surge and the box containing dinner fell to the floor. When the pain and shocks subsided, he realized he was lying on the floor with his nose pressed against the cardboard. The fall must have heightened his sense of smell because he had never detected such a strong aroma from food. His saliva glands kicked in and he could have controlled the weather easier than the drool pooling from his mouth.

Why did his head feel so strange? He pushed up with his arms and paused for a moment to let the dizziness pass. *Okay, I made it to my hands and knees. Time to stand up.* A push with his knees and he went nowhere. Looking up from his lower position, he saw two pairs of emerald orbs staring down at him in horror.

“*What’s wrong?*” Damn, his voice sounded more like a growl. He looked down and jumped at the sight that greeted him. *Holy shit.* The vision of black, curly fur covering a small paw where his long fingers should have been, sent his heart racing. What the hell was going on here?

“*Mirror. Mirror, get me a mirror. Quick!*” He looked up at the freckled faces hovering above him. “*Get me a damn mirror. Have you gone deaf?*”

Getting no answer to his question, he turned to search for the needed object himself, but fell flat on his stomach with a thud.

“Oh dear. What have you done?” Riz demanded of her sibling.

“Me?” Mel glared at her twin. “You’re the one who wanted to get the book down. I know better than to listen to you. We always get in

trouble with your brilliant ideas.”

Damn it all, couldn't they see he had some kind of problem here from their foolishness? There was no time for another of their stupid arguments. A growl and sharp bark startled Rand with how menacing it sounded. Both sisters jumped and stopped their verbal battle.

“Oh dear, I don't think he knows.” Riz chewed on her bottom lip.

“*What? What don't I know?*”

“You tell him.” Mel pushed her twin forward.

“No. You.” Riz stepped back.

“Somebody damn well better tell me something and fast or I'm going to gnaw their ankle off.” Rand felt his brow furrow at the thought. *Now where did that come from?*

Simma, his mother's black cat, walked by and shot a look of disgust in Rand's direction. *“Probably from the fact you're a dog and thinking like one.”*

“I'm a what?”

“I don't believe I stuttered my friend. A dog. A black Scottie dog to be more precise. Sort of cute if one likes dogs.” Simma sat down and inspected a paw before he licked the fur and proceeded to wash his face. *“It appears your sisters have once again blundered in their magical efforts.”* The cat's tone dripped with boredom and he followed his comment with a loud yawn. *“Oh well, not my problem.”*

He ambled out of the room leaving Rand to wonder what his mother saw in the snooty, conceited creature. The urge to chase reared its ugly head, but he resisted. A more important issue needed his attention. The trouble-making witches in front of him were the priority of the moment. If he could get this walking thing coordinated, he'd show them a thing or two.

The twins held a whispered argument by the sliding glass door to the patio while he struggled in synchronizing the movement of four legs. After several attempts, he finally succeeded in achieving the desired standing position and all four legs working together instead of against each other. Baring his teeth he advanced toward them in a stalking crouch, a growl rumbled low in his throat.

“Oh, crap. I need to pee.” The urge hit suddenly and he rushed toward the door.

“Open the door. He's going to bite us.” Rand wasn't clear on which girl screamed the command or who opened the door, and didn't care as he rushed out into the evening dusk looking for the nearest bush or tree.

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I can't believe I'm peeing on a tree trunk with my hind leg in the air before any and everyone. Oh well, better get used to it until you can figure out a way to communicate with the two brain trusts and get them to find a way to undo the damage they've done.

What was that? Something moved by the fence. Damn, it's the Henderson's cat. I hate that big yellow tom. Can't understand why Simma hangs out with him. Well, I'll just show him who's boss.

No, wait. I'm not a dog. I'm just temporarily under a spell and I will not lower myself to act like the animal whose body I inhabit. Oh, but it's a cat and a cat I hate. What the hell. May as well have some fun.

Screaming Rand's name, the twins chased after him as he bounded across the yard in pursuit of his natural enemy. He wasn't sure at what point their voices faded until he could no longer hear them. The only certainty was he wanted to do major damage to the beast that zigzagged in front of him.

Man, I'm tired. Doesn't that jerk ever slow down? His sides ached from running so hard. Wait. He's cutting across the street and there's a concrete barrier there. If I cut over here maybe, I can catch him when he doubles back.

He heard the sound of screeching tires and had the sensation of flying through the air before everything went black.

Chapter Two

Amanda Livingston didn't think her day could get much worse. Her morning started with a phone call from Jess Morgan giving the good news on his engagement to the ditzy bitch he'd dumped Amanda for. Worse, he had the gall to ask her if she'd like an invitation to the wedding. What a dick wad!

No, she wasn't still in love with him. Those feelings faded over the past year. Okay, she'd admit the day he announced they had nothing in common any longer and he'd found someone he could be happy with, left her devastated. She'd sat on the bed and clenched her fist as she watched him pack his belongings when what she really wanted to do at that moment was throw him and his meager possessions off the top of the highest building.

Yes, it still stung a little to think of the five years she'd invested in their relationship and he never asked her to marry him. About the only thing he proposed during their time together was to lots of kinky sex. Whether she was a veterinarian or not, the games he'd suggest to spice up their love life she found repulsive and...well her mind didn't even want to go there.

"Look on the bright side," she mumbled. "The jerk is truly out of your life now and you've just met a yummy new man. Phil Roberts has a thousand times more potential than a wannabe rock n' roll musician." She stretched her neck from side to side in an effort to relieve the stiff muscles. The emergency call out into the country shortly after the cheery start to her day ended up consuming more hours than she'd anticipated when complications in the horse's labor developed.

Thankfully, she'd saved both the mare and her foal, but the birth, long and difficult for the first time mother, left all involved exhausted. Amanda shrugged her shoulders up toward her ears in attempt to release more stress. "Long hours are part of the job. Stop your whining and when you get home you can have a nice hot bath." Her

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eyes darted to the side of the dark street. The city council really needed to get off their asses and have street lights installed in this neighborhood. “Note to self. Remember to not come this way after dark when you’re so tired.”

A movement from the sidewalk caught her weary eyes. A cat streaked across the road in front, far enough ahead she only tapped the brakes. Another figure followed, causing her to stomp down on the break pedal. Too late. The SUV hit the unfortunate second animal, sending it flying through the air.

“Oh my God.” Amanda scrambled from the vehicle, her heart in her throat. She saved animals, not killed them.

Rushing to the side of the limp figure in the middle of the street, she fought back tears. “I’m sorry.” Her expert hands ran over the body, her fingers feeling for any obvious fractures. Internal bleeding would have to be determined by further testing. “Poor little guy. Look at you. Damn, I sent you flying. The headlights are no help. It’s so dark out here I’m not sure what breed of dog you are. Scottie, maybe.” She slipped off her light sweater and wrapped it around the soft form. “At least you’re still breathing. Let’s get you over to the clinic where I can examine you better.”

Gently placing the wounded dog in the back of the SUV, she muttered a soft thank you for the traffic light timing that allowed her to make the drive quickly. Inside the clinic, she did a more thorough exam and x-rays. “A minor concussion. You’re lucky nothing is broken.” She stroked the wiry black coat. “The impact knocked you unconscious, but you should come around soon.”

In answer to her prediction, he opened his eyes for a second and attempted to lift his head. “No, it’s okay. The shot I gave you will kick in any minute and you’ll sleep. I promise you’ll feel better when you wake up. But, you’re going to be sore and probably have a headache.”

Exhaustion flowed through her and a loud yawn escaped. Given tomorrow’s heavy office hours, staying up all night with him here in the clinic was out of the question. She had a cot in her office closet she kept for nights she needed to stay over with a patient, but the thought of hauling it out was more than she wanted to deal with right now. Since the little guy wore no identification, she had no way of notifying the owners, either. “Well, my friend. Looks like you’re coming home with me tonight. If I keep you on the bed with me, I’ll know if you wake up and need anything.”

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Rand opened his eyes and groaned. His attempt to move sent pain ripping through his body and he knew someone was using his head as a drum. *Damn, I feel like I've been hit by a truck.*

The closing of a drawer distracted his assessment of body pain and drew his attention toward an open door into what appeared to be the bathroom. A woman came into view and stopped. The light behind her made the t-shirt she wore transparent and did nothing to hide the curves it covered.

"You're awake." She advanced toward him and he could see from a bedside lamp the deep rich honey color of the long braid hanging down over her shoulder. "Do you need to go outside or are you not up to that yet?"

Why the hell did she talk to him like a child? *Oh yeah. That's right. You're a dog.* Memories of the earlier part of his evening came rushing back. His sisters were dead when he got his hands on them.

"I'm sorry, little guy. I really tried not to hit you." Gentle fingers stoked his side and rubbed behind his ears. *Damn, that feels good. Why is my hind leg kicking? It hurts like hell every time I move. Yep, I've seen dogs do that when something feels good. I could actually enjoy the scratching if the thumping would stop so the pain would go away.*

"Who do you belong to?" The sweet voice of the angel sitting on the bed beside him wanted to know. "I bet your owner is worried sick. You're about the most enchanting little fellow I've seen in a long time." The full lips made a little boo-boo pout.

If she only knew. Rand eased his head further under her hand, encouraging her to scratch more. Pain or not, the desire to stand up and kiss the pink mouth when she did the pouty thing, almost overcame the soreness. *Then again, dogs don't really kiss. Doggy kisses are licks. He didn't care what one called them as long as he could get his tongue against those soft lips.*

"Even though you're awake, I'm still going to keep you in bed with me tonight. The sedative I gave you isn't completely out of your system and I don't want you moving around too much."

Hot damn, jackpot! Too bad, he found himself in some little dog's body when he snuggled up against this luscious specimen of a woman.

"Let me get us settled." The beauty pulled back the covers on one side of the bed. "You can stay where you are, though it's my usual place. I don't want to move you too much because I know you have to

be sore from the banging you received.” She reached over and turned out the light. “Goodnight, little guy.”

Rand listened to her breathing and knew from the steady rhythm, she fell asleep the moment her head hit the pillow. He snuggled closer and sniffed. Roses. She smelled of roses, his favorite flower.

Sleep searched him out and he moved again in an attempt to find a more comfortable position. Allowing his heavy eyelids to close, he inhaled the scent of the human beside him once again. The slumber that only a moment ago almost claimed him disappeared. *Oh, crap. How the hell did a dog deal with a boner?*

* * * *

“Mom and Granna are going to kill us if we don’t figure out how to undo this spell.” Riz twisted her hands and blinked back the tears threatening to spill.

“Tell me something I don’t know.” Mel’s watery green pools reflected the same fear in her sister’s. “Why can’t we ever leave well enough alone? You’d think after fifteen years of getting into trouble with stuff we aren’t supposed to touch we’d learn.”

“*So, true.*” The large black cat sitting on the table between them shook his head. *You do realize your mother has a special spot for Rand, even if he doesn’t have the magic abilities of you two trouble makers. After all, he’s the son of the first man she loved. If he’d lived, you two would have a different father.*”

“Shut-up, Simma!” The twins yelled in unison.

“*My, my. If nothing else, this mess you’ve created has you both working together for once.*”

“True, Simma.” Mel reached out and scratched behind one of the big cat’s ears.

Riz smiled and tweaked the other one. “Yeah, maybe we can accomplish more by working together.” She gave her sister a love tap on the shoulder.

“Ouch.” Mel rubbed the wounded spot. “Good thing we have this new spirit of cooperation going here or I’d have to hit back. Still, the question remains. How do we undo what happened?”

“*Huhuum. Excuse me, hairball.*” Simma turned his head and cleared his throat again. “*May I suggest looking in the second volume of the book you used to create the problem?*”

Mel eyed the cat dubiously. “There’s a second volume? Mom and Granna never mentioned a second volume.”

Let’s just say your mother and grandmother know the pair of you

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well. Too well in fact. They didn't think you were ready for some of the magic contained in the second volume.

"Where is it?" Riz looked around the kitchen.

"Not here, kittens. Follow me." Tail straight up, Simma started down the hall and stopped at the door of the room where their mother kept the most powerful magic ingredients.

Riz shook her head. "We can't get in there. Mom keeps the door locked."

Mel's shoulders slumped. "We're screwed."

"Not so fast, Ladies. Are you forgetting who you're dealing with? After all, I am the family familiar and have a certain amount of magic. The cat stared at the door and blinked until a soft click sounded. *"Shall we?"* Entering into the room, Simma stopped in front of a large cabinet and once again stared until a slight noise indicated the lock released. *"Try the top shelf. And be careful."*

Amazed at the ease with which the large double doors opened, Riz pulled a chair over and Mel climbed onto the seat in an effort to reach the top shelf. "Wow, this is twice as thick as Volume I." She handed the book down to her sister's waiting hands.

Making her way over to the empty table in the middle of the room, Riz dropped the weight down with a thud. "Man, is that ever heavy. No wonder Mom and Granna don't use it often."

Simma licked a paw and shook his head. *"Hello dense ones. They are witches and powerful ones at that. Do you think they'd use brute force to lift something weighing that much?"*

"Good point." Mel said and her sister nodded in agreement.

"I have another question." Riz looked at her sister who tipped her head in concurrence. "Why can we understand you when you do the mind talk and we couldn't pick up anything from Rand when he changed?"

"Valid question for once." Simma hopped onto the table. *"If you recall, you can't always read what I'm saying. Your abilities in that area are developing. Combined with the shock Rand experienced with the transformation, he blocked your limited efforts."*

"Got it." The twins spoke in accord.

Riz opened the book and groaned. "This is written in some language I can't read."

Mel looked over her shoulder. "Me neither. Why did Mom and Granna keep this book locked up? It's not like either of us could use it."

“Allow me.” Simma moved around to sit at the bottom of the thick volume of charms. *“This is a very ancient language and handed down through the ages to only a selected few. Fortunately, my long association with this family has given me some knowledge of it.”*

The large cat studied the pages in front of him and they began to turn slowly. After several minutes, he stopped. *“Hmmm. This may be what we are looking for. How to reverse animal enchanting.”*

“Sounds right.” Mel reached over and squeezed her sister’s hand. “Read it to us...please.”

“Very well, since you asked nicely. It says here the full moon affects the change during its waxing and waning phase.”

Riz interrupted with a question. “How? Tell us how that works.”

“Well, little Miss Impatient, if you’d let me finish reading we might have an answer.” Simma returned to the pages of the massive book spread in front of him. Okay, so he couldn’t decipher it word for word, but close enough would do. *“Looks like our boy will revert to human form for about a week during this period. Let’s see, where is the moon cycle now.”* He looked across the room to a calendar on the wall. *“It appears your brother is going to be running around on all fours for another two weeks.”*

“Then he’ll become himself again.” Mel let out a sigh of relief.

“Only for a week. Remember, the charm is only reversed for a week during the moon phase.”

“Oh.” Mel’s shoulders slumped.

Riz placed her arm around her sister. “We’ll continue to search for a permanent reversal of the charm. With Simma’s help of course.” She shot a pleading look toward the cat.

“Yeah, we can do that.” Mel stood up straight and looked at her two companions. “I just have one question. How are we going to find Rand to tell him about this?”

Chapter Three

Rand laid his head in Amanda's lap and rolled his brown doggy eyes up at her as his short tail drummed the leather couch. The past few days he'd watched the gentle care she gave all her patients and the concerned manner in which she handled the pet owners in difficult situations. When she looked at him so lovingly with those large violet eyes, his heart did little flip-flops.

"You know, Alistair, I can't believe how much I've come to care about you in such a short time. Your company makes evenings more pleasant around here. I never realized how lonely it is. Let's hope no one responds to the ad I placed in the paper. That way I can lay permanent claim to you."

Goddess, I hope not. You're one hot lady and I'd love to stay around you, but not in the body of a frigging dog, no matter how cute you think I am. Rand closed his eyes as her fingers worked their magic behind his ears. *Where did she come up with the name Alistair? She almost gave him a heart attack when she decided on his new name. If she only knew how close she'd come to Randall McAllister's name.*

"Well buddy, I need to get my butt in gear. My date will be here before I'm ready, if I don't get a move on."

Amanda leaned over and placed a kiss on top of his furry head and Rand rewarded her with a doggy smooch in return. How he wished his human lips met hers instead of the soft contact on his nose. Date? That's right; she said she has a dinner date tonight. Jealousy surged through him and since he couldn't tell her how he felt, he dived on a sofa pillow, to vent his frustration. The unfortunate stuffing became the victim of pent up doggy anger.

"Stop it. Bad dog." Amanda took the pillow from him. "You'll be fine for a few hours alone. Now behave yourself." She headed for the bedroom, unbuttoning her blouse as she went.

Rand flung himself down on the sofa to sulk. He'd forego the

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chance to watch Amanda undress. He didn't need the stimulation of her nude body as she got ready for some other man to fondle her. *Come on fool. She thinks you're a dog and you need to figure out how to turn back into a man. A few days of romping around on four legs, lifting your hind leg on bushes and trees and having someone clean up after you when you take a dump on the lawn is one thing. But, it's not the life you want forever.*

Damn, I even sniffed smells I didn't know existed. Amazing how strong my sense of smell has become.

The grossest part is being able to lick my own ass and balls. Hell, I can't control myself when the urge hits, but then my pecker pops out and it gets licked too. Yuk! I will admit it has a certain feel of pleasure. Plus, I can think of a few guys who'd love the ability to get their mouths on their privates if they could. The jerks who always complain about women who can't give a decent blow job. Maybe if they could manage do it themselves they'd discover the perfect technique.

Eewwww. He was actually sitting here thinking about how good it felt to lick himself. This dog business has gone on long enough. I need to find my empty-headed sisters, if they haven't killed each other with their fights, and make them fix their screw up. Simma has his hands full in any attempts to referee those two, or should that be his paws full. Can dogs grin? I think I just grinned at my own joke.

The doorbell announced the arrival of Amanda's date and a whiff of her perfume tickled his nose as she walked by to get the door. "Phil, hi. Come in, I'm running a little behind. Keep Alistair company while I finish. I'll only be a sec." Both pairs of male eyes watched the sway of her hips as she pulled the satin robe tighter with her exit.

Once Amanda was no longer visible, Rand turned his attention to the intruder. Women probably consider him handsome with his slick polished appearance. *Yeah, he's slick all right Starting with the coifed brown hair shot with streaks of sunlight from a bottle, down to his wing tipped shoes. Hell, bet that walking ad for tooth whitening smile is as fake as the highlights. Looks more like he works for a mobster than the financial firm Amanda mentioned earlier.*

"Well pooch, guess it's just you and me for awhile. The fake suntanned male sneered down at the animal he so obviously considered beneath him. "Does the lady have anything to drink around here stronger than water?" Rand watched as the competition made his way toward the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. "She

does have lousy taste in beer. I don't think she'll mind if I help myself to one. Do you?" He found an opener in a drawer and levered the cap off the microbrew that happened to be Rand's favorite.

"I'm ready." Amanda stood in the door and smiled at the pig as he swilled her beer.

How can she be fooled by this jerk? What happened to the smart woman I've spent the last few days with? Maybe women are as bad as men. Instead of a pair of big boobs, give them some muscle bound oaf and they forget they have a brain. Their thinking can go south too, only they don't erect a tent pole to reflect it.

"Be a good boy, Alistair."

Wow, she actually remembered him. Amazing the way she seemed to focus on Pretty Boy's arm wrapped around her. Enough of this crap. I'm not going to lie around here tonight with a hard-on.

Rand darted across the room to the couple before they departed and wrapped his front paws around Phil's ankle. Maybe he couldn't shout 'fuck you' like he wanted to, but the humping he gave the owner of the expensive brown slacks left no doubt in his doggy mind he got his point across. Amid Amanda's shrieks to stop and swearing from the victim, Rand knew double satisfaction when he allowed his load to shoot against the fabric.

"God damned, dog. Look what he did to a five hundred dollar pair of pants. I'll kill the little son-of-a-bitch." Rand zipped across the room when Phil took a swipe at him.

"No. Phil, let's just go." She pulled on the large man's arm. "I'll pay to have your pants cleaned. It's only a little semen and will come out." Amanda hustled the angry man to the door. She paused and shot a dark look over her shoulder in the dog's direction. "You and I will discuss this later."

Talk all you want if I'm here, baby. Damn, I need to find a way to get home and quick. Though the main thing here is to determine where I am so I can figure out where home is

* * * *

Amanda shook her finger at Rand and tried to keep a firm tone to her voice. "Alistair, you were a very bad boy last night. What got into you?" Lipid dark pools stared back at her with a hint of defiance. Surely, she imagined the anger she saw there. Dogs didn't respond with attitude over being chastised. If anything, their normal response appeared as a hurt look and cowering.

"You know, we would have had this conversation last night if I

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hadn't been so tired when I got home.”

Alistair continued to stare and she was sure her imagination heard the ‘humpf’ directed toward her.

“Phil seems like a nice guy and I could use a nice man in my life. I’m sure he has a few flaws, after all he’s human, but given the horse’s ass I wasted five years on he’s a jewel.”

A rumble emitted from the throat of the little black dog. “Don’t grumble at me. I swear, sometimes you act almost human.” She plopped down on the couch beside him, reached over and pulled the Scottie onto her lap. “And the worst part is you act like a man.”

She smoothed back the wiry eyebrows, not sure how he could see with the long strands hanging down over his eyes. Maybe she should trim them, but it was fun to sit and twirl them around her fingers. Besides, cutting them meant she would have to get up and find the scissors and right now she didn’t have the energy. “Don’t ever act like a man my sweet baby.” She leaned over and planted a kiss on the warm nose. A tear slid down her cheek at the thought of her lack of success in the romance department.

“Yeah, I can just see your reaction to the Dick Wad if you met him. He used to complain if I didn’t take a shower and change my clothes before I came home from work. Said I smelled like animals.” The dark chocolate eyes watched her mouth and Amanda knew the furry creature in her lap understood what she told him more than any man.

“You wouldn’t be in my life if he still lived here.” She paused, the fights with Jess over pets in the house flooded back. “I had a cat when I met him. He insisted the cat go or he wouldn’t move in. Do you believe I took my cat to the clinic and he became the office greeter?” Alistair’s blink encouraged her to continue.

“Plus, if I didn’t rearrange my schedule to meet his whims, he’d pitch a fit. Sometimes he’d spend two or three days not saying a word to me, then bless me with a cold, sullen stare when I tired to talk to him.” She smiled as the pointy fur covered ears perked up. “Talk about the desire not to come home. When we hit those periods of our idyllic life, I’d make up as many excuses as I could to work late. Pretty bad when a veterinary doctor wishes for an emergency to keep her at the clinic longer, isn’t it?”

The short pointy tail beat on the couch in what she took to be an affirmative answer. “When we went to parties, I may as well have been alone. The minute we walked through the door he headed for the

bar and I spent time with my friends. By the time we left, he'd be in no condition to drive." The warm body in her lap pressed closer and whined. The need to show affection to someone caused Amanda to hug the animal to her chest. "Okay, enough of this pity party."

"Then again, maybe I should listen to you about this Phil thing. I know animals have excellent people instincts. You're probably a better judge of men than me." Giggles erupted when the fur blanket in her lap jumped up to slather her face with doggy kisses.

"Stop, stop. Man, do we have to do something about your breath. I think you need a different dog food. Maybe we'll get one that cleans tarter because you have a severe case of halitosis my friend." The hurt look in his eyes caused her to pull him close for another hug. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. You're a dog and with some of the stuff you put in your mouth I'm always amazed when I read statistics on dogs having cleaner mouths than humans."

She grabbed his head on either side and forced him to look at her. "Alistair, I really need you to be nice to Phil. Give the guy a chance, since I am. Do you have any idea how long it's been since I got laid?"

Alistair's resistance when she held his head caused her to release him. "No, probably not and to tell you the truth it's been so long I don't recall." She reached out to the dog again, only to have him butt her hand away. *Very puzzling behavior for an animal, then again this dog wasn't like most of the ones she treated.* "You have to understand I'm not a one night stand sort of girl. I don't jump into bed with a guy on the first date, no matter how horny I am. There's a need to feel the relationship will go someplace or at the very least has the potential to evolve into more than a wham-bam thank you ma'am."

The whine emitted by Alistair sounded almost human and he crept forward to lay his head in her lap again. Why couldn't she meet a man who understood her the way her dog did? Her dog? How quickly she'd come to think of the little Scottie as hers. If the owners turned up, Amanda knew she'd be as heartbroken at his loss as she would over the loss of a lover.

"So what do you say? Will you cut Phil some slack until I figure out how things are going here?" The little pink tongue tickled her fingers which she took to be a yes. "Okay then, what say we go to bed and snuggle. Enough of a walk down memory lane tonight, don't you agree."

The dog shot off the couch, ran to the bedroom door and turned to encourage her to hurry. "I swear, sometimes I think you're human."

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Amanda turned out the lights, looking forward to the warm body stretched out beside her in bed. She shook her head when she walked into the bedroom and found Alistair on the bed waiting and sighed. “Too bad, you’re not a man tonight though. Hot sex might help me feel better.”

Chapter Four

“I’m tired.” Riz sat down on the stone wall, slipped off the purple Crock on her left foot and massaged the bottom of the aching appendage. “I don’t think my feet have ever hurt so much.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.” Mel dropped beside her twin and hunched over, holding her head. “It’s getting dark. We’d better get home. We won’t find Rand tonight.”

Her sister nodded before responding in a tired voice. “Do you think we should have dropped breadcrumbs or something to find our way home? I have no idea where we are.”

Simma watched the two and almost felt a pang of sympathy...almost. Nope, won’t go there. Remember how they tortured you when they were young and still do when they feel the need. It’s about time they got a taste of the real world. The adult witches had protected the twins far too long, which in his opinion accounted for some of their unacceptable behavior.

“*Come, kittens. I’ll lead you home.*” He jumped down from the wall and with tail in the air, led the parade home. The girls followed him into the house and collapsed on barstools at the kitchen island.

Okay, he’d give them a few minutes to rest before he demanded dinner. Sure his stomach met his backbone and given its empty state, he’d pass out from hunger soon. He glanced across the room to the desk tucked in the corner of the kitchen and noticed the blink of the crystal ball. Uh-oh. More trouble brewing. Mama called to check up on the home front while they were out and would want to talk to her son.

“*Sorry girls. I know you’re tired, but don’t you think you should respond to your call?*” His right ear twitched in the direction of the desk where the light blinked.

“Man, oh man.” Simma watched Riz’s panic filled eyes turn toward her sister. “What are we going to do? Mom will want to talk to Rand.”

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“I don’t know.” The normally assertive Mel sounded as frightened as her twin looked.

Simma didn’t attempt to repress a sigh. He needed to take over, as usual. *“Okay. Go over and get the communication device and let’s see if your mother is still there. She may have just left a message.”*

“Right.” Mel retrieved the crystal ball, bringing it over to the island and set it down between them. “What do we say if she’s still there?”

“Here’s the plan.” Simma padded back and forth across the counter top. *“If she’s still on, then you tell her Rand worked late. He told you to order pizza for dinner and he’ll call to check on things later since he needs to finish up the project that’s due tomorrow.”*

Mel waved a hand over the glass orb and the swirling clouds cleared and revealed her mother’s face. “Hello my darling! I tried to reach one of you earlier. Did you go out to dinner or something fun? Granna and I wanted to check in to see if you need anything.” Her grandmother stuck her head over Jorgia’s shoulder and waved.

Jorgia continued. “We’ll be tied up with meetings for the next few days, so tell your brother if needs us, use the emergency signal. We have to run now. Bye darlings. Talk to you in a couple of days.” Both women blew kisses as the fog swirled in, clouding the glass.

“Whew!” Riz went limp in obvious relief. The cat became concerned she’d fall off the stool.

“So what do we do now?” Mel’s pale face matched her sister’s and her eyes were wet with unshed tears.

Here we go again. Why do I always have to come up with the ideas around here? Simma twitched his tail in irritation. *“I do have connections. I’ll put the word out for the collection of information. Maybe someone in the animal world saw something and the word is out on our telepathic grapevine.”*

Color returned to Riz’s face and he knew she felt like her old self when she questioned his logic. “Is it realistic to think cats will pay any attention to a dog? Don’t they run when they see one on the loose? That won’t help much.”

He really did have to educate these two on the ways of the world. *“Cat, dog, bird...in times of trouble it doesn’t matter. We all become one community. I should have done this sooner. If anyone one has seen our boy, we’ll hear about it.”*

* * * *

Rand paced the floor. Amanda had another date with Pretty Boy

tonight and she ran late in her efforts to get ready, which meant he'd be stuck with the jerk again. The ringing of the doorbell confirmed his worst fear. His ears picked up the muffled sound of running feet as she rushed to the door.

"Sorry, Phil. I'm late as usual. A small emergency right at closing time put me behind." Amanda stepped back and motioned for the tall man to come in. "You know the drill. Help yourself to whatever. I'll be ready in a jif." She hurried down the hall toward her bedroom.

"Well, pooch, looks like it's you and me again." Rand watched as the man made his way toward the refrigerator. "Shit. She didn't get the hint about beer. All that's in here is that microbrew crap." In spite of his unkind words, he pulled one of the bottles out and found the bottle opener.

"So, little black dog, what's it like snuggled up against that hot body?" Rand glared as Phil took a swig of beer. "She tells me you sleep on the bed, but I'm here to tell you pal, tonight it's the floor for you. I plan to be the one in her bed."

Wanna bet? Rand resisted the urge to bite the creep's ankle. Why the hell if his sisters had to zap him with their spell, didn't they turn him into a Pit-bull or a Doberman? Instead, in their usual amazing ability to screw things up, they turned him into a frigging Scottish Terrier, small even for his breed.

"Yep, I plan to get me a piece of that luscious ass tonight." The inane ramblings from Pretty Boy got his attention with that comment. "Made reservations at a fancy restaurant and I figure with a little dinner and a lot of wine, she'll be all over me. Hell, we may not even make it back here. I may just do her in the car." The man placed his hand over his crotch and squeezed the bulge that appeared in his pants as he made his plans to seduce Amanda.

How can Amanda be so stupid and not see what a jerk this guy is? Rand still wrestled with that question, but in all fairness to her the guy acted like a different person when she came into the room. In fact, he became such a perfect gentleman when she appeared, he made Rand want to puke.

"So mums the word, fur ball." Phil reached over to pet him and Rand snapped at the hand that almost touched his head. Unfortunately, Amanda walked in the room in time to see the attempted bite.

"Alistair!" Amanda sped across the room and grabbed his collar. "Bad dog."

She turned to look at Pretty Boy. “I’m sorry Phil, I don’t know what’s got into him.”

“The little fucker doesn’t like me. Has he had his rabies shots?”

Amanda let go of Rand’s collar and stood up. She took the man’s hand in hers and examined it. “Did he get you? If he broke the skin I’ll get some antiseptic.”

“No, it’s fine. Take more than a little pansy dog like that one to get through Phil Robert’s hide.” He brought Amanda’s hand to his lips and nuzzled it before she pulled it free. “We’d better go. I made reservations for a pretty special place tonight.”

“Right.” She looked around the room. “Let me get my purse and I’m ready. I tossed it around here somewhere when I saw Alistair snarl at you.” The missing purse lay on a chair. “I’m ready. Let’s go.”

Rand watched the couple close the door behind them. She didn’t even say goodnight to him. He’d really upset her this time. Pacing back and forth, he knew a long night loomed ahead of him. What would he do when they returned if Amanda decided to take Phil into her bed instead of him?

* * * *

Rand heard the key in the lock and jumped to attention. He stood on all fours, ears cocked toward the door in order not to miss any sounds. Instead of spending the evening working on a plan to get out of here and find his sisters, he’d fumed and worried about Amanda needing to fight off the brute in the car. Her poor choice in men needed discussing, but unfortunately, he wasn’t in any position to do it at the moment.

“Thank you, Phil. I had a lovely time, but I’m afraid I drank too much wine.”

The sound of Amanda’s voice caused Rand’s heart to race. He should have been the one who sat across a table from the woman who owned his heart and shared a gourmet meal and wine. No, not wine. Champagne to toast her beauty would have been his choice.

“I’m glad.” The oiliness of Phil’s voice grated on Rand’s nerves. Even in his human form, this man would have sounded too smooth to him. “Are you going to ask me in for a nightcap?”

“I don’t think I’m up to anything else to drink.” Amanda smiled, but didn’t move to invite him in.

“Then let me make you some coffee.” Phil slipped past her and headed toward the kitchen.

Amanda followed behind him, the expression on her face none

too happy. “Please Phil, I don’t want coffee. I think I’m ready for bed. It’s been a long day.”

Rand cringed when he saw the smirk play around the man’s lips before he turned to face Amanda.

“I’m sure you are, darling.” He pulled her into his arms. “Let me make you feel better.” Phil’s mouth claimed the soft pink lips.

Amanda made no resistance and the kiss continued much too long from Rand’s point of view. Relief surged through him when she finally pulled her mouth away from the hungry man. One would never know he’d had dinner the way Phil feasted on the pretty lips as if he was at an all you can eat buffet.

“Come on, baby. This is our third date. Don’t you think you can warm up a little?” His hand snaked up and cupped a breast.

“Phil, stop it.” Amanda slapped his hand away. “Just because you bought me a few dinners doesn’t mean you get free access to my body.”

Woohoo. Rand felt a happy dance in order and pranced around their ankles. She finally got the true character of the ass.

“Honey, for what I’ve spent on meals, I could have invested in a high priced hooker without having to work so hard.” Phil moved in again and put his hands around her waist. “I’ve spent a lot of hours listening to you rave about this fucking fur ball,” he kicked at Rand’s attempt to wiggle in between his legs, “and all the other stupid animals you deal with. For Christ sakes, most fellows would have dumped you after the first date.” He kicked out again. The little dog yipped and jumped to avoid the wing-tipped shoe.

Okay asshole. You want to play it that way do you? We’ll just see about that. Rand lifted his hind leg, delighted at the sound of water splattering against perfectly shined leather.

“Why you little mother fucker. I’m going to break your skinny little neck.” Phil forgot his pursuit of Amanda and lunged to get at Rand.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Amanda leaped between the angry man and her dog. She scooped up Rand in her arms and turned on Phil like a mother tiger defending her young. “Don’t you dare hurt my animal.”

“Ah, come on baby. Let’s be friends. I didn’t mean to hurt the little fur ball. Just got a little upset when he pissed on my shoe. What man wouldn’t?” Phil extended a hand toward Amanda and Rand bared his teeth, a loud growl emitted from his throat. “Why don’t you

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lock the mutt up so you and me can retire to the bedroom for some slap and tickle?”

What an ass. The idiot didn't have sense enough to realize he'd struck out. Rand would have shouted with glee if he'd been able to, but settled for several short barks. Pretty Boy didn't have to worry about the bedroom tonight or any other night. He'd just sealed his fate. *Don't let the door hit you in the ass on the way out, buddy.*

“The only slap that's going to happen here is when I slap your face.” Amanda shifted Rand to one arm and raised her free hand. Rand was impressed with the force in which she applied her palm to the man's cheek.

“You stupid bitch.” Phil took a step forwarded and Rand went wild, impressed with his ferocious barks and snarls and how quickly they caused Phil to jump back.

“Hope you have fun with that fucking dog because with your holier than thou attitude you'll never get a man in your bed.” Phil stalked toward the door and slammed it on his way out.

“Whew. Ugly scene and I for one am glad it's over.” Still cuddling Rand in her arms, Amanda sat down on the couch. “I should have listened to you. You seem to have better instincts about men than I do.”

That's because I am a man. I know how we think. He lifted his head and licked Amanda's chin.

“Oh, Alistair, why can't I meet a man like you?” She buried her face in his fur and he felt the hot release of the tears she'd held back during the confrontation. After crying for several minutes, she let the dog go and stood up. “We'd better get to bed. I have a super long day ahead of me tomorrow.”

Rand jumped down from the couch and followed her toward the bedroom. Plus, he had a super long night ahead of him in an attempt to heal her pain. A night that promised a lot of snuggling.

Chapter Five

“Alistair, you to have to stay home today.” Amanda placed the cucumber slices over her eyes and tilted her head back. “I wish I’d thought of this earlier.”

Screw the cucumber. What do you mean I have to stay home?

“Cold cucumber is supposed to be good to moisturize the skin, plus the cold reduces swollen eyes. Can you believe I wasted all those tears over another jerk who passed through my life?” She took the compress off one eye and looked over at her companion. “It’s to the point I’m thinking I may swear off men. They’re more trouble than they’re worth. If I need sex...well, that’s what vibrators are for.”

No, don’t swear off men. Let me get back to my normal self and I’ll show you how a man should treat you. Wait before you decide my gender isn’t worth the effort. We’re not all animals I promise. And the real me can love you in ways no vibrator can.

“Anyway,” Amanda removed the cucumber slice from her other eye, “I’d better get going.” She took the last swig of coffee and placed the cup in the sink. “You be a good boy today.”

Shit, that’s right. She said I have to stay home. No fair, she never said why.

She made the little boo-boo face that always made Rand’s heart leap. “Don’t look at me with those sad eyes. I have to go to a charity event right after work and won’t have time to bring you home.”

Okay, he could understand that. *Just make sure you come home alone.*

Amanda stopped at the door and looked back. “I feel guilty leaving you home alone all day. I’m glad the man got the doggy door installed yesterday. You’ll be able to get some exercise in the back yard. I won’t feel so guilty about you being shut in the house all day.” She closed the door behind her.

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Well, that's that. Home alone. Okay, time to figure a way to get out of the yard and see if I can find my PITA sisters. How two young girls could be such a pain in the ass at times always amazed him, even when they were toddlers.

I'm glad the doggy door is installed, too. Rand wiggled through the opening and sniffed the air for any familiar scents. Nope, nothing around here smelled like his mother's neighborhood. He made his way slowly around the border of the fence. Any small open hole he could squeeze through would do the trick. *Damn, think I'm going to have to dig my way out. Oh well, it's a dirty job, but I don't see lines forming to do it. Guess it's my team of me and me. Besides, daylights burning.*

Intent on digging, he missed hearing his name called. He didn't notice big black cat that appeared across the fence in front of him.

"Rand, what the hell do you think you're doing?" Simma stared through the wire separating them.

"Simma, am I ever glad to see you?" Rand would have hugged the family familiar if he'd been able to reach him and if he had arms instead of dog paws. *"Do you know where we are? Dumb question I guess, since you found me."*

"You could say that." Simma licked a paw and used it to wipe his face. *"The twins are beside themselves with worry. Why haven't you found your way back home before now?"*

Just like a damn cat to cop an attitude. "Because I got hit by a car, I've been locked in a house or at the vet clinic since I became a dog." Rand started to dig again.

"So how'd you get out today?"

Rand stopped and panted for a moment to get his breath. *"Dog door, guy came over and put in a dog door yesterday. She has some event tonight and didn't have time to bring me back here, so I'm home alone."* The unblinking stare of the cat gave Rand the urge to squirm. Damned feline was almost as big as him.

"Well, at the rate you're going with your tunnel, we'll be here when she gets home tonight." The cat's shout vibrated through Rand's head. *"Brutus, get over here."*

The largest Doberman Rand had ever seen ran up and sat down beside the cat. *"What's up, Simma?"*

Damn, one bite and Simma would be this brute's snack. Come to think of it, so would I.

"Don't worry it's cool. In times of need animals band together."

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Simma turned his attention to the big dog. *“Brutus, we need your help to dig our boy out of here. As you can see, progress on his part is slow.*

“Yeah, well these puny little lap dogs aren’t good for much except taking up space on laps and yipping anyway. Get out of the way short stuff. Let a real dog take over.” The huge monster started to dig and in a matter of minutes created a hole large enough for Rand to squeeze through.

“Hey, thanks man. Can’t tell you how much I appreciate your help.” Rand wiggled under the fence.

“No problem. If you need help again just yell or should I say yip.” The dog laughed at his little joke.

Simma stepped between the two canines. *“We need to get going. It’ll be dark by the time we get back and the twins are home alone. Thanks Brutus. Talk to you later.”* Tail high in the air, Simma streaked across the lawn with Rand close behind.

Rand followed the cat, unsure he’d have found his way back home with all the twists and turns. He cautioned Simma a couple of times to not climb fences and lose him. He received a look of disdain when he pointed out that dogs don’t have the ability to scale six foot redwood boards.

The lights were on in the kitchen when they arrived and Rand paused by the window to watch the girls as they worked together to prepare dinner. He didn’t know they could cook, but it appeared they knew their way around the kitchen pretty well.

Simma sat on the window ledge and glared down. *“Shall we let them know you’re back or do you prefer to sit here and watch them like a perverted Peeping Tom?”*

“Sure, I’ll go around to the door and bark. That should get their attention.” Rand started toward the door, but stopped as a sharp pain shot down his leg and along his back.

The joints in his body were on the verge of exploding and agony ran through his bones with an intensity that made him want to howl. *“What the hell is going on?”* He directed the question at Simma, but didn’t hear the cat’s answer as his body shattered into a million pieces. Lying on his stomach in the grass, Rand realized he no longer had the body of a dog, but a nude human male.

Simma jumped onto his naked chest and stared into Rand’s eyes. *“Damn, looks like the twins didn’t do the correct calculation on the arrival of the full moon.”* The feline looked up toward the horizon

where the moon peeked up. *“This wasn’t supposed to happen for another forty-eight hours.”*

“You knew I would turn back to my human form again?. Why didn’t you tell me on the way over here, stupid cat?” Crap, he still used the mind talk thing. Better revert to his voice and make sure it still worked.

“Oh, that won’t be necessary.” Simma’s back claws dug into the bare skin as he jumped off. *“I’ve been able to read your mind for a very long time and you could have read mine if you’d not been so determined not to acknowledge your heritage.”*

“Really?” Rand started to explore this bit of news when it dawned on him; he laid bare-assed in his mother’s front yard. What if someone came by and saw him. The last thing he needed right now was a nosey neighbor putting in a call to the police. His current circumstances wouldn’t be easy to explain.

He jumped to his feet and scurried behind a bush, using it as cover. *“Okay, smart ass, how do I get in the house like this? I’m sure the front door is locked and I can’t slip in through the kitchen with the twins in the midst of a mad cooking spree.”* Rand’s voice sounded rusty to him. He’d only used it to bark or growl for the past two weeks, which must not use the same vocal cord muscles.

“Must I do everything?” Simma jumped up on the ledge and stared though the window. One of the twins turned in his direction. *“Let me in, please.”* A grin lit her face and she hurried to the door.

Rand waited in the bushes. Seconds later he heard squeals of what he hoped to be delight. The back door opened and Mel appeared. *“Rand. Rand, where are you?”*

“I’m in the bushes. Get me a towel or something to cover up with.” He heard the running of footsteps and Riz’s head appeared over her sister’s shoulder. Ducking past her twin she rushed toward the bush where Rand hid and tossed the towel. He wrapped the terrycloth around his lower torso and came out from his hiding place. In a mad dash through the door, he told the twins, *“After I get some clothes we’ll talk.”*

* * * *

Sunlight put a different perspective on things. Rand drank his coffee and contemplated his options as he soaked up the rays of morning sun. The conversation with the twins and Simma last night enlightened him to the probability he had about a week in his own body.

Jaded Beasts 6, Dog-Pig

Sleep eluded him when he went to bed, not only because of the need to find a counter spell, but also not having Amanda's warm body next to his. Even as a dog, he appreciated the feel of her and each time her arms reached out to snuggle him closer, he'd desperately wished to be Rand instead of the one she called Alistair.

There were two problems to resolve today. One, try and figure out how not to revert back to Alistair and two, come up with a way to meet Amanda as his true self.

"*Sleep well?*" Simma's tail swept back and forth across the breakfast bar as he made himself comfortable in front of Rand.

"Don't you know cats aren't supposed to jump up on kitchen counters?"

"*A misconception perpetrated by humans who want to be territorial.*" The animal in question licked a paw and stroked it down the side of his face.

Before Rand could comment, the twins barreled into the kitchen and threw their arms around his neck.

"I thought I dreamed last night." Riz squeezed harder and Rand worked to loosen her chokehold. "Sorry." She planted a kiss on his cheek and Mel smacked one on the other side.

"Lucky you got hit by a veterinarian." Mel reached over and swiped the toast he'd buttered minutes before.

"Hey, get your own." He snatched his breakfast back and took a big bite, washing it down with coffee. Back to the situation at hand. "I need to figure out a way to meet her as my true self. Either of you two have any bright ideas that won't cause me more trouble." Maybe soliciting their help wasn't too smart on his part. Give either of the duo an inch and they'd take a mile.

"Well," Mel stopped to grab the piece of toast that popped up, "we're talking vet here, which if I'm correct is an animal doctor." Not bothering with butter, she took a chunk out of the crisp bread and talked around it. "So what you need is to find an animal with some sort of problem and take it in for her to treat."

Damn, impressive. Rand wondered why he hadn't thought of something so simple.

"Yeah. All we need is to find a dog. Or you could go down to the shelter and adopt one." Riz wiped her upper lip to remove the milk mustache. "You can take the one you decide on to Dr. Livingston and say you just wanted to make sure the animal shelter didn't make a mistake when they issued a clean bill of health for your pet."

“Hmmm.” Rand tapped his fingers on the counter and his eyes drifted toward the cat who now soaked up sun on the window seat. “I don’t think we need to go to that extent. After all, we have a cat here. Why do we need to acquire a dog? It’s safe to say our kitty is magical enough to develop some type of ailment, don’t you think?”

Simma lifted his head and squinted at the three humans who formed a semi-circle around him. *“Hey, leave me out of this. I’m not going to the vet.”* His tail twitched a signal of his irritation. *“You know I don’t do vets. Never have cared for doctors since my brush with that Frankenstein dude awhile back.”*

“He wasn’t a veterinarian, just some whacked out doctor who thought he could change the world, you crazy cat. Come on buddy, you owe me. You let the demon duo get the book out when you were in charge.”

“Excuse me!” Hands planted on hips, Riz glared at her brother. “Since when did we become the demon duo?”

Rand, braced for an attack from the other indigent twin, fired back. “How about since birth?” He hoped the frown directed toward her sister would be enough to keep her quiet.

“Hey, don’t get all uppity with me, Big Brother. I kinda like the title. Not like I haven’t heard it before.” Mel grinned and gave her sister an elbow in the ribs. “Come on Riz. Admit we giggle about it in private. You’ve got a case of guilt about turning our brother into a dog, even if he does make a cute little woofers.”

“Enough!” Simma’s tale twitched back and forth in a pendulum swing. *“You,”* he fixed a green-eyed stare on Rand, *“are as bad as your sisters with all the arguing.”* He transferred his glare to the twins. *“I hoped the efforts to find your brother would help you two grow up, but it looks like I was wrong. If you want to bicker, take it elsewhere. Since the only way I’ll get peace and quiet around here is to go to a stupid vet, I’ll do it.”*

The large cat took a deep breath and mumbled something the humans couldn’t make out. *“There, are you happy now? Do you think this will get me into the doctor’s office?”*

Rand shook his head in amazement and the twins broke into hoots of laughter.

Chapter Six

“My, how interesting. I don’t believe I’ve even seen anything like this.” Amanda studied the growth on the cat’s nose and turned her violet eyes to Rand. “When did you say you first noticed it?”

“Well, I...um.” Rand fidgeted for an answer without telling an out and out lie. He really saw no way to avoid it though. If he told the truth and said about an hour ago, he didn’t think Amanda Livingston would believe him.

“Oh, we noticed it a short while ago.” Bingo, saved by a quick thinking Riz. “It seemed to really increase in the blink of an eye.”

“I see.” From the way Amanda shook her head in bewilderment, Rand knew she didn’t. “This is really an unusual growth. I don’t know if it’s a wart or a cancerous tumor that I’ve never come across.” She stroked Simma along the jaw line as she held his head in her hands and studied his nose. “We probably should do a biopsy.”

“No biopsy.” The cat’s shout vibrated in Rand’s head.

“Can’t you just prescribe a cream or something to try?” Rand watched the cat twist his body in an effort to get away from Amanda’s hold.

The cat continued to scream at him. *“I didn’t sign up for needles or cutting, no matter how horny you are. If you think you had problems as a Scottie dog, you ain’t seen nothing yet.”*

“Calm down, I’ll take care of it.” Rand smiled at Amanda. “I mean, it’s tough enough to catch him if he thinks a trip to the vet is involved. I don’t want to make it completely impossible.”

“Well,” Amanda hesitated. “I’m really not sure what we’re dealing with here. If you insist, I can prescribe an antibiotic cream and give it a few days. Then if I don’t see any improvement, a biopsy will definitely have to be done.”

Rand breathed a mental sigh of relief as the cat settled down. “Thank you. Yes, let’s try the antibiotic first.”

“It’s a good thing she’s reasonable or you’d be slithering out of here.” Simma fumed on the way to the car. *“Somebody get a tissue*

and get this crap off my nose.”

“I’ll leave you in the capable hands of the twins.” Rand placed the large cat on the back seat of the car. “I forgot the tube of ointment she wants me to use on you.”

“You better get back in there and ask her out. I didn’t go through all this trouble for you to lose your courage, big boy.”

Glaring at the bossy cat, Rand slammed the car door and retraced his steps back into the clinic. Let the girls listen to Simma’s complaints. He didn’t have the time. The cat was right about the need to invite Amanda out, though. He wasn’t sure how much time he had in his human form before he became a little black dog again.

“Mr. McAllister?” Amanda looked up from behind the reception desk as she hung up the phone. “Is there something else I can help you with?”

“I forgot the cream you prescribed for Simma.” He admired her shapely bottom as Amanda walked ahead of him into the treatment room to retrieve the tube of antibiotics. What the hell, if he didn’t go for it, he’d blow the chance to ask her out.

“Say, how would you like to have lunch?” Rand flinched at how awkward the invitation came out. He sounded like a teenager asking someone on his first prom date and felt the same rejection coming his way.

A smile spread across Amanda’s full mouth. “That would be nice. When did you have in mind?”

“Now...I mean today.” Crap, he could feel the blood rush to his face at the blundered invitation.

“Let me take the family home and I’ll be back to pick you up.” Rand hurried out the door before she had the chance to change her mind.

* * * *

Amanda rushed into the office and smiled a quick hello to her waiting patients and their owners, well aware she took too long for lunch with Rand. Her afternoon of appointments vanished from her mind the moment he walked back through the door and looked at her with those dark, soulful eyes. Eyes that reminded her of the little Scottie dog she’d come to love. Alistair disappeared out of her life as quickly as he entered and the void in her heart needed filling. Did she think Rand could do that?

How stupid, Amanda, to think along those lines. Get real, you don’t replace a dog with a man any more than you’d replace a man

with a pet. Come to think of it, she knew some people who had better luck in getting the love they needed from a four legged animal instead of the two legged variety. She laughed and pulled the chart for her first patient.

Her hand reached for the doorknob and paused as memories of the fleeting kiss Rand placed on her lips when they said goodbye surged forward. Even now, she felt the chills run down her body all the way to her toes. Never had a man's lips against hers brought such a strong reaction.

"Be careful with this one," she whispered to herself. Squaring her shoulders, she plastered a smile on her face and opened the door to greet a German shepherd and his owner. "Let me see that foot, Shotsy"

Examining the paw, her mind drifted to dinner tonight with Rand. Why did she agree so quickly to his suggestion? She already had plans for a book club meeting. Oh well, she hadn't read the book anyway.

"That's it Mrs. Johns. I removed the thorn and he should be as good as new." Amanda patted the large head and scratched behind the dog's ears in an attempt to get back on his good side.

The rest of the afternoon flew by and before she realized it, work was over and she now put the finishing touches on her appearance before Rand showed up to collect her. The doorbell signaled his arrival and a quick glance at her watch told her he was on time.

"Hi." He leaned down and brushed her lips with his.

She wondered if his pulse jumped as much as hers did with the brief contact. What will it be like when he actually kissed her with a deep tongue thrusting hot one, if she reacted so strongly to a buzz.

"Hi." Amanda stepped back and fought the desire to jump the bones of the man who created such strong emotions in her. *Don't act like a bitch in heat.* "Let me get my wrap." Glad for the excuse to put distance between them, she picked up the shawl and purse from the table where she placed them earlier and started for the door that Rand held open.

Her cell phone rang as she stepped out onto the porch. Crap. The urge to ignore the shrill demand surged forward, before her common sense took control. "Sorry," She smiled at Rand as she grappled to get the phone from her purse.

"No problem." He stood quietly while she talked with the hysterical woman on the other end.

“I really am sorry. Dinner’s off. I have to go into the clinic. One of my patients has been hit by a car.” Memories of her slamming into Alistair the night he ran out into the street in front of her SUV flooded back. Once all of her compassion would have focused on the dog, but now she also felt pain for the person driving the vehicle that hit him. She bit her lip to fight back the tears, threatening to flow.

“I’ll drive.” Rand took her arm and led her to his car, a silver sporty model she would have admired under different circumstances.

They pulled up in front of the clinic at the same time as the owner of the hurt dog. A sobbing Millie Adams jumped out of her vehicle before it came to a complete stop. “Please, Doctor Livingston. Don’t let Max die.” The distraught woman opened the back of the station wagon and reached in to pick up the blood smeared body of the white poodle.

“Here. Let me.” Rand moved Millie aside, lifted the limp form and followed Amanda. Inside the clinic she directed him to the trauma room, where he laid the little body on the table.

“Max, oh Max, I’m so sorry. I should never have let you outside.” A guilt ridden Mille stroked the head of her beloved pet. “I know how he chases cats and if there’s one within a mile, he sniffs it out.”

Amanda flinched as she recalled the impact of her car against the soft body the night it collided with Alistair. Once again she wondered what became of the little dog she’d come to love so deeply.

“Why don’t Millie and I go make some coffee?” Rand’s soothing voice interrupted Amanda’s trip down memory lane.

“Great idea. The kitchen’s down the hall on the left.” Relief flooded through her as Rand slipped an arm around Millie’s shoulder and steered her toward the door. She’d be able to focus better without the distraction of the emotional Millie. Hopefully, he saw the smile of gratitude she flashed his way.

Once she had Max settled, Amanda found Rand and Millie sitting around the table in the small kitchen the staff used for lunch breaks.

“Is Max going to be okay?” The red-rimmed eyes in Millie’s pale face were dark with worry.

Amanda smiled and nodded. “He should recover with time. His right hip is broken, plus a couple of cracked ribs. I had to splint the hip for now. We need to let him stabilize before I do the surgery to put a pin in the break. He may have a limp after he recovers, but otherwise he’s one lucky dog.”

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Rand placed a cup of coffee on the table and pulled out an empty chair. “Sit.” He softened his command with a smile. “Millie said the person that hit Max just sped off into the night.” He shook his head. “I don’t understand people like that.”

Exhausted, Amanda leaned back in her seat and sipped on the coffee. How did he know I take cream? Oh, yeah. I had coffee when we went out to lunch. Lunch. That seemed like a lifetime ago now. A glance at the clock above the stove showed midnight. No wonder she wanted to crawl into bed. The cot she kept in the closet of her office called her name.

“Millie, I’ll keep Max here for a few days. You should go home and get some rest.” Amanda patted the woman’s hand. “I’m staying here the rest of tonight to make sure there are no complications.”

A yawn escaped and Millie laughed. “I admit, I am tired, but you look beat Doc. I feel guilty leaving you here alone sitting up with my dog.”

“Don’t worry, you won’t feel so guilty when you get my bill.” Amanda walked the woman to the outer door and locked it behind her. She sensed Rand come up behind her as she watched Millie’s taillights drive away.

His arms circled her waist and pulled her back against him. “Do you want me to take first shift?”

“What ever are you talking about?”

“I’m staying with you and I’ve already unfolded the cot you keep in your office. Put the sheets and a blanket on, too. You go get some sleep and I’ll keep an eye on the patient. If there’s a problem, I’ll call you.”

A surge of anger bubbled to the surface and Amanda pulled out of his hold. How did he know she kept a cot in her office for nights like this? And who does he think he is ordering me around in my own clinic? “I do this type of thing all the time when I need to. I thank you very much for your consideration, but you need to go home, too.”

“Not gonna happen.” Rand leaned back against the desk and folded his arms. He met her glare without flinching. “Get used to it Mandy, I’m in your life and I’m staying.”

How dare he talk to her like that? In her life? She didn’t need a man in her life other than for an occasional fling. Too tired to argue the point right now, Amanda turned and stomped down the hall to her bed for what was left of the night. She’d set Rand McAllister straight in the morning when her muddled brain could focus.

Chapter Seven

After getting several hours sleep, Amanda wasn't sure why she'd been ready to fight with Rand about his insisting on staying at the clinic with her. The promise of a beautiful day took away any resentment she had on his determination to help. She couldn't remember the last time a man cared enough to inconvenience himself for her.

Once she made sure Max was still of this world and improving and left her day-time assistant with instructions on his care, Rand took her to breakfast and then dropped her off at her house. They made another date for the dinner that didn't happen last night.

Glad to have the work day over, she rushed home to get ready for her dinner date. When she took her purse and shawl into the living room, she realized how much she missed Alistair. He'd been there in her last attempt at dating. For some reason, she thought he might like Rand better than he did her last selection. "Silly little dog, why did you run away. I didn't think you'd break my heart like your human counterparts."

Still, it was odd that a man came into her life with a name so close to the one she'd selected for the dog that ran in front of her car. Was fate directing her here? Gave a girl goose bumps to think along those lines.

A knock on the door told her Rand was as prompt as last night. Let's hope there are no emergency phone calls tonight.

* * * *

Amanda's hand trembled in her attempt to fit the key in the lock. Would he kiss her goodnight? Her mind dwelled on that thought most of the night as she watched his full sensuous mouth smile, chew, laugh and talk. She hoped for a deep toe tingling, lip scorching smooch that set her soul on fire. Maybe she'd had too much wine tonight, which was taking her down a dangerous path. Her thoughts were entrenched in sex. Talk about sex on the brain. Lord, if the man

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didn't accept her offer to come in for a nightcap she might have to jump his bones right here on the porch. The neighbors around here would probably throw some popcorn in the microwave and drag out their lawn chairs for the free show.

Rand's fingers brushed against the back of her neck and she jumped. *Damn*. She needed to stop acting like a schoolgirl on her first date. "Would you like to come in for coffee or a brandy?" There, that sounded like the sophisticated woman she didn't feel like at this moment.

"I'd love a cup of coffee. Here, let me get the door for you." His strong fingers took the key from her and inserted into the keyhole without a problem.

Well, he was a man and use to inserting things in holes. Shit, she had to get her mind out of the gutter.

She dropped her purse and headed for the kitchen. Rand followed and while she emptied the coffee pot of morning leftovers, he pulled coffee and filters from the cabinet. How odd. He seemed to know the lay out of her kitchen because he reached into the exact cabinet for cups.

"You're spooking me."

"How so?" He pulled his head from the refrigerator and looked at her, a puzzled expression on his chiseled face.

"You know where everything is without asking. The first time someone helps in the kitchen is usually a game of fifty questions on where to find stuff." Did she see his grin slip or were her eyes playing tricks. A nervous flutter ran across her stomach. "You haven't been stalking me have you?"

Laughter danced in his eyes. "I thought you saw me sitting here watching you each day."

Okay. He thought she was being silly and was teasing her. Two could play that game. "No, that would have been my dog." She put in the last scope of coffee and hit the brew button.

"Amanda." Rand stood behind her, his breath warm on her hair.

Her throat tightened to the point she wasn't sure any words she attempted would come out. Finally, a strangled, "Yes," managed to escape.

Strong masculine arms slipped around her waist and his hands caressed her stomach. From the gush of moisture collecting between her legs, she'd just creamed her pants. It had been a long time...no, make that never, when a man's touch had this effect on her.

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“Kiss me, Mandy.” His hoarse command against her ear was just what the doctor ordered. Turning to face him, her lips met his and offered no resistance when his tongue sought entry into her mouth.

After a few minutes of an intense tongue war, she had to come up for air. “Wow, you’re some kisser.”

“I’m more than that, if you’d like to find out.”

Her heart pounded louder than a kettledrum against her ribs. “I bet you are.” She took his hand and led him toward the bedroom. Screw the coffee. If they wanted a cup later, they’d heat it up. Probably one of the reasons microwaves were invented to begin with.

A quick trip to the bathroom would be nice, but it would also give her intended victim the chance to change his mind. After an evening of lots of wine and drooling over the hunk across the table from her, there was no way in hell she’d give him an opening to escape.

Her clothes came off before she made it to the bed and looking across to the other side, she saw Rand in the same state of undress. His cock standing at full attention, waved at her and a vision of whipped cream with a cherry on top danced through her head. Maybe next time, because for some reason she knew this would be more than a one-night fling.

“Mandy?” Rand lay on the bed, his hand stretched out to her. “Have you changed your mind?”

Suddenly, Amanda felt shy. No, she hadn’t changed her mind, but maybe she needed to slow down. She didn’t want him to think she jumped into bed with every first date and this was their first real date. Taking the offered hand, she let Rand pull her down against him.

His kiss sent shock waves down to her toes. When his lips started the journey along her neck to her breasts, Amanda was afraid she’d pass out from pleasure. Yes, it had been a long time since she participated in an evening of sex, but this went way beyond that. With this man, she wanted to make love.

“Oh.” A gasp escaped when his teeth slid over the nipple of her left breast. Her breasts were sensitive and there were times in the past she’d almost achieved an orgasm from her partner’s stimulation of her nipples, but never this close to the edge. As Rand worked the tender buds with his mouth, his fingers tracked down to the vee between her thighs.

When he inserted a finger into her wet slit, she couldn’t stop the shudder that raged through her body. Good heavens, he’d barely

touched her clit and she'd exploded like a fireworks display into which someone tossed a match.

He moved his body up and claimed her mouth again. The erection she saw when they first undressed seemed, if possible, to have grown larger. The man had no issues in the equipment department. His cock slipped between her thighs and rubbed back and forth. If he kept that up for much longer, she'd go off again. That would be a first for her. She wasn't a multi-orgasm kind of gal.

His fingers kneaded her ass and ran down the crack between her cheeks, one playing around her anus. Amanda stiffened and he seemed to sense she didn't want to go there. She relaxed when his hands moved to her thighs in long slow strokes.

"Rand, I want to feel you inside me."

"Not as much as I want to be inside you." He lifted up and positioned his long body between her knees, his pulsing organ tickling her pubic hairs. "I've dreamed about this since the moment I laid eyes on you." In one thrust, he buried his shaft in her heat and she welcomed each powerful thrust.

Amanda felt the tension building in her body and when the spasms of another orgasm hit, she gave in to the pleasure of the release. A moan from Rand told her he'd reached his peak and she felt his seed spill into her.

Damn, they should have used a condom. Well, nothing she could do about it right now. She sighed with contentment as Rand covered them with a blanket and snuggled her close. He did the male thing of falling asleep after sex and it wasn't long before she joined him.

Chapter Eight

“Looks like our boy scored last night.”

Rand glared at the big cat that appeared to have been waiting for his return. “Shut up Simma. I’m not in the mood for any smart assed comments.”

“My, my, aren’t we testy?” Simma’s tail twitched back and forth as it always did when he was irritated. *“Just because you were out tomcatting around last night doesn’t give you cause to bless the rest of us with your grumpy-glow. I thought sex put humans in a good mood.”*

Rand fumbled in the cabinet for coffee filters, in desperate need of caffeine. “Sex does, but exhaustion doesn’t.” Damn, where did the twins put the coffee? It should have been on the shelf with the filters.

“So, she was a real animal in bed?” Simma chuckled, finding his question amusing.

“Be gone cat. Get out of my head with the mind talk stuff and leave me alone.”

The huge cat sniffed. *“Very well. Have it your way.”* A black streak raced across the kitchen floor and into the living room.

Rand sighed. From the pissy tone of Simma’s parting words, he knew would pay for his grumpiness at some point. Right now, he didn’t care. He wanted coffee, sleep and a shower, in that order. He should take a shower before getting into bed, but that would wash the scent of Amanda off and he wasn’t ready to do that.

Last night was everything he dreamed it would be. The most fantastic sex he’d ever experienced, but it went beyond that. No doubt about it, he was in love with Amanda. Totally, hopelessly in love and he only had a few more days to get her to fall in love with him before he disappeared. Then what? His gut told him even if she did come to feel the same way he did, once he vanished for several weeks without contact it would take more than “I’m sorry” to get back in her good graces.

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Depressed, Rand headed up the stairs still searching for a way to stop reverting back into a dog.

* * * *

Happy her appointment filled day finally ended, Amanda sat down to tackle the stack of paperwork on her desk. Anything to avoid thinking about last night. How could she have been such an idiot? Give her a little wine and she fell into bed with a hot guy at the blink of an eye.

Be honest with yourself fool. You didn't fall into bed with him. You jumped his bones. Truth be known, if he hadn't started things rolling with the first kiss, you would have.

Yep, she'd had a case of sex on the brain during dinner. Of course, the fact it was the best sex of her life didn't help matters any. One night wasn't enough. The taste she received of Rand McAllister last night only whetted her appetite. She could spend the rest of her life feasting on him.

Her fingers toyed with the four messages he'd left through out the day. The receptionist didn't lie when she said Amanda was with a patient. He just had bad timing; because every time he called she was in the middle of something she couldn't walk away from.

Once it had been splinting a broken leg on a Doberman, then he called when she was in the middle of delivering a litter of kittens. Maybe it was just as well. She would have sounded like a silly schoolgirl since her stomach turned to jello just thinking about him.

Okay, she was a coward and avoiding the man because he made her feel out of control. "Enough of this crap." She picked up the phone and punched in the numbers on the paper in her hand. No man would ever turn her into a sniveling female, again.

Great, he wasn't there. Drumming her fingers on the desk, Amanda ran through a list of reasons she should be glad. The more she talked to or saw this man, the more trouble she was in.

The last thing she wanted was for him to realize how strong her attraction to him had become. That decided how she would handle the situation going forward. If he asked her to go out this evening, she would say no. Let him pant after her for a change. Then again, who said his interest went beyond a couple of dates. Damn. Why did her love life have to be so complicated? Maybe she should become a nun and forget about men.

So, why did she jot down the address from Simma's file? In the trauma of two nights before and the heat of last night, she forgot to

check on her patient. She was a veterinarian after all and the cat had a strange growth. Probably should make sure it wasn't getting worse. She could swing by on her way home and check on the poor thing. It wasn't too out of her way, only about twenty or thirty minutes. *Liar. Try to convince yourself otherwise, but the real truth is you want to see Rand.*

Amanda pulled into the driveway and admired the house. She loved old Victorian homes and this one was a classic with the gables and gingerbread trim. Rand's car wasn't in the driveway. With any luck, he wasn't home and she'd do exactly what she told herself this trip was about. See how her patient's doing and leave before the man who turned her upside down emotionally made an appearance.

"Mandy!" Rand's smile of delight when he opened the door sent her heart into overdrive. "What a surprise. Come in." He stepped aside and motioned her into the entryway.

Casting a quick glance around the part of the house she could see, Amanda arrived at the conclusion Rand's mother was a woman of good taste when it came to decorating. Elegant, yet comfortable best described the living room with its antiques and overstuffed seating.

The touch of Rand's hand on her elbow made her knees weak. She could use one of those chairs right now. "I was in the neighborhood and decided to stop and see how Simma's doing." Did that sound as lame to his ears as it did to hers?

"He's fine. Come out to the kitchen and you can see for yourself." Rand's hand slid down her arm, capturing hers in his large one and leading her toward the back of the house. "We're in the process of preparing dinner. Why don't you stay and eat with us?"

The tantalizing smells coming from the kitchen caused her to remember her last meal today had been a granola bar for lunch that she washed down with yet another cup of coffee. "Are you sure? I don't want to impose." *Please, please, tell me I'm not imposing.*

"We'd love to have you. When the Demon Duo cooks, there's enough to feed an army."

Amanda laughed at Rand's name for his twin sisters. He'd shared with her over dinner what a challenge the two could be at times, but she heard the love in his voice for the girls that drove him crazy some days. "But, the question is, how is their cooking. Quantity doesn't always equate quality."

"True, though in this case it does. Hey, look who is here."

"Amanda." Mel grinned a welcome from her position at the

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stove. “Great to see you.”

Riz greeted her with a bone-crushing squeeze. “Or should we say, Dr. Livingston, I presume.”

“Smart ass.” Rand tweaked a strand of his sister’s hair. “What would you like to drink? I’m having red wine. Goes good with pot roast.”

Amanda’s heart slammed against her ribs in response to the lopsided smile Rand gave her. “Red wine is good.” Her voice came out in a husky whisper and she caught the looked exchanged between the twins. They knew she liked their brother. Like hell, the more she watched him, the more she knew the ‘L’ word working its way into her mind was a lot stronger one than ‘like.’

Mel glared at her brother. “Pot roast. You call beef burgundy, pot roast. Next time, Big Brother you cook.” She dipped a spoon into the sauce, tasted and pulled a spice bottle from the rack beside the stove. Adding a dash, she stirred and tasted again, then gave a nod of satisfaction.

Rand winked at Amanda as he set a glass of merlot in front of her. “Okay, lady. To eat in this fine establishment, you have to earn your dinner.” He handed her a stack of plates. “Table setting falls to you.”

Listening to the laughter and bickering as she set the table for the four of them brought a longing to her that Amanda thought she was past. Her parents’ death in an auto accident when she was in her early twenties still left a void. They were her only family and she knew now, their loss was one of the reasons she’d moved into a relationship with Jess so quickly...to fill the void left with them gone.

A streak of black jumping onto the window seat caught her eye and she remembered the reason she stopped by, or at least the excuse for stopping. “Simma let me see your nose.” The cat’s unblinking stare made her a little uncomfortable. In some ways, he reminded her of Alistair. Maybe the coloring or more the way he seemed to read her mind. Stroking the large cat’s head, she studied the nose. Relief and disbelief came into play. The large growth that caused Rand and the girls to bring him to her a few days before was gone with no evidence of its existence.

“Is the table ready?” Mel asked as she juggled three bowls before setting them on the table and Riz directed Amanda to a chair beside Rand.

As the meal progressed, the teasing and laughter increased and

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Amanda wondered ‘what if’ she became part of this family. How would her life change? Chastising herself for being silly, she pushed the thought away. No way could she be in love with this man in such a short time. *Besides, look at what love got you in the past...a broken heart. Do you really want to open the door for that again?*

Chapter Nine

Rand didn't believe his luck when he opened the door and saw Amanda. He'd tried to contact her all day without results. It seemed the forces were against him, because every time he called she'd been unavailable. Instead of dinner with her, he came home and let the twins talk him into a mad cooking spree with them. If he could reach Amanda after dinner, he hoped to get an invitation for dessert. Of course, the sweet delights he had in mind involved the bedroom.

Inviting her to join him and the twins for dinner came naturally. So did her blending into the joking and teasing he and the girls were exchanging before she arrived. He tried to give her space and act normal, but what he wanted was to wrap her in his arms and make love to her until they both exhausted themselves.

Okay, so he wanted more than sex. For the first time, he could see spending the rest of his life with someone. The thought of waking up beside her in his bed every morning and coming home to her at night gave him chills. Happy for him was spelled A.M.A.N.D.A.

"Hey, big brother, what's for dessert?"

Riz sat back in her chair and rubbed her stomach in anticipation of the cake Rand knew was her favorite and the reason he chose it. "I made it, so I think one of you should serve."

"No way." Mel shook her head in denial. "I don't want my name associated with the disaster I saw earlier."

Rand laughed and gathered up the dishes around him. "Okay, but you two have to clear the table while I dish up my gourmet delight."

He enjoyed the easy banter between Amanda and the twins as he sliced the chocolate cake. So, it was a little crooked and the frosting gooier than he hoped, but a quick taste with his finger satisfied him as to its quality.

Placing the last piece of cake on a dish, he started to announce he was ready to serve when an odd feeling rushed through his body. He'd felt a little itchy while he cut the cake, but now the urge to

scratch won. The knife fell to the counter as Rand dug at his ear and then started to nibble on his arm.

“Rand, are you okay?” He looked up to see Amanda and the twins watching him, concern on their faces.

“Sure. Fine, fine.” Why did his tongue roll out of his mouth? Good grief, he was panting like a...dog. *No. No. Not now, it's not time.*

Pain though through every inch of his body, leaving his joints on fire. He resisted the urge to scream, both from the agony of the change raging down him and the frustration of this happening now.

“Rand!” Amanda called his name again and he heard one of the twins begin to sob.

His mind resisted the change, but it was a losing battle as it tore through him like a wolf tearing at road-kill. He knew from the hysterical shouts from Amanda and the tearful voices of his sister, he was now a little black Scottie. No way would he ever be able to explain his way out of this with the woman he loved.

Just when he didn't think things could get much worse, a new voice entered the mêlée.

“Quiet!”

The silence that followed the demand hurt Rand's ears.

* * * *

Simma sat on the window seat and watched the scene. The arrival of the two witches gave him a surge of relief. He wasn't sure they'd received the urgent message he sent earlier.

A feeling of anxiety he couldn't identify earlier in the evening caused him to use the emergency contact method to get them to orb back before their scheduled return of tomorrow. If he'd learned anything over the past decades as the family familiar, it was to heed those feelings.

Jorgia's demand for quiet got the desired results and Simma watched her look around, appraising the situation at hand. When she spoke, it was to the group. “Would anyone care to explain what is going on here?”

A chorus of explanations flew at her verbally from the twins and mind speak from the shivering black dog on the floor. Simma kept his peace, knowing she'd get to him when she was ready.

“Enough. I can't comprehend all of you yelling at once.” A movement from Amanda, drew Jorgia's attention to the pale-faced woman holding onto the counter, looking as if a slight breeze in her

direction would topple her over. Simma felt sorry for the veterinarian, even if she was ready to cut a hunk out of him when they first met.

“Who are you and how are you involved in this mess?” The subject of her scrutiny opened her mouth to speak and instead slid to the floor, out cold.

Simma shook his head in disgust. Jorgia needed to work on her people skills. You didn’t take an aggressive stance in a situation like this. It required tact and consideration.

“Cat!” Simma flinched. He forgot to block his thought and though Jorgia now kneeled beside Amanda’s limp form, her mother stood in front of him. “It’s probably best you keep your thoughts to yourself.” Lila’s blue eyes skewered him to the window seat. Simma now understood how a mouse felt when he had it cornered.

“Could I get some help over here?” Jorgia held one of Amanda’s wrists in her hand, checking the pulse. “We need to get her into the living room and then someone can explain what the hell has been going on while we were gone.” She directed a look at Simma and he knew he’d be the one explaining.

Done with the tale of the past few weeks, Simma sat back and licked a paw. A fellow had to keep tidy and a situation like this could leave him a bit messy. He watched Jorgia cradle Rand in her lap.

“My poor baby. I’m so sorry you had to go through all of this. Fortunately, I’m familiar with this spell and know what it will take to counter-act its effects. Don’t worry, Mama will make everything right.” She paused in her stroking of the black fur and glared at Simma and the twins, who fidgeted on the loveseat where they were instructed to sit. “Then I’ll deal with those who created the problem.”

“*Hey, now. I tried to help.*” Simma wasn’t about to take the rap for this mess.

“Watch it cat food breath.” Lila didn’t sound too happy. “If you’d called us when this first happened we could have done a counter-spell. Now, it’s going to take more effort.”

“Plus, Simma, part of the problem lies with your misinterpretation of the old language, Jorgia pointed out.

“*Right.*” They were trying to make him feel guilty and doing a damn good job of it.

A moan from Amanda pulled everyone’s attention toward the couch where Jorgia had covered her with a blanket when they brought her into the room.

“Mom, take Rand,” she handed the little dog to her mother, “and

the twins to the kitchen. I want to talk to Amanda alone.”

While Lila hustled her charges out the door, Simma slipped behind the loveseat. He wasn't about to miss this conversation.

Jorgia helped the young woman sit up and handed her a glass of water from the decanter kept on the table beside the sofa. “How do you feel, dear? Are you okay?”

Amanda brushed a strand of hair from her face. She stared at Jorgia for a moment while she appeared to gather her thoughts. “How the hell do you think I feel?” The errant stand fell into her eyes again and she just blew at it. “As for okay, I may never be okay again. I just frigging saw a man turn into a dog right before my eyes. And, to make matters really great, it was the same man I spent the night in bed with last night.”

Pink tinged Amanda's cheeks when she realized she'd just disclosed her prior evening's entertainment. Simma had to admire her pluck. She didn't turn into a sniveling mass of goo when faced with what happened earlier.

“By the way, who are you?”

Jorgia smiled and patted her hand. “No one to worry about, dear. I'm only the mother of the man you saw turn into a dog and spent the night with.”

“Oh.” The pink tinge now burned flame red when Amanda realized what she had disclosed to Rand's mother.

Simma chortled and received a warning glare from Jorgia. He slunk back into his hiding place hoping for out of sight, out of mind, if he could remember to block his thoughts.

Amanda closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, she had another question. “Can you tell me what is happening around here? What kind of insane asylum have I stumbled into?”

“Certainly.” Jorgia took the empty glass from Amanda's hand and set it on the table. “You may find this a little hard to accept. We're witches or at least my mother and I are. The twins have strong natural abilities, but need to learn discipline and train in the use of those gifts.”

Simma watched Amanda mull over the information. “And, your son? Is Rand a witch too? Is that why he can become a...dog?” She whispered the last word.

“He has a few minor gifts, but Rand doesn't care to expand on them. Also, most of the magic passes through the females in the family.”

Jaded Beasts 6, Dog-Pig

“But, how...I mean why does he...” Simma felt sorry for the confused woman. Vet or not, she was a nice person and one with an open mind; trying to understand a situation most people would laugh at or dismiss completely.

Jorgia sighed. “I’m afraid the blame for Rand’s problem lies with his sisters and Simma.”

“Simma? The cat?”

“Yes.” Jorgia nodded. “One and the same. You see, he’s the family familiar and has a great deal of magic, also.” *Just not as smart as he thinks he is when it comes to old languages.*

“Ouch. That hurts.”

“Nothing like the pain you’re going to feel when I come up with the punishment for your part in this mess. I think training the girls in the magic arts may become your responsibility.”

Damn. She was right about pain. Stuck with the twins for who knew how long would be worse than most of the punishments she could hand out. Simma almost wished he’d left with the others and let Jorgia cool down.

Thankfully, Jorgia turned her attention back to Amanda. “Do you have any questions?”

“Oh, let me think. A houseful of witches, a magical cat, I sleep with a man who is actually the dog I ran over with my car and then took home with me for two weeks and she wants to know if I have any questions. Nope, can’t think of a one.” The sarcasm in Amanda’s voice elevated her status in Simma’s eyes several more notches.

“Well, I have one.” Jorgia smiled and took Amanda’s hands in hers. “How do you feel about my son?”

“Listen lady. It’s none of your damned business. Right now, I’m not sure I ever want to see the man-dog you call your son again.”

Jorgia resisted Amanda’s attempt to pull her hands free. “You’re not being honest with me. I see the opposite of what you’re saying in your eyes. I know this is confusing to you, Amanda, but it’s really important for you to be honest with me and most importantly, with yourself about your feelings for Rand.”

Simma watched the two women lock stares. He tried to read Jorgia’s thoughts, but she blocked him and somehow Amanda had a natural ability to not let him have access to hers.

After several minutes, Amanda’s shoulders slumped. “I love him.” Tears trailed down her cheeks. “No matter how crazy I feel all that’s happened is, I love him.”

Jaded Beasts 6, Dog-Pig

“That’s what I needed to hear. You see, Amanda, your love is what will save Rand. At this point, only love has the power to counter-act the spell placed on him by accident.” Jorgia gathered the sobbing woman in her arms.

“Mandy.”

Simma smiled a cat smile at the human Rand standing in the door, his arms spread open to receive the woman who flew into them. Thank heavens he wouldn’t be going to the dogs again, now that he had the love of his intended mate. The cat washed his face as he watched the lovers kiss.

Epilogue

“No.” Rand looked over at the sandbox where Sophie played. “You cannot.”

Amanda glanced up to see Sophie glare at her father.

“I don’t care what your aunts did when they were three, darling daughter.”

The little girl shrugged and went back to scooping sand into her bucket.

Fighting back laughter, Amanda watched the exchange between father and daughter. Thankfully, when she was around, Rand verbalized his end of their mind-speak conversations for her sake.

Adjusting to the idea of her daughter as a witch took effort some days. But, she knew the family motto of ‘do no harm’ would be instilled in Sophie. Even her aunts had become reliable and focused on their niece not making the mistakes of their childhood. So, if she didn’t learn about whatever created this argument with her father from the aunts since it seemed to concern them, where did it come from?

“Simma. He’s been entertaining her with stories of the old days.” Rand grinned at her startled jump. “You need to take Mom up on her offer to help you develop your mind-speak, honey. She also needs to teach you to keep your guard up. You don’t want darling daughter reading your every thought.”

“Hmmm. Right. Jorgia thinks I have a witch in my family line and can learn, but I’m not so sure.” Why did she feel defensive when someone mentioned the possibility of witches as part of her heritage? Probably because she was afraid they were wrong and she’d be the outsider in this family forever.

“You’re not an outsider, Mommy.” Sophie climbed into Amanda’s lap and awarded her with a sand filled hug and kiss.

“You’re right dear, but to make sure I can keep better tabs on you when your father isn’t around, I think I will take Grandma up on her offer.”

Jaded Beasts 6, Dog-Pig

Sophie climbed down and returned to her sandbox. Rand leaned over from his lounge chair and kissed her. “Good idea. Who knows what kind of magical powers this one will have.” He placed his hand over the bulge of her stomach and smiled.

“True. Now, go talk to your daughter so I can get a nap.” She leaned back and closed her eyes, placing her hands where Rand’s laid moments before. Another witch on the way and she knew this one was a girl. She saw it in a dream last night. Maybe she did have a family line of magic, after all.

The End

Excitable
by
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Chapter One

“And then she just...disappeared. There's no other word for it. Disappeared, in the middle of an auditorium full of *Mission: Jupiter* fans.” Jenna McCoy wrung her hands tightly, bearing her knotted knuckles against her lap. It looked almost painful, but Jenna's attention was focused more on her monologue. Her face exhibited another kind of anguish—every word spoken revealed her emotions. “It was like something from the show itself,” she continued. “One minute she's on the dais answering the same damn questions she does at every con—what was your favorite episode, who was your favorite guest star, blah blah blah...”

Wild gestures cut the air, and an added eye roll lent the young woman a fanatical air. All the same, Jeffrey thought she looked rather enchanting. Dare he say it, attractive, even borderline sexy with her pert features, expressive eyes and pixie haircut dyed dark red. “Identity crisis” had been the excuse for the drastic change in her appearance, she had said, as her boss' mysterious disappearance drove her to such extremes.

He watched her babble on about Dina Joseph's exit from this existence, his gaze panning first to Jenna's smallish breasts, then to the tightened juncture between her thighs, made evident in the ripples of her short skirt. Occasionally the hem would creep up the woman's legs and allow Jeremy a view of shaded rump.

Then suddenly his eyes darted upward and he looked again at her hair. Briefly the question of whether the rug matched the curtains flitted through his mind. Assuming Jenna didn't shave the rug. Jeremy smiled.

Jaded Beasts 6, Dog-Pig

“Can you find her?” Jenna's eyes sparkled like glass, unshed tears formed a shield that reflected the overhead light of Jeremy's office. The young woman appeared close to ethereal in their somber, wood-paneled surroundings—leather office chairs, bookshelves stuffed with ancient titles Jeremy hadn't bothered to read, a framed oil painting of a foxhunt. Aesthetics mostly, for the benefit of clients expecting an atmosphere of professionalism from a private detective. Jeremy cared nothing for it, or for the job; he merely kept up the facade of legitimate work to appease the Pack council, all of whom insisted each wolf in the family integrate with the general population seamlessly.

That would change, Jeremy knew, once he was named Alban's successor, and he could shed the nine to five drudgery that made civilian life so boring. For now, the distraction that was the lovely Jenna McCoy made the job tolerable at best.

“You are aware,” Jeremy began, leather upholstery squealing as he shifted closer to his desk, “that what happened to Ms. Joseph isn't unusual.”

“It's not?” Jenna's voice betrayed any attempt to hide her sarcasm. “You'll have to forgive me, then. Where I'm from, it's not *that* common to see people with pointy ears ripping holes in the fabric of the time/space continuum for people to step through.”

“Not time, alternate reality. The time/space continuum is actually a myth, as far as I'm concerned,” Jeremy said quite plainly. “Nobody has yet to prove time manipulation is possible, so I'm not inclined to believe it.”

Jenna sighed, exasperated, and slouched back in her chair. Jeremy could sympathize somewhat; the young man hadn't expected to have such a conversation today, and likely hadn't believed in things like elves or alternate dimension until two such creatures broke with protocol and exposed themselves before a gaggle of sci-fi geeks. Jeremy had heard from Alban that the Federation elders decided in the end to let the matter die. That the indiscretion happened at a science fiction convention lent the possibility of the event being part of the show. Meeting with Dina Joseph's assistant, Jeremy wondered if Alban or anyone in the Federation was aware that Jenna—an actual sane person swimming among a sea of Spocks and Sulus—witnessed the elves taking Dina.

Jaded Beasts 6, Dog-Pig

“I don't believe it,” Jenna said, assertive. “It had to have been some kind of illusion. Smoke and mirrors bullshit. Those men kidnapped Dina Joseph.”

Jeremy tried not to cluck his tongue to chide her. He should have expected Jenna would grasp for a logical explanation. Most “normals” did when presented with clear evidence of the fantastic. There was always smoke, a mirror, a trapdoor...She probably didn't believe in werewolves, either, never mind that one sat across from her.

Hmmm... Maybe she could be persuaded to open her mind if he could get her to open her legs so he could work his own “magic.”

Resting his chin on the heel of one hand, Jeremy absently waggled the fingers of the other under the guise of stretching. Jenna's reaction was inspiring, and he enjoyed the look of sudden surprise and mild ecstasy on her face. She might be thinking her crossed legs were so tight the pressure affected her clit—she had no idea Jeremy caused the growing tingle in her panties, and that excited the werewolf all the more. His cock hardened in his slacks, and he felt grateful for the huge mahogany desk between them. To feel pleasure during a dull work day was always welcome, but such improprieties seldom made for repeat business. Lord only knew how many referrals he'd get from Jenny after she experienced the best orgasm of her life.

“Not necessarily. It's impossible to kidnap the willing,” Jeremy said. He traced the alphabet in the air, delighting as Jenna squirmed to every curve and sharp line. He dotted an *i* and she nearly jumped out of her chair in response to the phantom touch on her clit. “Can I get you something?” he asked, almost teasing. “You look suddenly...uncomfortable.”

“I-I'm fine,” Jenna wheezed, looking about the room. “Hot in here.”

The air ran full blast, and Jenna was in short sleeves. Jeremy settled back in his chair and momentarily twined his fingers. She needed a second to rest. “Very well.”

“And how do you know Dina went of her own volition?” Jenna demanded. “You weren't there.”

“But you were, and did you see her struggle?” *Swish*, Jeremy now conducted a symphony with his forefinger. Beethoven's *Eroica*, almost aptly named. Jenna grasped the arms of her chair and cringed.

“No...”

“Did she shout for help? She *was* in a crowded hall filled with fans. I'm sure any one of them would have come to her aid if she

requested it.” He reached an arm forward and drummed his fingers on the desk, rubbing one forefinger in a suggestive manner. Jenna should be feeling the breach to her soaking wet core now, he surmised.

“Uh...”

“Ms. McCoy, it would be unethical of me to take this case,” Jeremy said. “For one, you cannot prove Dina Joseph is a victim of kidnapping. I wouldn't doubt, were we able to round up every geek, nerd, and dweeb in the tri-county area who attended that convention, they would tell you she went willingly. For two, I'm not too keen on breaching any alternate dimensions where I don't belong. Besides, with all the different realities out there, it could take years for us to find one where your Dina now lives. For three, and this is the big one...”

Yes, Jeremy sneered. He rested his hand in his lap, brushing his wrist against a thickened erection as his thumb and forefinger rubbed together rapidly. This was going to be a *very* big one, he could tell by the thin trail of sweat gleaming at the young woman's temple. He delighted in her pursed expression and fidgeting manner as she obviously willed her body to suppress the orgasm building inside her.

They were almost home now. This was going to be big with a capital B, which rhymes with C, and that stands for...

Come...on man! Dammit!

Jeremy's fingers stilled with the piercing whistle that filled his ears. Rather than bask in the sound of Jenna McCoy's orgasmic cries, he had to settle for a noise only he could hear, a shrill private summons from Alban.

His presence was requested at pack headquarters, immediately.

Jeremy sighed heavily and released Jenna from his mental hold. The young woman exhaled roughly and blood returned to her hands as her grip on the chair relaxed. She looked around in a daze, as though waking from a dream. Word tried to expel but the young woman only seemed to manage a few wheezing syllables before Jeremy stood.

“Ms. McCoy, go home,” Jeremy gruffly ordered of her. “I don't doubt Dina Joseph is happier now than she has even been, and if I were to find her I know she wouldn't want to come back here and spend the rest of her life signing autographs in VFW halls for dwindling population who can remember when she was an A-lister. Mallory will see you out, I have an appointment I just remembered. No charge for the consult.”

Jaded Beasts 6, Dog-Pig

You would have charged plenty if I had just five more seconds, he thought with mild annoyance as he bolted out of his office, past his secretary, to the bank of elevators in the hallway. Mallory appeared unfazed by her boss' abrupt departure. Assigned to work for him by the Pack, she well understood the eccentricities involved in the job.

Jeremy lumbered through the first set of doors that slid open and turned to face Mallory, who looked up from the game of Internet solitaire she had been playing. She arched an eyebrow and smirked. "*Eroica?*" It was hardly a guess.

Jeremy only smiled and let a grand gesture swath the air before him. He took great pleasure in watching his secretary gasp as the elevator closed on her brief ecstasy.

Chapter Two

In accordance with Alban's desire for seamless integration into society, Pack Headquarters was located on one of the busiest streets in Toronto. On days he was to meet there Jeremy would normally hop a cable car from his office in the spirit of communing with the "normals," but it would take a while for Alban's ill-timed summons to stop grating on his nerves. He had to wait for satisfaction, so Jeremy decided Alban could wait as well. For twenty minutes Jeremy walked down College Street to Yonge, taking long strides to ease the hard-on bobbing in his slacks.

His shoulders hunched, he kept his gaze down to avoid eye contact with the multitude of homeless lining the buildings and hiding in the crevices of doorways, blocked from the sun. Occasionally, however, the temptation to peek became too great, and twice on the trek Jeremy locked onto a Tim Horton's cup filled with change, the owner's elbow propped by a knee. The price of alleviating the sudden twinges of guilt cost Jeremy one toony per transient, the last of his two-dollar coins, before he reached his destination.

To the public, Pack Headquarters resembled a staid edifice sandwiched between adult video stores and souvenir boutiques bearing maple leaf-emblazoned gifts. The interior granted visitors the image of a men's social club that had disbanded on principle rather than succumb to equal rights admission. Several leather Queen Anne chairs, punctured with gold-plated studs in repeating diamond patterns, and bordered an authentic Oriental carpet that spanned the large lobby. Wood-paneled walls bore large, gilt-framed portraits of people Jeremy never knew, people he wasn't sure existed in the first place. Nobody in the pack could identify these dour-faced suits with mutton-chop beards and walrus mustaches, in fact. Rumor had it Alban bought many of the paintings at various auctions to give people the impression that these men once wandered the building, and sipped brandy from large snifters while spinning tales of adventures on

safari. Every time Jeremy came here he pictured the room coming to life with these men, not unlike a Disney animated show, complete with a ghost butler bearing cigars on a tray.

The door to Alban's office was on the far end of the room. Jeremy sauntered through the mahogany threshold to find the main players in the pack assembled in an arc around Alban's desk. Richard Leehy, another would-be Alpha, offered Jeremy a crooked smile tinted with yellowed smoker's teeth. Next to him stood the ever prim and proper Miss Wallace, a human...the only human employed by the pack to handle various affairs during the full moons. Jeremy licked his lips and winked at the older, thinner women, hardly surprised to see those thin, pale lips remained set in an unamused expression.

To Jeremy's right, he beheld a more welcome vision: the delicious Brenda Braxton, the great hope for the pack's future. A voluptuous creature with more curves than a wayward mountainside road, Brenda looked especially fetching in a soft, low-cut sweater and black pencil skirt. To her immediate right, Brenda's mother looked on with restrained disgust.

Jeremy smiled. This would well make up for the interruption with Jenny. He had waited long for this day, and the disapproving scowl on Old Lady Braxton's face—on all their faces—spoke volumes. Alban was going to name his successor. He was finally going to step down as Head Wolf and give Jeremy his due. Jeremy would lead the pack, and per his newly gained prominence take the sexy, fertile Brenda as his mate, to bear perfect cubs for years to come. The notion was certainly enough to get the old lady's goat, Jeremy was certain. He was already looking forward to Thanksgiving.

Alban's snowy white head remained bowed over a sheaf of papers. Jeremy situated himself in the center of the arc, back straight and chin held high as befitting any human keystone, and waited to be addressed. Eager as he was to be rid of the geezer, Jeremy was determined to exhibit the respect owed the man. If anything, he realized one day another would think the same of him come his retirement, however far into the future that would be.

One last signature nearly sliced a page and Alban set his work aside. Twining his fingers into a large fist on his desk, the older werewolf peered up at his audience with benign indifference. He regarded Jeremy in particular with a creased brow; there was no love lost between the two, and Jeremy knew Alban wasn't going to like doing this. Yet, what choice did the old wolf have? Clearly Jeremy

was the only choice to lead the pack into a new era. His breeding, his confidence, and his intelligence overpowered everyone in the tightly-knit group, likening them all to weakened cubs.

“Jeremy Vanderkellen, this day is a long time coming,” Alban began.

Jeremy puffed up his chest. Quickly he recalled the word order of the acceptance speech he had planned since his teens.

The old wolf's voice didn't quiver. “For years you have been a complete embarrassment to this pack. Your disregard for rules, your disrespect for humans,” there followed a side glance to Miss Wallace, who permitted a slight yet evil smile to bend her lips, “and your constant public flaunting of paranormal knowledge and abilities continues to put our race at risk.”

Jeremy felt his posture soften. The ache supported by his smug smile was gone, relaxed as his face fell.

Alban shook his head. “It's a small wonder you haven't exposed us altogether with one of your absurd schemes. We should be thankful we're not meeting right now in some cave at the Toronto Zoo while people throw popcorn at us, but rest assured I'll see to it that never happens.”

“What are you saying, Alban?” The words sounded hollow coming from his mouth, as if he had to ask them in the first place. Of course, Alban was going to pass him over as Head Wolf, and the saddened nod in his direction only confirmed what Jeremy feared.

“No...you can't do this, Alban.”

Alban's voice was cold. “You've given me little choice, Jeremy. You're a loose cannon, and as far as loose cannons go you make the most inept of us look like Stephen Hawking.” He shook his head, not a strand loosed from what looked like a shellacked helmet of hair. “I give you this pack, and we're extinct in five years, and I'm being generous with that estimate.”

Jeremy thought he heard Miss Wallace mumble something about “giving it six months,” but the bitch wasn't worth the rebuttal. He lost the pack! The prestige, the power the plans he'd crafted for years while sitting in that damned office, pretending to look important, flushed down the toilet. “How can you say something like that, Alban? Nobody is more qualified to run this pack after you step down.”

“I wouldn't say that.” If Alban tried to hide the wink offered to Richard, he had done a poor job of it. Maybe it was intentional, but it

was enough to set Jeremy's anger several degrees higher. Richard Leehy, Head Wolf! The mere thought made Jeremy wish to become fully human. Their government leaders were entirely more competent.

It took every ounce of control to prevent Jeremy from transforming right there, with the benefit of a full moon. "You. Cannot. Be. *Serious!*" he seethed.

"Like the very heart attack you threaten to give me daily," Alban said coolly. Leaning to one side, he opened a side drawer and extracted a manila folder thick with paper that landed flat on the desk blotter with a *thud*.

Jeremy narrowed his eyes. "You have a *file?*" How paranoid was this organization? And hadn't they heard of paperless storage? Alban's office wasn't set for wireless Internet, there wasn't even a computer for a lousy dial-up connection! It frustrated Jeremy how the Pack chose to remain in the nineteenth century with regards to procedure...and apparently intelligence, too.

"I have *the* file. Every infraction, every stupid scheme, every traffic ticket you've received since you learned to drive, including the one you got squealing out of the Atlanta DMV the day you *got* your license! Never mind what *else* went on in Atlanta, which forced the entire Pack to relocate to Canada in the first place. Shall we review some more?" Alban opened the file and held the top sheet between them. "Two years ago you tried to sue a film company."

"I had a legitimate beef, we all did," Jeremy said defensively. The film had been a cheesy werewolf horror tale, a gross misrepresentation of their race. As Alban's records indicated, however, the complaint was resolved more to his public embarrassment than benefit.

The next example forced a bitter smile from the older wolf. "Ah, yes. We can't forget last year's atrocity, the online auction store where you tried to sell werewolf hair clippings."

"Hey, people go on that site and buy haunted cereal boxes. I figured if they're willing to throw away a nickel to buy a quarter, give *me* the money and I'll give them something real."

"I see, and did the money you make benefit the Pack?"

Jeremy cast his gaze to the floor. "Actually, I didn't get many bids..."

"No kidding," Alban murmured. "Well, I'd normally enjoy a trip down memory lane, but there's too much here I'd just as soon forget.

All the better that this train had never left the station, but it's a bit (late?) for that. Least I can do is keep it from derailing.”

One hard push sent the file crashing to the floor. Nobody around Jeremy flinched, and he had to wonder if this show had been rehearsed, and hence every move of the older wolf expected.

Alban stood and straightened his jacket. “Fact remains, Jeremy, that your constant flaunting of our world puts every wolf at risk, to say nothing of other paranormals.” His brows lifted with concern. “You don't know what it's like for me here, son. I have to listen to elves, the fae...there's some vampire who is claiming you've threatened to expose him over an unpaid poker debt!”

“Now, in my defense, that was worth a lot more than what I would have made on the auction site, *and* I would have paid my dues to the Pack.” Well, some of it, anyway. *Stupid, tightwad bloodsucking freak*, blabbing about him to Alban. Jeremy had a good mind to visit his vampire friend while he was sleeping and pull up all the shades.

Alban wasn't listening. “And today you reveal the existence of alternate realities to a normal, setting her under some obscene erotic influence at that. Are you insane, Jeremy?”

“What? How did you...” But hearing the ever prim, proper, and vindictive Miss Wallace stifle a low-throated murmur answered that. Among her many hats was that of human resources guru. She found jobs for lesser wolves in need of assistance adapting to the human world: retail, hospitality...

...clerical. Jeremy pictured Mallory on the phone to headquarters the seconds the elevator doors closed on him. Well, no more orgasms for *her!*

“Wolf magic or not, though I'm certain you had enough sense to cast a memory spell after your shenanigans so the girl would forget everything, the fact remains that you are not fit to lead this pack. Seeing as how Richard is the obvious best alternative, I will hand over the reigns to him at the official ceremony at the end month.” Alban cast a dismissive gesture in Richard's direction, as though the decision were a reluctant one. Jeremy could see immediately the old man was aware his choice was the lesser man in the room. Why Alban could only see disaster in action he considered bold frustrated Jeremy. With unorthodox measures came risks, and Alban had to understand the Pack needed a bold leader to help them survive future generations.

He wanted to shout, swipe the marble knickknacks and blotter from Alban's desk, maybe rip the wispy, black hairs from Miss

Wallace's chin, one by one. Instead he kept his cool, his whitened knuckles pinned to his sides. A tantrum wouldn't coax Alban into reconsidering his position. "Alban, this isn't right," Jeremy quietly seethed.

"No, it isn't." Alban's voice was grim. "You do have a charisma about you, I'll admit to that. But charisma alone doesn't make for a successful leader. Stability is just as important, and Richard has that."

"The charisma of a mollusk," Jeremy muttered. He ignored the glares; he didn't care who heard. It was the truth.

Alban stood and rounded his desk, parting the arc of attendants on his way to the exit. "Well, that mollusk gets to mate with Brenda to assure the perpetuity of the Pack. Sometimes being soft isn't such a bad thing."

What? Bodacious Brenda with the pouty red lips, mated for life to that melon-head. Was Alban trying to breed wolves or dog show contestants? Jeremy wavered slightly in place, dizzy from the announcement. Around him people filed silently behind Alban, and Jeremy cringed when Richard oh-so gallantly offered a crooked elbow to Brenda, who gladly took it.

He watched that ruby mouth curl into a smile. Those lips would spend the next several years teasing the soft-serve shaft of that, that...*imbecile!* The mere notion set Jeremy's own cock to stone, just to prove Richard's shortcomings.

"What about me?" he called after the retreating group. "What happens to me?"

"Plenty of other eligible ladies in the pack, Jeremy, if any of them would have you," Alban said. "Though I hear you may have burned a few bridges in that department."

Alban moved to leave but lingered at the door, offering Jeremy a piteous glance. "You should take care to prepare for the full moon tomorrow night like the rest of us," he added. "All the extra anger you're carrying, I'd suggest you head for the country now."

"What if I don't want to?" Jeremy challenged. "What if I just wolf out right here in the middle of downtown Toronto on a Friday night? Wreak havoc greater than anything I did in frickin' Atlanta?" He'd do it, too. What was the point in going on if he couldn't lead the Pack? Let a Yonge-bound trolley flatten him in the middle of the street for all he cared, but not before ripping through the flesh of a few drunken co-eds.

Jaded Beasts 6, Dog-Pig

A bemused smile tickled the corner of Alban's mouth. "Oh, I don't think that's going to happen, son. You need to be taught a lesson, something I should have done years ago. You need to learn how to love and respect, and be truly loved and respected in return. You aren't going to harm anybody."

Jeremy felt suddenly pale. "You're banning me from the Pack?" Crafty as he was, Jeremy knew without the Pack to support him, he wouldn't have long in the world. Was he really that bad? Compared to terrorists and serial killers? He sued a movie studio, he didn't try to blow it up. "You can't do that."

The older man shook his head. "I'm not that cruel, son. However, if you want confirmation that you're in the doghouse with everyone here, you'll get it soon enough." And Alban's form slid slowly out of view.

"Doghou—" Jeremy huffed. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Alban poked his head back into the room and grinned. "It means you're not the only one here who's crafty with his magic."

Chapter Three

Normally, Jenna disliked crowded, cacophonous bars, and consequently nixed any offers to club-hop with friends and dates. Tonight, as she lounged in a molded wire chair on the open-air back patio of The Orbit Room, she was grateful for the blast of jazz-fusion rock sweeping through the narrow hallway that led to the main bar. The music served a good purpose in drowning out the irritating blind date set up for her.

Six sheets to the wind and halfway to the seventh, the heavy-lidded blond offered her a crooked smile before planting an oft-toked joint between his lips. Where he'd gotten it Jenna couldn't be certain; it was past one in the morning and the place was packed. Any of a hundred mouths, cold sores and all, could have touched that thing. She refused her turn, opting for a somewhat safer contact high as Malcolm blew the smoke in her direction.

Malcolm, or was it Mario? Or Martin? Jenna didn't catch his name when her roommate introduced them, but only grabbed her purse when he showed up and let him drag her all over the city. She had hoped the evening would help lighten her mood, help her to forget the disappearance of her former boss and friend. Help dispel any notion that she might be losing her mind.

She took a long pull from her dewy bottle of Sleeman's and leaned back to watch the cirrus clouds thread further across the sky and envelop the full moon in a wispy gauze. The night had proven useless, more so than the past few days. Authorities in Chicago had been unable to help her any further with the case. Scratch that, there *was* no case according to them. Nobody seemed to remember Dina Joseph disappear into thin air, escorted by two *Mission: Jupiter* fans...nobody except her. Any picture taken at the event, digital or otherwise, somehow managed not to develop. Jenna had no proof of

Dina's abduction other than her memory, which nobody seemed to trust.

She wasn't entirely sure now *she* could trust it. But, Dina wouldn't have just abandoned her in a convention hotel. Jenna had been invaluable to her, securing Dina numerous personal appearances at fan conventions around the world. Sure, the gigs weren't as glamorous as A-list movie roles, but they made good money. Dina was just happy not to be relegated to dinner theatre co-starring alongside other television has-beens. And Jenna had loved working for her; she thought the feelings had been mutual. More than once, Dina had even expressed more explicit feelings.

So how could an entire auditorium full of people not remember the air splitting in two to reveal another world? Jenna closed her eyes and inhaled. The cannabis air was sweet and pungent, and Jenna relished the dizzying sensation that veiled her mood and tingled her skin. Normally a good fuck would provide an excellent complement to the high, but Malcolm Mario Martin didn't appear to be a sponge-worthy candidate.

Then again, this was only her second beer, and one in the morning was relatively early on a Toronto weekend.

Malcolm Mario Martin leaned into her, smelling of Bob Marley's aftershave. "How 'bout some pizza?" he buzzed into her ear so she could hear over the din. "We'll try that place across the street."

"Do I have to move?" Jenna whined. Her body was leaden. "Can't we get chicken wings or something?"

"Can't. They closed the kitchen. C'mon."

Grabbing a full Sleeman's Cream from the tray of a passing waitress, Jenna followed her date through the narrowing passageway leading to The Orbit Room's main bar. Down the stairs, across the street and weaving around scattered tables, Jenna found a space by the window of the corner pizzeria and downed the beer while Malcolm Mario Martin ordered slices. From her front row seat she watched Toronto night life in full bloom—everybody laughing and chattering and toasting life, blissfully unaware that one of them might no longer have the luxury to do the same.

She felt a chill not associated with the drink or smoke. She closed her eyes to expel the thoughts from her head. Jenna didn't want to accept the possibility that Dina Joseph might be dead. Bizarre as the departure had appeared, Dina looked happy. Those weirdoes who had

taken her seemed enamored by her. If only she could remember what that detective had told her...

Ugh. Her stomach roiled at the memory of that smarmy private eye. The memory of their meeting was blurred, but Jenna knew she would never forget the man's condescending manner and leering appraisal of her. More than that, there had been an aura about the smirking, yet uncannily handsome man. He offered her no help in finding Dina, yet Jenna had the impression he seemed to know more than he let on.

If only she could *remember*. Just thinking back to yesterday's appointment caused her head to hurt, and for some reason her body to tingle with want.

Blech. Please tell me I'm not attracted to that man. A night with any of Dina's pocket-protector, Klingon-chanting virgins would be preferable.

The pizza helped little in easing any physical and mental discomfort. What little she did eat tasted like cardboard and canned sauce. Her date, now etched in her mind as 3-M, downed his plate and most of hers in five bites.

He licked specks of cornmeal from his fingers. "Y'wanna 'nother beer?"

His handsome, stubbly face stretched and yawned in her intoxicated vision. If she tilted one way, the man resembled Jeremy Vanderkellen somewhat, and Jenna cringed inwardly to feel her nipples tighten in response to this observation. Lolling her head to other side distorted the view, but not the memory of Jeremy's curled, endearingly creepy smile as she recalled his piercing gaze scanning her legs.

Guh. She would have to fuck 3-M just to cleanse the palate, she realized.

"Glass of wine, then?" he suggested. "A Coke?"

"Sure." She smiled, drooping her lids to tighten her vision of 3-M, as though concentrating to will X-ray vision. She wanted to see the man's chest. An odd indentation at nipple height indicated a piercing of some sort. Suddenly she wanted to run her tongue up and down the silver stud hidden by the tiny horse patch on his breast. She wanted to live now that Dina Joseph could not be here to do so.

She wanted to fuck and forget, if only for one night.

"So, what'll it be?" 3-M pressed. "A Coke?"

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Jenna shook her head. “A cock,” she said. Damned if she were overheard. She *wanted* be overheard. She wanted people to know she was alive, and now would be living double-time to make up for what Dina missed. If that meant fucking a guy she'd just met to ease ill thoughts of some worm, so be it. “A cock and a smile.”

3-M proudly delivered the latter, tossed a toony on the table for the busboy's tip, and pulled Jenna out of the pizza joint so they could catch a passing trolley.

* * * *

Jeremy sat naked in his favorite leather lounger, turned to face the broad picture window overlooking the city. From his living room on the twentieth floor of his building, he could nightly soak in the flickering landscape of Toronto. Weekends, especially, seemed brighter, with views of the CN Tower and the ballparks lights marking activity. Jeremy slouched down a few inches, smiling as the sensation of leather against flesh cooled him.

In ten minutes the moon would rise, and he would change. Then Toronto would face its most devastating terror since SARS. Tonight a wolf would prey among the innocent and weak, stalking partygoers and unsuspecting drunkards stumbling from pub to pub. Tonight, as the rest of the pack frolicked and howled in some national park, a lone wolf would cripple the city...because he knew he could.

If he were to be captured or killed, no matter. What was his life without the assurance of assuming pack leadership? He had no mate, no prospects of finding one, he hated his job, and to think more of it he didn't much care for others in his pack. If there was anything positive to come out of being passed over for Head Wolf, it was that he wouldn't have to deal with Miss Wallace. Then again, he *could* fire her, or invite her on a campout during the next full moon...

He scratched the arms of the chair. The tingling sensation that signaled the change twinkled in the pit of his stomach, slowly spreading an erotic warmth through his veins. Jeremy's cock hardened at the prospect of changing, quicker than before given tonight's situation. Breaking the rules has always stimulated him to some extent, but never before had he felt so aroused, so alive.

A wolf in the city, with nobody to stop him. No nattering Alban, no whining Richard. Jeremy salivated and twisted in his seat, already tasting the blood and flesh he'd devour by night's end. He flicked an aching incisor with the tip of his tongue, nearly cutting the sensitive flesh when his doorbell sounded.

It startled him, for in all the time Jeremy had lived in Toronto he couldn't recall *anybody* using the doorbell, much less knocking. He never sent out for food, and any wolf-related summons came via the Call that pierced his eardrums. For everything else, people contacted the office. Who would be calling him now, just minutes before the full moon?

Alban? Jeremy only briefly considered it. Alban might anticipate Jeremy to do something rash, but the old wolf towed the line too well to remain where people could be at risk. He wouldn't do anything so foolish as to leave another wolf behind to see to Jeremy, either.

"All right, already," he growled. A cold sweat broke across his forehead. He limbs felt heavy as he neared the door. His toes curled, and the bones creaked, ready to stretch into paws. God save the poor, inept pizza boy on the other side of the door. In a matter of minutes, Jeremy would have one pie with *everything*.

Instead, Jeremy was surprised to encounter the thin-lipped Miss Wallace staring dourly back at him. Not a hair out of place in her graying bun, the spinster held her awkward stance, as if somebody had shoved a pole up her ass and let her dangle.

Jeremy bared lengthening fangs. "Death wish, Miss Wallace?"

Miss Wallace huffed and stepped past him into the living room. "I've come for satisfaction, Vanderkellen, and I don't intend to be disappointed."

"Well, I'm certainly dressed for the occasion." Jeremy gestured to his upright hard-on. Tufts of hair were sprouting around the base, which he normally kept shorn. "I have to say, your timing kind of sucks. In a few minutes, I'll be a full-fledged wolf with an appetite for destruction, and you'll be the first course."

Miss Wallace perched her small bottom on the arm of the leather chair and patted her purse. "Oh, I have a snack for you right here, Vanderkellen," she sang. "And I'm not afraid of you."

"You're a fucking loon to come willingly to a wolf's lair on the night of a full moon," Jeremy said.

"Alban has assured me of my safety."

"You'd be safer with Alban here wolfing out instead of me. That neutered old fool. Of course, you'd know that already since you fuck him."

"Fuck *you*," Miss Wallace snapped.

"Maybe, if I don't kill you first." The words delivered with more spittle than usual. It was becoming hard to talk, even more difficult to

comprehend what Miss Wallace was saying. The wolf in him grew strong, demanding release. Beyond the view of Toronto he spied the glowing ball of light emerging from a string of gauzy clouds. No time to warn Miss Wallace, he was going to change.

And Miss Wallace crossed one leg sheathed in support hose and checked her nails. The witch.

It was his last conscious thought before the transformation. The initial twinge of change now possessed every nerve in his body, strumming a tune that tweaked his nipples and tugged his cock, and set every sense on fire.

He arched backward and relaxed, letting the moon work its magic on his body. The end result yielded a more orgasmic beginning to the evening this way, and so he crumpled to the floor and outstretched every limb. His skin exploded with hair, his nails lengthened and thickened, and a guttural cry bubbled in his throat and released with a mighty...

Yip! Yip yipyipyipyipyipyip!

Something was wrong.

Lean, terrible paws should have crossed his line of vision. He should have been ready to flip over and pounce on Miss Wallace, showing her truly that Alban had been wrong to let her come here. Instead, he was aware of being smaller than usual. Lighter, light-headed.

He took a few steps, conscious of the *tap tap tap* of little toenails against hardwood. What had happened to his stealth pace?

He looked down and found the answer in two tiny paws.

Shit!

He went skittering down the hall to his bedroom. The full length mirror tacked to the closet door confirmed the worst. Alban hadn't been joking the day before about magic, and punishment. Never, though, had Jeremy thought the old wolf would do something so humiliating.

He trembled in a sudden cold draft, staring balefully at his reflection. *His* reflection!

He was a Chihuahua. The fucker had put a curse on him! He was a fucking lap dog!

From behind came the heavy footfalls of sensible shoes. Miss Wallace towered over him like a the spinster older sister of a fairytale ogre. Jeremy caught a brief glance of granny panties while looking up her skirt and tried to gag.

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“Oh, is widdle puppy not well?” Miss Wallace cooed, laying it on thick. From her purse she produced a doggie treat. “Do widdly puppy want a Milk Bone?”

Jeremy answered by lifting his leg over her shoe.

Chapter Four

Fingers everywhere. Exploring threads, searching for zippers, poking ribs. One struck nerve sent a shockwave of pain down Jenna's leg and she reacted with a swift heel to 3-M's shin as he stood behind her.

“Watch it!” he warned, squealing. “If you hit certain parts, they might not work.”

“Well, we can't have that,” Jenna murmured, now regretting her earlier bravado. The Sleeman's had worn off on the glacially slow trolley ride to her apartment building, and as they stood on the stoop while she fumbled with her purse, she felt all previous horny feelings slide slowly to her feet. The mood was passing with the soft passage of clouds trying to conceal the full moon. How she would get rid of 3-M, she didn't know. Her roommate wouldn't be home from her bar-hopping yet, so there went that excuse.

Of course, 3-M was so keyed up now. Jenna could feel his erection brushing her backside as she dug into her purse. He would likely turn the inconvenience of a third party into an opportunity. Jenna sighed and wondered if she just lay there while he humped her, would he even notice her lack of interest?

3-M wrapped his arms around her waist, and nibbled her neck. His tongue tangled in short hair and her hoop earring, tugging it until she jerked her head away. The thin metal post in her lobe held fast, and she winced from the pain her unfortunate move caused.

“Uh, ow?” came a retort dripping with sarcasm that 3-M clearly couldn't sense for the influence his raging hormones now had over him. Her crushed her tightly to him, rocking her in a disruptive rhythm that jarred her eyesight and created an involuntary palsy that prevented her from extracting her keys from her purse. She felt like a human claw machine in a pizza parlor, so close to snatching the prize

but failing to get it two inches past the pile of stuffed animals and fake Rolex watches.

Some prize. Why the urgency over getting into her apartment, she wondered. True, she wanted to go home, but alone now. She'd get off, but if anything would aid her in reaching that goal it would be a toy from the bag she kept in her closet, not this steaming, drunk irritant behind her.

“You anywhere close yet?” he whined in her ear. Thankfully his lips only brushed the outer shell this time rather than try to devour it.

“Close to the edge,” Jenna grumbled. Teetering on the cusp of insanity with this clown prodding her to swan dive. Her head throbbed, her body crumpled forward inch by inch, trying to rebuff 3-M's advances. How did one retract an invitation for sex without appearing too rude. Jenna contemplated a solution when a sharp yipping noise broke her thoughts.

“What's that?” She managed to wrench herself from his grasp and move away from the door. The sight of a trembling Chihuahua at the foot of the brownstone steps tore at her, and Jenna's heart softened.

“Oh, hello, boy,” she cooed. 3-M was completely forgotten. “It's past your bedtime. Are you lost, fella? Huh?” Her voice pitched high, her mood turned suddenly giddy as the tiny dog wavered on quivering legs and looked up at her with soulful, dark eyes. Poor thing, lost in the middle of Toronto...Jenna saw no collar to give hint of any identification. The Chihuahua appeared to be full-breed, hardly a stray mutt, so how did it get lost?

Squatting down to its level, Jenna held out her arms and warmed as the dog quickly skittered into her embrace. At least something might go right this week, she realized. She might not be able to help Dina, but maybe she could give this dog a home for a few days until its owner could be traced.

“Hello?” 3-M sang behind her. “We gonna fuck or what?”

“Why don't you start without me?” Jenna snapped and tried to muscle past him to the door. With the dog looped under one arm, she used it to block 3-M as she retrieved her keys. The Chihuahua, sensing Jenna's dislike for her date, bared its tiny fangs at the sleepy-eyed dolt.

“Ehhh, watch it.” 3-M sneered at the dog and stepped closer until he was literally breathing down her neck. “What's with the 180? I thought you wanted to have some fun.”

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“That was the Sleeman's talking. I tend to stay mute on a first blind date. Sorry to have disappointed you.” *Please, let him be gracious enough to accept that, she prayed, or at least miss my face when he spits.*

“No, beer can't talk. *You*, on the other hand, said quite a bit...” The scowl curled upward and a malicious laugh pounded in her ears. Jenna's heart froze and she clutched the dog close for protection. Surely he wouldn't consider taking her by force? Drinking or not, he was her roommate's friend, and Jenna knew her friend wasn't the type to socialize with lecherous types.

“I said watch it!” She pinned the dog to her chest, but it appeared the Chihuahua had other plans. The tiny dog squirmed in her grip, bracing its paws against her arm to push upward. Hind legs kicked and scraped at her until she finally relaxed her grip. The dog landed on its feet and scurried around the couple.

3-M chortled. “Looks like you been dumped, babe.”

He wasn't laughing, however, when the tiny dog sprang upward and bit him on the ass. Jenna lurched backward as her date yelped and twisted from side to side, swatting aimlessly. The dog had a vice lock on 3-M lower left buttock, and growled as its fangs sank deeply into the denim. Jenna had to laugh at the site.

“It's not funny, bitch!” 3-M cried, swiping air as the dog managed to swerve out of reach. It seemed nothing could dislodge the miniature terror...except a hasty, heartless apology, delivered on a labored sigh.

At that, the dog's jaws widened, and the Chihuahua landed gracefully at their feet.

“Good night, Malcolm, or Mario or Martin or whatever the hell your name is.” Having found her keys, Jenna unlocked the door and ushered the dog inside. “I got a better deal.”

She was halfway up the stairs, Chihuahua in tow, when she thought she heard the man scream, “My name is Manuel!” to dead air. Like it mattered to her. One less name to forget when she sent Christmas cards.

Chapter Five

The last half-hour, his first thirty minutes in this new state, had been a blur. Urinating on Miss Wallace's leg had earned him punishment in the form of being kicked out of his apartment and into the next waiting elevator heading south. Just his luck, none of his nosy neighbors had bothered to check on the commotion outside, clearly uninterested in the blatant disrespect toward animal rights.

He skittered out of the building and into Toronto, ignoring the look of surprise on the doorman's face. Jeremy was only concerned with finding safety from that dog-hating witch. The second he changed back into human form, he would make note to inform Alban of his lover's decided loathing of the canine species. See if the old wolf would fuck her doggie style then!

From this ant-high view, the city looked completely different. Buildings stretched like reeds into the night sky. Lumbering, thick feet plodded along sidewalks, barely noticing his tiny body in their path. He must have yipped himself hoarse alerting pedestrians of his presence, and merely growled at anybody who reached down for a conciliatory pat.

“Whatsa matter?” drooled one drunken blonde, her tanned breasts about to spill from her low-neck blouse as she bent down to his level. “Do you want a Scooby snack?” Gay tittering from friends filled the air around them.

He wanted a snack, all right, and licked his sandpaper tongue across his jowls. Those ample melons beat any sack of kibble. He jumped in hopes of nipping a ripened tip between his teeth but the woman, sotted as she was, was still too quick. The group laughed into the night throng of revelers, leaving the were-Chihuahua to fend for himself.

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Keeping his head down, nose to the sidewalks, he got lost easily in the section neighborhood blocks. Faint clues illuminated by streetlamps offered clues to his whereabouts. Rainbow flags flapping in the breeze denoted passage through the gay district at Church and Wellesley, which irritated him. As a human, he wouldn't have been caught dead here. Random turns took him past St. Michael's, the seat of the archdiocese, and eventually to Yonge. For a little dog, he'd certainly gone a long way.

And his feet were killing him.

When he could take it no longer, he came to a rest against the steps of a brownstone. The name of the street mattered none to him, he just wanted to curl into a tan crescent and sleep off this nightmare. If he awoke naked on a deserted Toronto street, all the better. He'd be picked up by the police, and he'd reveal every paranormal secret from the werewolves to the fae to every undead, flesh-eating, stealth-winged creature that lived among normal folk. Sure, he'd be locked away as a loon, but he'd have privacy. Screw the pack, maybe he didn't need them after all, if they were going to treat him like this.

He whimpered into the concrete, spitting away dust and pebbles. Why didn't they like him? *Why doesn't anybody like me?* He remember Brenda didn't appear too disappointed to learn she wouldn't have to mate with him, and Miss Wallace...well, maybe she didn't like any of them! Maybe Alban only sufficed as a lover, Jeremy could only hope.

He, though, had to find somebody to love. At least, that's what he thought Alban had intimated. Being transformed into a lowly fast food mascot, maybe this was more than just a one night punishment. Maybe this was a curse that could only be broken at Alban's discretion. If so, Jeremy had sorely misjudged the old wolf's power. Truly, it strengthened with age and wisdom.

Watching the activity at the door front above him, Jeremy found new strength himself in his increasing anger. Some asshole was badgering a lady, not cool. Even at his most cad-like behavior, Jeremy liked to think he knew when to back off. This guy obviously couldn't spell the word *no*, much less comprehend its meaning.

Yip! Yipyipyipyipyip! Damn this falsetto alarm! Jeremy wished he could cringe, but it was enough to attract the woman's attention. Jeremy felt his tiny canine heart palpitate when he saw who his distressed damsel was.

Jenna from his office. He had played an invisible symphony on her clit, and wished to do much more. Perfect timing, stuck in this form. Jeremy had to suffice with being crushed against Jenna's warm chest as she made sickening baby noises.

Get it out your system, he bade her silently, panting.

Her unwanted companion, threatened by the pint-size usurper, made a move which Jeremy quickly quelled by animal instinct. One chop on the ass, in the ass, dispelled in the jerk any thoughts of continued harassment. The next thing Jeremy knew, he was struggling up stairs to Jenna's apartment.

"C'mon, boy," she cajoled, but didn't bother to offer help. If she thought her high-pitched encouragement was any better than a lift...Jeremy shook his little head and tried to push all thoughts of frustration away. He'd lost track of time, but the heavy mist outside indicated the possibility of the coming sun. Maybe in thirty minutes or so he'd transform back into his naked, human form and show Jenna that she had indeed brought the correct suitor home.

"In you go." She ushered him into a cramped loft, its walls lined high with overstuffed bookshelves. Billowing sofas, bordering a large Oriental carpet, faced each other in the main living area. Oddly shaped sculpture dotted the bachelorette landscape. Jeremy surmised Jenna had picked the pieces at random to give visitors the impression that she had some fascination for art. A well-placed broomstick would have looked equally fashionable in the otherwise dull room.

He leaped onto one sofa, nearly sinking into oblivion as the thick, downy cushions threatened to swallow. He yelped, but was unheard for the banging of distant cupboards.

"I don't have much for doggies to eat," Jenna called from the kitchen, "but I can give you a dish of water. Oh, and I have some beef jerky somewhere. Maybe you can eat that?"

The cushion muffled the gargling sound in Jeremy's throat. Yummy. Could he hope for a linen napkin to dress this feast?

Jenna set a cereal bowl filled to the brim at the edge of the carpet. Not to seem rude, Jeremy hopped off the couch for a few obligatory licks. To be truthful, the long trek had parched him, but he didn't dare touch the dried meat left next to the bowl.

Jenna had taken the other couch and was removing her shoes. She tucked her feet underneath her rump and leaned back, sighing. "I tell you, dogs have it so good," she said.

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Don't count on it. At least as a human he could pick up utensils and wipe his own ass.

“You have to pay rent, or taxes, or work for a living.” She sighed again and leaned back so that Jeremy could better see her bust line as her chest heaved up and down. She stretched completely on the sofa now and idly picked at her blouse. Suddenly his cereal bowl oasis didn't look as enticing.

“You sleep in the sun, you shit on the floor, and it's not your problem. Somebody always comes by to clean it up.” Her voice took on a darker tone. “You probably don't miss people who leave you, either. Always somebody else to come along with treats.” She rolled onto her stomach and smiled painfully at him. “You'll forget me, too, I'll bet, once we find out where you belong.”

Not true. Jenna was lovely to behold, so vulnerable and melancholy. Jeremy suddenly felt bad for having toyed with her during their meeting. She could only be referring indirectly to her friend, the actress. A quick scan of the room revealed framed photographs. Though a mere Chihuahua, he thankfully retained his primed wolf vision, and could easily tell many of shots highlighted Dina and Jenna's camaraderie.

“I'm not going to let myself get too attached to you,” Jenna warned, “because you're so damn cute. I've already lost one best friend. I can't bear to have anything else I love taken away.”

Any sympathy Jeremy tried to convey came out in a foreign whine. Jenna giggled as she slid off the couch and scratched the scruff of his neck. The touch was pure heaven. “You sleep anywhere you like, hon. The couch is really comfy. We'll get you home in the morning.” With that, she padded down a short hallway to a back room, leaving the door open just a hair.

Jeremy didn't move for the couch, but slithered to the floor and rested his chin on his paws. Amazing how, looking at someone through different eyes, elicited different feelings. As a werewolf, he naturally didn't come into contact with people, but acted out his primal needs in remote woods. Here, as a simple dog, he seemed to see more than that jerk did outsider earlier.

He saw more than human Jeremy did. Jenna was a woman in pain, and he wanted nothing more right now than to take it away.

The room was silent for a minute. Jeremy fixed his gaze on the sliver of light spilling from Jenna's room. An occasional shadow indicated movement, presumably as Jenna prepared for bed. The urge

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to tiptoe closer for a peek of flesh was strong, but in this new state of sensitivity Jeremy felt conflicted. Quite obviously, he realized, Alban cursed him so to show that he had been a cad. Spying on Jenna would certainly confirm that. Maybe, in staying put, he would earn the love he needed to break the curse.

His ears perked up at the sound of a faint buzzing, followed by a low, pleased moan.

Dear God. Jenna was using a vibrator.

The dog was at the door in two seconds.

Chapter Six

The second the cool, hard plastic cone touched skin her pussy twitched. Yet Jenna ground her upper teeth into her bottom lip and tried to focus on more pleasant pursuits. That she had let loose a prospective lover—irritating, he was, but a man was a man—in favor of this battery operated substitute niggled at her. If only the alcohol hadn't worn off, she might be warmer in this bed, and wriggling underneath a hard, seductive body as a thick cock pounded into her and helped her forget her troubles.

Of course, she'd wake up with a monstrous headache and many regrets. Jenna tried to convince herself she had done the right thing, repeating in her mind that 3-M's cock probably wasn't as big as the buzzing lavender tool now teasing her clit.

Mmmm. Braced against the headboard, knees raised and spread wide, Jenna played with one hardened nipple while her other hand directed the vibrator toward orgasm. Up and down the hard shaft massaged her pussy lips and dipped slightly into her aching core, greased by her own juices. Normally, when in such a state, Jenna was content to just press the vibrating plastic to her clit and ride an orgasmic wave to shore. Tonight, however, a quick fix wouldn't do. It would take a long time to get over the realization that her life wouldn't be the same. One little spurt couldn't soothe that pain.

Dina wasn't coming back.

Nobody was going to help Jenna find her.

She would have to find another job.

And now she had to take care of somebody's dog.

She sighed. Well, that last part wasn't exactly a burden. Perhaps, in some divine way, the Chihuahua's appearance was a blessing. She had taken care of Dina for so many years, seeing to appointments and conventions; maybe she could transfer that support to a creature of greater dependence.

The thought perked her up a bit. If nobody claimed the dog, she decided, she would take it in and give a real home, and a name.

First, however, she had to take care of herself.

She plunged the vibrator deep inside her, twisting slight to reach her spot. Failing, she opted for the quick fix after all and pressed the shaft to her parted lips; the tapered tip flicking rapidly against her clit. Wonderful as it felt, the orgasm was slow in arriving. Jenna's mind was a jumble of woes and concerns, and a brief temptation to give up passed as she decided she was too distracted.

Come on, she urged the toy, and closed her eyes. There had to be something, some erotic image or fantasy, she could use to dispel the dark clouds haloing her aura.

She thought of Dina, beautiful and ageless beyond her renown from a decades-old television series. The two had dabbled in minor activities during wild conference parties, yet neither woman considered herself gay, or bisexual. For Jenna, anyway, there was no attraction to women in general, just to Dina's peerless beauty and vivid personality. It was no wonder the cult actress was able to lure second-generation fans to her bed.

And two had lured her away for good.

Jenna conjured a wavering specter of Dina in her mind, willing the image to kneel before her parted thighs for a taste of ripened, wet pussy. Using the vibrator to simulate the action, Jenna guided the quivering tip up and down her swollen lips, tracing an oval pattern before dipping low to tease her anus. She imagined Dina's tongue following the same route, tapping at her clit and easing hooked fingers into her slit in search of that elusive spot. Jenna found the contrived memory helpful as blossoming ecstasy boiled in her belly and warmed her blood. An orgasm would be quick to wash over her.

Quite suddenly, the lovely visage of Dina hardened into a decidedly masculine form. Her eyes still clamped shut, Jenna continued her ministrations as Dina morphed into Jeremy Vanderkellen.

Huh? It shouldn't have come as a complete surprise. Jenna had thought of the man off and on over the past two days. Despite his brusque manner, he *was* handsome, and probably had a libido to match his swaggering personality. No doubt the detective would have given 3-M a run for the money in the bedroom.

Nestled between her legs, a naked Jeremy stretched forward and grasped either side with his ghostly fingers. Jenna watched his bare

bottom jounce on the mattress when he dove for a long, exploring taste.

“Nice, Jeremy,” Jenna murmured aloud. “How 'about we play some more?”

* * * *

That, I can definitely do...

...when the sun comes up.

Jeremy kept his nose lodged between the door and the jamb, picking up the sharp scent of Jenna's arousal. Even in the dim, his keen eyesight easily detected her solo play, and he watched with frustrated delight as Jenna rocked and stroked herself to a frenzy. That he couldn't join her and make the evening more pleasurable was pure torture; then again, he supposed he should be thankful to Alban for allowing this to happen. Otherwise, Jeremy in his regular wolf form would likely be dodging patrol cars and tranquilizer darts.

The only advantage to his current state right now was that Jenna couldn't see him spying on her. If she did, it clearly didn't bother her much. A human peeping Tom, probably not so welcome, even though she'd called him by name.

Jeremy perked up; his ears straightened. That's right! She called for Jeremy. She was thinking about him while beating off.

Nice.

Of course, it wasn't the love Alban had intimated before the curse was cast, so who knew how this would effect future transformations. For now, though, being a Chihuahua wasn't half bad. For the night, he had a warm place to stay and a free show. Adding love to the equation would have been a bonus, and now that he knew Jenna had some interest in him beyond his alleged professional talents, he decided to get in touch with her before the next full moon.

Jenna giggled, as though drunk, and continued to caress herself. Her hand glided under the swell of one breast, lifting it so she could lick her own nipple. Jeremy felt his entire body stiffen at that. Oh, if only this were ordinary time.

“Jeremy...” Jenna sighed. The dog's high-pitched whine followed. Not just out of want.

Jeremy twitched. He hurt, seriously. His limbs, his teeth, and even his nose, twinged with a pain akin to have tumbled down a flight of stairs, coupled with few sledgehammer blows. This was not an uncommon sensation, either, but one Jeremy experienced...

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...when changing back. Being so small, the pain was amplified to reflect the rapid growth of a foot-long Chihuahua into a grown man.

Shit! Jeremy tried to clamp his jaws shut so as not to alarm Jenna, but eventually the need to release surpassed any outside concerns, and Jeremy morphed complete with a loud roar. On the other side of the door, he heard appliances crash to the ground as the young woman squealed.

“Who's there?” she screamed. “Manuel? I'm calling the police.”

“No, don't. Please.” Testing his human legs, Jeremy rose slowly but remained hidden from Jenna's sight. “Don't get up. I have the wrong apartment. I'll leave.”

And Jeremy backed away a few steps, but remembered he was naked. He tried to recall if Jenna had an afghan draped over one of her sofas, but the woman had thrown open her door and flicked on the hallway light. The sudden explosion of white burned his eyes and he shielded them from view.

“What the—?” He saw Jenna's gaping expression. She was clutching a spiked heel like a weapon. “You? What are...? Why are you...?” She pointed to his crotch. “What...?”

“You said that already,” he said, at a loss for a comeback.

“What is all this?” she demanded. “Why are you naked in my apartment?” She squinted at him. “Jeremy Vanderkellen?”

“In the flesh,” he said with an awkward laugh. “More than most are used to seeing?”

Jenna shook her head. Any indication that she might have been fantasizing about him no longer existed in her now bewildered expression. “Is this a dream? How did you get in here? How do you even know where I live?”

“You invited me inside, Jenna.” When she vehemently denied this with another furious shake, Jeremy added, “Tell me this, do you hear any barking?”

Jenna thought a moment, then her eyes went wide. “Oh, God. You killed a poor, defenseless dog?”

“I *am* a poor, defenseless dog, Jenna. Rather, I was. I'm supposed to be a werewolf.” He drifted into the living room, drawn to the main window. Outside, the full moon was as round and bright as a communion wafer, yet Jeremy was unaffected. How could this be? Surely Alban's abilities couldn't defy wolf nature?

“What?” Jenna cried. “There's no such thing as werewolves.”

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“There is. I was the dog you brought into this house,” Jeremy said. “You were arguing outside your door with a man in a blue shirt and jeans. I leaped up and bit his ass. Be honored, because I don't do that for everybody.”

“You could have watched all of that from the distance,” Jenna charged. “I wasn't really paying attention who else was outside.”

“You sleep in the sun, you shit on the floor, and it's not your problem.’ Those were your exact words to Schnookums, right?”

Jenna was hesitant, shocked, but belligerent. “If you're telling the truth, change back. Wolf out.”

“I wouldn't do that if I could right now, Jenna. It would be too risky. Besides, I don't have control over my paranormal abilities at the moment.”

“Because there's no such thing as werewolves!”

“Just like a woman can't disappear into thin air?” Jeremy challenged, raising an eyebrow. No retort came from Jenna's open mouth, and he continued. “Just like a woman can't have an orgasm while sitting in a chair, untouched?”

“That really happened?” Jenna whispered. “I thought that was a dream.”

Jeremy shook his head. “And neither is this.” He reached forward for Jenna's hand, relieved she didn't immediately jerk away. He placed it on his rapidly pounding heart. “Or this,” he added, sliding down his chest to where the tip of his growing cock tapped at his belly.

Jenna surprised him by cuffing his shaft and testing its girth. “I'd have to be dreaming to do this, or drunk. I should throw you out. I ditched my date tonight out of principle.”

“Why don't you?”

Jenna lifted a shoulder in a lazy shrug. “Maybe I liked what you did to me the other day, and maybe I want more.”

“To forget Dina?” Jeremy asked. “Or because it's what you really want?”

Jenna eyed him suspiciously. “If you're a werewolf, why were you a Chihuahua tonight?”

“I'm being taught a lesson, it seems.” Jeremy gasped when Jenna tightened her grip playfully and tugged. “When the Head Wolf wants to get it across that somebody in his pack is a dog, he goes the extra mile.”

Jenna laughed. Releasing his cock, she moved closer and allowed Jeremy to encircle her in his arms. He responded in kind when she

looked down to realize, as if for the first time, that she too was naked. Jeremy relished the heated touch of her skin, her distended nipples so close yet barely brushing the feather soft hair on his chest.

“Well, what have you learned, lone wolf?” she teased.

Jeremy nipped a kiss to her nose. “I’ve learned to see things from the ground up, for one,” he said, walking backward with her to one couch. “I’ve learned how rather insignificant I am compared to the rest of the world.”

“Mmm.” Jenna eased herself between his parted knees, taking hold of his cock again as Jeremy lay back. “I suppose I could say these past few weeks have been a learning experience for me, too.”

“How so?”

Jenna sank to the floor, kneeling, with her face at level with Jeremy’s hard-on. Quietly, yet with relish, she lapped up the length and kissed the tip before answering. “I miss Dina. She was my friend and boss. But, I suppose I should realize she was lonely despite her fame. I didn’t want to believe she would leave me willingly, but I should accept her decision to live in another dimension. If it exists, and it must if you’re werewolf.”

“It’s an alternate universe, but we don’t have to split hairs.” Jeremy cringed at the bad joke.

Jenna’s tongue now ran south, swirling playfully around his sac for a few seconds. She lifted her upper body so that his cock bobbed in between her breasts. “Whichever universe she’s in, I hope she’s happy. That’s all she wanted. This universe, I’ve learned I’m not the center of it.”

“Neither am I apparently,” Jeremy concurred. “I wouldn’t mind having centered on me, literally.”

With a devilish smile, Jenna leaned forward, bringing her hips up to Jeremy’s. He reached below to find that thanks to the vibrator she was already wet and willing. With one knee buried in the sofa while the opposite leg brace against the floor, Jenna raised her pelvis and pulled at the skin above her mound to expose her clit. Slowly, almost painfully to Jeremy, she rubbed her sensitive spot along his shaft, sending off a thousand sparks throughout his body. The sensation and accompanying image was too sexy, too intense to ignore. Jeremy felt ready to explode and hoped to whatever God existed that the woman would just ride him to sunrise. Suffice to say, it seemed conclusive that he was not going to change again.

Jaded Beasts 6, Dog-Pig

Jenna arched her back and closed her eyes, as though concentrating on the erotic rhythm of her movements. Her arms raised high, then her hands came back down to smooth her neck, décolleté, and nipples. He would have loved to sit up and take into his mouth, but the view was good delicious to interrupt.

When Jenna finally conceded to let his cock sink into her slick pussy, he shuddered from the friction. Tight, hot, and incredible. He grasped her hips and bucked upward into her. Jenna countered with her own rocking motion, then bent low to take his mouth with hers. Tongues mating and their bodies pressed together, Jenna ground hard against Jeremy, speeding her pace so that orgasm for both was soon in coming. For Jeremy, it happened first with such force that he had to tear away from Jenna's kiss to cry out. He seed shot upward into her womb, heating her channel and causing her to clamp around his cock to milk every last drop.

“God, that's so good,” she groaned, and resumed her pace. With her parted pussy lips still rubbing against him, her own climax followed in time. Her face, though pinched in orgasm and blurred by rapid movement, was still sexier than anything he'd ever seen.

When Jenna finally floated back to him, they lay together motionless, their breathing synchronized. Jeremy kissed the top of her head and smiled as she snuggled closer. They should probably move to the bed, but he was beat. He imagined Jenna fared no better.

“Well,” he puffed, “here's to lessons learned.”

“I don't know,” Jenna said with mock skepticism. “I don't think I've been punished enough.”

Jeremy chuckled. “We should all be so lucky to deserve such punishment.”

Chapter Seven

Morning brought another unexpected visitor.

Jenna was in the kitchen making coffee when the bell rang. After another round of “punishment” on the couch, the couple finally retired to the bedroom to sleep away the small hours. The rest fueled them plenty for morning lessons until Jeremy drifted off again. Looking forward to a lazy Saturday of sex and making acquaintance, Jenna decided to let him snooze.

She first thought to ignore the summons. Only a religious witness would think to call so early on a weekend in this neighborhood, and she already owned a Bible, thank you. Yet, the knocking persisted, forcing Jenna to turn away from the enticing aroma of ground hazelnut beans to expel whatever busybody had come to intrude.

Without checking the peephole, she ripped wide the door and snapped, “Go away, I’m Jewish.” It was a lie, but she wasn’t planning to pursue any friendships here.

Before her stood a bemused older gent who looked as if he had stepped off the cover of a Fortune 500 magazine. Despite the staid dress and manner, his eyes sparkled with the energy of someone half his age. “Well, so am I. Wasting a perfectly good Sabbath coming here, but there’s not much I can do when duty calls.” He stepped into the living room without being invited. “I am Alban. I’m here for Jeremy.”

“How did you know...” And realization quickly dawned. “You’re one of them.”

“I am.”

“I didn’t know werewolves could be Jewish. How is that possible.”

“Simple, because my mother was.” His hands pinned behind his back, Alban strolled the perimeter of the living room, taking in the knickknacks and art. “Good morning, Jeremy.”

“Good morning.”

Jenna jumped at the sound of Jeremy's voice. Her heart pounded, then softened quickly as Jeremy emerged from the hall. A bath towel was fastened snugly around his waist, and his unkempt hair enhanced that handsome, disheveled look. Were it not for their guest, Jenna might have suggested a retreat to further mess up their appearances.

“Thank you for dressing,” Alban told the other man dryly. “I won't presume to know what's been going on here. In fact, I can fairly guess.”

“Is it fair of me to presume you had some hand in it?” Jeremy asked. “Who else but a Head Wolf has the ability to change anybody *during* the full moon?”

Alban smiled and nodded. “It is a very rare gift, revealed by a specific genetic marker. Unfortunately for you, you don't possess it. I must admit, that is partly the reason I had to pass you over for promotion, son.”

Jeremy appeared to concede to his elder's words, all of which confused Jenna. “Promotion?” she asked. “You were supposed to lead the wolves?”

“Apparently not. I'm guessing Richard has this marker?” Jeremy queried.

Alban nodded again. “Had you been the model of good behavior, Jeremy, I'd still have to defer to him. It's not personal. It's for the good of the pack.”

“Turning him into a Chihuahua was for the good of your pack, too?” Jenna felt a bit angry at the notion. “Before I knew who he was, I saw that dog. Alone in the city, he could have been hurt.”

“We wouldn't have allowed that to happen,” Alban said soothingly, offering a placating gesture. “Jeremy can be irritating, yes, but he's family and I would never see him in danger. He had protection all along and would have been rescued if things got too rough.”

“Protection?” Jeremy wrinkled his brows. “You don't mean Miss Wallace. The same woman who kicked me out of my own apartment?”

“What woman?” Was this jealousy panging her heart now? “Who's Miss Wallace?”

“Nobody you should be worked over, love,” Alban chuckled. “Just a very good, ah, *friend*.”

Jaded Beasts 6, Dog-Pig

“Ah.” There was the twinkle in the old man's eye again. Jenna understood, despite the barrage of unfamiliar names.

“Really?” Jeremy sounded unconvinced. “If she was out to protect, why put me in danger in the first place? I could have stayed out the night at home.”

Alban scratched his chin, considering the theory. “Yes, and would you have learned anything? Would you have found the love needed to break the curse?” His expression sharpened. “*Did* you find the love?”

Jenna looked at Jeremy. The electricity sparked from their locked gaze warmed her inside and set her pussy to melt. She barely knew the man, yet felt so close to him. Genetic marker or no, she sensed his power and authority. He certainly had the confidence for it, if their initial meeting had been any indication.

“I think,” Jenna said, “he found the right place.”

Jeremy smiled.

“Good to know. I have just such a place, and I'm headed there now. A long night in the woods alone always leaves me yearning for it.” Alban moved to leave, nonplused by Jenna's sudden burst of laughter.

“I'll assume, if things go by this pace, you'll be your old self by the next moon,” Alban was saying as he reached the door. He turned back for confirmation and Jenna noted the surprise on the older man's face with Jeremy's reaction.

“To tell the truth, Alban, that doesn't concern me,” he said. “If I have to be a lap dog for a while, fine. At least I don't have to vacate the city.”

At this he moved closer to Jenna and wrapped an arm around her waist. Jenna's heart danced at the contact.

The old man smiled. “It would appear you've learned more than I hoped,” he said, and left.

“I have,” Jeremy whispered softly in Jenna's ear. “I can't wait to learn more.”

The End

Secret Order of the Boar
by
Kara Andrews

Jonin Lee is content with his life and job at the space agency, until meeting Sabine Morgan , who treats him like a swine.

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Secret Order of the Boar

by

Kara Andrews

Chapter One

Red Rock Space Center

Abiquiu, New Mexico

Little time remained before the space station began approving applications for the exodus of people to the newly built community on the moon. Jonin Lee aspired to live on the station, but he didn't hold such high hopes. If he wanted to be considered, his application had to be flawless. He had fabricated some information, but there was no way the corporation could know about his personal life, the life he kept hidden.

"So I lied. The corporation would laugh me right out of their offices if I told the truth on the application." Jonin knew his friend Lou thought he was crazy.

"Why would you want to live on the moon? I mean, it's dark up there and there's no atmosphere."

He laughed, knowing Lou would never travel in space.

"There's atmosphere on the station. I want to leave this depressing planet. I'll get a new start, a chance to do something with my life."

"You could make a difference here. Look what you've done so far. You could convince the people to revolt. They would listen to you." Lou's voice rose.

"Shhh, keep it down. I don't want anyone to know about it. My application probably won't be accepted anyway. But what do I have to lose? Just my dream of leaving Earth behind. Life is too methodical. It's devoid of the little pleasures. I want excitement."

Lou chuckled. "Your wish just might come true. Look who just

walked in.”

Jonin turned and became mesmerized. As he stood in the center of the space station that overwhelming sensation came, the anxiousness he'd gotten whenever Sabine came on the floor. The low tone of the machines usually got on Jonin's nerves, but he didn't notice the flickering lights and sequenced numbered data rushing by on the screen. Not today—not right now. His head rose higher above the partition between the workstation cubicles to see her. Her name, he'd been told, was Sabine Morgan, an unusual name. It sounded old-worldly to him, but then again, he likened everything to having a connection with old-world and ancestry. He did want to meet her, and knew she was an important person at the corporation. When he was ready, he'd meet her. That wouldn't happen until he accomplished the goals of the SOB. His personal life was put on hold, and that even included women.

His friend snapped his fingers, bringing him back to reality.

“Lou, I just can't stay here. People don't have the deep ties to a God or Gods anymore. There's no solace to get us through the rough times. I can't help being spiritual, it's in my blood. You know this has been instilled in me since I was a kid. All those nights listening to my parents and grandparents telling stories of my ancestors affected me.”

“No one will go against the corporation, except you. You're the only one who can help Earth's inhabitants. I can't believe you're not jumping at the chance.”

Jonin wouldn't let Lou's enthusiasm affect him. “I only created the Secret Order of the Boar to inspire and help those who have the need for enlightenment. We're all just ordinary folks trying to figure out how to belong and cope in this rigid world.”

Lou laughed low. “That's why you'd be perfect, Jonin.”

“I can't do it. I just want to keep up the traditions of my ancestors, that's all.”

“You mean performing old-time magic so you can transform yourself into a boar?”

Jonin had a strong belief in the rituals, even if Lou didn't. “The night of our birthright is coming up. I'll only stay in that state for a brief period and then will return to my human state. It's the only way to achieve enlightenment.”

He had taken great lengths to make certain he used the correct opiates and measurements dictated by the old text he'd read in the ancient scrolls. Enlightenment would give the Secret Order the

answers they sought, and once they had them, they could figure out what to do with their lives. He already made his plans, but others still needed guidance. Tonight, he'd take it one step further.

Sabine Morgan always diverted his attention, and his gaze shifted when she moved closer. Whenever she was within sight, Jonin couldn't concentrate on the computer screens or anything around him. She looked sexier than any woman at the space center, not that there were many woman working at Red Rock. The RRSC was located in a desolate area, well away from civilians, and in such a rocky, hilly terrain where it would be difficult to trespass. Security had an easy job, since the center was positioned on the top of a high cliff.

With her fiery hair and her angelic face, Sabine appeared as sweet and delicate as a butterfly sitting on a fragile bonsai tree. Yet Jonin knew that she was far from delicate, and definitely not as flighty as a butterfly. The ugly gray zippered uniform the staff wore looked much better on her than anyone in the center. Jonin's eyes followed the one-inch thick red stripe on the left side of her body, which passed over her breast, down her curvy waist, running along her sculptured leg, until it ended at her foot.

Red was a symbolic color to him, but he admitted the stripe drew his attention only because it traversed over parts of her body that he so badly wanted to touch, or had imagined he'd touched. Fantasizing about her had become a daily habit. Sabine's light laughter made him smile—even from across the billet. Her presence commanded notice because of her majestic and self-possessed attitude—an attitude he admired in a woman. Her outlook didn't much matter to him, because he knew all about her. Sabine was a tigress. Jonin was secretly fascinated by her, and had been since the day she'd stepped foot inside the space center. She had all the confidence and ambitiousness that he wished for himself.

“Are you looking at her again? You are. Can't take your eyes off her, huh? The computer's waiting for your input.” His coworker snickered.

Jonin whipped his head around and saw Lou leaning on the cubical wall between their stations. Before answering, Jonin typed in the response and the computer began humming again, making the annoying tone he tried to tune out.

“So what if I am looking at her? It isn't a crime.”

“You're way out of your league, buddy. Sabine Morgan's going to run this place one day. Mark my words, we'll all be running around

like dogs, following her barking orders.”

He almost laughed at Lou’s ill-mannered speech. “Maybe” was all he could manage. Jonin continued to watch Sabine across the center, where she stood with their boss, Mr. Rhimes. After a few seconds, he returned his eyes to Lou. “But she’s a tiger—a fluffy, purring, cuddly...tigress.”

Lou threw his head back and bellowed with laughter, making a raucous noise. “You mean a ferocious, clawing, eat-you-alive, get-what-you-want, kind of tiger, don’t you?”

He couldn’t argue with Lou on that note. She was a “typical” tiger-like person. Anyone who fell under the Chinese Zodiac of tiger usually had the reputation for being too assertive, overbearing, and maybe even domineering.

“I wouldn’t mind being clawed by her.” Jonin hoped she would slow down, take the time to appreciate life, and perhaps notice him one day. Today obviously wasn’t that day.

Lou shook his head. “Man, you’re dreaming. She’d knock you down, step on you, and wouldn’t look back. You’re better off not getting involved with her. She made Jim, the mail clerk, cry the other day.”

“I know. We better get back to work, Lou. Mr. Rhimes is on the floor.” He nodded toward their boss, the owner and CEO of the corporation, who seemed as fixated on Sabine Morgan as he had been. Jonin didn’t like the look of their closeness, or the way his boss stood next to her.

Lou leaned, whispering, “I hear he’s training Miss Morgan as his assistant. They’re spending a lot of time together. He’s a lucky bastard. Yep, pal, she will be our boss one day. I’d try to stay away from her.” He then disappeared as he took his seat back inside his cubical.

Jonin continued to stand, gazing absently at Sabine. What if she had a “thing” going on with Mr. Rhimes? He shook his head, impossible. What could she see in him? Well, maybe a fortune, a means to live her dream, a man who possessed the world. Mr. Rhimes wasn’t exactly young. His graying brown hair was cut short in the latest style, and his threads had been tailor made just for him. There wasn’t anything about him that a woman would be drawn to, except for his money and power.

Jonin wanted to keep watching Sabine, as long as she remained in the area. Her presence always made him happy, and he found himself

smiling. Though he'd never actually spoken to her, he hoped one day he'd have enough courage. Sabine didn't come off as friendly, but he knew the typical tiger mind-set. He'd studied all the signs of the ancient Chinese Zodiac. His sign, the pig, indicated a deep sensitivity, a longing for acceptance and belonging. Unlike Sabine's, the tiger, which was self-assured and controlling.

Not one to invite confrontations, Jonin usually avoided people like Sabine. He supposed that was why being the high wizard of the Secret Order of the Boar gave him such pleasure and satisfaction. When he took on the role of the wizard, he left his "doormat" personality at the door. At each meeting, his confidence overtook him, and he'd turn into the type of man he so wanted to be in his everyday life—almost like a tiger. Wishful thinking, because a boar doesn't have the same abilities as a tiger.

Tiger—Sabine Morgan fit the bill to the letter. She had every trait a tiger could want. She'd come out ahead, whether it was in the boardroom or bedroom, what with her dominate personality. That was a fact that had drawn him to her in the first place. Her voluptuousness and sex appeal was an added bonus. If the old saying "opposites attract" was true, then they were meant for each other. One thing he noticed about her was the emotional outbursts she'd have when she was under stress. Just two days ago, he'd witnessed that flare of temper when one of the center's staff had given her the wrong report. Jim, the mail clerk, stood in the center of the station, completely put down. Jonin almost felt sorry for him.

He knew Sabine would be an exciting conquest, whether he pursued her at work or in bed. If only he had the conviction to make a move. Deep down, most tigers had a need of acceptance, but they rarely showed that vulnerability to anyone. To the outside world, they exuded an uncaring, unaffected attitude. Was she any different from the rest of the tigers?

Mr. Rhimes pointed at him from across the center indicating he wanted a word with him, so Jonin waited for him to approach. The apprehensive feeling washed over him, as it usually did, whenever Sabine was nearby. She'd be within an arms reach, and that thought caused him to perspire a bit. Where was that confident SOB when he needed him? Out to lunch—that's where. He couldn't help being a bit nervous around her.

Mr. Rhimes stopped beside his cubical, moving close to the metallic-covered partition. "Miss Morgan, have you met Jonin Lee?"

He motioned Sabine forward.

“I haven’t, Mr. Rhimes.” She kept her manner professional, but Jonin sensed her tenseness. Her bright-blue eyes rose to his. “Hello.”

“Hello, I’m...” Jonin swallowed his heart. Why was he such a worrywart about meeting her? Hadn’t he wanted to? He’d spoken to many women, but none so sexy and confident as Sabine. Why should he let her affect him? “...Jonin Lee,” he finally got out. His stomach knotted at the thought that he was actually speaking to her.

Her eyes seemed to hold his affectionately. Was he seeing things? His imagination had to be working overtime. She would hardly look at him with tenderness. They’d just met, he reminded himself.

“What is it you do here, Mr. Lee?”

He watched the way her lips moved when she spoke. She clasped his slightly warm hand in greeting, giving it that assured “tiger-like” squeeze. The touch almost sent him asunder. He could imagine what her firm hands could do to him, where they would caress, where they would linger. It was a good thing she stood on the other side of the cubical, because his uniform showed a tell-tale sign of how much she affected him. Damn these tight uniforms.

His cock hardened to a boner, and sexual thoughts imposed their way into his brain, just being near her. Jonin stood there practically absentminded, not answering, letting his imagination rule him. She smiled like a siren about to pounce on a boar hiding among the high weeds. He certainly didn’t want to be pounced on by a tiger, but Sabine—he wouldn’t mind her at all. His inane thought made him grit his teeth. He cleared his throat and pulled himself back to reality.

“I, ah, run the launch systems.”

“Oh, that’s right, Mr. Rhimes told me that. I understand that you want to be part of the experimental excursion to the space station on the moon.”

Jonin’s face became serious when he heard her mention the moon. The subject of the space station was more important to him than anything—well, except for SOB. The Secret Order of the Boar was foremost important right now in his life, but the space station was a goal he’d set for his future.

“I have applied for residency, but I haven’t heard yet whether I’ve been accepted.” He tried to smile, but couldn’t let the sincerity reach his mouth. Mr. Rhimes had to know about his application. Jonin didn’t want to appear desperate and give his boss power over him. He

maintained his cool, but professional manner.

At that point his boss decided to interject. “Well then, you’ll be glad to know, Mr. Lee, that I’ve given Miss Morgan the job of approving all the applicants.”

“Really? Congratulations, Miss Morgan.” It was then that Jonin discovered he still held her hand. He released it, and tried to appear dignified and professional. If she was approving the applicants, he certainly wanted to impress her.

“I haven’t seen your application yet, Mr. Lee. Perhaps I should get to know you better. We’ll have dinner tonight at the Skylab Club.”

Jonin practically swallowed his tongue. Her sweet voice didn’t ask, but commanded. She was so much a tigress with all that assertiveness. His blood began to heat, just thinking of spending the night with her. All he could do was nod.

“Good, then I’ll get to know more about you and decide if you’re acceptable.”

Mr. Rhimes smiled wryly, and Jonin knew he was about to say something smart assed. The man exuded a snake-like personality, one that Jonin detested.

“Mr. Lee’s performance has been exceptional, Miss Morgan. He knows when to launch, and he’s been known to make it exciting. So I hear.” His boss laughed coarsely.

Jonin wanted to laugh at his boss’ jibe just to appear supportive. He refrained, and only smiled. Talk about sexual undertones. Was his boss trying to get him and Sabine together? He had to be reading the situation wrong. Sabine seemed embarrassed by Mr. Rhimes’s wisecrack. She lowered her thickly lashed eyes and smiled as though it was private joke between them. Was he the butt of their conversations?

“I need to get to a meeting. Eight o’clock, Mr. Lee. Don’t be late,” she said, trailing a finger across his chest. With that, Sabine turned and marched her sweet sexy ass across the center, with Mr. Rhimes following like a lap dog.

Jonin stood shocked for a few minutes, until he realized his dinner plans conflicted with the SOB’s scheduled meeting. No matter how much he craved a relationship with Sabine, he wouldn’t allow it to interfere with his role at SOB. He sat in his chair, the computer screen flashing its systematic trial run of the next launch to the space station.

How could he be at the Skylab Club with Sabine and run the

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meeting at the same time? All the meetings were held in the desert, far from town. There was no possible way for him to get from one place to the other in reasonable time. Jonin only had a few short hours to figure it out. Instead of making sure the coordinates were correct in the data, he focused on his problem—how to be in two places at once.

Chapter Two

The view from his window looked much like a talented painter's landscape. The colors appeared like heavy strokes on a canvas, almost surreal in dazzling tones. As the sun began its descent, the rocks around him transformed from shadowy monuments to spectrums of light. It always amazed him. He'd miss this view when he left for the moon.

Jonin studied the scene, looking out his window. As the high wizard of SOB, it was his duty to run the meetings and perform the rituals. His ancient culture was important to him and to his supporters. In his quest to learn about the rites his ancestors had followed, Jonin discovered the prophecy of the boar. He'd deciphered an ancient scroll, studying the text and symbols, learning the secrets they held. The scroll stated that in the year twenty five and fifty-five, any person born in the year of the boar could change themselves into the animal, leaving their physical bodies, and receive total enlightenment—inner peace with themselves and in every part of their lives. Now that the year arrived, he knew he must take action.

The Secret Order of the Boar had to be kept hidden due to laws forbidding any religious practices. Throughout the past five hundred years, corporations overtook governments and religious orders. Even the most prestigious and wealthy religions were not immune to takeovers, nor were they able to fight the power of corporation. Only one corporation existed now, the highest of them all. Santex had gobbled up every possible company that existed. Jonin had heard of smaller corporations that went underground and somehow avoided Santex. These small businesses operated in what he considered were similar to the black markets his ancestors once operated under.

He was fortunate to be employed by Santex as a launch engineer. Those that didn't work for Santex were either poverty stricken or worse, imprisoned for treason. The world wasn't a pretty place right

now, which was one of the reasons why SOB had become so successful. Santex was practically a dictatorship like those he'd heard of in the olden days. So many people sought ways to find enlightenment or the inner peace their ancestors had once achieved.

Jonin stood inside his home, leaning against the window, considering his options. He peered at the high rock formations that always made him feel peaceful. He wondered if enlightenment would give him the same sense of calm. Pulling himself away from the view, he mulled over the fact that no matter what happened, he would support their cause until the end. Each step had been taken carefully.

He'd have to contact Sabine to let her know he couldn't make their dinner.

It was time to get ready, so in honor of the great dragon spirit, Jonin chose to dress in his favorite color. He slipped his arms into the red silk robe with the beautifully embroidered dragon on the back that his grandmother had sewn for him. To create the look of the wizard, he gripped his long black hair and stretched a thin leather strap around it. He hurried into his black silk pants and slipped his feet into the plain charcoal-colored loafers. During the rites, he wanted to be as comfortable; especially with all the moving around he did while casting the divinations.

Jonin had just a touch of Chinese blood running through him, enough to give him a sheen of black hair and exotic looking eyes, which all the women seemed to like. He long remembered the stories his parents told him of their culture, and he, being the clandestine type personality he was, enjoyed looking into his past. Celebrating the rituals was a fun time for him and he'd met many others much like himself. Jonin, born in the year of the Pig, was a typical boar. Sure he could be willful when he wanted, but did anyone really get what they wanted by behaving so self-serving? He'd rather take on a more subtle manner and still get his way. He couldn't help being laid-back or so the ancient proverb said. Most people couldn't tell his demeanor by looking at him. Jonin could be full of rage, but he never showed it outwardly. It was a trait he so admired in being a boar.

With a quick glance to the timemode, he noted it neared the time to leave. Soon, he'd be able to leave and prepare for the beginning of their transformation. Though their total transmutation wouldn't take place until the night of the boar, the rites preceding the event were necessary.

After the ceremony, the SOB members would gather at

Blakeslee's Pub, where they'd discuss the old ways and how they were connected to their birthright. He couldn't help smiling as he thought about the little dark room in the back of the pub where he'd spent many nights with his friends. He could already hear the excitement of the SOB members. They had two weeks to prepare and until their prophecy would be fulfilled.

The meetings were usually held bi-annually, but the closer they came to the year of the boar, the more frequent the meetings became. This meeting was the second held this month alone. He grabbed the large leather bag and began placing all the ritualistic tools inside. The Daoism rituals called for various magical items. Jonin pulled back the scabbard of the symbolic sword he used during ceremonies, and saw the gleam of the steel before he set it aside. Of all the objects he used, the sword was his favorite. When he held it, the sword made him feel powerful—something he didn't normally feel. Most boars were gentle, almost submissive in their nature. He liked the intense feeling of power the sword invoked.

After setting the sword beside the bag, he picked up the token seal. It too was an important part of the ritual, in that any written word would be unchangeable once the seal was affixed. Jonin had chosen the Chinese symbol of strength along with his initials, JL, another symbolic gesture. All the tools held some kind of indicative meaning.

He lifted the bag and rummaged through it to make certain he hadn't forgotten the bells, cymbals, and ornamental objects needed for the fasting and incantation of their offerings.

Before leaving, he picked up the receiver to the communicator so he could break his date with Sabine. Date? Why had he thought it a date? It was more like a business function, perhaps a meeting more or less. It would have been great if it was a date, but it wasn't. Surely she wouldn't become upset with his breaking their engagement. After all, she really didn't know him. But Jonin knew all about her temper.

Almost fearful, he punched her work number into the communicator. He didn't know what to expect or why he was nervous. If Lou could see him now, he'd tease him for months about being a whipped ass. Hell, Lou would probably sucker-punch him for even calling her.

"Hello."

There was that voice that hardened his stomach. He could hear her authoritative tone, and the almost imperious purr that went along with it. Perhaps that was what had drawn him to Sabine? He

wondered if the thought of her having power over him, giving him those forceful directives, was what excited him. That definitely would make sex interesting—being forced to accept pleasure or giving it.

Jonin cleared his throat, enabling him to use his usual deep voice, instead of the squeaky tone that threatened to come out. “Hello, Miss Morgan.”

“Who is this?”

“It’s Jonin Lee. You know, from the center.”

“Oh, yes. I’ll be seeing you in an hour.”

“About that... Well, I’m sorry but... I’m afraid I can’t make it.”

Jonin almost cringed at his softly spoken apology. He thought he’d heard a growl. Had the tigress growled at him?

“You what?”

Jonin would rather have been hit by a smoldering meteor than upset Sabine or cause her anger. Yet he couldn’t be at two places at once, no matter what magical rituals he performed. “I tried to catch you at the station to explain, but you walked away before I could tell you that I have other plans this evening, which I cannot break.”

“I see.” Her voice maintained that direct, unemotional aura.

“I do want to get together with you to discuss my application, but we’ll have to do it another night.” He waited for her denial, but all he heard was silence. A few seconds later, he heard what he assumed was the DTV broadcasting in the background. She must have been watching the news, since that was the only program showing this time of day.

“I would think you’d jump at the chance of meeting me...to discuss your application. But you’re a fortunate man, Mr. Lee. I seem to have other plans also. I’m not usually so agreeable when someone breaks a scheduled meeting, but I’ll overlook it this time.”

He detected a smile in her voice. She’d overlook it, would she? If he wasn’t so set on residing on the space station, he would have laughed at her comment. “I’m relieved then.”

“Yes, we wouldn’t want to jeopardize your application, now would we?”

Had she just threatened him? He realized she had. It didn’t bother him, because he was used to people’s intimidation, especially tiger’s. Sometimes it worked. Well, usually it worked. Damn his boorish behavior. Most often, he detested his being born a boar.

“It is very important to me, Miss Morgan. Believe me, the last thing I wanted to do was break our...meeting or jeopardize my

placement. But I really cannot miss my appointment tonight. Not only was I interested in discussing my application, but I...thought to enjoy your company.” There, he’d said it with such bravery. He hoped it appeased her.

“Touché, Mr. Lee, very well put. Only a select group of people will be hand-picked by me to live on the station. You’re going to have to be extremely charming to win me over. I’m a woman that likes to be caressed, finessed with a certain amount of pleasure. You may want to think about that. I’m open to suggestions.”

Jonin grew still. Had she just implied...what he thought she had? He detected a slight sensual tone to her words, as if she’d become the tigress. The non-subtle suggestion was thrown out there. Was she toying with him? Should he take the bait? Or would he be skewered and placed upon a fire pit, roasting, as a boar should be? He could almost feel the heat rising inside his body. If she were standing in front of him, he could imagine her trailing her long fingernail over his chest again and her mouth inching closer...just by his ear, nibbling...

“I’ll take that under consideration, Miss Morgan. Right now, I’m late. I’m sorry about this.” Jonin quickly hung up the receiver and ended his communication with her. He settled back in the chair and smiled. So Miss Morgan had sex games on her mind, did she? She wanted to be caressed and finessed. The thought excited him. He’d be pleased to join in the fun, especially if that meant his application would be accepted. What did he care if she used her position for gain? As long as he got what he wanted in the end, he shouldn’t care. It seemed that he’d get Sabine and a transport to the moon.

After the enlightenment, Jonin wanted a fresh start, and living on the space station would give him that. He wasn’t sure if he could use Sabine that way, but she was the one who had suggested it. What if—to her—it was just a way to have sex? What if he wanted more? She was the woman he’d envisioned being joined to—the woman he’d share his life with.

Could a tigress love a boar? Could she resist feasting on him as if he was a meal meant for a hungry tiger and then spit out carelessly? He was only sure of one thing at that moment. If he didn’t get a move on, he’d be late for his meeting. A wizard should never keep his followers waiting.

Chapter Three

Sabine smiled as she set her handheld communicator on the seat next to her, and turned off the broadcast she'd been listening to. She had suspected Jonin would be calling her to break their engagement, which was why she'd had her office communicator switched to her handheld. As she watched him leave his plex, she studied the exterior of his home. He lived in a modest plex with very little outward amenities. His home didn't have the conveyor that enabled a person to leave their transport without having to walk. She noticed his windows didn't have the tinted shields that blocked the strong New Mexico sun. His air-controlled system must have to work overtime to cool the plex.

She noticed that he stopped at a panel next to the Auto Trans. The AT's white shiny surface gleamed in the dusk of night. He punched buttons on the panel then entered his transport, leaving the darkened area beneath his home and shooting off down the road. Sabine waited until he was at a good enough distance ahead before she engaged her own AT.

She'd parked far enough away, but was still able to see his plex. It had been the perfect surveillance spot. During the past month, she'd found herself parked outside his home many a night waiting for him to leave. On each occasion, she had followed him, and knew where he was going. *SOB*. Sabine couldn't believe Jonin had the audacity to go against the corporation. He knew the practice of religion had been outlawed; yet he still participated in the activity.

In a way, she admired him for his rebellion. He didn't seem to be the rebel type, but she knew very little about him personally. Professionally, she knew all the details—from his first day of work—to this very day. All that he'd accomplished was there in the employee programs and files for anyone's access.

She sighed, feeling resigned at getting to know the real Jonin. "You're braver than I thought, Jonin. All for the greater good though.

Will you show me the real you?"

Sabine followed his AT, keeping a good distance behind, and had programmed the destination into the autodrive system. Using the AD system would enable her to keep her lights off, and she could remain inconspicuous. The last thing she needed right now was him discovering her.

In the last week, she'd become frustrated; knowing what she was about to do was risky. Could she trust him? Luckily her boss charged her with finding out everything she could about Jonin Lee. If he hadn't applied for residency on the moon, she might never have considered him. Outwardly, he didn't show signs of valor or being the key. He definitely had a dull, uninspired personality. Was it all a lie? During her observation, she noticed his easygoing nature and quiet attitude. She never expected someone like him to be the main organizer of a religious sect. What if he wasn't? Could she be wrong about him?

She knew she wasn't wrong. He had to be the key. Many nights she had followed him, just like this night, and had seen him perform the ritualistic ceremonies. If she hadn't snuck inside the cave, she probably never would have learned the truth—that he was a pig, or boar, or whatever they called themselves. He'd kept his organization well hidden from the corporation. Sabine had watched him from the dark corners of the cave, surveying the goings on. It had taken all her willpower not to intervene and reveal herself. The greater good was at risk. Would Jonin be the key she desperately needed to enact the events that would change the world?

The AT in front of her stopped and the lights went out. His shadowed figure moved toward the cave. Sabine's AT also stopped and had parked itself near the line of other vehicles outside the cave. Before she could go inside, she had to transform herself unrecognizable. Using her ability, she shifted into the form of a blond-haired woman she'd seen earlier in the elevator. Sabine didn't know if he would recognize the woman, so she pulled on a longhaired brown wig. She slipped her arms into a long black coat. There was just enough room inside the compartment for her to adjust it. She'd changed out of her space station uniform earlier, and had dressed in a plain black one-piece velvet outfit to conceal her body.

There was no possible way Jonin would recognize her, unless she spoke to him, and even then she could alter her voice enough. At least, she hoped so.

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“Keep your cool, Sabine. You won’t have to talk to him. Find out what you can, and get the hell out of there. If he’s the key, there will be time—plenty of time to act.” Muttering to herself, she slunk toward the cave’s entrance.

Strange things happened inside the cave, things that scared her a bit. She was never one to speculate on religious matters. What did she know about cults and magical elements, or anything spiritual? She’d been raised by members longstanding with the corporation and had never considered even finding out about religion. Resources had been unavailable anyway, and besides, it was taboo to want to study anything that had to do with religion.

The corporation was wrong to forbid people’s heritage. If it were the last thing she did, she would return power to the people. Sabine knew her position at Santex would provide her with useful information for her quest. She’d been preparing for this since she was a teenager. Memories of that awful night tightened her heart. On her deathbed, her grandmother had revealed the oracle of their faith. With deep gypsy blood running through her veins, her grandmother fought dying until she could gain Sabine’s word of honor.

Never had Sabine dreamed her grandmother would ask something so dangerous of her. Yet she agreed anyway. A woman of her word, she vowed to bring down the corporation and return people to their way of life—a life that included the freedom of religion and the pursuit of happiness. Her grandmother had told her a man would be the key to setting it all to right. She’d even gone as far to describe him, saying, “look for the pig.”

Sabine didn’t laugh at the time, for it would have been rude to laugh at a woman on her deathbed, but the thought of searching for a pig seemed kind of humorous. Before her grandmother could elaborate, she’d taken her last breath. In the years that followed, Sabine had looked for the key. Now the key was close at hand—Jonin Lee.

If she had to speak to Jonin, she’d use that sweet voice she used on Mr. Rhimes. It had worked so effortlessly on him. Usually, she didn’t have to alter her tone, but she wanted to advance in the corporation. Mr. Rhimes had certainly fallen for her “sweet woman” ploys. He’d been easy to fool. Jonin Lee was a different matter altogether. She didn’t believe she’d be able to fool him so easily.

Members moved inside the cave, and she followed behind a few of them, keeping herself shielded by the shadows. Regardless of

whether she had to speak to Jonin, she had to get inside tonight and find out what she could. She sensed the excitement from the members as they walked into the cave.

A few worshipers stood just inside the entrance, holding candles, speaking in low tones. During the previous two visits, she'd managed to get inside, but she couldn't understand what they were saying. Everyone spoke in whispers.

She saw Jonin standing in the center of a circle of people. His hands were raised, and he had his eyes closed. He chanted in an unknown language, and the worshipers around him joined in. Their words sounded almost musical. For some reason, it relaxed her. She should be frightened being in a place she didn't belong, but something inside her told her that she had nothing to fear.

Since the corporation had taken over most of the planet's resources, laws had been passed in which only English could be spoken. These people obviously missed the memo. The corporation feared the ties that Spanish, Italian, French, and Latin had to religion. As she listened to the chanting, she realized she couldn't place the language Jonin spoke. It was neither Spanish, nor Italian, both of which she had learned in a translation course she'd taken years ago at her grandmother's insistence.

Sabine stood in her usual place by the back wall, just inside the cave. A strange odor permeated the air. She wasn't sure if it was a smell coming from the cave itself or if the members created it. Many candles had been lit tonight, sending brightness farther than usual. She pulled the hood of the coat she wore over her head and watched Jonin move around the worshipers.

She hated the thought of spying on such a gentle man like Jonin. It was her nature to step on men like him on a daily basis, but there was something about him that made her weaken. He made her want to be nice. Being nice made her want to snarl. Why did this man affect her so? The sexual attraction she felt for him wasn't enough to make her alter herself, was it? Yet she found herself wanting to smile, wanting to be near him, wanting him to speak to her. Was she crazy? The man was a rebel, a lawbreaking citizen, and a pig. Worse, it was her job to report his activities to their boss, albeit, she'd falsify her reports to suit her own purposes.

Her heart raced at the prospect of deceiving him. Maybe her heart raced for other reasons too. Was it because of the way he moved around the crowd? His body wasn't overly bulky with muscles, but

nor was it lanky. It reminded her of a boxer's body, like a lean, mean, fighting machine. He had just enough flesh, and in areas where it made him appear sexy. In the light, she could see the bulge in his pants and wondered if he was as large as he appeared. With his shiny hair pulled back, his thick brows and long-lashed eyes were revealed. His deep brown eyes softened when he looked at her. He had attractive lashes a woman would kill for, and arched cheeks and strong jaw line. His features didn't portray the weak man that he seemed to present.

She noticed his hands gripping the sword, while chanting some unknown jargon. He looked like a lean, ancient oriental warrior, who could easily stalk his pray without them knowing it. Like a young girl, she wished she could hold his hand, stare into his eyes, and have him reveal all his secrets.

"Get a hold of yourself, Sabine. Just do your job and you'll find out his secrets. Remember, he's just a means to an end. Don't look at him like he's more than a man," she whispered under her breath.

Jonin stopped, opened his eyes, and seemed to be looking directly at her. She gasped a quick breath, hoping she was wrong. He moved toward her, placing his sword in the hands of the closest worshiper. Once he stood in front of her, he took her hand and pulled her toward the circle. The worshipers enclosed them, and began moving around them canting and smiling.

Sabine wanted to yank her hand from his, yet she wanted to clasp it tighter at the same time. She wasn't sure what was happening, but it seemed romantic. Was he trying to involve her in some magical curse? Nothing appeared to be happening, save for her embarrassment, which she hid beneath her icy glare. Jonin raised his hand and all the followers stopped.

"Welcome." His deep voice echoed in the cave, and his smile touched her. She could have sworn he was a totally different person, but his face and body appeared as sexy as it had in the station. Sabine was thankful he hadn't changed everything.

She nodded, but resisted speaking. He handed her a brass pipe. Smoke resonated in the air around them as if it cradled them. It smelled sweet, unlike anything she'd ever come across before. She watched him warily, wondering what he would do next.

He moved his mouth past her cheek, so close to her face, she could almost feel his breath caress her with warmth. His lips drew in the smoke from the pipe and he turned to her. "Go on," he said in that

deep silky voice.

Did he actually think she'd smoke whatever drug was inside that pipe? Could she risk her sensibilities being affected, especially around him? She wavered in uncertainty, not knowing what to do.

"It is part of our ritual. Don't be afraid, it's just opium, nothing too harsh. Our spirits and ancestors used the pipe to better enhance the rituals. Only one drag for each of us though. It can be addictive."

Was he insane? Only one? She didn't want any part of it, but she supposed if she wanted to be accepted in their circle, she had to smoke it. Hesitantly, she moved toward the gleaming brass of the pipe. He held it up for her and she placed her lips on the end piece as she'd seem him do. With a small drawn-in breath, she tasted the scent of the smoke and then blew it outward. It wasn't so bad.

"Well done." He passed the pipe to the next worshiper, and pulled her to the side.

Sabine's mind became lethargic and relaxed. She leaned against the rock wall inside the cave, looking up at the man she was supposed to be investigating, the key to the future.

"You're new here. This is an exciting time for us. Who did you come with?" His eyes bore intensely into hers. He smiled and made her legs weaken. If she wasn't leaning on the wall, she might have fallen to the rocky ground. Instant relief lightened her mood when he failed to recognize her. For a moment, she suspected he might know it was her, yet he hadn't called her name.

"I... I..." She could think of nothing to say, and didn't have a name to speak of. How would she get out of this tangle? Would he have her escorted out of the cave?

"Never mind, I must return to the circle. Are you going to Blakeslee's afterwards?"

She nodded, even though she had no idea what he was talking about.

"Good, then I'll see you there." He walked away, leaving an ambiance of masculinity behind. His scent seemed to seep into her.

She watched his firm ass, long legs, and tapered back moving away from her. Sabine almost crumpled to the dirt floor then. Damn, he was so magnetic and she couldn't help falling for him. As she waited for the ritual to end, she lost sight of Jonin in the crowd. He didn't appear to be anywhere inside the cave. Disappointment overcame her. She should never have lost sight of him in the first place.

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The worshipers began leaving, and she made her way to her AT. She listened to them talking about the gathering at Blakeslee's. Following a member's AT, she kept a close enough range so she wouldn't lose him. The worshipers seemed to be in a festive spirit. At Blakeslee's she'd find out exactly what was going on with this group, and more importantly, what Jonin could be up to and if he really was the key.

* * * *

In the rear room of Blakeslee's, Jonin sat back, listening to his friend, Robert's griping about the corporation. All around him, his friends seemed to be enjoying themselves. Jonin kept an eye out for the brunette he'd spoken to at the ceremony. He hadn't seen her before, but for some strange reason, he felt he had. She must be new to the order and had been brought along with one of the followers. He'd asked those closest to him if they knew her, but they didn't know who she was.

The opium affect had worn off and most of the members returned to their "normal" selves, if you could call them normal. Most of them lived as normal as possible, but they were an odd breed of human. He admired them, especially because they, like he, wanted to be part of something spiritual. If only the world hadn't become so corporate, isolated, and lonely for some, they wouldn't need to enact the upcoming ritual.

"Did I see you with a sexy brunette tonight?"

Jonin nodded at Robert's question.

"She was a sweet ass. So what was it like?" Robert's voice faltered a bit, due to the amount of drink he'd taken.

"What was what like?"

"Fucking her. Come on, man. In your position, you could have any woman at the meetings. They all surround you like you're the prized cock. Any man would take advantage of it. I know I would." He chuckled in a mocking tone.

"That's untrue. They do not. Stop being so crass, Robert. Their only interest in me is because of the rituals."

"Yeah, and I'm a bull with a dick the size of my leg. They all want you. You don't see the way they look at you, you lucky S-O-B."

"I don't have sex with our female members, Robert. It would be unethical. Maybe if you did have a dick the size of your leg, they'd look at you like that too." Jonin laughed at Robert when he spilled half his drink on the table.

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He lifted his drink, taking the last swig, and placed his cup on the table. The brunette wasn't going to show up tonight. Jonin had already been there for an hour, and she still hadn't come inside. He would have known, since he kept watch on the entrance.

During the ceremony, he'd been drawn to her as if the spirits guided him. He hadn't been able to resist moving in her direction. When he'd taken her hand, he felt such a connection, a jolt that riveted through him. The woman was an enigma—one that he wanted to solve. He'd get nowhere tonight since she obviously wasn't going to come.

"I'm heading home. I'll see you next week, Robert." Jonin rose to leave.

His friend nodded, placing his head on the table in a near drunken stupor. Jonin never let himself get so inebriated that he didn't know what was going on. Before he left, he asked another friend to make sure Robert got home safely.

As he walked outside, he felt the warm breeze on his face. It had grown so dark that all the stars glowed in the sky. For a moment, he took advantage of it and looked up in wonder. He felt so alone in the darkness, and wondered what living in space would be like. For centuries men had pondered that, and now, Jonin would have the opportunity to experience it. That was if Miss Morgan accepted his application.

Tomorrow, he would have to contact her and reschedule their meeting. If he had to woo Miss Morgan's acceptance, then so be it.

"Hello."

He turned at the sound of a voice and footsteps behind him, and saw the brunette approaching.

"That was an interesting ceremony tonight."

"Yeah? I'm glad you enjoyed it. Are you of the sign of the boar?" Jonin moved toward her, closing the space between them. The woman stood beneath the neon-lighted sign, which softly lit her profile. She had shed the cloak and in the dimmed light, he could see the silhouette of her body. Curves of her breasts and shapely hips stood out and almost made him wrangle out a grunt of approval.

She nodded. "I've been hoping to join the order, and I thought tonight would be the perfect opportunity to meet you."

He held out his hand, and she took it. "I'm Jonin Lee."

"Oh, yes, I know who you are. I'm...Sally. I'm eager to find out more about SOB and you. I love the spirituality of it. Everyone seems

to be so happy when they leave. Is it always like that?"

He released her hand. "Usually. Sally, do you want to get out of here?"

She nodded again. "Can we go somewhere quiet?"

"How about my place?" Ordinarily, he didn't take a woman home, but this woman made him react without concern. Jonin liked the sound of her voice, so honeyed, almost caressing him like a warm breeze. She looked so much like a boar with her apprehensive demeanor. He was used to boars and their ways.

When he reached his AT, he pressed the button on his control communicator and opened the door for her. She slipped inside and he did the same on the driver's side, taking a moment to notice her shapely legs. As he slipped his legs in, he noticed that she sat back, smiling at him. In the darkness, he searched her face for recognition, but couldn't see past the shadows. He did notice the shine on her lips though. Heat coiled inside him, making him hard with the need to taste those lips, to devour them, to suck them... His cock sprang to life, altering him of intentions that were better left unsaid. He'd wait until he reached home before he suggested anything of the sort.

"I don't live too far. Are you hungry?"

"I could eat something."

Those taunting lips parted when her tongue slid so sensuously over them. He grinned, and then punched a button on his control. "I'll program a meal. It'll be ready when we get there. Do you like rice?"

"Rice, what's that?"

"I had the control prepare a meal of rice and vegetables. Rice is a dish of my ancestors. Not many eat it anymore. It's a rare commodity nowadays. But I like the taste of it, especially when it's prepared like the old ways."

"I've never had it before Mr.."

"Please, call me Jonin. So you want to be a SOB member, Sally?" Jonin punched the controls to have his AT travel to its destination without his attention. While he was able to, he studied the woman next to him. He could smell her fragrance of perfume, and saw that she wore a velvet outfit. It looked soft, and for a second, he imagined his hand moving over the textured material. There was something about the woman that attracted him. Never one to refute the spirits, he'd given himself over when they interfered and guided him to her earlier. His body reacted again, searing him with sexual

heat.

Now that he was on his own more or less, he wasn't sure how to act. At least, she was a boar like him and knew how awkward it was to proceed when meeting the opposite sex. He almost laughed at the thought of the blind leading the blind. But he did have some experience, and wasn't totally inept at pleasuring a woman. Is that what he planned with Sally? What the hell had he been thinking of for the past five minutes?

His AT pulled up to his home. He took the control out of the ignition, and pressed the control for the automatic door. "Let's go inside." He escorted her toward the door, which was now open.

"You have a nice place, Jonin. I like the decor. Did you have someone design it?" She walked toward the resin-molded sofa and sat on the soft cushion.

"Ah, well no, I did this myself." Jonin almost admitted it was a boar's trait to be able to conform to style, but she already knew that since she was a boar herself. After all, she'd shown up at the SOB, she had to be a boar. He shouldn't assume anything at this point.

"I'll be right back, make yourself comfortable." He went to the kitchen and pressed the retrieval button on his culinary machine. A dish of cooked rice and vegetables slid up on a pedestal, wafting the scent into the air. He took two plates and forks off the counter and placed them on a tray, then lifted the dish, and grabbed a few other essentials.

"Here we...are." Jonin almost lost his breath when he entered the living room. She looked beautiful standing beside the window with her long hair flowing over her back. He could see her bare back showing. Haltered outfits had such appeal for their easy access. When she turned, her profile was exquisite. He might have seen her before, but he wasn't certain. This was going to be a night he'd remember for a long time.

"It smells delicious." She joined him at the table and took the seat across from him.

He placed a few heaping spoonfuls on her plate, and handed her a napkin. After giving himself a portion, he began eating. The silence between them made him uncomfortable. He wasn't a good conversationalist, but SOB would be a safe enough topic.

"So you want to be a member of the SOB? Are you into the spiritual cult?"

Sally nodded. "This was my second meeting. It makes me feel at

peace, which is something I haven't felt before.”

“I know what you mean. That's one of the reasons why I started it in the first place. You're not afraid are you?”

She set her fork down and grabbed her napkin. “No.” After dabbing her mouth, she smiled. “But aren't you afraid of the corporation? If they find out...”

“How can they? I'm not afraid they'll find out. We're very select in whom we let in, and we're careful about our practices. You're not someone to fear, are you? Who are you, and what interest do you have in the order?” Jonin saw her smile, and felt a sense of relief. For a moment there, he grew rigid in that she might be someone against the order. He didn't mean to raise his voice, but he couldn't help being suspicious of her.

“I'm just a woman who heard about your religion from a friend. Honestly, I don't have any intention of harming you or the order. Yet, you take risks by letting anyone join. I was able to walk right in. You might want to take better precautions. Perhaps you should place security at the entrance. Shouldn't you have to prove yourself to be a member?”

Jonin raised an eyebrow at her suggestion, and took her hand. “And how would you prove yourself, Sally?”

“I have something in mind, Jonin.”

Her sexy voice drifted over him like a sunray, making his body hot. She sounded so seductive, and yet so different from Sabine. Maybe he was wrong in his attraction for Sabine. Sally certainly made him feel movements in certain areas, places that now ached with lust. Perhaps a tigress wasn't what he needed. Maybe someone like Sally more fit his lifestyle.

“Oh? Sounds...intriguing.” Jonin set his fork down and leaned forward in his chair. Something in her blue eyes told him to be cautious, but he disregarded it. “I'll be right back.” He quickly left the dining table and went to his bedroom. Certain he'd cleaned up earlier; he just wanted to make sure there was nothing out of place. Everything appeared to be tidy. For a second, he pondered what he was doing. Should he get involved with someone right now? Would she consider this being involved? Jonin hadn't had a relationship for some time, and he wasn't about to begin one now. He'd be leaving the planet soon, or at least he hoped he would be. That's if Sabine approved his application. *Sabine*. Would this night with Sally interfere with any possible relationship he wanted with the woman of

his dreams?

“What are you...doing?” Sally stood by the doorway. “Oh, so this is where you went.” As she stepped inside the room, she grasped the zipper of her one-piece outfit and began unzipping it.

Jonin watched absently with his tongue practically drooling at the skin revealed as her hand slipped lower. To hell with everything. Right now, he just wanted to enjoy himself with this giving woman. He wouldn't think of Sabine, tomorrow, or being on the space station, or even SOB. The woman before him deserved all of his concentration and attention.

As he willed himself to leave all his thoughts by the wayside, he approached her and cupped the soft skin on her neck. He let his hand trail a path down her nakedness, where the unzipped material showed smooth flawless skin. Warmth ran through him now, knowing his body wanted more than a touch. He moved his arm around her back and pulled her against him, crushing her breasts against his chest. She felt so perfectly formed to him, nestled so close.

“You feel nice.” He moved his face beside her neck and smelled her lovely fragrance.

“So do you,” she said, softly.

A pleasurable moan escaped her when he cradled his hard length between her legs. He moved briefly, feeling all her softness cuddled so undeniably against him.

Tilting her face back, Sally looked at him with a hunger he too bore. Jonin felt time had stopped and, as if in slow motion, his mouth hovered above hers for all of a second before he took full possession of her sensual lips. He claimed her with a possessive kiss, a kiss so unlike him. With fire claiming him, he swamped her with what he hoped was an erotic display. The kiss became consuming; he had never experienced such passion from a woman before. It was as if she'd given herself over to him.

“You're really beautiful, Sally. That kiss blew my mind.” He kept his expression serious, while he held her face for another kiss.

Sally's hands burned his skin with her touches. He felt her stroking his arms, back, ass, and body. His breath hitched slightly when the stroking went to his crotch. How could he get any harder?

Jonin swooped her into his arms, kissed her with all the fire inside him, and placed her on the bed as gently as he could. Still, she made an oomph sound at the force of her body hitting the comforter. His mouth never left hers. He immediately found the zipper well

below her breasts, and began unzipping it further. Once it was fully undone, he pushed the material aside and trailed his mouth over her exposed skin. He stopped when he reached her throat, raining a brand of hot kisses along the sensitive area. Nibbling her silken flesh fueled his lust and he hungered for more.

She groaned, “Yes, Jonin, keep doing that.”

He kept himself in control, even hearing the sweet approving moans coming from her throat as he kissed her. His clothes seemed constricting, and he wanted to discard them. With that thought, he pulled back, and began unfastening his shirt. He practically ripped it off, buttons flying as he tossed it to the floor. Sally reached up and moved her hands over his sparsely haired chest, her fingers hardening his muscles as they explored.

“Mmm, I just love your chest.” Her hands kept caressing him.

Next, he concentrated on his pants, shoes and underwear. He took a moment to settle his fortitude, but that was short-lived once his pants came off. Now released, his erection intensified and pointed in the direction he wanted to go. Sally moved to a kneeling position in front of him, and took his cock in her hand.

“Whoa, you’re...delicious, Jonin.”

Mindless, he almost cried out at the sheer pleasure her touch caused. A painful stirring made him groan in a throaty tone. He could wait, he told himself. Jonin was sure the woman exuded a confidence, which he didn’t think a boar would be capable of. Wasn’t she a woman who should be shrieking and hiding under the covers?

“Stroke me, Sally. Ahh, yes, that’s it.”

She was more like Sabine, the tigress, taking control of the situation and working his sexual tension like an experienced woman. Jonin didn’t mind that, and he’d gladly give control over to Sally, if she wanted it. She pushed him backwards until his body was level with the bed. Alright, so she did want control. Looking upward, he could see her sweet smile before she took ownership of him. Beyond himself now, Jonin let himself feel her mouth moving over him, heating his skin, wetting it, readying him. His cock was fully engorged and ready to join the party, but there was time. He wanted to see what she’d do.

Before he could insist she stop torturing him, Sally stood and let her one-piece outfit fall to the floor. She stood before him, her skin glowing in the softness of the nightlight coming through the window. She looked enchanting, as beautiful as a goddess. Words failed him as

he watched her move over him. He felt her delicate body touching his as she positioned herself over his throbbing head. A groan escaped his throat, and he willed himself to concentrate on her pleasure.

Sally situated herself and assisted their bodies in joining. All the wondrous feelings of entering a woman immediately swamped him. He reveled in the warmth of her womb surrounding him, of the tightness encasing his hard flesh. Everything ceased for man in that moment, and Jonin's breath attested to it. He couldn't feel anything but the gentle movements of her body, so temptingly causing his undoing.

Her hands moved to his face, and he looked up at her blue eyes. A smoldering glance back told him she was thoroughly enjoying herself. He grinned. As Sally thrust and gyrated her body against him, he jerked his body, entering her fully and completely.

“Harder, Jonin. Fuck me harder.”

Her lusty words made him oblige. Mindless euphoria overtook him. He kept up the forceful plunging, making them both rasp for breath. Each time they converged, arresting sensations exploded inside him. Jonin reached out to her bouncing breast, holding her nipple for a few seconds before she broke contact. He wished he was close enough to touch it with his tongue, but unfortunately he couldn't. Sally placed her hands over her breasts, cupping them, teasing him with their beauty. She leaned toward him—as if she knew what he wanted.

He got his wish and was able to taste the nipples that had teased him only a moment ago. After a few seconds of pleasure, she pulled backward and moaned.

“You have the sweetest tits, Sally.”

With her eyes completely closed, she threw her head back and allowed herself to climax. Jonin lurched his ass upward to assist her. He enjoyed seeing her climax, and loved the fact that she didn't have any inhibitions. Her reaction fueled his own culminating need. As if he was on the highest peak in Red Rock, he shouted a distorted cry. Mixed with pain, pleasure and everything in between, his voice grated its approving abandonment.

Sally continued moving over him, and her hands held on to his biceps. She let her brown silky waves tickle his stomach, leaning forward to place kisses on his mouth. He met her lips with a tender touch then helped her off him.

Jonin pulled her against him, cuddling her body with his. He

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closed his eyes, reveling in what they'd just shared. To him, joining with a woman was almost a spiritual event. In the moment of bliss, a man could be no closer to heaven. His ancestors coveted women and had worshiped them for all their beauty. If the old saying: *beauty is in the eye of the beholder* was true, then right now he beheld one hell of a beauty.

“Jonin, that was amazing. You’re an exquisite lover.”

He tilted her chin back and moved his mouth over hers. “It is you who is exquisite.”

Chapter Four

Jonin forced his eyes open even though the brightness of the morning caused a yellow glow inside his bedroom. He sat up, letting the sheet fall off his chest. Noting the red digits on the timemode, he had plenty of time before he had to be at work. His body felt as though he'd climbed Red Rock Canyon yesterday. Then he remembered.

Sally. He turned to look at her, but she wasn't there. No trace of the woman could be found inside his bedroom. With a shove to the sheet, he rose and went into the living area. Nothing—she was gone. She hadn't woken him, or even had said goodbye. Would he see her again?

He'd experienced the most intense sexual night, but felt guilty. A one-night stand wasn't something he'd participated in before. Most of the women he'd had sex with were wooed during a relationship. He had no idea what he should do or how he should react.

Should he try to find her, get her communication number and call her? He supposed if she wanted him to contact her, she would have left her number. She hadn't left a trace behind. Maybe she just wanted a one-night stand too. If she showed up at the next SOB meeting, he could ask her. Who was he kidding? He'd never ask her that.

"Forget her," he mumbled. "There's too much at stake right now to be concerned about a woman."

Jonin forced himself to disregard his memories of last night, and got ready for work. The drive to work only took ten minutes and as he walked inside he saw the hustling of his coworkers. People moved around the station on escalators, elevators, and conveyers. Announcements of various meetings came through the speakers on the mezzanine level. He'd gone through security on the lower level and walked to the bank of elevators that took him to the secured area below. Inside, he pushed the button for his level, and saw someone entering. He lodged his arm between the doors and set off the sensor

for the doors to reopen.

Sabine stepped inside. She looked ready to take on the world this morning. He smiled politely.

“Good morning, Miss Morgan.”

She smiled, pressed the button for her floor, and turned her back to him.

“I think we can dispense with the formality, can’t we, Jonin?”

Jonin grinned behind her, taking a moment to admire her back and bottom. He had to admit the form-fitting uniform did have its benefit. As if molded on her body, the uniform left nothing to his imagination. He especially liked the way the material hugged her ass. For a moment he thought about cupping her bottom with his hand. Instead, he fisted his hand by his side, knowing it wouldn’t be a good idea. The tigress might claw him.

She turned around. “Did you hear me?”

“What? Oh, sorry. Yeah, I guess so. Are you sure you don’t mind me calling you Sabine? I would think here we should be more formal.”

“I see what you mean. Very well, but when we’re not in the workplace you’ll call me Sabine. So have you given thought to my offer?”

“Offer, Miss Morgan? I took it as a command.” Jonin stepped closer, wanting to smell her fragrance. There was something oddly familiar about her scent. Her curly auburn hair smelled nice, when he got close enough for a whiff.

“Perhaps it was a command. Don’t tell me you’re having second thoughts. I thought moving to the station was important to you. I guess I was wrong.”

Jonin set his hand on her shoulder and pulled her close. “It is important to me. Is this the only way you’ll consider my application?”

Her beautiful blue eyes seemed to sparkle with mischief. “Perhaps. So, do you have any plans tonight? Are you available to meet?”

The elevator doors opened on her floor, and he watched her press the “open” button while she waited for his answer.

“I’m available. Where do you want to meet, the Skylab Club?”

“Oh, no, we’re well beyond the Skylab Club now, Jonin. I’ll come to your plex and we’ll have a fine time. Then we’ll discuss your application.”

“What time should I expect you?”

“Nine o’clock. You’d better be there.”

“I will, Miss Morgan. You can count on it.” Jonin winked at her, then watched her walk confidently out of the elevator toward the security entrance of the floor. She didn’t turn to look back.

She was such a tigress. Jonin wasn’t really certain his having sex with her would secure his application, but what did he have to lose? Only his heart, his future, his ethics—everything that mattered to him.

He spent the rest of the day in a haze, not really caring about his work. The systematic programs were run methodically, without thought to any purpose. All he could think about was Sabine, and seeing her tonight. Once in a while, Sally would intrude, and memories of their time together flashed in his mind. Her reaction had been almost loving, lover-like, as if he mattered to her. Maybe he was reading too much into her touches, her smiles, and the way she’d held him. Someday he’d find a woman to make him feel like that again. There might be just such a woman on the station.

Tonight, he had to pretend to be as affected by Sabine as he had been by Sally. Could he pull it off? Regardless of his feelings, he’d do what was necessary. That meant he needed to wine and dine the woman. How could he impress a woman who was corporate from head to toe? What kind of food should he serve? Should he even serve food? Would she even want any? She probably just wanted sex and then she’d be on her way—his application secure.

He couldn’t see Sabine acting like that. He’d always thought there was much more to the woman than she revealed. This was a once in a lifetime chance to get to know the woman under the steel exterior. With that thought, he smiled. Tonight he’d find out everything there was to know about her. That was if he could manage to get past looking at her body.

On his way out of work, he stood on the conveyer, which took him to the parking area. Two board members were just ahead of him. He tried not to listen to their conversation, but they didn’t know he was behind them, and they spoke loudly.

“Can you believe Mr. Rhimes, placing that woman at the helm?”

“That bitch is perfect for the job. She’ll make us richer than we ever dreamed.” His comrade laughed. “I can’t believe she’s secretly investigating our employees. Do you think any of us are under investigation?”

“Nah. Why would Rhimes investigate us? But that poor fellow... What’s his name...?”

“Jonin Lee,” the other man supplied.

“Yeah, he’s going to be put through the ringer. Man, I’d hate to be in his shoes. I wonder what else the woman is hiding. Gotta give her credit though, she’s playing Rhimes like a fiddle. I can’t believe he promoted her. Guess she’s giving him a good piece of ass.”

Jonin felt blood rushing to his brain. He wanted to yell at the pressure building inside him. She was betraying him. Why would Rhimes have her investigating him? Did they know about the SOB? He desperately needed to meditate and calm down, especially before the woman herself walked into his plex. The worst part of it was the fact that she used her sexuality to secure her position, if what he’d heard was true. Wasn’t that what she was doing to him as well? He couldn’t fault her for that.

As soon as he got home, he went to retrieve all the candles he owned. After placing them all around his plex, and chanting the calming prayers of his ancestors, he began feeling better. Should he give her the benefit of the doubt? Maybe those men had it all wrong. Before he made any assumptions, he really should hear it from her. Would he have the nerve to ask her? He must. All his plans rested on her answers. What if she was really investigating him? He wondered if the SOB members were secure. It would really destroy him if they were in jeopardy because of his stupid actions.

Jonin went to his bedroom and changed out of his uniform. He noticed his rumpled bed, and decided to tidy up before she arrived. Smoothing the sheets, he noticed a lump in the center. He reached under the sheets and pulled out a wig—the brunette wig that belonged to Sally. Not Sally. Suddenly, it dawned on him that he hadn’t been with Sally. Just who was Sally? Was she Sabine?

“What the hell is going on?”

* * * *

Sabine looked at herself in the mirror one last time. Tonight she’d put her plans into motion. She hadn’t intended to involve Jonin so soon, but Mr. Rhimes changed all that today when he made the announcement to the board. She hadn’t expected him to appoint her as his replacement when he retired, but that’s what he’d stated, much to the dejection of the other men. But the board had signed the document, all without coercion. Sabine read through the lengthy agreement, which stated all the tie-in bonuses and use of corporate amenities she’d receive with her promotion. Yet the one clause that made her smile inside was the “accidental death” clause.

“I couldn’t have planned this any better,” she said, while applying lipstick. If Mr. Rhimes died due to an accident, she’d immediately be placed in his position.

She could still hear Mr. Rhimes’s speech. “I trust Miss Morgan will continue to run Santex as it has always been run. She knows the changes I want to make. Follow her lead if anything should happen to me. You never know when one of these underground rebels will come out of hiding.”

Then he’d gone on to tell the board about his little investigations. That didn’t make her feel so good, them knowing who she was investigating and why. It became a dangerous game in no time. Time was of the essence now, all for the sake of the key.

Sabine clasped her hands at the thought of Mr. Rhimes giving her full rein, and the action with which she’d take control. The man had no idea what she intended. Now her only concern was getting rid of Mr. CEO and giving back the people the lives they’d been missing. The first thing on her agenda—religion. Since she had participated in the SOB ceremony, she had become more attuned to the idea that people should be able to worship anyway they pleased.

It was time Jonin understood his role, she mused. She’d taken great lengths to make certain she looked appealing tonight. The skimpy red dress, she hoped, would cause him to salivate. A vision of last night stopped her as she exited her plex. She’d never reacted to a man like that before. During the sexual encounter, she’d given herself wholly to him, including her heart. It was a stupid thing to do. What if he recognized her as Sally? When she’d awakened this morning, she was too out of sorts, and had forgotten to grab the wig. There was no possible way he could connect her to Sally. All day, she’d thought about calling him, but hung up the communicator each time. Should she just tell him? She’d figure that out when she got there.

Sabine programmed the AD to take her to Jonin’s plex. She sat back and closed her eyes, smiling in satisfaction. All would work out. It had to. The people of Earth needed the sacrifice. Jonin had to understand that. “Please, grandmother, let him be the key, make him agree.”

Her AT reached his plex sooner than she thought it would. Taking a few minutes, she worked up the courage to go inside. It appeared dark from outside.

The plex door opened when she walked up to it. As if she’d entered the SOB cave, the inside was cast in candlelight. Everywhere

she looked at a white candle. Was he performing a ritual? If that was so, she wasn't sure if she should interrupt.

Now standing beside the window, she looked at the surroundings, wondering where he was. She felt an unfamiliar lump lodge in her throat. It looked as though he was being romantic. No man had ever tried to make her feel so special before. Normally, she controlled the relationship much like a tiger on the hunt, telling her lover when and where she wanted him. And even though Jonin seemed shy, he also had tenaciousness about him.

"Hello, Sabine."

She turned, hearing his voice. "Jonin, hello. I just arrived."

He stepped into the light; wearing the silk robe she'd seen him wear at the SOB meeting. His appearance made her heart lighten. He looked as though he'd been lounging. Had he been waiting for her?

"Everything looks so...romantic."

He smiled smugly. "Well, you deserve it after last night."

She now knew why. "You know about last night? How...did you find out?" Sabine cringed remembering the wig, but he couldn't know it was her just by him finding it.

"Look familiar?" he asked, holding up the wig for her inspection.

Jonin walked around a chair in the middle of the room. He took her hand, leading her into the room. Sabine was at a loss to explain. Everything she'd risked was for nothing. He wouldn't believe any excuse. She knew he wouldn't help her now.

"Sabine, are you going to turn me in? I'm guessing you want to use me for sex, find out my secrets, uncover SOB members, and then turn me in to the authorities. Have I got it about right so far?"

She didn't like the cutting tone of his voice or the sadness in his eyes. He was the last person she wanted to hurt, but how could she make him understand?

"No, Jonin, none of that is true," she whispered.

"Really? Well then, let me tell you what I've discovered. Today, several board members were talking about your miraculous promotion. Then I heard them discussing the investigation that Mr. Rhimes has you assigned to. But it wasn't until I heard my name that I suspected anything. All I know is, I've been a fool to trust you."

"It's not what you think. Please, we should leave here and then I can—"

"There is nothing you can say. Last night, I experienced a woman who I thought reacted with honesty. You're nothing but a pack of lies,

lady. Did you enjoy using me, Sabine? Was the sex worth it? Why would you want to have sex with me? Why didn't you just put the noose over my head and pull it? I don't get you."

In all the time she'd been investigating Jonin, she'd never seen him get angry. He always maintained that cool, collected attitude. His demeanor now wasn't so pleasant. He showed a hurt, angry mien that upset her, mainly because she'd caused it.

"Jonin, I didn't mean to hurt you," she whispered, trying to keep her voice low. "Yes, I was supposed to investigate you...am investigating you. And yes, I was appointed as Mr. Rhimes's replacement, but there is so much you don't know. The sex was wonderful last night. I mean it. I liked being with you and I wasn't using you."

"Just go, Sabine. I don't want to hear it. If you're going to turn me in, at least wait until after the next SOB meeting. Then, I won't care what happens to me. I must think of the members. I don't want to see you. Now, get out."

Sabine stepped toward him, but he turned and left the plex. It took all of two seconds for her to run after him.

Outside, she saw him standing beside his AT, leaning his head in dejection on the roof. She'd never seen him look so angry. Well, she deserved it. Everything had gone haywire. This wasn't how it was supposed to go down. If she could just explain, he might believe her.

"Jonin, wait. Please, you have to listen to me, but not here. I can explain everything. It is all lies, all of it. I'm not investigating you for Santex or Mr. Rhimes, but for me." She tapped her chest, looking sincere. "Give me a chance to clear this up."

"Get in."

She entered the AT and relaxed, knowing he would at least listen to her now. Before she began, Jonin started the engine.

"Where do you want to go?" He kept his eyes forward and didn't look at her when he asked.

"Anywhere, just drive. It really wasn't safe to talk inside your plex. I just hope we haven't compromised ourselves."

She noticed his jaw twitch.

"Are you saying—?"

"Mr. Rhimes had your plex under surveillance long before he asked me to investigate you. He only did that because he wanted me to prove myself. Ah, Jonin, I'm sorry, but I had to tell him things about SOB. I didn't tell the truth, if that matters. It was the only way I

could—”

His head snapped in her direction, and his eyes blazed with fury. “What? Shit! I can’t believe you. When will the enforcement show up? How much time do I have?”

“They’re not going to come after you, Jonin. I only pretended to be investigating you. I told Mr. Rhimes that I found out you were part of a religion. I made up a religious group called Save Our Beasts. He doesn’t know its location or that you perform the rituals. I wanted him to believe that I was fully investigating you, but I had a more important reason for doing so.”

“Go on.” His eyes softened a bit and no longer portrayed such anger.

Sabine took a breath before continuing. “My quest to help the people began when I was fifteen. It was the year my grandmother died...” She related the quest and what her grandmother had told her that night. “...and I believe you are the key she told me about. You must be. She said to search for the pig. You’re the head of SOB, the wizard of the boar. How much clearer can it be?”

“That’s a far-fetched story. Why would your grandmother tell you to search for me? I don’t know how I can possibly help you.”

Sabine touched his shoulder. “It’s the truth, Jonin. My grandmother had certain abilities and could see things. You are the key. I just know you are.”

He sighed, looking straight ahead. “What do you want me to do?”

“Kill Mr. Rhimes.”

Chapter Five

Jonin almost shouted in disbelief, but somehow kept his cool. He directed the AT to the edge of a cliff and parked. She wanted him to kill the most powerful man on Earth? If he went through with it, he'd be executed. She was crazy. Would it even make a difference for the people? He was insane for even considering it. How could he do something so heinous? The air inside the AT grew thick, and he found it difficult to breathe. He needed air and quickly left the AT, walking to the rim. His legs felt like jelly with all the talk of killing. Sabine exited the AT, and approached.

He turned to look at her and noticed her serene expression. "You want me to kill the most powerful man on Earth? Why, so you can take over the corporation? I won't do it."

Sabine sat cross-legged on the ground. She seemed mesmerized by the view and didn't say anything to him when he crouched next to her.

"I can't do it."

"Jonin, if you don't do it, all the people of Earth will continue to suffer. You can help me save them. You're the key."

"I'm not a fucking key. You're asking a lot of me. I don't think I can sacrifice myself like that." He fisted his hands, wanting to hit something, but wouldn't. With a deep breath, he gained control of his anger. "I've never killed anyone. How will it help the people?"

"Once Mr. Rhimes is...gone, I can begin changing the corporation and the laws. I intend to put the people back in charge, as it should be."

"That's commendable, but just because he's gone doesn't mean the board will let you make new laws."

She reached out and took his hand, pulling him next to her. Like a tigress, she had a look of satisfaction on her face, as if she had stalked her prey and was victorious in the hunt. Jonin wanted to kiss her. Something about that look gave her a sexual aura. He thought

about taking her in his arms, kissing her breathless and making love to her until she gave up on this ridiculous idea. Sex was hardly appropriate right now, but he dislodged the thought when he heard her purr. How could he refuse her invitation?

“Rhimes told the board to follow my directions, should anything happen to him. They all agreed and signed the contract.”

“So they’ll just listen to whatever you say?”

“Well, yes. And with you being the killer, there is no way they’ll suspect that I had anything to do with it. It’s all for the greater good, Jonin.”

“The greater good be damned. I’ll be executed for his murder. Does that mean anything to you? I don’t know if I can give up my life, even if it benefits mankind.”

“You won’t have to. I’ve come up with the perfect plan. On the twenty-sixth, the shuttle leaves for the moon. I’ll have false credentials made for you. Once you’re on the moon, you’ll be safe from law enforcement.”

Jonin shook his head. “It won’t work. They’ll come to the station searching for me. What makes you think I’ll be out of their reach?”

“I’ll be in control of the situation and will report that we’ve done a complete sweep of the station. I’ll provide them with a list of everyone who resides there. We’ll have to come up with a new identity for you, and appearance, but they’ll believe me.”

“Do you swear you intend to give the people back their rights? You’ll return the democracy?”

Sabine smiled, squeezing his hand in reassurance. “Yes, Jonin. I promise. That is all I’ve wanted all along, for a good many years. Earth will return to democracy. I have a list of contacts already. They’ll help me start the process. Now kiss me before I throw myself at you.”

Jonin laughed. His tigress ordered him in her commanding tone. He leaned toward her and gave her a peck on the cheek, then rose.

“What kind of kiss was that? Where are you going?” she called after him.

He got inside the AT and waited.

Sabine ran back to the AT and entered. No sooner had she sat in the seat, she propelled her body toward him, throwing herself at him like she’d promised.

“Jonin, last night, we shared something amazing. Don’t let it end like this. We don’t have much time left. There are only a few days

before the twenty-fifth, that's the day it must go down. I want to spend each minute with you."

He cupped her face and saw a slight shimmer in her eyes. Was his tigress going to cry? That was definitely not a trait of the tiger, more like a boar's. Jonin didn't know how to react. He could probably handle anything right now except tears.

"Shhh, we have tonight." He kissed her, taking his time to feel each movement of her lips.

Her soft tongue lapped his, taunting him to explore her mouth deeply. He wanted the moment to last forever. Jonin kept the pace of the kiss going. His night with "Sally" engulfed him, and he became hard with need. The fact that he'd made love to Sabine hit him like a rock. He broke off the kiss.

"Wait a minute. Why did you pretend to be Sally?" Frowning, he looked at her, his gaze skeptical.

Sabine touched his face. "I was afraid."

"You, afraid? I don't believe it."

"I had disguised myself so you wouldn't recognize me at SOB, but then you came to me during the ceremony. Why did you do that?"

"I don't know. Something made me go to you. It was beyond me. Why didn't you tell me who you were and what was going on?"

"I couldn't. Not then. I wasn't sure if you were the key and if I could trust you. Now, I know. Please, forget it, Jonin. Let's start over."

"I don't want to forget it. I think I'm falling in love with you."

"Oh, Jonin, I want to love you, but I can't let anything stand in the way of the greater good. Just fuck me, I need you."

Before he could refute that nonsense, she pressed her mouth against his, pushing her tongue inside. He let it go, and decided to enjoy Sabine.

Her hands gripped his shoulders, pressing the fabric of his robe downward. The smooth palms caressed his arms until the robe fell away. Now bare-chested, she moved her mouth to his nipples, kissing the hard flesh surrounding them. Jonin clutched her auburn curls, holding her face in position for another kiss.

As the kiss heated him, he slid off the straps of her dress and shimmied it downward. Now, it was his turn. His mouth found her nipples in the darkened AT, and for several seconds he tasted the delectable mounds.

Jonin repositioned her, and spread her legs. Sabine moaned,

leaning against the AT door. He used his finger to feel his way through her curls, until he felt the nub of her clit. Leaning in, he flicked his tongue over it, tasting her womanhood as if he were starved. He glanced at her and saw her squirming. His cock twitched and throbbed each time his mouth made contact with her silky folds. He kept to the task, and knew exactly when to pull back.

He sensed that she was close to reaching orgasm, but he wanted to prolong her pleasure. Her hand gripped the waist of his pants, while her other hand unfastened them. His cock pulsed to life at her sprightly touch.

“Take them off,” she commanded.

“Yes, boss.”

He almost laughed, but the heat of the moment kept him serious. He lifted his ass, thumbed the waistband and removed them. The amount of space inside the AT didn't make it easy. When he lifted his butt, his cock pointed outward in perfect position. Sabine took advantage of it and used her tongue to excite him further. He wasn't sure if he could last. His legs began shaking, making him feel the fervor of the moment.

“Come, sit on me. I want to feel you...be inside you.”

“You want to fuck me hard, don't you?”

Jonin swallowed hard, nodding. Oh yeah, he wanted to do that and more. In answer, he groaned, taking his cock in hand, priming it, positioning it. She straddled his hips, her thighs resting on his, lowering herself on his rod. He loved this position because he could reach every part of her.

She began gyrating in deliberate strokes, her wetness making the action easy. Jonin let her control the pace, and enjoyed the languid movements. It seemed like an erotic dance, the way she moved over him, how her breasts moved forward then retreated. So like a woman to take it slow, when all he wanted to do was thrust inside her and continue until he couldn't move.

Sabine moaned softly. “Oh, yes, that's what I want...all of you. Give me all of it.” She rose on her knees, allowing herself to fully slide on his shaft. Then with a forceful grunt, she pushed down and writhed her pussy, soaking his erection with her warm fluids.

Jonin gripped her ass, helping her to slam it. He almost exploded in pure bliss. The strokes continued until he heard her squeal with the first signs of orgasm. He gripped the underside of her ass, lifting her and helping her to fuel the climax, until she was thoroughly sated and

lying helplessly against him.

“I’m going to explode, Sabine. Ahhh.”

No sooner had her moans receded, his took over. With his legs stiffened, he lifted his ass one more time, thrusting deep into her, expelling the juices that made him incoherent. Jonin couldn’t control his breath or his reaction. He almost growled as loud as a tiger, but it probably was more like a boar’s grunt.

He turned his attention to Sabine, and felt her breath on his shoulder. Her body crushed his against the AT seat, and steam inside made it difficult to see out. He pressed the button and opened the window. A breeze caught one of her auburn curls, sending it across his face. Her light fragrance along with his masculine sweat assailed him. He was definitely in love with Sabine. Everything about her excited him.

A future together was impossible. He’d be living on the moon, while she was here on Earth, saving people’s livelihoods. If he could live the dream—he’d want it all—a life with the tigress. Jonin didn’t want to ruin their time together with thoughts of being without her in the future. Instead, he thought about the task she’d charged him with.

Only days away, he’d do something he never imagined he’d do. What method would be easiest to kill a man? A gun, knife, poison, strangulation? Jonin swallowed anxiously at the thought of choking someone to death. Although he knew he had enough strength to do it, he wasn’t certain he had enough conviction. Even though Mr. Rhimes deserved it, could Jonin go through with it?

Sabine leaned back. She lifted his face, looking at him puzzlingly. “What are you thinking about? You look so serious.”

“Murder.”

Chapter Six

The day of the twenty-fifth arrived more quickly than he'd hoped. Jonin sat in his living room waiting for Sabine's arrival. The next two days were going to be crazy, especially with all that he had to do. It wasn't every day that you killed someone, then performed a magical ritual, and then prepared to depart on a shuttle to the moon.

Sabine opened the door, walking toward him, smiling. She jumped on his lap and folded her hands around his neck.

"Hello, lover. Don't look so down." She kissed his slightly whiskered cheek.

He grinned at hearing her call him that. Since that night in the AT, she called him lover. He placed his head on her shoulder and grinned.

"I have all the information."

"Is everything set then?"

"Yes, Mr. Rhimes will be at the shuttle launch affair tonight at seven."

Jonin signed. "That only leaves me two hours."

"There will be plenty of time for you to get to the cave afterwards. Don't worry so. It won't take you long to meet with Rhimes. He doesn't usually stay at the party long." She placed another kiss on his cheek. "Everything will go as planned."

"I sure as hell hope so. It's my ass on the line. I'll be able to board the shuttle tomorrow at six?"

He felt her nodding.

"Yes, and don't forget, your new name is Hank Lipster."

Jonin chuckled. "Hank, what a name, but I guess I can live with it. Do you have my passport and instructions?"

"Yes, I'll leave them on the table. Now listen, Mr. Rhimes is only going to make an appearance, so be on time tonight. Is the gun loaded?"

"Yeah, I loaded it earlier. I'll be ready and on time."

She set her cheek next to his, rubbing her soft skin against his. “I’ll see you in the morning before you board the shuttle. It’s a shame we can’t share one more night together.”

“You know I have to perform the last ritual. I can’t let the SOB members down. We’ve been planning this for two years.”

She sighed. “I know I’m being selfish. It’s just... I love you, Jonin, so much that it hurts in here,” she tapped her chest. “And the thought of you leaving ... I wish you could stay here and help me.”

“I can’t, love. It’s the way it has to be.” He hugged her, deeply regretting losing her. For the greater good, she’d called it. If mankind knew what he was giving up, they would believe him a fool for walking away from something so precious.

“Well, we have a few hours before you have to leave. Let’s get naked. I want to touch every part of you, and fuck you for an hour.”

Jonin laughed. She had a way of putting it so temptingly. He reached out to help her remove her shirt, freeing her breasts.

“Only if you let me fuck you for an hour first.”

* * * *

Sabine stood in the center of the ballroom in the most decked out gown she owned. The slinky form-fitting material went to her feet and fit her to perfection. She wore her hair up, clasped in a jeweled burgundy comb that matched the color of her gown. Mingling with the board members, shuttle borders, and other Santex employees, she tried to pretend everything was normal. She couldn’t stop thinking about Jonin.

He was there somewhere. She could feel it. Before they had left for the party, she inspected his dress. Running her hands over the smooth fabric of his tuxedo, she memorized the feel of his muscles. Her heart ached, not only for losing him, but she worried about him. She wondered if her grandmother knew that she’d sacrifice her only love for the sake of the greater good. If she had, she’d never said so.

“Evening, Miss Morgan,” Mr. Chistle said, coming to stand next to her. The senior member of the board looked dashing in his tuxedo and smoothed back silver hair. He smelled like pipe tobacco and peppermints, a hardy combination.

“Hello, Mr. Chistle. It’s a great turn out, isn’t it? I’m so proud of our accomplishment. Imagine, having a station on the moon, where people will live. It’s all very exciting.”

Mr. Chistle smiled. “Yes, it is. Mr. Rhimes is about to speak.” He gestured toward the podium.

Jaded Beasts 6, Dog-Pig

Sabine turned toward it, seeing her boss whispering to a man standing next to him. She didn't recognize him, but focused her attention on Mr. Rhimes. His expression showed his normal cold-calculating manner.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'm honored to be here tonight. We have much to celebrate. I find myself a bit melancholy at the moment. You see, one of our own employees has been trying to kill me."

Sabine raised her face and tried to keep a professional mien. Unwavering, she stood still. How she managed to stay on her feet, she didn't know. With her mouth opened in shock, she turned to look at Mr. Chistle.

Mr. Rhimes continued, "Five minutes ago, Jonin Lee was found on the balcony to my office, with a gun in his possession. I can only assume his intent was to kill me. Thanks to our esteemed employee, Miss Morgan, we were able to intercept him before he did any permanent damage to me or the corporation." He raised a glass, toasting her. "Miss Morgan, you are definitely a valued employee."

The audience applauded.

Sabine's face whitened. She turned when Mr. Chistle touched her arm.

"Is this true?" he asked low.

She swallowed the lump forming in her throat. Shaking her head, she felt the need to shout out the truth. What the hell was Rhimes talking about? She hadn't told him any such thing.

Mr. Rhimes waited for the applause to die down. "Enjoy the rest of the evening and to all those who depart tomorrow morning, we wish you a safe journey and homecoming." He left the podium and disappeared through a door with the strange fellow following.

"Come with me," Mr. Chistle said, clutching her arm.

She had no choice but to follow him. He led her to a room just off the ballroom. Two other members of the board were inside. They stood up when she and Mr. Chistle entered.

"Is what Mr. Rhimes said, true?" he asked as soon as the door closed.

"Well, yes, except for the part about me giving Jonin up. It was my plot, not his. He should not be held responsible."

Mr. Chistle frowned. "We thought as much. Well men, we must consider this and figure out what to do."

"I don't understand. Didn't you hear me? Jonin was my pawn in this. He's only doing this for me. It was my idea to kill Mr. Rhimes."

We need to help Jonin.” Sabine sat in the nearest chair, next to an elderly board member, Mr. Ando.

“Miss Morgan, we’ve been watching you for months. We know what you were up to and about Jonin Lee’s involvement.” Mr. Ando grinned, nodding at the other members.

“Please, you must release Jonin. He has an important meeting tonight. He can’t miss his meeting. Oh, this is all my fault. Are you going to call the enforcement and have me placed in custody?” Sabine didn’t show any sign that this mattered, but she wanted them to know her guilt. The greater good was lost, Jonin was incarcerated, and Earth’s people would continue to be doomed under repression. In then dawned on her that the members of SOB would be disappointed when Jonin didn’t show up. She wanted to cry at the thought of losing so much—most of all, Jonin.

“We are the enforcement. Now listen, we have to act fast. You will need to carry out the mission.”

Sabine gasped at Mr. Ando’s statement. “What? You want me to kill Mr. Rhimes? But why? I don’t understand. This isn’t making any sense.”

Mr. Chistle patted her hand. “We were rooting for you, my girl. We agree that Mr. Rhimes must be extinguished. We’re tired of his dictatorship. The board wants to return the rule to the people—to the way it used to be. Since you were handling it so marvelously, we decided to see what would happen. Here,” he said as he slipped his hand inside his coat. He retrieved a small handgun and pushed it across the table. “You will carry out your mission.”

“I don’t know if I can trust you. And what about Jonin, I need to—”

“You can trust us, Miss Morgan. Don’t worry about Mr. Lee. We’ll go release him. In the meantime, you have a duty to perform. Tomorrow morning, you two will be aboard the shuttle and we’ll clean up the mess Mr. Rhimes left behind.”

Mr. Ando nodded at Mr. Chistle’s statement.

Sabine looked each one of them in the eye, and saw sincerity. She agreed by reaching for the gun.

She didn’t look back at the members as she left. She just wanted to get it over with. The gun felt so heavy and cold in her hands. Would she have the courage to do it? She smiled at the thought of Jonin telling her about the sign of the tiger.

This afternoon, they’d cuddled in bed, and he told her that she’d

been born under the Chinese zodiac sign of the tiger. He explained the persona of a typical tiger, saying she was his tigress. He said a tiger didn't let anything stand in her way. She wasn't about to let anything stop her now. With a determined step, shoulders back, and her eyes straight ahead, she walked toward Mr. Rhimes's suite.

Her feet clicked the marble flooring, albeit softly. She tried to lighten her steps, so he wouldn't hear her approach. Her urgency overcame her with the need to run. Her body pressed the wall when she reached the door.

She heard Mr. Rhimes talking on the communicator inside his suite. Standing outside the door, she listened.

"Yes, I'll be cautious." He paused. "You don't know how he escaped? Find him. Don't let him live. Yes, do whatever it takes. She should still be at the party. Yes, find her too. Thanks for letting me know." It grew silent.

She entered quietly, holding the gun behind her back.

"Ah, Miss Morgan, right on time." He waved her inside.

"Mr. Rhimes."

"So, you've come, have you? Tell me, did you and Mr. Lee enjoy screwing me behind my back?" He stood up, leaning on his large mahogany desk. "Nothing to say? I'm sure you're aware that he's escaped. Of course, you are. Why have you come here? I was more than willing to let you go, not involve you in the retribution. As long as that religious freak was executed, it didn't matter that you lied to me. You'll serve your purpose one way or another."

"Shut up, Mr. Rhimes. Just shut up, you bastard."

"Such sweet words from Santex's own bitch. You were perfect, you know. So beautiful...a smart woman, so beneficial to the corporation. It didn't matter that you were fucking that pig. I figured I'd get my turn eventually."

His sinister smile unnerved her, and his words bit. It only increased her agitation. She raised the gun, aiming it at his head.

Laughing, he held up his hands. "What are you going to do, shoot me? Really, Miss Morgan, you almost look convincing."

She applied pressure to the trigger, her hand began shaking, so she used her other hand to steady it. As the trigger clicked, a loud explosion jerked her hand.

Mr. Rhimes gasped. The bullet struck him between the eyes. Sabine watched in horror, at the stream of blood running down his face. He slumped forward, over his desk. Blood pooled on his blotter,

soaking the entire span.

Sabine hesitantly walked to him, her heart thumping madly. She killed him. Before she turned to leave, she set the gun next to his head. As she walked through the door, she didn't look back at him. She ran down the hall. Once inside the boardroom, she closed the door and leaned against it. Her breathing labored, and she scrunched her eyes closed, not wanting to replay that scene in her mind. She'd just killed a man. Why didn't she feel anything...remorse even? She felt nothing.

"Miss Morgan. Have you done it then? Is he dead?"

She could hear Mr. Chistle's voice. Slowly, she opened her eyes and found the board members standing around Jonin. He looked concerned, tired, yet sexy, handsome, and a sight for sore eyes. Without a word to them, he walked toward her. When he reached her, he crushed her against him, caressing her hair, comforting her. Desperately, she hugged him, needing that reassurance.

"I thought you turned me in," he said in a quiet voice.

Sabine shook her head. "Never. I never would have done that. Rhimes lied to you. You know I love you Jonin. I wouldn't do that."

His voice grew thick. "At first I wasn't sure, but then Mr. Chistle came..."

"Oh, Jonin, I wanted to go and warn you, but it was too late."

Jonin kissed her softly. "Are you alright?"

"He's dead. Mr. Rhimes is dead. I killed him."

"I know, love, I heard the shot."

"I killed him." She couldn't get over it.

"Yeah, you did. You're shaking. Are you alright?" He kept her pressed against him, offering a sense of protection.

"I guess so. Why don't I feel something?"

"Maybe you're in shock."

Sabine kissed him, taking the time to revel in the wonder of it, and when he set her back on the floor, she felt off balance. Her eyes shimmered with tears, mostly because Jonin was safe.

"You did the right thing, Sabine."

"I was scared," she said low so the others wouldn't hear.

"I would have been, too. You saved the world for the greater good." He smiled lightly, showing his pride.

Mr. Chistle stepped forward. "Indeed, she has saved us all for the greater good. Mr. Lee, you need to go. Don't you have a pressing appointment?"

Jaded Beasts 6, Dog-Pig

Jonin glanced at the timemode, noting it neared eight-thirty. He had half an hour before the SOB meeting officially began.

“Sabine, will you be alright? I must go, but if—”

“Yes, I’ll be—”

Mr. Chistle cut her off, “She’ll be well taken care of. Don’t worry.” He smiled reassuringly.

Jonin frowned at him. “She’ll be on the transport in the morning as we agreed? I have your word, no matter what happens...”

“Yes, Mr. Lee. Go.”

He turned toward her, and Sabine wasn’t sure what was going on. She didn’t want him to leave, but she knew it would be selfish to ask him to stay.

“Jonin, be safe. I’ll see you tomorrow morning. Right? You’ll be there?”

He nodded. “I will.”

“I’ll have someone pack your belongings.” She leaned to kiss his cheek. “Goodbye.”

He shook his head. “Not a goodbye, a ‘see you later’.”

“Yes, a ‘see you later’.” She watched him leave then turned toward Mr. Chistle.

“Now, what?”

“We need to get you out of here.”

“Yes, alright, Mr. Chistle. Where are you taking me?”

“Somewhere, where no one will find you.”

Chapter Seven

Jonin reached his AT parked in the underground area. He programmed his destination into the AD then reached for his bag. He'd have to change on the way to SOB's cave. As the AT drove along, he readied for the final ritual. Tonight, he and his members would perform the magical rite of the boar. Enlightenment was close. He could feel it and almost taste it.

When he reached the cave, he had changed into his red-silk robe and had pulled his hair back. Some members had already arrived. He went inside and saw that the table being prepared for the feast. As part of the rite, they would consume a light meal and socialize before the ceremony would be performed. The dining beforehand was merely a social thing, a way to relax and let off steam before one had to concentrate on giving themselves mentally to the ritual. Jonin wanted everything to be perfect.

More members arrived, some placing dishes of lamb and beef on the table. As was customary, any dish with bones was placed on the left side of the table. Diners began taking their seats, with the most senior members taking their place of honor. The conversation was light and cheerful. But as the eating wound down, their voices became more animated.

Jonin took his sword in hand, indicating the end of the feast. He swept it over the members, chanting a prayer of thanks, and blessing them with strength. After a few minutes, he set the sword aside and took the pipe from the table. He took a toke of it then passed it to the next member. While they began the ancient custom of smoking the pipe, he wrote their intent on a scroll and affixed it with the seal. He passed the scroll to the members for their approval, and once they each read it and agreed it would be passed to the next person, until each and every one of them had a chance to approve it.

Next came the streamers and cymbals. He raised his arm, indicating the next phase of the rite. A female member stepped

forward and accepted the cymbals from him. Several women joined in, each taking a set, and began making a beautiful melodic sound. The men began reaching for the bells that sat in the center of the tables. Some took the pieces of jade, which made a different sound when struck. All the instruments were designed to call forth the immortals. The members began dancing around, almost in a trance. When the group awakened themselves to the spiritual essence, he could speak the words to change them to boars.

He felt the seriousness of the situation weighing on him. Once those words were spoken, who knew what would happen? He'd only read the origin, and knew they would receive enlightenment, but he didn't know for how long. Would he return to his normal state before morning? He stood the possibility of losing Sabine forever. The words would be spoken no matter how selfish he wanted to be. Time neared. The members danced around in a frenzied meeting of the souls. Most wore a blank expression, as if their mortality had already been taken over by the immortals. Disembodied, the member's spirits released their physical forms. Now was the time to evoke the divination.

Jonin clutched the jade colored streamer, its broad width making it hard to control. He used it to encircle himself while he cast his lot to the spirits. His priestly duty to call the celestial masters into their presence was working. Escorts of the souls entered the cave by way of wind and rain, which he could hear outside. Soon, they wouldn't be able to hear noise from the outside world.

In ancient tongue, he spoke using a loud enough voice so all the members could hear him. "Great heavenly Lord of Supreme Oneness, roar in your heavens and send the immortals to guide us. We give up our bodies this night, all for the sake of the boar. Show us enlightenment, for we give ourselves to you."

He twirled the streamer around him a few times, and then let it float to the dirt floor. A deep sense of awareness came to him, as if he could see inside himself. Along with the other members, he fell to the ground in an unmovable state. All around him, darkness closed in. In a hazy fog, he saw a figure waving before him—in the form of a beast with tusks. Looking into the eyes of the animal, he read deep sadness in them. Was he looking into his own eyes? Was it possible that he became a boar?

The animal grunted, rearing its tusks. Sounds made his dizzying state surreal. Colors muted around him, and then faded. Jonin gave himself over to it, knowing he'd soon receive the ultimate blessing.

Jaded Beasts 6, Dog-Pig

* * * *

Sabine didn't want to hide out at Mr. Chistle's plex until morning, even if he was concerned for her safety. He insisted she stay with him until the hype of Mr. Rhimes's death died down. Inside the small spare room, she paced, knowing Jonin needed her.

Mr. Chistle took a long time to settle down for the night. She heard him talking on the communicator, arranging for someone to pack her and Jonin's things. He contacted other board members around the globe to let them know about the unfortunate death of Mr. Rhimes. He'd made up a ridiculous story, saying Mr. Rhimes had committed suicide, and before he pulled the trigger, he tried to accuse a good standing employee of attempted murder.

A good twenty minutes passed since she'd heard his voice. She assumed he'd finally gone off to bed. It neared midnight, dark enough for her to sneak out. She wanted to make sure Jonin was all right. Since he'd left her, she got a sinking feeling that something had gone terribly wrong.

To assure herself, she decided to go to the cave and see that he was all right. She promised herself that she wouldn't disturb him, but she wanted to make sure he was in one piece.

Sabine went to the window and unlatched the lock. It was one of those levered windows that opened at the bottom. Damn, Mr. Chistle for not upgraded his plex. She judged the amount of space and figured she could squeeze through. Feet first, she jimmied her way, but got stuck when her ass got in the way. Repositioning herself, she managed to get past. She landed on her feet and then rounded the plex. Her AT was back at the space center, so she'd have to borrow Mr. Chistle's. Now she had to go back inside to snatch the control.

She jumped a good foot when an alarm went off, as she tried to reenter the plex. Mr. Chistle came running, dressed in his robe.

"Oh, it's only you, Miss Morgan," he huffed. "I thought we had an intruder."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Chistle, I didn't mean to frighten you. But I need to run out. I came back inside to borrow your AT." She looked expectantly at him.

"No harm. Why didn't you just ask me?"

"I didn't think you would let me leave."

"Why wouldn't I? Everything is under control now. I'm guessing you're going to Mr. Lee." He placed his hands in his pockets, smiling smugly.

Jaded Beasts 6, Dog-Pig

Sabine lowered her gaze. She felt kind of guilty for causing him concern. “Yes, I have a bad feeling about him. I need to make sure he’s alright.”

“Do you love Mr. Lee, Miss Morgan?”

“Well, yes, I do. I know we’ve only recently become acquainted, but I do love him. I’m worried. I want to make sure he’s alright.”

He held out his hand. “Here.”

She took the control from him. “Thank you, Mr. Chistle. I won’t be long.” Hurrying, she turned around and left the plex, trying to dodge the sudden downpour. Instead of programming the AT to take her to the cave, she drove herself. Impatiently, she sped down the roadways, and could hardly see through the windshield of the luxury AT. The cave was just ahead and even though the rain obscured it, she knew it was there.

As she came to a stop, she bumped another AT that was parked outside. Without thought of the wind and rain, she got out and ran inside the dark entrance. She was soaked through before she reached the opening. In the night, with all the rain coming down, it appeared like an open mouth waiting for food, with sharp rocks jutting downward, resembling a tiger’s sharp teeth.

She shook off her bizarre thought and went through it. Deeper inside, all she could hear was silence. There were no candles lit, but she noticed the small torches on the walls. She took one and continued. When she reached the large chamber where Jonin performed the rituals, she almost tripped over something. She positioned the torch to see what it was. A body. Moving the torch around, she saw more bodies, then Jonin’s. She cried out at the sight of them lying there lifelessly. Their eyes were closed, and their faces all serene.

She knelt beside Jonin, touching his face, feeling a deep sadness that lodged a knot in her throat. He felt cold to the touch, his skin like ice.

“They’re all...dead,” she whispered.

Chapter Eight

Sabine looked out onto the tarmac where the shuttle was being prepared for boarding. The weather was fair enough for a launch and all systems were a go. Six families, several scientists, and a good amount of single men and women waited for the announcement to board. There was an electrified excitement in the group. She wished that she shared their enthusiasm.

There was really no point in going to the station on the moon now, but Mr. Chistle insisted she go. He told her she needed a fresh start, especially after finding out what had happened to all the SOB members. At this moment, Mr. Chistle was probably on his way to the cave to take care of matters.

Losing Jonin put an end to any thought of happiness. She swore not to cry, and had done enough crying during the night to last a lifetime. Her red-rimmed eyes grew moist. Sabine took a calming breath. She was a tigress—at least, that’s what Jonin called her. He wouldn’t expect her tears.

“Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please, we will begin boarding the shuttle now. Please make your way to the tunnel doors,” the woman’s animated voice came over the speaker system.

Sabine picked up her duffle bag, and followed the mass of people. The excited group rushed past her and she was left walking alone. She should be proud that she’d accomplished what her grandmother charged her with. The people of earth would live better lives, and they’d no longer be under Mr. Rhimes’s thumb of oppression.

Great changes would begin, but she, along with the other people going to the moon, wouldn’t see it happening. They would get news broadcasts and reports, yet it wasn’t going to be the same as being part of it.

A commotion behind her caused her to move out of the way. Several guards ran past her. Shouts from men rang out, apparently

trying to stop someone from entering the security zone.

Sabine reached the end of the line, and stood behind a group of men—obviously scientists. They conversed about who knew what, using phrases she was unfamiliar with. Boarding would take several minutes, and her thoughts turned to Mr. Chistle. Their goodbye had been endearing. She almost felt like she was saying goodbye to her father. He reassured her many times that everything she'd risked her life for would come to fruition. Not everything—not her happiness, and certainly not her life with Jonin.

Only after Mr. Chistle listed all the meetings he'd scheduled, and his promise to see to the SOB members, had she believed him. He agreed to contact her often with reports of their progress. He told her to protect their interest on the moon, and that he was counting on her. Mr. Chistle made it difficult for her to say no.

Now she found herself standing in line to board a shuttle to the moon. Sabine just wanted to go to her plex, close all the shields, and hide from existence for weeks, maybe months—however long it took to get over Jonin. Would she ever get over him?

“Sabine.”

She thought she heard her name being called. Was that Jonin's voice? She turned, narrowing her eyes, and disbelieved what she saw. Jonin stood at the entrance of the security zone. He looked disheveled, yet the same as when she'd last seen him.

Was she losing her mind? Had she conjured his image in her mind? She turned back to the boarding line.

“Sabine, wait.”

She craned her neck and saw him running toward her. Her fingertips released the handle of the duffle; it fell to the floor. She yelled out, ran toward him, practically leaping into his out-stretched arms.

“Jonin, Jonin. I can't believe it's you.” Sabine pressed her hands on his face, holding him still, to look into his eyes.

“Sabine, love.” He held her around her waist, rocking her as if he were a child holding a doll.

She breathed deeply, smelling his scent, reveling in his holding her. He wasn't dead. She ran her hands over his warm face.

“How?”

He released his hold, but moved his hands to her face. She leaned into the tender caress of his touch.

“How, what?” he asked.

“You...they...I saw you. You and the SOB members were... You were all dead. I came because...I knew you needed me.”

Jonin’s expression grew serious. “We did it, Sabine. We received enlightenment. What you saw was SOB members being held by the Supreme Being. We weren’t dead; love, only in a deep consciousness.”

“But I felt you. You were cold.”

He smiled weakly. “I was inside a cave. It was damned cold in there. I’m not dead, Sabine. Feel me.”

She touched his forearms then ran her hands up to his shoulders. The warmth of his body and strength of his form felt real enough. He was alive and well. Sabine cried out joyfully, as a stab of emotion came to her.

Jonin took her in his arms again.

“Don’t cry, love. We were like that for hours. Then we awoke a short time ago. I thought I missed the shuttle, and would never see you again. I drove like a mad-man trying to get here on time.”

“You received enlightenment?” She giggled, feeling giddy.

“The experience was definitely eye-opening.” He brushed his lips across hers, and rubbed a lock of hair between his fingers. “Let’s just say that I know exactly where I belong.”

She wasn’t happy with his somber expression. “And where is that?”

An alert tone came over the PA system. “Your attention, please... This is the last call for all shuttle passengers. The doors will be sealed in three minutes. Please proceed to the boarding area immediately.”

Jonin lifted her chin. “With you, in space, on the moon. Come on, before we miss the launch.” He took her hand and they ran for the ramp.

Epilogue

Along with the swoosh of the door opening, Jonin heard the sound of the SOB members leaving. He'd taken on the challenge of bringing his spirituality to the station. Many had taken to it, and conformed to the ancient ways. He put away his religious objects and had just reached for his sword when he heard laughter coming through the doorway.

He smiled, knowing who it was. "Come in."

Sabine peeked inside. "Are you sure you're finished? We didn't want to disturb you. Has everyone left?"

He smiled widely. "Yes, the elders just left. You're not disturbing me."

She stepped inside, holding the light of his life. Sally's smile always gave him a sense of pride and love.

"Can we go to the conservatory and look at the stars tonight, father?" His daughter's bright eyes pleaded. "Mama said there will be an eclipse tonight and it will be dark."

He placed his hand on her sweet head, caressing the auburn curls, nodding. "Of course, after dinner we'll go."

His four-year-old daughter looked up at him as though he'd given her the universe. "I'm going to tell Becca." She ran off through the door to find her friend.

"Why are you so quiet, Sabine?"

She leaned against a chair, and hunched her shoulder. "I can't believe you turned them down."

Jonin approached her, and took her hand. He led her to a bench, and sat, pulling her onto his lap, trapping her with his arm. "I'm very happy here."

"In the darkness of space?"

"You're the only light I need."

She grinned. "You always say the right thing. You could preside over a larger congregation on Earth."

Jaded Beasts 6, Dog-Pig

Jonin chuckled. “No matter where I am, the Secret Order of the Boar will always be with me. It doesn’t matter whether here or there.”

He leaned to kiss her, while he fondled her breast. Instantaneous heat came to him. His wife knew how to make him want her. All she had to do was give him that sexy look, the one with hidden suggestions. Right now her eyes implored him, and he wouldn’t disappoint.

Using his hand, he lowered her top until it bared her exquisite breasts. His mouth found its way to the puckered nipple. He adored sucking her tits. When he felt her palming his cock, he drew a harsh breath. His tigress was up to her old tricks. She giggled as his hand glided over her stomach to the warmth and wetness below.

“Are positive you want to do this?”

Jonin lifted his head, grinning at the question. “Yes, I’ve been thinking about this all day. I want to make love to you right here, right now. Right there,” he said pointing to the altar. “I want you hot and squirming.”

She laughed. “I don’t mean this. Are you certain you want to stay here on the moon? We can return to Earth.”

“I’ll stay here, or anywhere you are.”

“Then love me.”

“I will,” he said, flicking his tongue over the pearled nipple. “Forever.”

The End

Prophecy of the Boar
by
Mila Ramos

As the last of her kind, Ailsa must fulfill a sacred prophecy with the one man she believes betrayed her.

<http://www.milaramoswrites.com>
Blog: <http://jademystique.blogspot.com>

Prophecy of the Boar
by
Mila Ramos

Prologue

The distant past

Home is where the heart, which is what mattered – a house filled with five generations of memories and love. Each family had their own touch, their own special sense of comfort and warmth. Ailsa’s wasn’t any different. The tension of the day and the rigors of psychic training melted the minute the three-story building housing her childhood dreams came into view.

The pressure of being the best and trying to prove herself as a woman working for the Elusion government fled when the promise of relaxation came into sight. She knew even before she stepped through the front door, the smells of her mother’s cooking would assail the senses and tease every nerve in her stomach.

With her mom’s hearty meal in her stomach and her siblings’ screams of glee echoing in her ears, she could dismiss several woes that linger in her mind. Banished into the air were thoughts of maneuvers and tactics she needed to memorize. Expelled were the rigors of endurance, so she could apply for the elite squad, Shadow Breakers. Her family felt excited at the prospect, that another generation to the long line in the Elusion military.

Her father, a Shadow Breaker himself, brought home a new story of the dangers, the excitement and dispelled illusions of the privileged group. His years in the service weren’t years she could easily dismiss

as risk-free; he would walk through the front door with a multitude of scars and bruises her mother tended to with care. Years later, as he decided whether to leave and live a calm civilian life, his daughter would enter the Elusion government. She couldn't wait to tell him all the stories of her own training within the academy.

For now, those thoughts left her mind as she clearly saw him, in her mind's eye tinkering around the house as his gruff and stern voice reminded her younger brother Henry, and sister Isabella, that they once again left a mess in the living room.

Stepping out of the mobile transport that brought her home, an eerie ill-omened wave burst through her system. Home was the one place she never had to worry about barriers and shields, where doubts were eased and fears conquered. She never had to worry about psychic disturbances pushing into her thoughts or someone trying to probe her brain for answers. But these new sensations, the intensity towards their target, her home, were odd, strange and all kinds of bizarre.

The vibrations curled deep within her stomach, fluttering spikes of jolted energy through her entire body. Shivers changing in proportion and strength started in her stomach. The tremors changed from nervousness to frightening and sinister as it climbed her spine. Impacted by the state of silence and order that touched her ears, the wrongness before indicated the truth; her family had never been known not to be boisterous or energetic.

The house doors were continually opening and closing as her mother slapped her father's hand out of tasting the food, never greeted her. The habitual greeting when she would arrive did not occur. Her ears fell upon a strange silence as she opened the door to an empty house whose normal state was lively. Closing the door with care, the emptiness of the house void of her siblings' laughter welcomed her. Toys, on average strewn all over the living room, were cleaned and arranged in a matter not customary.

Ailsa walked down the halls peering into each bedroom with caution. Henry and Isabella may have left with her father to go out on an errand, but where was her mother? Her father, known to take the twins to the grocery store or some other errand he had, so they wouldn't be cooped up inside the house, were absent. The twins were interesting characters amongst themselves.

When not arguing with each other, they were more often than not running through the house with clever plans of mischief and

destruction to whatever lay in their path. These well-crafted plans brought forth by the best mastermind who ever existed, herself, were to teach her siblings the value of plan and action. Still, the unnatural sense of amiss settling in her stomach increased.

The search throughout her home echoed distant noises off the vacant and bare quarters. Gone the sounds of happiness, but it did amplify an abnormal resonance that caught her attention. Did that sound like a whimper? Faint and indistinct, walking towards the source of the sound, nothing came to mind as to what the unintelligible noise could possibly be. She couldn't pinpoint the location and headed into the kitchen still at unease. Her mother could be in the lower part of the house in the dark garden. The stench of burnt food that had boiled over tinged the air as pots and pans littered the tabletops.

Moving the pots to a safer area, the foreboding sensation traveled from her stomach and now spread to the middle of her back as it made its way through her body. What in the world happened to her family? The cold sweat covered her brow and made its way down her back as she reviewed over possible scenarios. Where were they? Where was her family?

Before she called the local Search and Assist, the noise she'd heard earlier broadcasted itself more clearly. Genuine screams filtered from the backyard. A distant voice boomed orders to proceed inside the house. A second sweep of the house to locate any stragglers triggered her battle training. Crouched down low on the ground, Ailsa crawled with great care, controlling her movements to minimize the amount of noise. She didn't want to draw attention.

Ailsa snaked with ease on the flooring, moving towards the window in the living room. The voices sounded clear, the tones of her mother and father. They loomed close as she used her senses to determine how many individuals were in presence; the number of unrecognizable accents moving in and out of her range of hearing. Strategic movement and garrison positioning muffled the intonations of her parents pleading for help. She inched closer. If she made any type of sound, detection would be easy.

Her senses alerted, she lifted her body and peered outside the window. Huddled close in a tight embrace, her parents muttered soft words to each other. Words she knew were meant to soothe and calm in the sea of tension. She, though, was outside of that needed circle of tranquility and peace. The pressure in her mind thumped in

accordance to her accelerated heartbeat, her nerves trembled and jumped as she continued assessing the area even though her first instinct to run flooded every fiber in her mind.

But it was the whimpers of her siblings, on their knees, which ripped and shredded her sanity. They were babies, children who deserved better treatment. They didn't deserve to be part of this type of horror. Her mother, serene and calm, held her composure as she whispered into Henry and Isabella's ears.

Soldierly men, wearing colors she hadn't seen in her short time at the academy, surrounded her family. Shades and hues ranging from near black to light purple mixed company. It was commonly known that Elusion soldiers wore a brand of violet on their person. Whether it was an arm band indicating the branch of service or insignias solely stating their rank, Elusion military now stood in her backyard. These men looked different though, they were not recognizable. They didn't seem like armed forces through the expression of themselves, and carried out their business...

Ally, you will stay where you are and not make a sound.

Papa, please, I can't bear this!

No, Ally, listen to me and stay there.

She didn't want to accept her father's commands, but complied. The masked man, whose identity concealed the truth, wanted something from her father. He was a true enemy.

"He's lying. I know they have one more child, and she is almost full-grown. Look throughout the house and find her," another voice interjected.

"You know why we are here Captain."

Though this man wasn't masked or hidden behind concealment, by height alone he overpowered the other men. Her family became his agenda, this much she understood. Repugnance etched the features of his face, and highlighted the scar across his chin. Hatred burned in his eyes as he looked at her siblings.

Why does that man hate us Papa? She stared at the tall man.

Quiet, Ally, or they'll know you're here, her father commanded.

He did not wear a military uniform as the other soldiers did. His attire resembled that of a bounty hunter, his tight-fitting suit allowed mobility and flexibility with well-armed weapons aligned along his right and left legs. He stood at ease in a black skin suit cut off at the arms, his strength evident against a muscular and powerfully built body. No badges or symbols of allegiance on any part of his suit

indicated loyalty to a specific race. A holographic emblem constantly changing on his chest and the tattooed arm were the only two distinctions he presented. His right arm displayed a Phoenix encased in fire. It looked active as it changed through stages, the bird never stayed in one place. The Phoenix familiar, though the reason why eluded her.

Papa, I know that man with the tattoo.

Things are not what they seem Ally, her father replied.

She watched from her crouched position as the Phoenix-tattooed man stepped forward and said something to her father. Her mother shielded her siblings' eyes and whispered into their ears. She noticed her siblings' slump in their mother's arms – nobody else seemed to notice. What happened to Henry and Isabella?

What's wrong with Henry and Isabella?

Ailsa, remember what I'm going to tell you from this point on.

Papa, I don't understand.

Find your Uncle Nick, and tell him to give you our jade necklaces.

What does that mean?

Just tell your Uncle that Ally.

I'll contact him.

No! Her father stated with firmness. *They will pick up your reading. Do not use so much of your power.*

Time slipped by faster after her mother's conversation with Henry and Isabella. The knot tightened in her stomach and her senses flared again. She needed a way to help her family. They were trapped on all corners. It would take a huge distraction for them to slip through and run. Dead-ends met her ideas as she tried to think of a possible way. She needed to find an answer fast before the soldiers found out she was inside the house.

She waited for a sign, for a number of ideas to come to mind, but as she tried to find alternative methods, the tattooed man turned in her direction. Those eyes, she knew those eyes.

Papa? Papa...it can't be.

She had stared into those eyes once with love-sick infatuation. Dancing nerves with butterfly flutters undid her calm each time the crystal blue gaze turned in her direction at the academy. She knew those hypnotizing eyes that changed shades depending on the intensity of his emotion. She had spent two years with this man. Two years having chats and getting to know each other. This man became

her close friend. She thought they shared a special kinship and bond. Each day he helped her to understand the various lessons bombarding her mind. He helped her control her gifts and use them in the service of her government. A man she would give body and soul to if she had a chance. Duncan Walsh. Duncan Rylos Walsh.

Why Papa? Why would Duncan do this?

She fought the strong sense of denial.

Duncan was three years older but she didn't care. She felt the pull around him in her body and soul. As a Lieutenant in the military, he helped train the new novices at the academy. With his skills in hand-to-hand combat and tactical maneuvers, his delegated authority focused on the Cyrenius Core in the Infinitium. A multi-galaxy coalition working with races and governments through interstellar communication and cooperation, the Infinitium proliferated throughout the planets of Elusion, Eirenah and Atriopius and Cyrenius Core. Throughout the galaxies, for military and interstellar fighting, the Cyrenius Core patented the phrase 'the best of the best'.

Glass shattered, snapping Ailsa from her thoughts, back to the horror and reality she momentarily escaped.

We trusted him Papa, we trusted Duncan. How could he do this?

Ally, calm down.

No Papa, he betrayed us!

Hush Ally, you're giving off too much power.

She ducked down out of site should someone noticed, then waited for a few moments just in case a search started.

The man resembling Duncan stared her father down. "Captain this is the last time I will ask you, where is your other child?"

Her father never answered. She couldn't bear the torture of having to hide while her family remained as hostages in front of these armed men. Her father knew she was close, yet he acted as if the men lost their minds each time they asked about her as he pulled her mother and siblings closer. She had no idea what was wrong with Henry and Isabella, they didn't respond to any noise. They only lay slumped in their mother's arms as if...as if...they'd died. With no ideas, no way to stop any whim the military men came up with to inflict pain on her family, she hid and fought the rage as the man she held far too deep in her heart betrayed her trust.

Why didn't they fight, dammit? Fight! There had to be a way out for them, figure out a way to save them. Why did they not struggle? Why did they not see the only option left was death?

Jaded Beasts 6, Dog-Pig

Close your eyes Ally. Close your eyes now, baby.

Stopping in the middle of her thoughts, calm poured through her body. Soft warmth embraced her heart and her mind. An intense peace she had never experienced before flooded every pore of her being. How strange to feel such a soothing and comforting emotion in the midst of danger and peril.

Papa, what's happening?

Close your eyes now, baby.

She didn't second-guess or question the words her father said. The soothing feeling increased as she closed her eyes. Horror mixed with guilt and great sadness swamped her heart at the same time as the reassuring blanket in her mind doubled its effect

We love you, Ally.

She opened her eyes too late; multitude shots of light pierced the sky.

Chapter One

Eighteen years later...

Ailsa Sullivan sat up straight in her bed, gripping her sheets for some type of hold on reality. She searched her dark room disoriented from the nightmare, her eyes tried to find something, anything, to focus on, to bring the present quicker to the forefront. The walls expanded and contracted, objects in the room levitated and spun in a whirlpool. Her face wet, reliving the nightmare added to the increased heartbeat pounding in her chest. Over the past years, she came to accept the dreams would never go away. Who was she kidding? This wasn't a dream, and it became the worst type of nightmare a rational person could endure. Over the years, some of the details faded, but the terror felt as fresh as the first day.

She dangled her legs over the side of the bed taking a deep breath to verify the dream ended. The nightmare had changed again; it allowed her to get an extra hour of sleep. She always referred to the nightmare as an 'it', a living breathing being. That is what it felt like to her, this being, this thing. The nightmare had a mind and will of its own equipped with its own sadistic agenda.

Trying to get her thoughts in order, the bedroom clock chimed five a.m. indicating the start of a new day. It didn't matter whether she started now or four hours from now, the day would be brutal at its best. Standing to dress and mentally prepare for the rigors ahead, her personal android Maru entered starting the daily tasks with her usual alert and chirpy attitude.

"Good morning, Mistress Ailsa. I see from your vital scan that it was once again a restless night."

Rubbing the ache out of her neck Ailsa tried to ignore the chattering droid next to her. "Good morning, Maru, and yes it was."

"Well goodness, Mistress, you must see the ship doctor to give you a sedative. It is very imperative that you are rested and alert for your upcoming meeting today."

Maru continued talking about the pros and cons of sleep while Ailsa ducked out into the bathroom to shower and get ready. When

she returned, Maru finished her discussion on sleep and continued to a dissection of her personal life. Letting out a sigh, Ailsa pulled back her hair and casually walked into the kitchen, rolling her eyes at every single comment coming out of the android. There is nothing like getting your personal life scrutinized by a droid over a hot cup of coffee to start your day off on the wrong foot.

“Mistress, there has been talk among the other droids that you should take the assignment on Atriopius. Of course you have to train at Theocradia, but the Major says you need to learn the skills you didn’t receive at the academy.”

Ailsa stopped from drinking her coffee and quietly put down the cup. “What assignment?”

Maru continued without a pause, “You have training on Theocradia with the Infinitium in three days. Your ship is set to leave in less than three hours.”

“I have what?”

Ailsa stood at once and headed over to her panel, summoning the Elusion government. She would find the underlying cause of this confusion and the only person who would tell her the truth was Nicholas Hawke, a long trusted family friend and Centurion.

Since she turned fifteen, Nicholas became her legal guardian. When she turned eighteen, she became a member of the Elusion government of her own volition. After her enlistment she underwent five years of basic training. It entailed classes in combat, Elusion history and biogenetics where she graduated top of her group. By recommendation she ended up as one of the elite Shadow Breakers. Ten years later, she held the rank of Second Lieutenant and was known through the Elusion government as one of the top five Shadow Breakers.

When entering Shadow Breakers, the Commanding Officer Major Nicholas Hawke kept her legal adoption silent. After the death of her family she took as many precautions towards her life as necessary. Though Ailsa owed Nicholas her life in many ways, he was the only one who knew the truth about her enlistment. She knew her adoption and enlistment was his way to protect her life. When she turned twenty-one years old, she learned the truth behind the nightmares and Nicholas’ extreme vigilance over her protection.

Hunted for being a rare Elusion, known as the Boar, silence about her bloodline was imperative. For those special gifts and magic, bounty hunters often sought the mystical bloodline in order to sell the

genes on the black market. Not only was time manipulation a gift, but the Boars held many more fascinating and astounding psychic abilities. One of the manifestations was through their crimson tears. At the peak of agitation, the falling of crimson tears sent a Boar to a different mental state of heightened energy and ability. Their only distinguishing mark, a tattoo distinctly located on the wrist, written in the ancient Boar language, Benabi. Ever since she was a small child, her family taught her to hide the Boar mark.

This same mark led to the terror that plagued her nightly. Four weeks before her sixteenth birthday, as she returned home to screaming in the distance. As she silently crept through her home, she came upon her family held at gunpoint, tormented, and then ruthlessly massacred. Escaping before the soldiers' flooded the house in search for her, she ran until her body gave out. She sent psychic calls to Nicholas who, after ensuring her safety, returned to her home with his military unit and indeed confirmed her family's deaths. Nicholas had returned with the necklace in question, the one her father had spoken of, and he placed into her hands. It was half of a jade Boar necklace, a long foretold wedding gift her parents had promised.

It was custom, as her mother once told her, for Boar life mates to share the Boar jade symbol for marriage. The symbol would rest upon their hearts; one half on the male, one half on the female. It was only when they married and merged their lives would the jade marking appear. The sign placed over their hearts represented two souls inhabiting one body. Only through death, would a necklace appear broken in half. Its significance of two souls apart from each other meant the life mates were not bonded. Her parents, without her knowledge, had already given the male side of the necklace to the man she would marry; her betrothed, Duncan Walsh. She knew it was only when the two pieces were placed together the first of many links for the life mates sealed their future.

Her most detail and vivid memory was the murderer and a symbol on the side of one arm. His similar features and build she knew all too well. Her family's murderer was without a doubt in her mind, Duncan Rylos Walsh. It took time for her to accept the loss of her family, her new burgeoning talents, as well as the knowledge of being the last of a rare race. But Nicholas helped her through each and every trial and she knew he was there for anything she needed.

That made hearing the news from Maru not only shocking but down right insulting. How was it that her android knew she was going

on a mission? Though at times mentally tasking, she did enjoy her job; she just hated some of the red tape behind it. Shadow Breakers existed for the Elusion government to deal with most of the terrorism problems.

A highly evolved class of humans, Elusion, through time developed unimaginable powers by using the full capacity of their minds. A highly intellectual and technologically advanced race they valued peace and harmony above politics as evident by their galaxy ranking as the planetary peacekeepers, legislatives, and scientists. Through time, the hostilities between the Elusions and the Amalgamate, a fighting warrior race, emerged bringing the planet Elusion to many wars. Though not blind to the realities of the galaxy, the Shadow Breakers specialized primarily in psychological warfare.

Elusions held the interstellar market in the rare and vibrant gem, the firestone. Used for energy, throughout multiple galaxies Elusions were the only race selling the gem for energy and various uses. For such purposes, thieves, mercenaries, and assassins held Elusions as hostages, using any method of mental warfare to destroy the mind of their hostage and acquire the valuable energy source.

Only those selected for Shadow Breakers endured the extreme rigors needed for the position. After passing the multitude tests and training, every member had psychic enhancement specifically designed for their area of expertise. Though Ailsa's psychic enhancements pushed her natural gifts to levels she still discovered, she had to keep her gifts and augmentations under strict control.

Standing in front of the panel and waiting for her communication to go through, Maru continued chattering about every interstellar topic ever devised. It was amazing how artificial intelligence could drive her nuts at times. Waiting for an answer, Ailsa's attention turned to her wrist at the unusual burning sensation her tattoo gave her. Strange that after so much time it would now cause problems. Lost in her thought, she didn't see the panel finally answer.

"Ailsa, is something wrong?"

Ailsa looked up and smiled at her guardian, whom she affectionately called her uncle. For so many years, the warm grey eyes and gentle smile comforted her during her roughest moments, even when her parents were around. As the only remaining family she had, she held on to that link dearly. Being so, he was young at fifty-seven years of age, and wondered why her uncle didn't settle down. Heavens knew his attraction to Major Elisabeth Parsons, head of

Shadow Breakers, showed but he remained duty bound. Elusion didn't worry about old age as it was common knowledge her people lived well past the age of one thousand years. Why her guardian held back from finding happiness, she didn't have a clue.

"Hi, Uncle Nick. I actually had to ask you about something that suddenly came up."

"That would be?"

"Oh, about a little assignment that somehow escaped not only my commanding officer's mind, but also my guardian's. Who by the way, before I start on a tangent, happens to be the boss of this sector's military unit?"

"Ailsa," Nick said with a slight irritation in his voice, "your sarcasm isn't appreciated at this moment."

Forgetting rational thought, Ailsa threw her hands up into the air infuriated. "Why didn't you tell me about the mission, Nick? I'm going to Theocradia to train for something I have no clue about!"

"Ailsa, you are going for training. You will be meeting with Duncan Rylos Walsh. He is the Captain of the Psi Squad in Cyrenius Core. You are to meet with him and undergo combat training for at least a year. Depending on the ranking he gives you, it may be shorter."

Unadulterated rage blinded her vision as the name she came to hate filtered through her ears. It took years, but she finally came to terms about the man who was at her house. The man who shattered her dreams, destroyed her life, and forced her to live the cyclic nightmare all in a single moment. She remembered Duncan Walsh, and all the years it took her to try to forget the name. The same man who'd been her closest friend in the academy...the man who'd betrayed her. Her assignment was to face her family's murderer and learn combat with him.

"Duncan Walsh. You are sending me to Duncan Walsh?" She seethed while gritting her teeth. "How could you?"

Nick let out a deep breath. "Ailsa, I know what you're thinking but Duncan is not the man who killed your parents."

Tightening her fist trying to keep her composure, tears glistened in her eyes. "How do you know? Were you there when you saw your mother, father, baby sister and brother gunned down? Were you there when they pleaded for their life? No. You weren't. I was there Nick."

"Ailsa, I'm not going to sit here and argue with you. You are ordered to go to Theocradia and meet with your training officer."

She stared at the screen willing it to explode. The room shook in stages, the walls first expanding and contracting, then a slight shake moving part of the foundation loose until the walls pulsed inward and outward repeatedly like sound waves. Rage became a living breathing thing, and it had a name. With a clenched jaw, she stared at the screen and saluted her commanding officer.

Immediately turning off the panel, Ailsa tried to calm her senses. She could feel her power boiling like an inferno. Her Shadow Breaker training filtered through the anger as she tried to regain her focus and subside her anger. She needed her mind clear. With her anger out of control, she became a danger to anyone around her. She focused on all the glass in her room, but knew it would not do. She replayed the assignment in her mind; the words mocked her.

Training with a murderer, her family's murderer. Forced to train with the psychopath that took pleasure in torturing her family. Duncan Walsh took her kin from her, the only security she'd ever had. Memories of laughter, the birth of her younger brother and sister, her parents' anniversary engulfed pain deep into her heart.

She hated every single feeling she ever had for the man. A naïve and love-sick fool back then and wasted her time thinking she was tied to him in an inexplicable way. The way the deep baritone in his voice pronounced her name as her nerves went wild in response. It frittered away time to think those small, stolen moments were real. She remembered how her body ached for him. It started in her breasts as they tightened to sharp points, the heat traveling down her skin and tightening the muscles of her stomach. The heightened sensations caused the heat to pool in the junction of her thighs to drive all logic out of her mind. The insignia of her race burned with the surge of her emotions. She couldn't understand why she felt such things around Duncan. Thinking back, she knew those thoughts were just hormones run amuck.

Damn him, she thought as she clenched her fists. The fury of emotions cracked one of the walls as all sound was driven from her mind and merged to a high-frequency shrill. Overwhelmed in throbbing pain, she dropped her head back and screamed her anguish. The room shook with intensity small cracks began to split other walls. She dropped to the floor holding her head as a high-pitch frequency emitted from her mind. Within moments glass shattered, metal snapped in half and objects levitated into the air.

The pain ebbed and flowed as she struggled to contain her emotions. Shifting between the past and the present, reality was indiscernible. Out of the haze of pain, a soft touch helped to solidify her current position. She opened her teary eyes and looked up at Maru's concerned gaze. The droid ignored the display of power breaking in the room and picked up things as Ailsa waited for a few moments and stood with unsteadiness to try to regain her composure.

“Maru?”

“Yes, Mistress?”

Ailsa let out a deep breath. “Pack my things, I'm headed for Theocradia.”

Walking into her bathroom past the destruction, Ailsa looked at her puffy eyes and tear-streaked face in the mirror. Her face stated the wear brought on by the years of living a walking nightmare. Her eyes swirled iridescent silver. She instead focused on the determination.

“Death is coming to your door Duncan Walsh. Best be aware.”

Chapter Two

Duncan Rylos Walsh walked down the corridor deep in thought reading preliminary reports. The reports were the recent squad assignments for the newly graduated recruits. His Psi team would be receiving a new member, expanding the team number back to six. The original sixth member was his twin brother, Garrick Walsh, who had been transferred to the Knights of Epsilon as a protector to the Council of Elders.

Unlike the other members of his team, the newest addition was female. He admitted to himself, that the Infinitium had moments of complete insanity. After ten years with his current squad, why bring in a female member? Then again, he was not one to question the Infinitium; the Elders always had their own reasons for every movement.

Lost in thought as he read the debriefing reports, he checked the panel for the time and made his way down to an available conference room. He needed to go over the upcoming assignment with his team and mention the addition they would have soon. As the doors slid open, Duncan pulled out the new recruit file while his thoughts were still spinning.

Duncan grabbed the ball from Declan Reardon, who was throwing it against the wall and whistling time away. Shaking his head and throwing the ball elsewhere rendered a comment from his other teammate, Gabriel Reardon. The original five members of Psi squad were comprised of the Reardon brothers and himself. The Reardon brothers were ancient Druids from the olden planet Eirenah. Gabriel, Declan, Finn, and Keane Reardon had worked with him years before when Eirenah needed help from a biological pandemic. Once their planet was out of danger, they transferred to Theocradia to work with other Infinitium members.

“Alright guys listen up.” Everyone moved to their seats as Duncan set the papers down. “First order of business, we have to get location details for the following planets: Toscah and Elusion. We

need blueprints and access to the new corporate building in Toscah to deal with the rebels. The outbreaks have increased in occurrence and severity. Declan. Keane. Get to work on those details. Talk to our government contacts within the Royal Guard. From the debriefings, the Princesses of Toscah are the primary targets. They are specifically aiming the attacks at the oldest, Princess Ayani. Gabriel, Finn you are going to Elusion. The command has gone into high alert specifically over the Shadow Breakers. Major Hawke has sent one of his best for training by the Infinitium. Something is happening within the interior Elusion government and we need to know what exactly.”

Declan raised an eyebrow and shrugged at one of his brothers. “What the hell is a Shadow Breaker?”

“Shadow Breakers are the elite of the Elusion government. Trained in every possible field of mental combat with their natural gifts, their training includes psychic enhancement. They are the most powerful soldiers Elusions train. We have orders from the Elders to train a specific Shadow Breaker in physical hand-to-hand combat.”

Gabriel leaned back deep in thought. “Wait, if this is an elite soldier why does there need to be additional training? Shadow Breakers can kill anyone with a thought.”

“Not from what Major Hawke told me. He needs this soldier prepared in case the Elusion training fails. She will be here soon, so let’s try to make her feel at home. The first few months will be one-on-one with each of us, and then we progress to group and specialty training.”

“So her name is?” Keane interjected.

“Second Lieutenant Ailsa Sullivan.” Touching the button on the panel before him, Sullivan’s profile came up along with vital stats and personnel file.

“Is she single?” Declan whistled in appreciation.

“Yes, I am,” a voice said in reply.

He and the men turned around to the different voice. Standing at the door, a woman dressed in a black jumpsuit, her dark brown hair touching the middle of her waist, icy dark brown eyes staring at the men in the room. Standing at alert with her arms crossed over her chest, the right side of her arm had elaborate Elusion colors and insignias. Hues of purple, black and white swirled in different shades of light and dark displaying the Elusion separation of rank, government sector, and years of military service. On the left side of her jumpsuit were two different size communication links, one link

for communication between team members and the second link for current checkups on her psychic enhancements. Strapped to her thighs, she carried the standard issue Shadow Breaker weapon, a mid-size, powerful stun gun, and a baton.

“Damn, are there any more like her?” Duncan heard Declan whispered to Keane.

“I don’t know but if you want me to find out....” Ailsa glared at Declan.

Duncan let his mind go blank the minute Ailsa walked in to the room. He knew her, but it wasn’t in a friendly setting. Since receiving her file, he tried to force the memories of other instances where they may have met, but pain lanced through his mind. He still suffered memory loss from an accident eighteen years ago. The only accessible memory was crossing paths with Ailsa Sullivan when she accused him of murdering her family. Two years of litigation and no proof ended his trial, yet damaged his reputation. It took many years to fix that break, but only time could completely heal it. Now here she was standing before him, with the same venomous glare in her eyes. He still couldn’t remember her and now he had to train her.

He had to agree with Declan, as much as he knew the comment would get his ass kicked. Ailsa was a beautiful woman. The black jumpsuit did nothing to hide the lush curves of her body. Though the suit covered the great majority of her skin, her caramel-colored complexion sent fire through his body as she set her tense features on the group. Her figure resembled hourglass proportions, generous hips he could easily imagine moving while she was riding on top of him while she dropped her head back and he suckled and played with her ample breasts. Telling a woman though who had far advanced psychic gifts he was thinking these things would was not the most brilliant idea at the moment.

“You must be Ailsa Sullivan.” Duncan cleared his throat and stepped forward offering her a hand. “I’m Duncan Walsh. People around here call me Rylos.”

Her smile never reached her eyes. Ailsa looked at the tall, handsome man approaching her. His eyes were of a man who trusted those he deemed worthy. His stance was the conviction anything he said was true and would not be doubted. The man standing before her had experienced life, experienced danger. He was no longer the man she had foolish romantic notions long ago. The ember she thought had died, simmered beneath her skin and acknowledged the love she tried

to end within her heart still lived. Duncan Walsh never left her heart, he was the quiet and persistent thought she had tried to rid herself of over the years.

Strands of his jet black hair hung near his eyes exposing a clear blue color destroying her reserve. Easily over six and half feet, his shoulders looked like they carried the weight of many responsibilities. The dark, midnight hair suited him with the style cut short at the nape. Overall, he looked pretty devastating. Those blue eyes she'd dreamt of years before hid under dark eyebrows with straight lashes. They followed the curve of his almond shaped eyes and could change intensity in a split second. His eyes held an infinite amount of power. When his eyes focused upon her, Ailsa struggled for composure.

She took her time surveying him and traveled her gaze down his arms, still well-defined and strong. She remembered how she'd reached for his arms to keep reality from returning. She remembered the way her body hummed from just a single kiss; his mouth teasing and drawing sighs from her, exciting her to want more of him. She recalled all their heated moments from years ago. Those lost moments when he would hold her up against a wall when their passion was too much to bear and explore each other as much as they could. She couldn't think clearly when his hands touched her, her legs of their own accord wrapped around him wanting to keep him close. Oh, how he teased her reserve, tested her will power to stay pure just for him. She already knew then she was his, body and soul. She already knew back then there would be no other man in her life.

Yet it was the one moment when together, alone in his quarters, where he reached her heart. Refusing him yet again, he answered the way a man enthralled with a woman could; whining about the situation. She knew by the smile on his face he didn't mean it at all. But it was when he gave her his heart that she could never refuse him anything ever again.

I love you Ailsa, you know that right?

Duncan, you know what you have to do. It's the way of my people.

I know, whatever it is, I'll do it.

Promise?

I'd promise you the galaxy if it makes you mine.

Ailsa forced her thoughts to the present. She let her mind slip, let her guard drop for just a moment. Now she had to force herself back to reality. The memories did as they as promised, reminded her of

betrayal. Anger fired through her system as fury replaced the heat. No, she thought, she knew the truth about this man and as the leader of a very elite and dangerous group, risk followed him always.

“Hello, Duncan Walsh,” she said with controlled anger.

Without second thought, Ailsa smiled up at Duncan and hit him with her most powerful right hand punch. Caught by Duncan’s fist, they stared at each other as he imposed his strength and impaired her mind. The group of men around her immediately moved to their feet and approached. Retaliating with more of her strength, Duncan was knocked back as the force hit his jaw.

Forgetting Duncan for the time being, she turned her attention at the rest of the men approaching. Ailsa glared at the man named Gabriel that advanced towards her. She felt a powerful urge, almost divine in nature, to teach this arrogant group of ‘soldiers’ a lesson. Justification gave way to a wicked grin.

Gabriel eased closer to the Elusion. “Ms. Sullivan. Would you mind explaining to us, what is truly going on?”

Ailsa looked intently at the man before her, and flicked her wrist to throw him away from her as if he were a puny Elusion Mesala, commonly described as a mixture between the Earth scorpion and spider. Yet he didn’t budge. She tried again to throw him but the man did not move.

Gabriel smiled and hooked his thumbs in his pants. “My name’s Gabriel and Elusions have no effect on Druids. We have older powers at our advantage.”

Before Ailsa could retaliate, another man who looked like Gabriel tackled her. Pinned on the floor, she struggled against the man as she heard Duncan fall to the ground groaning.

He stared into her eyes and forced her into submission.

“Look, Miss, I don’t like doing this to ladies, but I’m not letting you go until you calm down and promise not to do that again.”

“Get off me!” Ailsa shouted as she struggled.

“Hey, Finn, bet you never heard a woman say that before.” The man, who had made the previous comment when she entered, laughed.

“Shut up, Declan, or I’m going to hurt you.”

He stared back down at the woman before him. “Look, Ms. Sullivan, I’m going to get up, but I’m warning you, one move and I will restrain you again.”

“Alright, I won’t do anything.”

Jaded Beasts 6, Dog-Pig

Finn got up and offered a hand to Ailsa. Standing to full height, Ailsa glared at Duncan from the distance. Pure, seething rage boiled in her blood as she stared at the man who murdered her family.

“My name is Finn Reardon you just met my brother Gabriel,” he said as he introduced everyone. “The one who made the stupid comment is my other brother Declan, and the one next to him is Keane. Of course you know the living piñata, Duncan, but as he said, we call him Rylos.”

Duncan stood to his feet as he rubbed out the aches in his arms. He stared at the woman before him, anger seething in her stance, and at once felt the strange, high-piercing pain swell in his mind. Ailsa hadn't given him a chance to answer as she lifted him and slammed him against two different walls. Walking at a snail's pace to the front of the table, he opened Ailsa's file looking for any valuable clues. There was no way he would train a woman who held so much animosity towards him. Worst of all, he underestimated her being and had let his guard down. Her attack should have easily been prevented and he let her continue. Why? Did he feel obligated to her in someway?

“Alright, everyone you have your assignments, you're dismissed. Lt. Sullivan, we'll contact your government to have you reassigned to another squad.”

Ailsa crossed her arms and rolled her eyes. “Major Hawke said this is a permanent until I'm deemed fully trained.”

Stretching his neck, he pushed the number for the Elusion command.

“No Lieutenant, you are sorely mistaken. I don't take to violence such as you have displayed. A team member doesn't beat up a fellow member because they are having a fit. I don't want you here on my planet or near my team.”

As Major Hawke appeared on the panel, Duncan let out a deep breath. Ailsa Sullivan would soon be a distant memory.

Chapter Three

Two Months Later...

Duncan walked down the corridor deep in thought as he replayed the recent conversation in his mind. Over the past two months of training with Psi Squad, Ailsa's attitude hadn't changed towards him. Cold and aloof was the side she showed. She remained held to her conviction he was a murderer. She had no proof but a memory and to her that was enough for a conviction.

One of his sparring partners, Captain Noah Adame, a Shadow Breaker, informed him on Elusion, about Shadow Breakers and Ailsa Sullivan. Noah worked closely with Gabriel on the odd occurrences in Elusion, but the information he just received, set his mind spiraling with questions. Entering into the training room he let out a deep breath and stared to the people in the distance.

"So what did Noah say?" Gabriel stated as he watched the team in the distance.

"Things I really didn't want to hear," Duncan replied with a tight jaw.

"Such as?"

Duncan ran a hand through his hair letting out a tired sigh. "We are solving something even the government has no idea how to handle. There is someone, an insider, who is leaking information to high-priced bounty hunters about the Boars. No word specifically who the bounty hunters are, but from the medical reports, there are murders occurring beyond the government's own scope of understanding. Someone is truly trying to finish off this race of Boars. I'm still going through the fact, but from what I have understood so far, the murderer is leaving an insignia burned into the victim's skin as a calling card."

"Wait. Just how bad is it?" Gabriel asked.

"Bad. The Shadow Breakers are in apprehension. Four months ago, two of the oldest male Shadow Breakers died in their own homes. The medical station listed the deaths as suicides. It was

through further inspection, they noticed a brand on the back of their neck, their blood missing, and holes found in their bone marrow.”

“What?”

“Yeah and it gets worse. The brand was a unique pattern, flames engulfed around an orb. After the autopsies, the examiner established the deaths followed an old case in Elusion history three thousand years before. Medical sectors thought it was the emergence of an old virus mutated to survive in present time, but discarded the idea once the brand on the victims’ bodies was identified as Centurion in nature.”

“One of your people killed an Elusion?”

“That’s what it looks like.”

Duncan watched Ailsa train with Keane as his thoughts focused on possible Centurion convicts. Her form needed a bit of improvement, but her ambition rectified immediate notice. With the uncertainty in the Elusion government, her protection and training was now precarious.

“Anyhow,” Duncan continued, “a murder of an Ancient Elusion two weeks before sent the government into high alert and prompted Ailsa’s transfer. The murder style was confirmed identical to the deceased Shadow Breakers. It wasn’t until the end of the investigation, they found out the Ancient Elusion and the two Shadow Breakers were apart of the believed extinct and highly revered Boars.”

“Wait,” Gabriel stopped Duncan. “The Boars are dead...aren’t they?”

“It seems that the Boars have been in protective silence. Whether by their own will or by their government, they are still alive. It’s already rumored the Ancient was a Timekeeper. They checked the differences between Timekeepers, Elusion Boars and general Elusion population and it comes down to gifts and the markings. The Ancient Elusion wasn’t a Timekeeper but apparently these Boars say that he or she is out there. This special person is the last of their kind, the one to bring peace to their race.”

“So the Timekeepers do exist,” Gabriel stated in awe.

“Yes they do.”

Duncan focused on Ailsa’s movements off in the distance though his mind wasn’t there as he continued. “Now from what I’ve been told whoever has a Timekeeper controls Elusion. Timekeepers possess a multitude of innate abilities that help them endure the force of opening time and traveling through it. This Timekeeper could be used

in ways I really don't want to think about, but it also means the generations after are in danger. Two prophecies declare whoever possessed all of the powers would be the subsequent Timekeeper and their children guardians of the time continuum. The guardian though comes from the unison of two prehistoric lines. ”

“What about the mainframe break-ins we heard about?” Gabriel said as he focused his vision elsewhere.

“The illegal breach into the Elusion mainframe revealed existing Boars with rare qualities. The information sold to the bounty hunter was the names of Boars that possessed telepathy, psychogenesis, psychometry, pyrokinesis, and psychokinesis. From that list, three males and nine females had already been murdered. A price is set for any Elusion Boar dead or alive for one billion firestones. With the reward, information is sent on how to disarm a Boar in any line of Elusion, including Shadow Breakers.”

“Holy shit.”

“My sentiments exactly.”

“So when are you going to tell her about it,” Gabriel stated.

When was he going to tell her? Duncan thought, as he remained quiet. He had learned much more about Ailsa Sullivan that his first in command didn't need to know at the moment. He could tell Ailsa every thing and let her deal with it all on her own. In her eyes, Duncan was a killer, but he wondered just how she would react when she found out her family hadn't died as assumed.

Held in trusted silence to the Ancients, reports came in from the Elders of the Infinitium to him that on Toscah and Earth her siblings lived and had been alive since the murders. After the deaths of their parents, they were sent to the two planets for safety. Their deaths needed to be faked and bodies made to disappear. He learned the siblings' survival was credited to an ancient spell spoken by only true Ancient Boars. From his research into the log data of the murders Ailsa had seen her mother speak something into the ears of her brother and sister.

Moments later, they lay dead in their mother's arms. With this information about Boar magic, there was no hiding the fact Ailsa's mother was an Ancient Boar. But if her father was an Ancient Boar as well, his involvement in the Shadow Breakers would have revealed his family's life as well as fellow Boar's life in danger. He let out a tired sigh and ran his hand through his hair. His mind dizzy with each revelation, nothing he searched into was what it appeared to be.

Ailsa's life was about to get more complicated than she had ever wished.

"I'm going to tell her pretty soon and to hell with her conviction," Duncan replied.

Duncan stared out at the training before him. The Boars still existed and were deeply hidden. It was only through death any one knew about their existence. Someone was breaking and entering into classified mainframes trying to find remaining Boars. Now a female Boar on his team thought he murdered her family. And to make all things worse, he couldn't remember a damn thing about her, though he was sure they had crossed paths before.

Turning his full attention to second in command, Duncan finished stating the outcome of his research. "We have only a few weeks remaining before Ailsa's transfer to Theocradia become public knowledge. She is the descendant of two ancient Boars, and from what I have been reading through their scrolls, she has a prophecy to fulfill. She needs to join with another ancient line to unlock the future of their people. Ailsa needs to fulfill the prophecy in order to become the next Ancient."

"What is the prophecy?"

"From what I translated, they said, 'It will come to pass that the last of the Ancient Boars shall carry in her body the seed to the next generations of her people. War will break as the struggle for control of the continuum ensues. It is through the joining of ancient lines and the birth of a pure being, half of each ancient line that peace will come to the Elusions for the next five millenniums. Failure of the Ancient to succeed with her tasks will strip her people of their gifts and cast them as slaves to the Amalgamate.'"

"Amalgamate? The warrior planet they've always fought? Gabriel said with dawning.

"Yes."

"Damn." Gabriel replied after contemplating all the information. "So what do they mean by ancient lines?"

"Does it look like I have a clue?" Duncan shrugged.

"But that's why you've been graced as the Captain."

With a humorless laugh, Duncan rubbed his eyebrow with his middle finger as Gabriel walked off. Though warped in his idea, Gabriel did have a point, he had to figure out just what the prophecy meant. He turned his attention to Ailsa and Keane moving through basic stances and techniques but his focus was elsewhere.

Jaded Beasts 6, Dog-Pig

Ailsa was a part of a hunted race, no one knew who was after her, but they certainly wanted her dead. Letting the information settle until he could tear it apart, he opted instead to be useful.

Chapter Four

Duncan watched as Ailsa protected herself from Keane's attacks. For being with Cyrenius Core for two months, she was a fast learner. She'd already caught on to basic stances and defensive and counteroffensive combating. With each learned tactic, she graduated to specialized styles of fighting. The rigorous training enduring over a full twenty-four hours of continual fighting, took Infinitium officers or any other species between four to six months to learn. This Elusion's accelerated learning curve processed the information within two months.

As he approached, he distinctly noticed how his presence affected her concentration. An easy right-handed punch meant to throw Keane off balance, ended with her flipped over on to her back. Duncan tightened his jaw and tried not to yell. This woman was a part of his team and if anything fell to her, they would perish. If his presence was that disrupting, she would never be able to win a hand to hand combat. It didn't matter if he was there or if he wasn't there, she needed to keep her focus at all times and protect herself and the team.

"C'mon, Ailsa, block me like you did earlier," Keane encouraged.

"I'm trying but I just can't...concentrate." She moved her eyes to indicate she spoke about Duncan.

Duncan raised an intrigued eyebrow and an arrogant smirk graced his face "Lieutenant, if you can't learn to defend yourself, I'll gladly tell Major Hawke to send you to another section of Infinitium. Perhaps the Knights of Epsilon would be of your taste?"

Ailsa threw another hard punch into Keane's gloved hand. *Damn hypocritical bastard thinks he can push me around.* Another aimed punch into the protected gloves sent Keane back. Ailsa tensed in restraint. She hated not being in control of her anger. The result was always the same, a burst of her telekinetic powers into whatever held her current attention.

“I am sorry, Keane.” Putting down her head and taking deep breaths, she refocused her energy.

“Lieutenant Sullivan, if you would like to leave by all means I’ll have a transport send you back home.” Duncan crossed his arms across his chest.

“Captain, the only person leaving is you. I was doing perfectly fine until you came around.” Anger laced in every word leaving her mouth.

“Oh, so let me get this straight, I’m distracting you. Is that correct, Lieutenant?” His smile grew wider.

“Fuck you...sir,” she said without glancing back in the direction of the man who reeked of superiority, and threw another punch into Keane’s gloved hand.

“And a bitch too, oh lucky us your on the team.”

Without warning Ailsa turned in a full roundhouse kick aimed at Duncan’s head. Prepared for the assault, Duncan ducked and landed a hit into Ailsa’s side. Taking his hand, Ailsa grabbed Duncan and flipped him over her body. Duncan landed with a pronounce thud. She stood over him with her foot in perfect alignment with his neck prepared to deliver a blow.

“Next time you call me a bitch, you’ll see how strong Shadow Breakers really are.” Controlling her breaths, she kept focus on her target.

“Why wait till next time...”

“Yes, why wait,” she smiled with pure taunt.

Ailsa walked back a few steps, fists prepared. She maintained her rigid stance as Keane had taught her the first day of learning hand-to-hand combat. ‘Never let down your guard, even if your enemy might.’ Ailsa knew Duncan would display more power and skill she wouldn’t submit easily. Taking a moment she watched ever inch of Duncan’s body. The corded muscles in his arm bunched and relaxed as he took his time. The egotistical smile which pissed her off, still hadn’t faded from his handsome face.

All mental thoughts froze with the statement. He was no such thing. He was a living testimony of horror. He was a ruthless killer, even if his squad didn’t realize it. Yes, he was physically appealing, but assholes had a tendency of being that way. Yes, the way the strands of his hair fell across his eyes did stir some endings. She wasn’t a fool; she was attracted to sexy men like Duncan. He was a bastard, yet a sexy bastard. There was something though, in those

blue eyes that made- no, she thought abruptly, Duncan Walsh was a murderer.

“Changed your mind, Ailsa? Realized that you’re way over your head?”

“No.” She stood still in position. “I’m just trying to figure out what to say to your precious squad when they confirm I kicked your ass.”

“We’ll see what happens.”

Duncan pulled off his shirt, tossed it aside and took his defensive stance against Ailsa. He could hear in the distance his team mumbling a few comments. No doubt this would prove to be everything they hoped. Moving his eyes all over the room, the Reardon brothers stared with great curiosity. Towards his right Gabriel had walked into the training room.

* * * *

Gabriel entered the training room while searching for Duncan. He had a longer talk with Noah Adame and the reports he received about the Boar murders were valuable to pass on, but he wasn’t expecting the view before him. Duncan and Ailsa ready and prepared to fight.

“What is going on, Keane?”

“Ry challenged Ailsa and she’s wants to do some damage. Gabe, he knows she’s not ready for this type of combat yet. She has only learned a few styles of defense. As fast a learner as she is, she isn’t ready. Duncan’s going to overpower her.”

Gabriel smiled watching the pair ready for battle. “No Keane, I think there’s going to be something very different happening instead.”

Chapter Five

Ailsa squared off against Duncan. Her stance locked and prepared, as was his

“Take the first swing, Ailsa.” Duncan smiled in a casual tone. He licked his lips while his eyes roamed over Ailsa’s body. He liked a bit of adrenaline rushing through his system before he fought. Occasionally the rush of endorphins didn’t come from a fight. Sometimes the sight of a beautiful woman gave him the extra edge. As his eyes roved again over Ailsa, lust washed over his system; he would enjoy this woman.

“I insist, ladies first.”

She smiled back with a slight tilt to her head. “You first.”

Crystal blue eyes burned fierce changing to a darker sapphire as Duncan threw the first swing. Ailsa moved out of his line of direction, knocked his hand out of the way, and threw a jab into his stomach. Grunting in pain, he pushed Ailsa back and jumped into a front kick that connected with Ailsa’s chest. Falling back onto the matted floor, Ailsa seemed to shake off the pain and stand her ground again.

Duncan breathed out and threw another punch. Taking his swing, Ailsa flipped him over her back as he landed with a resounding thud on the floor. He used the opportunity to knock her off balance by swinging his leg around and hitting her in the back of the knees. Ailsa landed on her back, with a groan, and pushed herself up halfway and threw a side punch towards Duncan’s stomach.

Taking his strength from the needed blow, Duncan grabbed her fist and twisted her arm. Now on her stomach, he pinned her down with his weight. She struggled against him, fighting him, trying to get him off her body.

“You bastard, get the fuck off me!”

“Did you know you’re very sexy when you’re pissed?” he chuckled.

“Get off me!”

Jaded Beasts 6, Dog-Pig

Duncan smiled as Ailsa bucked and screamed underneath him. He leaned his head down against the softness of the woman below him. Comforted against smoothness and curves he had not been under in a while, he enjoyed the current moment as his blood pumped faster and his hips rocked against her. Ailsa's generous curves cushioned the rougher angles of his body.

Her scent, subtle and alluring, taunted his cool and aloof reserve. He'd heard it called vanilla and something else, an exotic scent. Delicate yet potent, it weaved its magic through his pores and bombarded his mind with lustful images. She felt soft and pliable as she breathed with controlled precision. He could still feel her struggle against him but with less force as the light sheen of sweat on her body released her unique scent. Pressing his body closer, he felt a break in her struggle as she moved her hips up against him.

They were at a stalemate. She struggled for freedom and another chance to fight Duncan. To the outside viewers it was a struggle of power, one trying to master the other for the upper edge. Those outsiders didn't know it was the closest and most intimate moment ever between them and it was best to keep up appearances.

"If you'd stop moving for a moment, you'd see I'm not hurting you. I won't hurt you, Ailsa. I don't know why you'd think I would."

"You killed my family." Anger laced through every word.

"Then why don't I remember them or you?"

"I hate you."

"Yes, I know but why would I kill them?"

"Maybe you wanted to be rich, my genes are valuable." She struggled more.

"That's not me, Ailsa."

"Get off me!" She said gritting her teeth.

"No. You can shove me off anytime Ailsa, you have gifts." He lowered his head and purred the next words in her ear. "I think you like this and I can tell by the change in your scent. You're getting excited, aren't you?"

"Go to hell." She panted when his lips tasted her heated skin.

"I don't think you really mean that, Ailsa. The scent your body is giving off tells me otherwise."

She tasted divine and he felt the first signs she yielded. The soft hitch of her breath left her trembling lips as he felt the movement of her hips. Though she did struggle for freedom, the resistance wasn't as excessive as before. The length of his hard cock was cradled within

the soft curves that tempted him. He imagined her naked body over him as her waist length dark brown hair tickled his chest, as she leaned forward and he sunk himself into her willing body. Those thoughts alone shredded his sanity.

“I hate you,” Ailsa repeated softly.

“You don’t seem sure about that?” He whispered and tenderly suckled on her earlobe.

He released the arm he twisted, and massaged the soreness out of the arm. He didn’t move and left his weight upon her body. When he put his full weight on her, her ragged breathing hitched higher. With part of his body out of view, he used the opportunity to slide his hand up her body with languid motion as he traced the lines leading to various accentuated curves. As the scent of Ailsa’s arousal increased, he watched the body below him tremble as the mixture of arousal, confusion and fear tickled his senses.

There was a battle waging inside her and noticed by the change in her breathing, her posture. Only when she moved her head back and closed her eyes did he give himself the small triumph over the spirited Ailsa Sullivan. Oh yes, he thought, this woman would without doubt be wild in bed. As he was about to touch more of the rich curvatures, a surge of strength slammed into him lifting him in the air.

Ailsa scrambled from the floor and stood, anger vibrating through her emotions. The walls around them expanded and contracted with her fury. Hit with the strong force equal to the one she sent out, Ailsa stumbled to the ground, but kept her concentration on keeping Duncan away. Trying to fight back with Shadow Breaker skills, Ailsa used her training and searched Duncan’s mind. The command though didn’t reach her objective and bounced back through her body. Hitting a barrier, the wave sent out, slammed back into her and reverberated through her body spiking her own insignia to burn. Grasping her wrist, she looked at the source of her pain. Duncan held on to his own tattoo, his face etched in pain.

Duncan stared at the Phoenix and watched as the majestic bird, that had long-lived on his body since birth, change form. The bird that as a child was small and fragile sat in its nest watching the world from the inside out. The intensity of fire corresponded to his childhood dreams and beliefs, profound and vivid. At puberty, the bird changed from its resting state to attack form. Its wings spread out to full span as the fire now encased the entire bird.

As the majestic bird held its pose of power, its razor-sharp talons held tight to two orbs of magic. Each orb contained enchantments of the Centurion-line that lived in the past, and held the possibility for the Centurion-line in the future. The past orb, colored an incandescent midnight blue, radiated with the performance of an ancient ceremony, or an ancient tenement filled within the life of the Centurion. With each act, the second orb colored radiated silver and swirled, representing fulfillment of the future. The phoenix was now changed its stance but he couldn't tell just yet how it would end.

“What the hell are you doing to me?” Ailsa screamed as she sent another telekinetic throw towards Duncan and it was rebuffed.

“Me? You're the one that's causing this.”

Dropping to his knees, Duncan's vision clouded over. Images of a life he never lived raced through at alarming speed. A family killed, a young girl hiding in the shadows crying for help. Was this Ailsa's life? As the imagery sped faster, he kept seeing the figure of a man who bore a striking resemblance to him. What was going on? Why was he in Ailsa's head? Who in the hell was that man? Questions he had no answers to swirled in his mind. Impressions of life on Elusion, imprints of all the training she had to endure in order to become the best of her government's military. Before he could delve more into that part of her mind, heat lanced through his entire body.

The images racing through his mind didn't feel like his own. Was he looking inside her mind at her memories? He thought. The vision didn't hold the same consistency as his own when he recalled an event. Searching through the illusion, it dawned on him as the image cleared, that it wasn't a memory at all, it was a fantasy. He was looking inside Ailsa's mind into one of her fantasies.

Roses littered all over the floor, candles with their luxurious light splayed the outlines of people melding into each other on the wall. The rich, heady content was enough to make him dizzy. He could see the outlines of two bodies moving together in unison. A woman with her eyes closed in euphoria as the man moved his body with strength and determination into hers. He could not believe the hard-ass lieutenant he had gotten to know had such fantasies. This was a side he would with certainty look into closer. The vision drew closer to the couple on the bed as his senses with gradual ease began to register the room surroundings. The scent of sex was the first to register in his mind. He knew that scent, vanilla, and orchids mixed with an exhilarating need. It was unbelievable the reality to the daydream.

Closer and closer, he ventured towards the couple when the face of the woman was none other than Ailsa deep in the throws of passion. An orgasm lanced through her body as she cried out in pleasure, clutching the man in her arms in a tight embrace. She moved to sit astride when he looked at the face of the man he would murder for touching her. Dumbfounded to the core of his soul, he stared down at the face that was none other than his own. Looking back at the wanton Ailsa in the daydream a smile crept to her face as she once again dropped her head back, but now called his name in ecstasy. Before he could ask a question, his vision returned.

Ailsa trembled in disbelief, as she watched and felt Duncan's mind travel into hers. The only way to explain it was the impossible happened. Someone actually gained access inside her mind. Someone actually gained access into a Shadow Breakers mind. What was the use of being one of the elite Shadow Breakers when anyone, even her worst enemy could gain access to her mind?

She felt the mental probe, her memories, and her daydreams open to his perusal. Instead of the pain she was used to feeling, it felt like a soft caress over her body. As he continued looking through her mind, the caresses increased and so did the pooling of heat in her body. Only a fraction of a moment later, she felt the probe leave as Duncan returned to his own mind and body. No one gained passage inside an Elusion mind. No one, except – no it couldn't be what she thought.

Shaking her head and trying to find her balance, Ailsa once again tried to shove Duncan away mentally. The attempt failed as she watched in horror, her own talents have the opposite effect on Duncan. They caused him pain, but also let him gain access to her mind.

“Stay away from me, Duncan, or I'll kill you with my bare hands.” Taking the chance, Ailsa ran from the training room at full speed knocking into Gabriel and Declan.

Duncan walked up to Gabriel rubbing his arm. The phoenix changed its form and the pain associated with the transformation equaled the tear of flesh by the use of corrosive hazards. The phoenix now looked to be in an attack mode, yet also embraced another phoenix. How in the hell did another bird get into the picture? He stared at the two birds now moving towards his bicep. His phoenix, the one he had known all his life was larger than its previous form. Its wings curled in defense and in protection. The smaller phoenix hid

under the safeguard of one wing holding the future orb while his phoenix held the past orb. He stared at both animals amazed by the circular link of fire held between them. What does that mean? he thought.

“Well I must say I didn’t expect this,” Gabriel said with a chuckle.

“What the hell is going on? One minute we’re fighting, the next I’m in her mind.”

“You’re such a fucking idiot, Ry,” Gabe snickered again.

“Oh I’m the fucking idiot. What the hell, she comes in here with a vendetta, wants my head on a stick and I’m the idiot. She thinks I am a murderer and I am the idiot. I see into her mind, strange shit is happening to my arm, and I am the idiot! Yeah thanks for the vote of confidence, Gabe.” Duncan grabbed his towel, plopped into his chair and propped legs up on the table.

“You know Kyan would kick your ass if he knew you were forgetting your tradition. Think, Ry. You know what this means.”

Duncan let out a deep breath and closed his eyes. The many teachings when he was a child flash through his mind. He remembered the stories of past Centurions; Etheos and Menaly, the first Centurions during the Battle of Ice and how they declared their love for each other through the ritual of fire. He recalled the ancient lessons of Atriopius, the importance of truth and decisions in understanding the threads of life.

He kept shifting through his thoughts and recalled the story of his parents meeting. His mother always said she had known his father was her mate. A young Centurion female named Ravyn saw a young Centurion male Darius enter the academy classroom. As the first in his family to want to enter the military, he carried the hopes of his family on his shoulders. She felt her Phoenix go through one of its many changes; the addition of another majestic bird shielding hers. She said—Duncan stopped his thought and opened his eyes.

“Not possible, Gabe.”

Duncan checked his arm again, and stared at Gabriel again.

“This can’t be happening! Fuck!” He walked out of the training room and cursed down the hallway.

Keane didn’t understand what happened as he tried to put the pieces together. He crossed his arms over his chest and shifted his gaze from the hallway to his brother.

“Why is Ry so pissed?”

Jaded Beasts 6, Dog-Pig

Gabriel let out a deep breath in disbelief. He couldn't believe the ironic twist.

“Keane, two things happened that you'll need to keep in mind. First, it seems Duncan just found his soul mate, and second, the woman who is his mate, not only just left the room, but thinks he's a murderer.”

“This is not good.”

“No Keane, this is not good at all,” Gabriel replied as he walked after Duncan.

Chapter Six

Duncan headed to his personal quarters and let his brain shut down. He found his mate and she hated him. She accused him of murder. He had a vague recognition of her, but remembering sent the pinpricks of pain through his mind. Now he had to win her over before she shot him in the dead of winter. He'd found his mate, and his proof to the existence of hell.

He had hoped for career accomplishment and personal satisfaction through his job while working for the Infinitium, but finding his mate was something he didn't expect. Looking to the future, he anticipated he'd settle down several years from now when he was at the prime of his age and rank. Centurions lived as long as Elusions, far past into 1,500 Cantus. They weren't like those from planet Earth whose time was limited. With a mate, things in his life had to change. He and his mate must go through the Centurion binding ritual of souls. He didn't know what rite the Elusions' went through.

On his planet he was considered young and finding a mate so early in life was a privilege, yet dangerous. He still hadn't learned the necessary requirements for the soul-binding. Finding his mate was one part, but enduring the change of the Phoenix was something he hadn't prepared for at all.

Duncan heard from his older brother that a Phoenix change did affect a Centurion mentally and physically. The moments before the soul-binding were nerve wracking at best. Finding a soul mate was a privilege, something that was to occur after 200 years of life experience. Waiting between mates caused physical and psychic pain from the separation. One of the few times he wished a black hole would suck him up and spit him out in another galaxy.

Now, he had a mate who couldn't stand his presence.

"I think we're about four Mach's from the next black hole," a voice said from the door of his quarters.

"Good, I'll push you out when we're there."

“Hell, I’ll do that for my brothers, but that’s just me.” Gabriel chuckled.

“Shut up, Gabe, you know you love messing with your brothers.” He smirked as he checked files on the wall-link.

“It’s a gift, what can I say. So what’s going on, Ry? We both know what your tattoo did.”

It was useless to avoid the subject. He wished he could, but Ailsa was now a part of his life. He had to prove love, but also innocence of crime. She had only been on the station around two months, but she had already integrated herself into the working routine of the team. She understood an enemy tried to kill her and she worked to avoid a possible attack. Again, he wondered just how did Elusion dealt with finding their soul mate. He ran his hand through his hair, frustrated. Did she even realize what had happened between them?

“Gabe, she thinks I killed her family. I saw the memory. The man looked like Garrick and I don’t want to think about what that means. But...I know I’ve met them. Things are just sketchy.” Rubbing his temples, the pain of trying to remember the past settled behind his eyes.

Gabriel raised an eyebrow. “Duncan how long have you had this pain?”

“For as long as I can remember. How the hell am I going to explain this to Ailsa?”

“Ry, you said Ailsa looked familiar. Do you remember where you’ve met her?” Duncan watched as Gabriel sat down and opened the file he had on the lieutenant. The information was standard issue, yet incomplete. Using Psi Squad confidential government accessibility, Gabriel told Duncan, he had asked Finn to send the lieutenants complete personnel file when located

“She looks familiar somehow. I know I’ve met her but...” he said as he rubbed his temple. “Each time I think about it, everything just gets jumbled.”

“Does this happen every single time you try to remember?”

“Yes, but what does that have to do with anything?” Duncan called out over his shoulder as he pulled on a shirt.

Duncan never knew the extent of the Druid gifts, but they were enough to help those in need. Though Gabriel hadn’t used the skill in front of Duncan, those from Eirenah were supposed to be able to see into the mind. If this was true Duncan realized Gabriel may be able to see where Duncan’s memories failed and if there was tampering.

“I think it’s time we look at your memories.”

Duncan moved back a couple steps. “Gabe, you know it weirds me out when you do that Druid hocus pocus.”

“Hocus pocus? The humans call it magic. Is there something I’m not supposed to know?” He smirked as Duncan flipped him off.

Sitting down in the seat closest to Gabriel and Duncan let out a deep breath. As much as he valued his second-in-command’s leadership, he was uneasy about any brain probing. To allow a probe inside as his whole persona underwent scrutiny was the worst kind of violation of privacy. But this may be the only way.

Duncan relaxed and closed his eyes, waiting for a jolt or charge. Gabriel and his brothers always joked about jumping into minds and getting information. In their humor, they made it look very painful. It could have been because they were siblings and tormenting one’s own blood was more fun than strangers.

“Okay I’m done.”

“You’re done?”

“Well it’s interesting, there are changes to your mind that only an experienced Mind-wielder could perform. Everything you know about the lieutenant is true. You do know Ailsa, but you remember her as Brie, Brie O’Hara. I fixed the damage so there shouldn’t be any pain. Now tell me about Brie O’Hara.”

Duncan closed his eyes and before he let out the breath, the flash of recognition rushed with quick and lethal force. Brie, he remembered Brie. She was the sweetest woman he’d ever gotten to know. She had expressive, soulful and inquisitive eyes. Every time he saw her, the pull to stay longer increased. It started with small chats, small conversations over the basics of their lives, the basics of training and then it changed. They had their first kiss, more intimate moments, until she was in his every pore.

She had been at the academy over a year and ranked among the top students. He had noticed her long before she spoke a word to him. The energy inside him sparked then smoldered deep until it flooded his system. Unbearable, aching nights passed where she haunted his dreams. Images of his Brie, because that is what she was, his. He pictured her lush form taunting and teasing him past rationale as he imagined pleasure beyond comprehension. Her kisses tore at his sanity, and drove him insane as he remembered stolen moments with her in his arms and the taste of her soft, full lips tormenting his senses.

Later in the year, he found out that she was his betrothed. By Centurion custom, he was to meet with her parents to accept or reject the arranged marriage. How could he even make sense of the situation? They had spent few moments together, but it wasn't enough. Confusion would have been preferred instead of the shock hearing his parents went behind his back and agreed to an arranged marriage. When he met Brie's parents later on, nervous would have been the understatement.

He knew ancient tradition wouldn't steer him down wrong roads, his siblings' maybe, but not tradition. He had sat across from Captain O'Hare, a Shadow Breaker with an infamous military record, and agreed to the marriage. He must have been at least twenty Cantus at the time. Meeting with the O'Hare's, his insignia burned with more intensity than before, it was unfathomable.

How could he have forgotten that he met his mate so long ago? The weight of an imaginary force settled on his shoulders. He was her betrothed, and the man she saw murdering her parents.

"You didn't kill them, I checked."

He should feel better about the truth but how could he? Rolling his neck, the com-link screen flashed the arrival of a new file.

"I need to talk to her. There are things that she doesn't know. Things her parents told me. I have her...betrothal present. It's her father's and I know she's going to want it back."

"You have what?"

"Her father gave me a box to give to Ailsa, he said that it would be important and it was of their people."

Gabriel shook his head as he exited. "Good luck."

Duncan let out a deep breath. This was the woman who is his mate and partner; the woman that would share his life. She would be the one that would exchange vows with him. She would be the one his phoenix would protect when it left his body and encased them in flames, which needed to endure the burning of the Centurion mark, who would have knowledge of his people, of his life memories. He would have her life, her peoples' culture, her memories impressed in his mind. After the binding was complete, they would be connected telepathically and metaphysically. And the one thing that shook his core was the person after her and wanted her dead.

Walking to the com screen, Duncan opened the file. He was sent files on the previous murder victims. The Ancient Boar, the two Shadow Breakers they found. The preliminary report from the Elusion

medical sector scrolled across the screen. Each victim had their blood drained, bone marrow taken with small signature remains. The photo of each signature was distorted on each victim. It was Ailsa's complete profile with much of the information that was previously left out. Attached was a note specifically for him. *'Protect what is yours,'* was all it said.

"Shit, Ailsa."

Duncan grabbed his weapon and ran down the hallway towards Ailsa's room. Damn it, the attacker couldn't be coming after her already. They had a few more weeks before she was in real danger, didn't they? There was no indication of any upcoming battle.

"I've got a Code 7 in Lt. Sullivan's quarters."

"Code accepted, Captain," the digital voice replied.

"Where is Lt. Sullivan?" He kept running passing various officials, and met up with Infinitium security.

"She is in personal quarters with a guest."

Duncan gave the authorization to open her quarter's doors. The moment he stepped inside, the one person he didn't expect was fighting against Ailsa. With her limited knowledge, she threw her attacker off balance with a quick punch and jump kick to his face. But before she could recover her stance, the attacker doubled his efforts and punched her across the face. When the attacker stood, Duncan couldn't believe it.

It was his twin brother, Garrick Walsh.

Chapter Seven

“Back up away from her, Garrick!”

Weapon pointed, Duncan moved forward and hit the com-link button for emergency. The overhead lights in the room turned yellow as the digital voice overhead announced the warning. Ailsa lay still without moving. Keeping his weapon and eyes still pointed towards his brother, he bent down and checked Ailsa’s pulse. It was beating strong, but fast.

“Get away from her, Duncan. She’s the next Timekeeper,” Garrick brusquely replied.

The betrayal crawled up his spine and threatened to overthrow his combat instinct. A paralyzed soldier was a dead soldier. He’s the enemy, he thought. His brother, no Garrick was a murderer, Duncan continued. He kept his thoughts from straying, forced them from asking questions.

They were identical in every way except a few small differences. Identical in every way, except in ethics. Why would Garrick want to kill an Elusion?

“She’s my soul, Garrick. One step and I’ll shoot.”

The smile he knew as his own smirked in refusal. “Then until next time, Duncan.” With those words, Garrick shimmered out of sight.

“Shit.” He cursed as he checked the room in a sweeping pattern.

Duncan waited, retiring his gun in case Garrick reappeared. Ailsa was still unconscious as he returned and decided the threat was temporarily over. Kneeling down and checking her pulse again, he checked her body for any serious wounds. Several bruises marred her caramel-colored skin. With care, he moved and checked her face for any cuts and noticed the deep cut on her bottom lip. Her eye sustained a gash as it bled profusely around the swelling. As he turned her with care on to her back, a deep red stain which smeared the floor covered her shirt; she had been stabbed under her ribs.

Jaded Beasts 6, Dog-Pig

Ailsa's doors opened as Finn and Gabriel entered prepared for combat. "It's too late he left, but he got in a few punches to Ailsa."

"Who was it?" Gabriel asked while searching the room.

"Garrick." He whispered the painful truth.

"It can't be. He's a Knight of the Epsilon. He protects the Elders and the entire Council. There's no way he could be around them if his thoughts projected this type of hatred." Gabe argued.

"I saw him with my own eyes, Gabe. It was Garrick."

"Keane is ready at the medic station for her," Finn replied as he pulled the earpiece out of his ear.

Lifting the unconscious Ailsa in his arms, Duncan walked out of her quarters and down to the medic station. The medics would be able to heal the cuts but would insist the bruising continued in its normal pattern to promote the body's repair defense. He stared at the woman in his arms. The innate reaction of possessiveness swamped every fiber of his being. He forced his thoughts to think analytically instead of on instinct. He warred between anger and safety. Protect his mate, defend his mate, his heart screamed. Find Knights of the Epsilon and recruit their help in capturing his brother, his mind contemplated.

* * * *

Duncan surveyed the medics working attentively to stop the blood flow. He watched as Keane did the necessary work on Ailsa. Keane was focused on his patient, with the constant monitoring of the display readings as he placed each probe on Ailsa's body. Though on the team as a medic, Keane's medical training spanned the knowledge of several races. Keane called out orders, but never left Ailsa's side, as he applied pressure to the wound on her side. The rapid-fire authority he held in the medical station was never questioned as with every order came subsequent instructions. All aides and other doctors worked cohesively and moved as a structured unit.

Duncan kept his fists clenched, his anger suppressed. Blood flowed hot beneath the surface of his skin, as his focus never strayed. His phoenix, which now found his mate, moved in agitation. The disturbance seared his muscles while the pain traveled in and around the muscles when they contracted and relaxed. Moving his hand in line of vision, he opened it as a flame produced from his skin. The anger from his soul emitted out from his body and enveloped his hand. Pyrokinesis; the flame was in every part of his being. Tapped on the shoulder, he closed his hand and put his attention to whoever needed it.

“Duncan, she’s stabilized and doing well. Her healing will take time. I administered some heavy medication for the wound. Her composition is unlike any I’ve seen in an Elusion. It seems her body will repair itself as long as she’s stabilized. We have her hooked up to a respire-tube, but for right now she will be unconscious. I’ll call you when she’s conscious.”

“I’ll stay.”

“We don’t know when she’ll be awake.”

“I’m staying,” Duncan said, driving out any argument.

“I’ll be back to check on her in a bit.” Keane walked to the com-link near Ailsa and punched in a few numbers before he left the room.

Duncan stared a while longer at the woman on the table, so still as the vibrant face he knew looked pale and was marred with bruises. She would finally know the truth; he wasn’t the one who committed the murders. His twin brother was after her. His brother, Garrick, the one person in the galaxy he shared a bond that also gave them abilities to understand each other better than anyone else alive. Why Garrick would need to kill Elusions? What would drive a man honored as one of the Infinitium’s vital protectors to murder?

Ailsa took a deep breath and moved her head as she slept. Duncan neared the bed and placed a hand on her forehead. Her temperature felt elevated and small beads of sweat covered her brow. Taking a towel nearby, he wiped dipped the end into some cool salve Keane had left and dabbed the cream over her skin. Testing the temperature again, he noted the slight change in temperature. His hand lingered a moment longer, tracing the soft line of her cheek. The supple skin he had forgotten for years was now under his hand, though bruised. She was still silky as he remembered. As his fingers followed the line down to her full lips as he fought the heat that lanced his body. Her lips full with a subtle pout tempted him to give her anything she could ever want. Those same lips he remembered tasting during stolen moments at the academy. The sweet, honeyed flavored taste of her mouth pulling him farther into the bliss of heaven.

Tracing the curves of her face gently not to wake her, he took the quiet moment to commit to memory what was stolen from him. He wouldn’t have forgotten her if he had the choice. She was his soul mate, how could he? The fire he recalled deep in the chocolate eyes, had been replaced by ice. Would now there be a chance reconcile a destroyed past?

Jaded Beasts 6, Dog-Pig

The love she was raised with was taken from her life, whereas he had his brothers and sisters. Ailsa witnessed their deaths first hand, and he hoped he would never have to suffer such a thing. He had lived life to the fullest with the support of those near, while she relied mostly on herself. He couldn't begin to imagine the nightmares plaguing her in her dreams as she tried to live. The anger, confusion she had to endure to harden and force her mind to tolerate the rigors of psychological training. The necessary duty to contain the anger required to finish an assignment with the central focus of her hate. If he had been forced on assignment with someone he knew killed, his reaction would have been deadlier. She took it into prospective, even treated him civilly despite the animosity. Now the one thing that drove her, fueled her force had been shattered.

Taking his time, the quiet sounds of the medic station soothed his thoughts as he gently cleaned Ailsa's bruised lip. They were still lush, still held the subtle pout that was accentuated when she was angry or sad.

"You were right," a raspy voice broke through his thoughts.

He stared down into sad, brown eyes unsure and pained.

"All this time I thought you were the one."

"You need to rest, Ailsa."

Groggy, she shook her head raising a trembling hand and touching Duncan's cheek. "I'm sorry."

He didn't know what to say. For the first time in years, Ailsa looked at him like she had long ago. Something changed inside her, but he wasn't going to question her at this moment. He closed his eyes as her palm remained on his cheek. Turning his head into her palm, he placed a kiss on it and let out a deep breath.

"We'll stop him, Duncan," Ailsa said as she took a deep breath, her eyes fixed on his. "We'll find Garrick and stop him."

"Ailsa." He silenced her words as he touched her lips with his thumb tenderly. He couldn't believe after all these years, she was finally here before him touching him the way it should have been long ago. It took his brother's betrayal to bring them together. "Garrick will come after you again. I know my brother. He won't stop until your dead."

"We'll stop him," she stated with finality. "I'm the last of my people. I have to do this for them."

Silence passed for moments between them as the monitors beeped in the background.

Jaded Beasts 6, Dog-Pig

“Ailsa, there’s something I need to tell you about your people.” Duncan took a deep breath. “You are the last Ancient Boar, but you are not the last of your kind.”

She blinked rapidly absorbing the information. “What?”

“Henry and Isabella are alive,” he said quietly, searching her eyes as the truth descended up on her.

Her brown eyes widened in surprise. He could see relief in those soulful eyes, a mixture of confusion and uncertainty. But also, within her eyes, he saw worry and a tinge of hope.

“Oh my god Duncan the prophecy has already begun,,” she said, then her face brightened as his words sunk in. “My family is alive! We shall find them, and I swear I’ll make Garrick pay!”

His arms closed about her with the warmth of a new beginning promised. She leaned her head against his chest, accepting what his arms offered. More adventures awaited them, but for now, each sensed that the other was content with discovering their newfound emotions for one another.

The End