

Black Pearl

Alecia Monaco

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It's not easy being royalty, as Princess Phaedra of the Terra Mystica Kingdom can tell you. Her manicure budget alone is enough to bankrupt the national treasury of the small Texas-based Fey kingdom, not to mention her clothing allowance, trips to Sephora, her collection of Jimmy Choo heels...

The spending is getting out of hand, so Phaedra's father comes up with a brilliant idea. It's time for the princess to earn a living! Which leads her to take a job in Houston's infamous vampire district, at a club called Black Pearl.

Vance is a seventh generation vampire, ruler of the element of iron, and a dominant par excellence. As owner of Black Pearl, he's trained more than his share of subs for the local vampire elite. He hires Phaedra with some misgivings, despite his initial attraction to her. But soon he sees in Phaedra what she'd only begun to suspect herself -- that she's capable of becoming the ultimate submissive. Can Vance take the spoiled princess firmly in hand and break her to his will... or will she end up capturing the vampire's heart in the process?

Dedication

In memory of M.L.H.
Oct. 19, 1945 -- Feb. 4, 2007

Con todo carino, Mamita

Chapter 1

"Cutting me off?" The sound of shopping bags full of Jimmy Choos could be heard hitting the floor. Princess Phaedra of the Terra Mystica Fey sat down on her gilded chair with a thud. "You're cutting me off?"

The king cleared his throat. "That's what I said, darling."

Phaedra puffed her cheeks out and exhaled with a sound like a tire leaking air. "How can you do that?" She could feel sparks shooting from her green eyes, a sure sign of Fey anger. "Why would you do that?"

"Phaedra..." Her Aunt Chloe, the dowager princess, leaned across the gilt and glass table. "Your father and I feel that you need to learn wiser spending habits. Your clothing allowance alone is..." Chloe glanced at the piles of shopping bags surrounding her niece, each bearing the logo of one of Houston's many exclusive boutiques. "Well, let's just say that we fear for our national treasury if you don't learn to moderate your shopping habits before you become queen."

"You know how the press rags on me if I don't look my best all the time." Phaedra crossed her arms over her chest, glaring at the king and his sister across the table. "My clothes have to be the latest style, my hair and nails have to be perfect --"

"At some expense to the kingdom," Chloe interjected, her gaze traveling from the artfully styled pink curls that tumbled to Phaedra's shoulders to her designer suit and *Sex and the City* style heels. "Your weekly spa visits do add up, my dear."

"What do you suggest?" Phaedra threw her hands up. "That I start doing my own nails?"

"You could suffer a worse fate," Chloe replied, smothering a smile.

Somehow, Phaedra doubted it. "As for getting a job," she went on, ignoring her aunt, "I'm sure Uncle Phillias will hire me to work at the *Sidhe Sentinel*. Maybe I could write a fashion column."

The king and his sister exchanged worried glances. "Actually..." the king began, averting his eyes, "... we've issued an edict." He cleared his throat. "No Fey operated business is to hire you."

"What?" Phaedra sprang to her feet, a shower of sparks like a rescue flare shimmering forth from her eyes.

"Your father and I feel that, were you to work for a Fey business, you'd receive such special treatment as to render the experience meaningless." Chloe folded her hands and looked at her niece the way one would look at a bomb ticking toward detonation.

"Who am I supposed to work for, then?" Phaedra could hear the icicles in her own voice.

"Might I suggest the want ads in the *Preternatural Herald*?" The king gestured to the neatly folded newspaper on the table in front of him.

Phaedra felt something beyond panic, beyond desperation tightening around her throat. She'd never considered taking a job. Since the day when Sam Houston, then President of the Republic of Texas, had given the Fey their own sovereign lands near what was now known as Harris County, the royal family had ruled over Terra Mystica with a gentle hand, beloved by all of their subjects. Since the Fey had helped Texas attain their victory at the Battle of San Jacinto, they'd lived in the Lone Star State with a certain amount of respect from their human neighbors, never suffering the sort of bigotry that shifters, weres, and vampires had to endure at times. Into this privileged world, Phaedra had been born.

And from this cushy existence, she mused as she snatched the want ads up with her hand to storm from the room, she was about to be expelled.

* * *

A knock sounded on the door to Phaedra's bedroom. She looked up to see her cousin peeking through it as she held it slightly ajar. "I heard." Kismet regarded her with a mournful expression.

Phaedra tossed the want ads aside. "Looks like our days of clubbing and maxing out plastic at the Galleria are over and done." She fell back onto the bed with a thud.

"Just humor your dad for a while." Kismet used her fire-colored wings to propel her to the bed, where she perched on the edge. "Let him get this whole learning the value of a dollar thing out of his system, then you'll be home again." Kismet crooked an eyebrow. "I bet your dad will even surprise you with one of those black American Express Centurian cards just to say he's sorry."

"You think so?" Phaedra propped herself up on an elbow, searching her cousin's face for a glimmer of hope.

"I do." Kismet smoothed her flame-colored hair back with a hand. "And you should be able to find a job in the vampire district easily. Humans tend to not want to work for bosses who drink blood."

"Yeah, well..." Phaedra flopped back down on the bed again. "Be that as it may, legend has it that Fey blood is even more appealing to vampires than human blood."

"I'll ward you and keep you from getting bitten." Kismet's burning copper eyes looked down at Phaedra with mirth. "Although, you've got to admit, some of those bloodsuckers are kind of sexy... so you might not want me to make the ward *that* strong."

Phaedra giggled. "You can actually do that? The warding thing, I mean."

Kismet grinned. "I'm a Dominion *Sidhe*. I can do every form of protection magic."

Phaedra felt her face fall again. "And being a Dominion *Sidhe* means you were born with a job." She moaned, covering her eyes with her hands. "Why couldn't I have been a Dominion Fairy?"

"Because you're a princess." Kismet spoke in the slow, measured tones of one who'd dealt with Phaedra's theatrics more than once. "And someday, you'll have the most important job in Terra Mystica. You'll be queen, just like your mother was once."

At the mention of her mother, Phaedra turned her eyes toward the framed photo on her bedside table. It was her mother's official portrait, but the slight half-Fey, half-human woman who gazed back at Phaedra from the depths of the photograph looked more like a mother than a royal personage.

Phaedra swallowed the knot in her throat. She'd inherited her mother's petite figure, her mother's deep pink tresses that set off their alabaster complexions, her mother's sense of humor and love of beauty. But she hadn't inherited that core of inner strength the queen had possessed, the kind of deep-seated wisdom that made her adored by family and subjects alike. Queen Iphigenia's memory was so treasured in the hearts of her people that the entire kingdom would've rioted if Phaedra's father had ever dared to remarry.

Not that such a thing would've crossed the king's mind, Phaedra mused. Her mother was irreplaceable.

"You miss her." Kismet stroked her cousin's hair.

"I wish I could be more like her." Phaedra touched the picture with her fingertips, almost expecting to feel the soft warmth of her mother's skin. But it was only a picture, and nothing but the cool glass of the frame met her seeking hand.

"Maybe you're more like her than you think," Kismet observed.

Phaedra snorted. "Can you imagine my mother ever getting tossed out of the castle for her spending habits?" She shook her head. "She always knew who she was and what she was meant to be." Heaving a deep sigh, she sank into the pillows at the head of the bed. "I'm just a leaf, blown about by every wind that comes my way."

Why was it so impossible to know what she really wanted out of life? Everyone else seemed to emerge from the womb with a sense of purpose, a goal, something to give meaning to their lives. The only thing she'd ever been good at was matching her purse to her shoes and staying six months ahead on current fashion trends.

And now she was going to have to be good at a job.

Phaedra hoped her mother was watching over her from that heavenly Summerland where she surely must be. Nothing but a little divine intervention could help her to become the kind of queen her father wanted her to be.

Chapter 2

"Dearest, you haven't touched your food."

Phaedra met Aunt Chloe's concerned gaze across the table. "I don't have much of an appetite tonight, Auntie." She pushed her food across her china plate with a heavy silver fork. "I'm sorry."

"We asked Cook to prepare all your favorites." The dowager princess gestured to the silver serving dishes lining the sideboard behind her. "Ravioli, green beans with olive oil and dill, angel food cake..."

"It's all delicious, Aunt Chloe. Really, it is." Phaedra speared a mini pumpkin ravioli with her fork and put it in her mouth. Even her favorite dish tasted like sawdust. But then, what did she expect? It was her last dinner before she left the castle to venture out into Houston with only a hundred dollars and the want ads.

"Where's Daddy tonight?" Phaedra gulped down a mouthful of sweetened ice tea. "I figured nothing could keep him from the last supper here."

"Your father had to meet with his advisors. Some rumor about crime in the preternatural community." Chloe shook her head. "What is the world coming to, when we're as violent and bloodthirsty as the humans?"

Phaedra choked on her tea. "Bloodthirsty?"

Chloe nodded. "It seems there have been some unsavory murders in the vampire district."

Holy Fairy shit. Had her family figured out her plan to get a job working for the vampires? She chose her next words carefully. "What kind of murders?"

"Vampires killing humans, draining their victims of every drop of blood in their bodies." Chloe shuddered. "Horrible creatures... I hope they lose their legal status over this."

Phaedra momentarily tuned out her aunt's travails and turned this latest piece of information over in her mind. If there was a murderer on the loose in the vampire district, and humans were the targets...

Not only would humans be reluctant to take jobs down there, even the local vampires would be looking for employment elsewhere. It was a golden opportunity. Even someone with her utter lack of experience and marketable skills could find *something* under such circumstances.

"... and deport them all back to Transylvania, or whatever Godforsaken part of the world they came from." Chloe shook her head again, knee deep in one of her pet rants.

"Auntie," Phaedra began, gratefully taking a helping of angel food cake from the serving platter that Hattie, one of their gnome servants, offered her. Suddenly, food was appealing again. "You know if they start outlawing one group of preternatural creatures, we could very well be next."

Chloe's normally soft features hardened. "The Fey will *never* be expelled from Texas. We are here on a special land grant signed by Sam Houston himself, granting us a home here as long as the sun shall rise in the east."

Phaedra stifled a groan. She loved her aunt like a second mother, but another round of Texas history meets Fey nobility was enough to make her put her head through the nearest wall.

"Were it not for Fey soldiers fighting alongside the Texas army, the Battle for the Republic would've been lost. Our people changed the course of history!" Chloe pounded the table with a delicate fist.

"Yes, Auntie, you're perfectly right." Phaedra stuffed the rest of the fluffy white cake into her mouth. "I don't know what I was rambling about earlier. Vampires... suck." She snorted at her own pun.

"Dearest." Chloe's face softened again, back to its normal motherly lines. "It does my heart good to see how well you're taking this turn of events. You're going to make your father and I both very proud of you."

Phaedra smiled. "I plan to surprise everyone."

That was putting it mildly.

* * *

Back in her room, Phaedra finished packing the overnight bag she'd decided to take with her. Kismet had agreed to smuggle out anything else she might need in the future, so starting out with the bare minimum seemed like the best plan.

But she didn't intend to leave the castle without at least one ace in the hole. She strode across the plush lilac carpet of her massive bedroom to the walk-in closet that occupied a space larger than some people's homes.

Once inside the closet, she made a beeline to the case where she kept her diamonds. Items of jewelry she'd purchased for herself, trendy stuff, not the colored stones favored by the royal family for state events. No heirlooms, nothing that had belonged to her mother, nothing she couldn't bear to pawn if worse came to worst. She'd tuck it into her overnight bag, just to give her a safety net if things didn't work out in the vampire district.

Something else caught her eye, a black velvet drawstring bag hidden carefully behind the jewelry case. Phaedra felt her lips curling into a mischievous smile.

Her vibrator. Speaking of *never leave home without it...*

She grabbed the drawstring bag with her free hand and went back into her bedroom, closing the closet door behind her. Adding the jewelry case to her travel bag, she examined the stacks of neatly folded clothing, looking for a place to conceal her pleasure toy. No telling where she'd be living for the next few weeks. It could be a while before she had enough privacy to take a battery operated ride down the orgasmic highway again.

Or... she could just take one last rocket to the stars tonight, in the privacy of her own room. One last hurrah, right? She glanced at her California King sized bed.

One for the road.

Phaedra slipped out of the robe she'd put on. The Italian terrycloth garment fell to the floor unheeded.

The silky burgundy thong was next. She slid it to the floor, already feeling her pussy getting wet and tight with anticipation.

Phaedra hadn't lacked for male companions. In fact, Fey men were known for their stamina and friskiness. But none of the men who'd shared her bed had ever satisfied her deepest longings, the dark desires that made her blood race and her clit pound with yearning.

She wanted to be dominated.

Settling onto her bed, she pulled the sleek phallus-shaped vibrator from its drawstring pouch. Teasing her already hard nipples with her free hand, she moved the vibe to her mound, running it over her outer folds as she slipped into a favorite fantasy.

She was tied up, face down, her knees bent at a deep angle. A faceless man had her at his mercy, ready to use her for his pleasure, for any desire that crossed his mind. She existed for nothing but to service his cock.

She slipped the vibrator between the folds of her pussy, circling her already throbbing clit with it. She didn't want the frisky fucking she'd had with her previous sexual partners. She wanted a man who would take no prisoners, who would give her the greatest release by taking her for his own pleasure with no regard for her own.

She ran the vibe over her clit, down between her inner lips and back again, thrusting her hips as she imagined the faceless man taking her from behind, the thickness of his cock slamming into her at a frantic pace.

Feeling her own juices running freely, she slid the vibe into her core, her inner walls tightening around it. Coming always felt better when she had something -- or someone -- inside her. And she was about to come, no doubt about it.

Thrusting the vibe slowly in and out of her already drenched pussy, she felt the inevitable tightening that meant an orgasm was on its way. Her fantasy fractured, spinning off into fragmented images of herself bound, penetrated orally, anally, every which way her master desired. And she'd make him come, too, taking every last drop of his hot sweet fluid into her mouth, onto her skin, wherever he wanted it.

She came, a shower of sparks radiating outward from her clit through her entire body. As the aftershocks faded, the only sounds in the darkness were her uneven breathing and the muffled buzz of the vibrator.

It was so easy to give pleasure to herself. Coming was the easy part. Reconciling herself to all her unfulfilled fantasies... now *that* was another matter. But where was an unemployed Fairy princess going to find a man with enough balls -- literally and figuratively -- to dominate her?

She stood up, gave the vibe a quick cleaning with one of the alcohol wipes she kept in with it for that purpose, dropped the vibe back into its pouch, and placed it in her travel bag. She had bigger fish to fry than her desire to wear someone's collar.

Like finding a place to sleep tomorrow night.

With that cheerful thought, Phaedra eased herself back into bed, nestling between the ridiculously high thread count sheets. Better get a good night's sleep while she could. Who knew if tomorrow night would find her on a park bench?

Chapter 3

"The meter's running, so I guess I'd better go." Phaedra gestured to the yellow cab purring in the massive circular driveway in front of the castle.

It was a beautiful sunny morning. She'd have plenty of time to find a room in the vampire district and get a nap before full dark, when all the vamp businesses would open.

So why couldn't she find any enthusiasm for this new chapter of her life? The idea of going out on her own and taking a job was suddenly about as appealing as a nice hot bowl of cement for breakfast.

"Remember, you're warded now." Kismet gave her a pat on the back where the four Dominion *Sidhe* -- each having control over a season and its corresponding elements -- had marked her with their protection. "No vampire can bite or attack you. All of the elements are joined together to keep you safe." Kismet sighed. "It's the least I could do." She threw her arms around her cousin impulsively. "I'm going to miss you so much."

Phaedra returned the hug. "You said it yourself... I'll be back before you know it." The cab driver honked his horn, shattering the moment. "I'd better go. It's not going to get any easier if we keep standing here." She gave one last longing look at the castle. "I wish my dad and Aunt Chloe had felt up to seeing me off."

"You know they were both just afraid they'd cry and relent at the last minute." Kismet gave Phaedra's hand a squeeze. "I'm about to shed a few tears myself."

"Then it's definitely time for me to go." Phaedra tried to laugh. "Don't the Summer *Sidhe* cry tears made of liquid nitrogen or something?"

"Get out." Kismet shoved her playfully. "Go on, get your little behind in that cab and go conquer the world."

A few minutes later, as the cab drove slowly away from the castle grounds, Phaedra was certain that conquering the world wasn't even an option.

* * *

It had been full dark for hours, and Phaedra was no closer to finding a job than she'd been when she left the castle. She'd gone through all the want ads in the vampire district's independent newspaper, marking each one off with a red pen as she met with one closed door after another.

She shuffled down the street toward the last location on her list, some club called Black Pearl. They'd advertised for a waitress, and maybe she could at least do that. Every other place had wanted someone with more experience, or special training, or some other elusive quality that life in the castle had failed to prepare her with.

If this was what non-royal folk had to go through to make a living, they were certainly worthy of her sympathies. She'd never imagined it would be so hard just to *find* a job, much less *keep* one.

Bumping into a black velvet rope caused her to look up. Ropes usually meant a club, and sure enough... the discreet sign over the door read *Black Pearl* in simple script.

What the hell kind of name for a club was Black Pearl? It sounded like an Elizabeth Taylor perfume.

"Here goes nothing," she muttered under her breath, and pushed the door open.

* * *

"I'm here about the waitress job." Phaedra gave the burly bartender her most winning smile as she perched on a barstool opposite him.

He returned the smile, flashing fangs in the process. "See where it says *Exit* up there?" He pointed to the back of the room where the ubiquitous red-lettered sign hung over a glass and steel door.

She nodded.

"Go all the way to the back, and turn left at the *Exit* sign. Go down the hallway to the last door, marked *Office*." His grin widened, revealing more fang. "Tell him Franco sent you."

"Will do." Phaedra slid down from her stool. Rather than trying to weave her way through the writhing figures on the dance floor, she unfurled her pink butterfly-shaped wings and simply fluttered across the room to her destination.

She landed deftly and turned to take another look at the interior of the club. The walls were all rough stone, and light fixtures designed to look like flaming torches provided the only illumination.

What the heck was up with the patrons, though? Phaedra wrinkled her fashion-sensitive nose. One usually had to go to Hot Topic to see that much black PVC in one place. Good grief, was one of the women *flogging* her male companion?

What had she gotten herself into?

She cast a wary eye at the disc jockey. Not a vampire... she could detect that much with her own highly attuned paranormal senses, and the DJ felt like a shifter of some kind. But with Roky Erickson howling "Night of the Vampire" through the speakers, the shifter obviously knew how to please a vampire-centric crowd.

Maybe it *was* possible for a non-vamp to succeed in the vampire world. She could only hope.

* * *

"And you have no experience working as a waitress?" the interviewer asked in his crisp British accent.

"No," Phaedra admitted, feeling a knot of discouragement tightening in her stomach, "but I'm very motivated and I want to work."

"It's highly unusual for a member of the royal family to seek employment like this." He spoke without looking up from Phaedra's job application. "My name is Mr. Charles, by the way."

"If I'm going to be a just and effective queen, I need to understand the struggles my subjects endure on a daily basis." Okay, so she was parroting her father's words, but they were turning out to have at least a few grains of truth to them. "What better way to share my subject's concerns than to experience the workday world the same way they do?"

Mr. Charles nodded, and she could've sworn she saw a glint of approval in his eyes. "A noble sentiment, indeed." He put her application down on the desk blotter in front of him and peered at her over the rims of his glasses. "You do realize you won't be working the front room out there?" He waved his hand in the general direction of the club floor where she'd come from.

No, she hadn't realized that. "Where, uh..." She swallowed hard. "Where will I be working, then?" As his personal waitress, brewing and pouring endless cups of tea all night every night? Where else was there to work in this club?

"Perhaps it would be best if you saw for yourself." Mr. Charles stood up, smoothing away the invisible creases in his brown tweed suit. He stepped across the room to a cabinet, and extracted a ring of keys from his pocket. He quickly unlocked the door and removed a garment bag.

"First, let's see if you can wear the uniform." He handed the bag to her. "Then I'll take you... downstairs."

Downstairs? Phaedra clutched the garment bag in a white knuckled hand.

This was getting weirder by the minute. Maybe she should've applied for a nice receptionist's job down at the bay, working for the Merrow or something.

Well, she reasoned, following Mr. Charles to the employee dressing room, at least the vampires couldn't bite her. As for what else they might be able to do to her, she'd have to trust Kismet's warding and take the plunge into whatever the rest of the night might hold.

At least it wouldn't be boring.

* * *

After changing into her uniform -- which was, of course, made from the same dreaded black PVC that seemed to be the fabric of choice at Black Pearl -- Phaedra met Mr. Charles outside the dressing room.

"You'll need this." He clipped a gold VIP pass to the scanty fabric that passed for the top of her uniform. "No one is allowed downstairs unless they're wearing one of these gold passes."

“What do they have to do to earn one of these passes?” She shrugged uncomfortably in her tight attire. “And what am I supposed to do if I catch an interloper down there? Throw them out myself?”

Mr. Charles barely managed to hide his bemused smile. “There are guards posted downstairs during business hours. They’ll tend to any, erm... interlopers, as you put it. Just notify one of them and they’ll rush to your aid.” The older man’s smile grew, morphing from bemusement to genuine affection. “Now, if you’re ready?” He offered her his arm.

She took the proffered limb gratefully, wondering if it would be too clichéd for her to say she was as ready as she’d ever be. She held on tight as Mr. Charles led her to some stairs.

Chapter 4

At the bottom of the fairly ordinary staircase stood a door of the medieval wood-and-iron variety. Mr. Charles swung the door open with a dramatic flourish.

"Welcome," he said, "to the dungeon."

Phaedra stepped inside the room, conscious of the sound her stiletto heels made on the stone floor. Her senses were instantly alerted to three things... the presence of vampires, the presence of their human servants, and the presence of sex.

"Are you going to give her your collar?" A deep male voice emerged from somewhere within the dimly lit chamber, sending a pleasant shiver down Phaedra's spine.

"Not unless she shows herself worthy," a husky female voice replied in a vaguely eastern European accent. Why did all female vampires have to sound like poorly trained B-movie actresses? Phaedra shook her head.

"Well, girl," the as yet unseen male said, "can you show yourself worthy of pleasing your mistress? Or shall we sell you at our next auction?"

"Come," Mr. Charles said, steering her by the elbow deeper into the dungeon. "If you can handle what you're about to see, I don't think you'll have any trouble working here."

Phaedra opened her mouth, and then shut it before a single sound could squeak out. She couldn't speak. In fact, she might require help remembering to breathe.

The owner of the deep voice was, without a doubt, the embodiment of every fantasy she'd ever had. Over six feet tall with just the right mix of leanness and muscle, he had the kind of body that could make any woman's mouth water.

He was her faceless fantasy man in the flesh... and undead flesh, at that. A vampire, and not one of the newly dead, if her scrambled senses were right. But she

couldn't have remembered her own age at the moment, not with him within her line of sight.

Dark hair tumbled around a chiseled face... a face with just enough imperfection to make it memorable. But it was more than his looks, more than the sexy voice rumbling out of his full, sensual lips.

It was the aura of utter power radiating from him, the air of effortless command. Here was a man who was comfortable being the boss. The alpha wolf, the leader of the pack.

A man who could probably dominate a woman with no hesitation.

His dark eyes met hers, boldly raking her barely clad form before turning to Mr. Charles. "Show our new waitress to her station, please."

Way to dismiss the drooling woman, Phaedra thought with a pang of disappointment.

"This way, Miss." Mr. Charles led her to the small wet bar in the corner of the dungeon.

"There's no alcohol allowed in the dungeon, so you'll be serving synthetic blood to the vampires and bottled water to the others." He gestured to a small brass contraption on the bar's surface. "You'll learn how the blood warmer works soon enough."

Blood warmer... yum-o. Phaedra wrinkled her nose and was about to comment on the total *ewww* factor of heating up synthetic bodily fluids when the male vampire's voice distracted her.

"Now, girl, show us that you're worthy of a collar."

Phaedra's eyes had adjusted to the dark of the dungeon, allowing her to make out two women near the opposite wall. One was a vampire, an old one, tall with dark hair pulled into a high ponytail so tight that it gave her a kind of unnecessary face lift. She leaned against the wall, stark nude except for a pair of black platform heels.

Of course, Phaedra noted, there *was* that flogger in her hand. But didn't that item count more as an accessory than as actual clothing?

The other woman knelt at the vampire's feet, obviously a human. She wore some concoction of black leather straps that covered only the bare essentials, leaving her nude for all intents and purposes. Her wrists and ankles were shackled with... goodness, was that *iron*? Popular myth to the contrary, not all Fey were violently allergic to iron. High order Fey and sidhe were immune to its powers, while the more delicate members of the species, such as Pixies, could be killed by it.

So could half-human members of the Fey family, Phaedra thought, pain stabbing through her heart at the memory of her half-human mother's death.

"Why is the girl shackled with iron?" Phaedra turned to Mr. Charles, letting disapproval bleed into her voice.

"She's one of the submissives Vance trained, and he's showing her to a prospective, erm... buyer." Mr. Charles straightened his brown silk tie. "If Vivica decides to purchase Salima for her slave, Salima will also become the vampire's human servant." Which was all interesting, Phaedra thought, but it didn't answer her question about the use of iron.

"Like that one over there." Phaedra indicated the smaller of two barely clothed men lurking together in the shadows.

"Yes, Eris is Vance's human servant." Mr. Charles nodded.

"The other one is hard to place." Phaedra squinted, trying to get a better look at the dark-skinned, exotic young man. "Not quite a shifter..."

"No, he's not." Mr. Charles smiled. "But you're close. He's a totem."

That nearly made her jaw drop. "You're kidding me."

"I assure you, Miss... I never kid." The older man smiled again.

Had she ever seen a totem in person? Not that she could remember. But... didn't that mean... "I thought only the most powerful vampires could conjure a totem."

"Correct." Reading the surprise on her face, Mr. Charles continued. "Vance is a seventh generation vampire."

"Which means?" Her gaze drifted to the imposing figure across the room. Vance strode around the kneeling Salima like a lion surveying a prime piece of prey.

"Once a vampire has survived seven generations -- meaning, he's lived to see one hundred and twenty human years pass seven times over -- his powers can increase dramatically. He has not only the ability to control an element -- he becomes the complete master of it. He can also conjure a totem, and if his powers are particularly strong, the totem can assume human form with ease." Mr. Charles followed her gaze to the floor show. "Vance's totem is the white tiger, so when he conjures Rakesh, the totem can come in tiger or human form, as Vance wills it."

Impressive powers for a guy who could fill out a pair of black vinyl pants so tight they looked vacuum packed. "What is his element to control?"

Mr. Charles answered with one word. "Iron," he said simply.

Oh, joy. Well, at least it explained the shackles.

"It's time, Salima." Vance managed to address the kneeling girl in a voice both commanding and seductive. "Show Mistress Vivica how you will pleasure her, if you are so lucky as to become her slave."

Phaedra watched with her heart beating in her throat as Salima crawled on all fours to the female vampire. "Mistress, I await your command."

Vivica's beautiful features wore an almost pained look of desire. "Make me come, if you think you can."

Without further ado, Salima positioned herself between the vampire's legs. Her small pink tongue darted between her lips like that of a cat, and she ran the tip of it slowly up Vivica's bare thigh.

Vivica gasped, and planted her legs further apart, leaning against the dungeon wall for support. Salima followed this silent cue, spreading the folds of Vivica's pussy apart, revealing a swollen clit and inner folds slick with arousal.

As the kneeling girl began to flick her tongue against the vampire's clit, Phaedra felt herself getting wet. It wasn't the girl-on-girl action she craved -- not that there was anything wrong with it, but that wasn't her particular thing. It was the way Vivica dominated Salima that made her own juices flow, caused her nipples to harden against the stiff fabric of her uniform.

Salima worked her tongue on Vivica's inner lips, pulling lightly at them with her teeth before returning her attention to the vampire's clitoris. She lapped at it, bringing Vivica almost to the brink of coming before sliding her tongue to the side, running it up and down the wet furrows of the vampire's pussy.

Phaedra wanted to touch herself. She knew Salima had to be dripping with desire, burning with the need to come herself, but her hands were shackled in such a way that any attempts at self-pleasuring would be obvious. Maybe something like that was against the rules for a sub? Did they have to get permission to come?

The mere thought made her own clit hum with desire and her inner walls tighten with anticipation.

Vivica reached out and grabbed Salima's head. "Fuck me with your tongue," the vampire panted. "Make me come or I'll scream so loud the walls of this dungeon will crumble."

Salima slid her tongue into Vivica's wet core, even as the vampire raked her pointed nails across her own hardened nipples. The sounds of Salima's tongue thrusting in and out of Vivica's pussy, the sight of all that nude or partially nude flesh, the smell of sex... Phaedra could feel her own orgasm building, threatening to explode without a single touch.

Just then, Vivica's own cries tore through the room. Her legs trembled as she came, and Phaedra watched as the powerful vampire almost broke into sobs with the urgency of her release.

Just then, Vance's dark gaze snared her from where he stood across the room. She met his eyes boldly. The last thing she should do was to show how turned on she was by these displays of dominance and submission. If he knew she was getting off on the floor show, he'd probably never let her waitress in the dungeon.

Plus, it would give him far too much of an advantage of her to know her own personal turn-on, and an advantage was the last thing any princess liked to give a man.

Especially a man she was drooling over like a thirteen-year-old at a Justin Timberlake concert.

"I think I'll be purchasing Salima," Vivica said in a hoarse voice.

"Mr. Charles will tend to the paperwork in the office." Vance helped Salima to her feet, giving her a sound smack on the ass in the process. "Enjoy your collar, girl. You earned it."

Phaedra frowned as Mr. Charles excused himself to lead Vivica and Salima from the room. Did they really *sell* humans here? How could that be legal?

"She goes of her own free will," Vance said, as if reading her thoughts.

Phaedra's gaze shot up. "I didn't say anything."

He gave her a mocking half-smile. "You didn't have to speak a word. That face of yours said it all." He moved closer to her in that predatory, stalking way of his that was both frightening and arousing all at once. "You disapprove of my little business here?" He made it a question.

"How can you legally sell a human?" She tried to draw back, thankful that she'd retracted her wings before entering the dungeon.

"It's an employment contract, more for show than anything else." He had her effectively pinned against the bar, so close that she could smell the heat rising from his skin... a smell that did things to her, things she'd rather he didn't detect. "The sale part of the Master/slave relationship is legal fiction, something to enhance the fantasy." He reached out and tipped her chin up with his hand. "And we all like a little fantasy, don't we?" She leaned into his touch, fighting the urge to moan. "Even pretty little Fairies who claim to disapprove." His gaze pierced hers. "But you rather enjoyed our show, did you not?"

Before she could voice her denials, the clanking weight of iron shackles formed around her wrists and ankles, courtesy of one seventh generation vampire who stood grinning before her.

Chapter 5

The pretty little Fairy's eyes narrowed to angry slits. "All right, I get that you're a big bad vampire. Now, make these damn things go away." She held up her cuffed wrists in a gesture of protest.

Oh, but he'd love to break this one's fiery spirits. And he had a strong suspicion she'd love it just as much. He could smell the arousal rising from her in intoxicating waves.

Too bad he had a policy about diddling the help. But he might make an exception, just this once. His cock throbbed, agreeing that it sounded like an excellent plan.

"So, you're our new waitress?" He circled her slowly, taking in every inch of her petite form. A tasty little nugget if he'd ever seen one. He wouldn't mind rolling his tongue along that body for a few blissful hours. "I must say, our waitress uniform never looked quite so charming before."

"Thanks for that vital piece of info." She glared at him, a shower of emerald sparks shooting from her eyes.

"There's no need to be hostile about it. You'll find I could make you very happy, if you have submissive inclinations." He traced a finger over her collarbone. "Are you saying you don't dream of being bound, at the mercy of someone else's pleasure?"

"I'm saying that I *really* don't like iron, okay?" She rattled the shackles at him.

"You're too high on the Fairy food chain to be allergic to iron, so that's not it." He raised an eyebrow at her. "What's the problem, then?"

"I just don't like it." She squirmed beneath his gaze. "Unbind me."

He leaned in, close enough that he could smell the sweet fragrance of Fairy blood pulsing beneath her pale skin. "That's not what you really want, is it?"

She let out a hiss. "No, what I want is to go home and have my gnomes give me a foot massage, but since I'm stuck here with you, the least you could do is unshackle me."

He raised an eyebrow. "Your gnomes? You criticize me for indulging my clients in a little fantasy, while you have your own troop of foot rubbing gnomes at home?" He laughed. "Where do you live, little one? Castle Terra Mystica or something?"

He paused a heartbeat, watching as a hot blush spread across her face. "Mother of St. Germain, you *do* live at the castle!" Oh, this was too much. He wanted to double over with laughter. "Who the hell are you, the princess?"

When her beautiful mouth formed a tight frown, he gave in and nearly collapsed with laughter.

"This is too much. St. Germain in heaven, what did I do to deserve this honor?" He could hear Eris and Rakesh laughing in the background. "Her Highness, the most regal princess of Terra Mystica, is going to waitress in a vampire dungeon!" He dropped to one knee before her and took one of her tiny shackled hands in his. "To what do we owe this unexpected royal visit?"

She snatched her hand from his, leaving him vaguely disappointed. He'd enjoyed the touch of her skin. "Get these fucking cuffs off me, or face the consequences."

All right, the joke had gone far enough. He believed in training his subs, pleasuring them until they could take no more, but this one was obviously too much of a spoiled brat to merit his attentions.

He waved his hand in her direction and visualized the iron dissolving. "Done," he said, as the shackles vanished into thin air.

"Thank you." She rubbed her wrists with a scowl in his direction.

"So, my princess --" he began.

"My name is Phaedra," she interrupted.

"Phaedra," he amended, "why are you taking a job as a waitress when you have all the riches of Terra Mystica at your disposal?"

She scuffed the toe of her patent leather stiletto on the floor. "I have my reasons." She peeked at him through lowered eyelashes. "Do I have the job or not?"

Did she? Would he regret bringing a woman who stirred his most primitive and passionate instincts into this realm of sexual bliss, night after night?

Could he keep things between them strictly professional?

Hell, did it matter if he couldn't? He was a vampire -- albeit a powerful one -- and she was a princess. It wasn't like they were going to ride off into the sunset together... or the moonrise, in his case. She'd haul her cute little ass back to the castle where she had gnomes to file her nails and bake soufflés for her, or whatever, and he'd find some nice, sweet, submissive human to fuck. End of story, fade to black, finis.

If this woman wasn't a safe bet for a quick fling, no one was.

"Yes, Phaedra," he said, allowing himself a fang-baring grin. "You have the job."

* * *

Phaedra hummed to herself as she placed a bottle of Vlad's Merlot-flavored synthetic blood in the warmer. Her second night on the job, and she'd already mastered the warmer.

She'd taken a room at the Hotel Ruthven on Mr. Charles' recommendation. Even though the hotel catered specifically to vampires, the rooms were more comfortable than anything else she could've gotten with her limited budget. Besides, the Ruthven was set up for anyone who kept vampire hours, which was handy, considering that she was working nights now.

Not only that, but her neighbors were certainly entertaining. Identical twin female vampires, blond and tragically fashionable in a Stevie Nicks sort of way. One did all the talking for both of them. What were their names? Malice and... somethingorother. Veronica? Yeah, that was it. At least life at the Ruthven wouldn't be dull.

The dungeon was empty except for her and Rakesh, whom she watched with a nervous eye. She wasn't sure how she'd handle it if he suddenly morphed into a white tiger right there before her eyes.

The sound of footsteps alerted her -- Vance was coming downstairs. She'd seen the schedule for the evening, and a vampire named -- oddly enough -- Dom was supposed to audition one of Vance's subs. The knowledge that she was about to witness who knew what kind of sexual acts had Phaedra on edge. What if it turned her on the way last night's display had done? She wasn't even into other chicks, and the sight of Salima going at Vivica's pussy with her tongue was enough to make even the straightest straight girl come like a house on fire. What would watching a man and woman do to her?

Vance entered the room, his presence hitting Phaedra like a physical blow. Why, why, *why* did she have to want this man? He was her boss, he dominated people for a living... hello, recipe for disaster.

A huge vampire, around 6'4" with impossibly wide shoulders, followed Vance into the dungeon. "Care for a Vlad's, Dom?" Vance gestured to the wet bar as if Phaedra were invisible.

The other vampire shrugged, the fabric of his black cape rippling over his broad back. "No, I think I'll wait for the real thing." Dom smiled, exposing fully ejected fangs. Phaedra rolled her eyes. Why didn't he just flop out his erection, while he was at it?

As if on cue, Dom tossed his cape aside, revealing said erection clad in nothing but a black scrap of underwear so tiny it *had* to have come from Europe. Other than black Doc Marten boots riding his legs, he wore nothing else.

"As you wish." Vance nodded and stepped over to the intercom by the door. "Eris, bring Julia down, please."

The air in the room was suddenly electric with anticipation. Phaedra's nipples hardened obligingly. It had to be some sort of cosmic joke to watch her most secret fantasies acted out while she was in exile from her real life... not to mention while she was supposed to be *working*.

She could hear the rattle of shackles approaching. The *only* thing about this scene that didn't turn her on was the constant sight of iron. Of course, that made perfect sense

for someone who'd lost her mother to soup cooked in an iron pot by a treacherous servant.

Eris opened the door to the dungeon and brought in the shackled Julia, who wore the same next-to-nothing black strap garb Salima had worn the night before. She took her place on her knees beside Vance with her legs apart. Her hands rested on her thighs, palms up, her head down, her gaze directed at the floor.

Yet for all this subjugated posturing, Phaedra could sense the girl's arousal. Arousal, hell... Julia was horny as fuck.

"She's a beauty, Vance." Dom did the whole circle-the-prey thing, but without the sheer animal grace Vance possessed. "Where did you find her?" Dom wrapped a handful of Julia's glossy blond curls around his fingers.

"I'm not about to reveal my sources." Vance smiled, reminding Phaedra of those old television commercials where Colonel Sanders discussed his secret blend of eleven herbs and spices.

"Very well, then." Dom took a step back from Julia. "Shall we?"

"By all means." Vance made a sweeping gesture. "Do you require anything in the way of toys?"

"Rise, girl." Dom snapped his fingers at Julia, who stood obligingly. He cupped her breasts in his hands, letting their weight rest against his palms. "Let's get some clamps on these pretty nipples." He rolled one between his fingers, and it hardened to a taut point. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"If it would bring you pleasure, Master." Julia kept her gaze down, but Phaedra knew she wanted the clamps.

Damn, why hadn't she thought to include nipple clamps in one of her masturbation marathons?

Rakesh appeared with a tray of toys. Dildos, butt plugs, clamps of various descriptions all displayed as proudly as pastries on a dessert cart. Dom selected a set of clamps, attaching the clovers to Julia's nipples, and then dropped to his knees in front of her.

"Spread your legs," he commanded. "I'm going to clamp your clit, and if I catch you touching yourself, you'll get ten strokes of the whip."

"Wait," Phaedra interrupted. All four men in the room turned to look at her as if they'd forgotten she was in the room.

"I have a question," she continued.

"We're waiting with bated breath," Vance replied, a sparkle of something like admiration in his dark eyes.

"Well... it's just... what about Julia? When does she get... you know... sexual satisfaction?" She looked at Dom, then at Vance.

"You worry that the submissives are denied pleasure," Vance said, rubbing his chin.

"Well, aren't they?" She put her hands on her hips.

"Watch and learn, little one." Vance chuckled. "Watch and learn."

Dom joined Vance's laughter as he fastened the clamp to Julia's clitoris. "Now, girl." He backed up until he was against the wall. "Suck my cock."

Julia dropped to her knees in front of him, and slid Dom's briefs down until he could step out of them and kick them aside. She reached out and wrapped her hand around the base of his cock, licking her lips with obvious anticipation.

That single gesture was almost enough to make Phaedra come right then and there.

The room went silent other than the wet sounds of Julia's mouth sliding up and down Dom's cock. She took the vampire deep into her throat, then slid him slowly back out again, lapping at the head with the tip of her tongue.

"Enough," Dom groaned. Julia released his cock with a popping sound. "Get on the table." Julia stood and ran to the closer of the two tables that stood on the other side of the room. "Boys, bind her."

Eris and Rakesh moved to obey without a word. Julia settled onto her back, and the two men fastened her cuffed wrists and ankles to the corners of the table so that her arms were above her head and her legs were far apart.

Dom positioned himself between her legs, tugging at the chain that connected her nipples to her clit. Julia let out a faint moan. "You suck a fine cock, girl. Did you see those plugs on the tray?"

"Yes, Master." Julia's hips rolled involuntarily, and even from a distance Phaedra could see the gush of fluid between the other woman's legs.

"She's been preparing for this moment," Vance said as Rakesh brought the tray over.

Dom selected a plug and glanced up. "Lube?"

"It's under the bar." Vance looked at Phaedra.

With unsteady hands, she fished the bottle of lubricant out from beneath the bar and handed it to Vance. When his fingers brushed against hers, the electrical shock almost made her knees buckle.

Dom covered the plug with lube and slowly slid it into the tight opening in Julia's backside. "You worry that the slaves are denied pleasure?" Dom looked at Phaedra. "Does this one look unhappy?"

Julia's pussy was soaked, her nipples looked harder than granite, and a sexual flush covered her entire body. No, Phaedra had to admit, not exactly unhappy.

And then, without warning, Dom shoved his thick cock into Julia's waiting core. She let out a moan and thrust her hips.

"Move like that again, and your backside will regret it." He slid out slowly, then thrust back in with such force that the table beneath them shook.

Phaedra watched the action, her own body pained with need. Dom fucked Julia mercilessly, pounding her pussy like a battering ram. "Boys," he panted, "suck her nipples."

Eris and Rakesh moved in closer, each taking one of Julia's swollen nipples between his lips.

It was too much. The suction caused the chain to pull at the clit clamp, and the sensations of Dom's cock and the plug combined would've sent anyone over the edge. "Master..." Julia thrashed beneath the three men, "...may this girl come now, please?"

"On the count of three, girl." Dom thrust into her. "One..."

Rakesh reached down to rub Julia's clit frantically. Dom slid out and slammed back into her. "Two..."

Eris released her nipple and ran his tongue over the seam of her lips. Julia met it with her own tongue.

Dom slid out once more, his cock glistening wet. "Three!"

Julia came, her entire body racked with spasms. Dom followed, pumping into her like a man possessed as he filled her with his come.

It had become unbearable to watch this and not find release. Phaedra slid her hand under the skirt of her uniform, finding her panties drenched.

"Master," Eris turned to Vance. "I need to come, too."

"Be my guest." Vance regarded the sated forms of Julia and Dom on the table. "Although I don't believe Dom will be sharing Julia from now on."

"This one will wear my collar home tonight." Dom kissed Julia in a frenzy of tangled tongues.

"I don't need Julia to make me come." Eris shed his black jeans, leaving him nude and erect. "Rakesh?"

The darker man shed his clothes as well, and grabbed the bottle of lube from the spot on the floor where Dom had left it. "I want you." Rakesh glanced at Vance, who nodded his consent.

Phaedra's fingers zeroed in on her clit, circling it slowly, praying that the bar effectively concealed her actions.

The two men met in a heated kiss, the hardness of their bodies intertwining in a spectacle Phaedra found hopelessly erotic. She watched as Eris sucked Rakesh's tongue into his mouth. Rakesh wrapped his hand around Eris' cock, pumping it slowly until it grew even harder.

Dom unshackled Julia and slid back into her. Julia wrapped her legs around him, undulating as he fucked her again.

Rakesh bent over the other table. Phaedra held her breath, watching as Eris covered his cock with a slick coating of lube. Then, inch by inch, he slid it into Rakesh's backside.

Rakesh threw his head back and groaned, supporting himself with one hand against the table while he used his free hand to knead his cock.

Eris pumped his hips, thrusting in and out of Rakesh's ass, each lubricated inch vanishing and then reappearing with every thrust.

Phaedra gave up. There was no fighting it. Everyone in the room was going to come. She rubbed her clit harder. Everyone was going to come... except...

She opened her eyes as orgasm claimed her, only to find Vance watching her with intent interest. She came with his eyes on her, her voice breaking on his name as she found the ultimate release.

Chapter 6

"Let go!" Phaedra struggled against his grip as he dragged her into the small storage room next to the dungeon. Vance knew he could end her pointless protests with a little iron around her hands and feet, but since she hated it so much he'd have to do without it.

"Not until we discuss what just happened." He pulled her into the musty room and slammed the door behind them.

"Look, I know that buttering my muffin on the job isn't exactly professional behavior, okay? But, Vance..." Her eyes filled with tears. Oh, dear St. Germain, not tears. He could bear anything else from a woman but that. He'd gladly walk into the sun to stop a woman he cared about from crying.

Wait, a woman he cared about? *What?*

"I need this job." A perfect tear rolled down her flawless cheek. "I can't go back home a failure. Please, Vance, give me another chance."

"Making poems with my name won't help you at all." He brushed the tear from her cheek before he could stop himself. "But firing you isn't the issue."

"It's not?" She snuffled.

"No. In fact, I'd like to promote you." He couldn't prevent a smile from spreading across his face. "I'd like to train you to be my slave for exhibition."

"Wha... what?" She took a step back. "I'm a member of the royal family. I have to go back home someday and assume my duties. I can't be anyone's *slave*."

"I'm talking about training you to show my skills as a dominant when we have our exhibit in a few weeks. I won't own you, and you'll be free to come and go as you please, but you'll get a substantial pay raise and the chance to do something that obviously turns you on."

"You don't know what turns me on." She crossed her arms over her chest, pouting in a way that drew his attention to her full, suck-able lips.

"I think I could find out, if you gave me a chance." He bent down, forcing her to meet his gaze. "Admit that you want to be dominated, Phaedra. Just give in to it."

"So what if I do? That doesn't mean I want to do it in public."

He considered her words. Beneath that girly girl exterior beat the heart of a flaming exhibitionist if he'd ever seen one, but one step at a time.

She'd be worth it. Of that he had no doubt.

"Just try one session with me, in private." He ran his hands over her bare upper arms, warming himself with her flesh. He hadn't fed all night, not wanting to walk around with an erection during Julia's audition, and the thought of sinking his teeth into Phaedra's pale skin while her hot Fey blood flowed over his lips...

"All right." Her agreement startled him. "One session, no intercourse, no promises."

No intercourse? He'd see about that. "Name the date."

"Tomorrow night after closing. That'll give us two hours before dawn." She turned to leave. "Don't be late."

He watched her stride back into the dungeon, his fangs already ejected in anticipation.

Something inside him... some instinct so primitive that it couldn't be put into words... told him that this woman was it, in more ways than one.

Not only could she be the sub of his dreams and his sexual soulmate... Phaedra just might be his destiny.

* * *

"You headed back to the Ruthven?"

Phaedra forced a smile for Tamara, one of the subs Vance was training for a member of the Vampire Court. "No, I'm going to Transylvania Towers."

To meet Vance and become his slave, she added silently to herself, at least until sunrise.

"I'm just headed out for a smoke." Tamara gave her a knowing smile. "Have fun." With that, the petite redhead vanished into the dark confines of the club.

Goodness, did everyone know she was headed out for some unbridled sex action? Scratch that... there might very well be bridles involved, she thought with a grimace.

She stepped out of the front door of Black Pearl, into the chill of pre-dawn darkness. She'd changed into street clothes, leaving the skimpy waitress uniform in her locker back at the club, and put a warm trench coat over everything. Who knew what Vance would have her wear when she got to his penthouse?

"Goodnight, Royce," she said to the club's bouncer. He was the last one to leave after their 4:00 AM closing, always staying behind until every female employee and guest had left the club, offering to walk them to their cars or to hail a cab if needed. Since the Hotel Ruthven was only a few short blocks away, Phaedra usually walked back alone, or with Malice and Veronica if she ran into them. But tonight, she'd need a cab to the high-rise tower where Vance made his home, a building that provided the high security, reinforced crypts, and blackout window treatments vampires tended to prefer in their daytime retreats.

"Vance sent a car for you," Royce replied, pointing across the street where a black Lincoln limousine sat purring.

Phaedra had ridden in her share of limousines -- after all, she and her family met with almost every royal delegation that came to the Houston area, and limousines were standard fare at those sorts of events. But the fact that Vance thought enough of her comfort to send one made her feel...

Well, it made her feel more than she wanted to feel, especially for this man who would be seeing her in various states of undress before the night was over.

She crossed the street and smiled at the uniformed driver when he stepped out of the car to open her door.

It promised to be an amazing ride... in more ways than one.

* * *

The elevator doors slid silently open with the kind of well-oiled precision one would expect in a luxury high-rise. Despite having a cheesy name like Transylvania Towers, the place was almost unbearably elegant, even to Phaedra's refined sense of style.

And Vance had the penthouse? How well did being a pro Dom pay, anyway?

She stepped out onto the plush carpet of the entrance hall, which was tastefully illuminated by a crystal chandelier. There was only one door, and it had to belong to Vance. Steeling herself, Phaedra pressed the doorbell.

It opened instantly, a smiling female vampire in full Goth attire on the other side of the threshold. "You must be Phaedra."

Wow, someone must've spiked her fake blood with caffeine, Phaedra mused. "Yes, um..." *I'm here to be dominated?* No, that didn't sound right. "Vance is expecting me."

"I'm here to prep you for your session." The vampire smiled again, her fangs managing to look somehow perky. "I'm Penny Dreadful, by the way."

It *had* to be a stage name, but whatever. "Prep me?"

"Yes, follow me." Penny led the way through the foyer into a beautifully decorated living room. They passed through it into another hallway replete with the prerequisite oriental rugs and chandeliers and stopped when they reached a door.

"This is the dressing room." Penny flung the door open.

It certainly was a dressing room... better than the one she had back at the castle. Two walls were covered with floor to ceiling mirrors. Racks of costumes stood in the middle of the floor, along with chairs and footstools. Finally, a dressing table with a massive makeup mirror occupied the third wall.

"Your makeup is fine, so I'll just help you change into your gear and take you to the dungeon." Penny marched over to the rack and began flipping through the garment bags.

"He has a dungeon here?" Phaedra sat down on one of the overstuffed chairs and kicked her shoes off.

"Oh, yeah." Penny laughed. "But I'm not allowed to tell you anything else."

Phaedra forced a smile, trying not to mind that Morticia over there knew so much about Vance's home life. "How do you know Vance?" That was a nice way of asking about Penny's involvement with him, wasn't it? As nice as Phaedra felt like being about it, anyway.

"I'm his personal assistant." Penny pulled a garment bag from the rack. "You know, like a secretary. I'm putting myself through school."

"Oh, so you must not have been..." Phaedra stopped herself, blushing.

"You're right." Penny laughed. "I haven't been undead for very long. I became a vampire three years ago, when I was twenty-four."

There had to be a story there, but as long as she wasn't sleeping with Vance, Phaedra could wish the girl well.

"Now, let's get you ready." Penny flashed a fanged smile. "You know the pleasure pose, right?"

Phaedra nodded, a rush of panic knotting in her stomach. What was more frightening... the idea of never getting her ultimate fantasy? Or knowing that her ultimate fantasy stood on the other side of the wall?

She took a deep breath and rose to her feet for Penny to dress her.

Chapter 7

Phaedra knelt on the floor of Vance's twenty-third floor dungeon, thighs apart, her hands resting on them palms up, and her head down. The floor was a glossy mosaic tile, and the walls were all mirrored.

All the better for her to see herself, posed like a slave, waiting to be taken in hand.

The sound of Vance's familiar footsteps caused every muscle in her body to tense. Her heart banged in her chest like a percussion instrument run amuck. Could he, with his acute vampire senses, hear her wild pulse? Could he sense her excitement, the heady mix of fear and anticipation burning through her blood like an intoxicant?

Did he know that she was already wet, the juices of her arousal threatening to run down her legs before he'd so much as touched her?

"Well, well." Vance stopped in front of her. "I've seen many women in this pose, but none quite so appealing as you, Phaedra."

"This girl is honored by your compliments." She'd hung around the dungeon enough to know how to do sub-talk, but had never imagined it would be quite so... well... *hot*.

"Stand." Vance stepped back, and she rose to her feet obligingly.

"Mmm, Phaedra. What will I do with you first?" He touched her shoulder with a cat o' nine tails, letting the leather tendrils snake down her almost bare breast. The outfit he'd selected for her was a slight variation of the house garb for slaves at Black Pearl, the only difference being that hers was pink instead of black, and there were cutouts exposing her nipples -- nipples which hardened as the silky leather strands passed over them.

"I'd like to have you on the spanking bench first." He gave her a slight thwack on the backside with the cat o' nine tails. "Go to it and bend over, please."

She'd already noticed the bench -- it was hard to miss. She went and bent over it, noting that the bench had been lowered to fit a person of short stature.

He'd planned to have her over the bench all along, and had thought of her comfort once again. She quickly smothered a smile, but the knowledge made her heart flutter with an emotion separate from all the other feelings thrumming through her.

Vance joined her at the bench, cuffing her ankles and wrists to it quickly. "No iron tonight, as I promised," he said under his breath. "Phaedra," he continued in his usual commanding tone, "if you intend to be a good slave, you must learn to accept discipline." She could hear him crossing the room to the wall where a boggling assortment of toys hung.

"This girl is ready to accept whatever discipline you see fit to give her, Master." Was that true? Could she really handle whatever he felt like dishing out? They'd discussed limits ahead of time and agreed on a safe word, but still, she was putting more than her sexual pleasure in his hands. He had control over the entire scene, not to mention her body and mind.

"Count for me, Phaedra," he said from behind her. She felt the gentle lash of a flogger against her backside.

"One," she replied, feeling blood rushing lower in her body in response to the first lashing.

He struck her ass again.

"Two," she responded, gasping as he dragged the tails of the flogger over her pussy.

He lashed her again, this time harder. The sting hovered on the line between pleasure and pain, making her hyper-aware of her ass. "Three..."

He struck once more. "Four." As she voiced the number, he stroked her wet slit with the end of the flogger.

Another stroke of the whip, this one much harder. "Five," she gasped.

"That ass of yours looks ripe for fucking." She winced as he squirted cold lube over the tight opening in her backside.

"As you wish, Master." She held her breath, waiting. The tip of a glass dildo probed at her untried entrance.

She'd had plenty of sex in her lifetime, but until now, her backside had been exit-only. She breathed out and willed herself to relax.

He slid it in deeper, cautiously gaining another inch. It was cool, smooth, and impossibly hard. New nerve endings seemed to awaken as the dildo passed over them. She let out a shuddering breath and bent over the bench further.

Something about that shudder allowed Vance to finish pushing the glass phallus into her. She felt it deep inside her, creating a pleasurable sense of fullness she'd never experienced before.

"Excellent." Vance smacked her ass with the palm of his hand, and then let out a pained shout.

"What happened?" Phaedra had felt some sort of electrical charge pass through her when he smacked her.

"Your skin," he shouted with pain in his voice. "Somehow it burned me!"

Chapter 8

Vance held up his blistered palm to examine it. Being a vampire -- and a seventh generation vamp, at that -- he'd heal within minutes. But what the hell had happened to cause the burn in the first place?

"Let me see it." Phaedra craned her neck awkwardly, trying to see him from her cuffed position.

He walked around to the front of the spanking bench and held his palm at eye level for her.

"Oh, no." She closed her eyes and groaned. "I think I know what happened."

"What?" He could hardly wait to hear her explanation. He'd known the evening would hold some surprises, but this took the proverbial cake.

"My cousin and some of her friends sort of... warded me." She scrunched her face.

"Warded you against what?" he asked, although he could make a pretty good guess.

"Vampire attacks," she said in a small voice.

Mother of St. Germain. "And who is your cousin?"

"The Dominion *Sidhe* of Summer." She opened one eye to peer at him.

His little Fairy sub had friends -- or cousins, as it were -- in high places.

"And who were these friends of hers?"

She paused for a beat. "The Dominion *Sidhe* of the other three seasons." She grimaced. "I guess the ward saw that smack on the ass as an attack."

"We'll stick to toys, then, and leave the hand to hand combat for another time." He had to smile at her discomfort over burning him, although smiling over the cuteness

of a sub wasn't something that normally happened during a session... at least not for him.

Every danger signal he had should be going off. Do not mix business with pleasure. Do not get emotionally invested in subs. Do not pass go.

But this one was brave. She'd left the secure digs at the castle to make it on her own. That took guts, and he respected guts, even when they came in a sexy little package.

Okay, he admitted to himself, the sexy little package was hardly a strike against her. But still, the girl had brass, and he had to admire that. Like the way she'd stood up for Julia, demanding sexual pleasure for subs everywhere.

Brass. A good quality, no matter how you looked at it.

But, he thought, returning to the present moment, time to get back to the matter at hand... literally.

"Anything else I should know about?" He returned to the rear of the spanking bench, admiring her raised ass. No, the sexy little package was not a bad thing. Not at all.

"I'm also warding against vampire bites," she said from the opposite side of the bench.

His cock softened a notch. He'd dreamt of tasting her sweet Fairy blood as he pumped his cock into her, filling her with his come even as she filled his mouth with her life essence. "Even a bite done as an act of pleasure?" He raked the tails of the flogger over her back, unfastening her costume with his other hand.

"Since vampire mojo doesn't work on Fairies, I'm not sure how much pleasure I'd actually get out of a bite."

He pulled the costume loose and tossed it aside, leaving her nude except for her pink patent spiked heels and cuffs. "You might be surprised by the answer to that question." He selected a harness from the table designed to hold the dildo securely in her ass while allowing free access to that succulent pussy of hers, and fastened it around her.

"This girl is willing to try, Master," she said, indicating that she was ready to return to play.

"Later." He bent down to unfasten her ankle cuffs then did the same for her wrists. "Right now, I think the thing you need is to get on the bed." He swung her into his arms and carried her to the custom made BDSM bed, which was basically a leather covered table with built in restraints, a more luxurious version of the ones in the dungeon at the club.

"As you wish, Master." She closed her eyes and sighed as he placed her on the bed and fastened the restraints, securing her wrists above her head and planting her ankles far apart.

Her entire body was nude save for the harness and displayed for his enjoyment, from the small globes of her breasts to the narrow strip of pink curls guarding her entrance. She was a living, breathing, all you could eat buffet of pleasures, and he was ready to snack all night long.

But this was her fantasy. Being a Dom meant knowing exactly how to give your sub what she wanted, to somehow reach inside her soul and touch her most secret desires.

He could do that for her. And he knew exactly how to begin.

Turning to the table of toys, he chose a set of clover clamps with a Y chain that would connect to her clit. He fastened the nipple clamps first, adjusting the tension carefully so he could tighten them later. She shifted on the table, her approval of the clamps showing itself in the rapid rise and fall of her chest.

Moving lower, he faced her exposed pussy, her tiny but hard clitoris, and her small but fully engorged inner lips. It was almost too tempting to run his tongue over her. He wanted to taste her juices, to feel her clit throb beneath his tongue. But not quite yet. He knew such pleasures needed to be earned in order for her to get the full experience of submission.

He fastened the clamp to her clit, tightening it only enough to make her aware of it, then stood back to survey his work with satisfaction.

"Something's missing here." He ran his hands over her inner thighs, feeling the muscles tremble beneath them. "I think a little double penetration is in order."

"This girl would welcome it," she answered, her voice shaky with need.

He took a thick pink silicone dildo from the selection of toys, and coated it with lube, even though she was wet enough to render lubricant unnecessary. "You must ask me for it nicely, Phaedra."

"Fuck this girl with the dildo, Master." She arched her hips for emphasis. "Please."

He slid the glossy tip of the dildo over her slit, using it to apply pressure to her clit. She squirmed, her legs shaking as he circled the tiny clamped nub with the head of the dildo.

Before she could come from the clitoral stimulation, he slid the head of the dildo into her, watching her entrance stretch as it breached her. Vance felt his cock harden to an unbearable degree. He would've given anything at that moment to shove himself into her, to feel her wet heat enveloping his cock, tightening around him until she milked every sweet drop of his come...

He shook his head, erasing the mental image. Steadying his hand, he slid the dildo further into her, gliding into her drenched core until it was buried inside her with only the bare end of it accessible to him.

She spread her legs further, and the silent invitation burned inside him. He wanted her, not only as her master, but as her lover. Subs would come and go -- both literally and figuratively -- but there was something about Phaedra that made him want... *more*. Maybe it was because a princess didn't have to submit to anyone about anything, ever. The gift of her free will in this instance was the rarest gift he'd ever been given, both as a Dom and as a man.

But she hadn't even agreed to have actual sex with him, to allow him inside her... she only wanted play.

So play he'd give her.

He eased the dildo out slowly with one hand, tugging on the Y chain with the other, pulling it at just the right angle for her to feel it in both nipples as well as her clit. She let out a strangled cry.

"Remember, Phaedra, you are not to come until I've given my consent." He slammed the dildo back into her shuddering pussy.

"Yes," she panted.

He slid the dildo back out again, this time all the way, sliding the tip over her clit for good measure. "Yes, what?"

"Yes, Master," she replied. He hid a smile. Damn, she'd done it again... made him lose his Dom mindset long enough to observe how adorable she was.

Just for that, he shoved the dildo into her to the hilt. "Do you think you'd like to come soon, Phaedra?"

"Yes, Master." She opened her eyes, watching with dilated pupils as he circled around to the head of the bed to tighten the clamps on her nipples, giving each swollen bud a flick of his tongue. Damn but she tasted good. What wouldn't he give to take those nipples into his mouth and suck them until she shattered like china in his arms?

He rose from her body, finding his lips inches from hers. They hadn't agreed on kissing. He couldn't close those few inches between them and claim her lips with his. But his cock wanted that kiss to happen.

More than that, his heart wanted the kiss. It was crazy. It was a disaster waiting to happen. It was probably the biggest mistake he could make, but there it was, staring him in the face with a pair of emerald eyes he could lose himself in forever.

His heart wanted the kiss.

His heart was beginning to want *her*.

It was a line he couldn't afford to cross.

He moved back to the other end of the table with vampire speed and removed the harness. "I'm going to begin counting... you may come on the count of three."

He took a double headed dildo from the table of toys, and after carefully sliding the glass phallus out of her ass, he slid both heads of the new dildo into her -- one in her tight core and one in her ass.

Double penetration at its finest.

Gripping the handle of the toy, he eased them both slowly out. Before she had a chance to adjust to the emptiness, he thrust them back in to the hilt.

She thrashed on the table, eyes screwed shut, head tossing from side to side as he continued fucking her with the dildos. He could feel her orgasm building, even as pre-come leaked from his cock in a steady stream.

A flush spread across her pale skin, and her pussy had become completely soaked. It clenched around the toys inside her, making it more difficult for him to thrust them in and out smoothly.

"One..." He pulled at the clamp chain, increasing the pace of the thrusts.

"Two..." He moved his free hand down, tugging on her clit clamp with his fingers, grinding the dildos into her. She was going to come, and it would be a damn miracle if he didn't, too.

He'd lost his perfect control, the wall around his emotions that kept him from getting too involved with his subs crumbling before his eyes like a sand castle caught by the tide. He needed that wall. It had helped him to endure well over eight hundred years on this Godforsaken planet. Lose the wall, start identifying with non-vampires too much, and you'd want to die when they did. Immortality required that wall, and he wasn't about to surrender it, no matter how much Phaendra tempted him.

He had to get it back, somehow, some way...

"Three."

She came in a blaze of emerald sparks. Her body wrenched on the table with the power of her orgasm. He thrust the toys inside her slowly through the aftershocks, wanting nothing so much as to join her, to find completion together. As Dom and sub, as Master and slave... as man and woman.

“Vance...” She broke the spell of their scene, calling him by his name instead of master. Somehow, it felt right.

“Yes?” He leaned over her, gripping the bed with his hands to keep himself from touching her.

“I changed my mind about our limits.” She met his gaze with heat shimmering in her eyes. “I want you to fuck me.”

Chapter 9

Phaedra held her breath, waiting. If he said no, it would be more rejection than she could handle. She wanted -- no, she *needed* this too much, and if he said no...

He paused, his face immobile. Her heart sank to somewhere below sea level, and her mind raced to find the right words, words that would somehow ease the awkwardness of being turned down for sex while being cuffed to a bed, naked and spread eagle.

Suddenly he moved at blinding speed, removing the dildos and unfastening the cuffs. "Come here." He pulled her to a sitting position, bringing her down to the end of the table.

"Unzip me." He looked down at his fly.

She did as he ordered with shaking hands, freeing him of the black leather pants that had so effectively restrained a massive and very flattering erection.

He'd gotten that hard just from playing with her? Her heart rolled over in a rush of feminine pride. But the feel of his lips on her neck derailed that train of thought, blurring her senses until her awareness had narrowed only to his skin against hers.

She arched her back, offering him her still clamped breasts. He lowered his head, reading her signals as if they'd done this a thousand times before. Taking a clamped nipple between his lips, he flicked it with his tongue, sucking it slowly until it throbbed with painful pleasure.

He pushed her back onto the table and shed his pants completely, leaving his entire muscled form and thick erection nude. She wanted to touch him, to knead those taut muscles with her bare hands, to feel his cock filling her mouth. But she would wait until he gave her permission to taste the full menu of his body, even if it killed her.

She didn't have much time to mourn her limitations, though... not with him lowering his head to lick his way down her body, raking her skin with his fangs.

Apparently the ward had no problem with fang to skin contact.

When he reached her mound, he stopped to tighten the clamp on her painfully swollen clit. "Sit up."

She obeyed.

"Wrap your legs around me." He helped her, placing his hands on the backs of her thighs. "I'm about to fuck you senseless."

"Please, Master." She threw her head back as the head of his cock touched her entrance.

"Brace yourself." He used one hand to guide his cock into her, and the other to pull at the chain, causing a sensory overload that almost fried her circuits.

He pushed himself further into her, until he was seated balls-deep in her tight channel. "Can you tighten around me?" His breath came in short gasps. "Do you know how to do that?"

She flexed her inner walls around his cock. "Like this?"

"Oh, God... I'm going to come." He closed his eyes.

She felt a vague stirring of disappointment, wanting to prolong the intimacy of having him deep inside her. But he seemed to gain some measure of his control, because he slid out of her, gliding back in with perfect precision.

The ridge of his cock brushed the sweet spot on the upper wall of her core as he thrust into her. She tightened around him on the outstroke, arching her hips to feel every inch of him sliding out of her.

They found a rhythm, hips pumping furiously as the crown of his cock stroked the spot inside her guaranteed to make her come. He bent her back over the table, licking her breasts even as he pounded into her pussy until the tip of his cock touched her cervix.

She was going to come with his cock inside her, filling her through every blissful contraction. The knowledge sent her over the edge, her pussy spasming around him

until he followed her, spurting his come deep inside her, deeper than she'd ever imagined possible.

She fell back onto the table, and he joined her, falling into her arms. As she stroked his damp shoulders, she knew they'd somehow crossed a line.

Going back to whatever they were before would be almost impossible. But the question was... where did they go from here?

* * *

She didn't have long to wonder.

"Get up." Vance climbed down from the table, already fully erect again.

She followed, knowing she would be sore in entirely new ways the next night.

"On your hands and knees, please." She did as he asked, keeping her gaze fixed to the floor. She could hear him gathering something from the selection of toys on the wall before he rejoined her. Without a word, he spread her ankles apart and cuffed them, locking them into place to create the perfect doggie style angle. She'd seen the spreader used often enough at the club to know that he'd just put one on her, which could only mean one thing.

He was going to take her from behind, just like in her fantasies.

"Touch the floor with your forehead." He knelt behind her. The instant her head touched the tile below, she felt him enter her with one smooth thrust.

It was hard not to throw her head back and groan with the sheer bliss of it. He filled her so perfectly, his cock molding to her inner walls as if it had been created for the purpose. When he slid out of her and back in again, using his fingers to reach around and rub her clit, she knew she'd found the sexual partner she'd always longed for.

The problem was, she knew he could become more than that. In some irrevocable way, he already had.

Her nipples ground against the cool tile floor as he fucked her, his hand stroking her clit in perfect time with his thrusts. She braced herself against the floor, almost knocked forward from the power of each delicious movement of his hips.

When he withdrew from her without warning, she whimpered in protest. "Keep your head down," he ordered. She obeyed, her pleasure-addled mind dimly wondering what would happen next.

The feeling of lube sliding over her ass gave her a hint. She could feel the tip of his cock seeking entrance, and she deepened her bent position in response. He worked his cock into her ass slowly, gaining every inch carefully until she could feel the entire length of him inside her.

"God, Phaedra... your ass could launch a thousand ships."

She stifled a laugh at the compliment. "This girl wants nothing more than to be fucked in the ass by her Master."

"I can't think of anything I'd rather do." With that, he withdrew slowly.

They recaptured their earlier rhythm, each thrust bringing her closer to another climax. Vance reached between her legs and deftly unfastened the clamp on her clit, sending her into the throes of another mind-bending orgasm.

She came, her body shuddering around him, quivering until he came again too, filling her ass with his come.

This time they fell onto the floor together. She could hear her own heartbeat pounding in her ears, mingled with the sound of his rapid breathing. She turned her head to meet his gaze and saw a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"I have a surprise for you." The smile revealed fully ejected fangs.

"I can't imagine what could surprise me after what we just did." She held still while he released her from the spreader, and then rolled onto her back, exhausted. She was -- to coin a phrase -- all fucked out.

"You might want to reserve judgment on that." He stood up and vanished into the dressing room, returning a second later with a pink box in his hands.

"For you, should you decide to accept my offer." He placed the box beside her.

Phaedra sat up and opened the box. Nestled in pink tissue paper she found a pink collar.

"Do you like it?" His voice held a note of expectation. "I wanted it to match your hair."

"It's like the house collars you give the subs at Black Pearl, but pink." She turned it over in her hands. "And studded with rhinestones." She arched her brows at him. "Impressive."

"*Those*, my princess, are not rhinestones." He took the collar from her hands and knelt behind her, sweeping her hair over her shoulder in a gesture that made her want him all over again, aching muscles and all. "*Those* are diamonds." He paused. "The question is, will you wear it?" He held it up to her neck. "Will you let me be your Master?"

She let out a giggle. "You know me... I can't resist new jewelry."

He fastened the collar around her neck and drew her against him for a kiss that she knew would lead to more... and she wanted more.

She wanted everything he could give her.

Chapter 10

Phaedra staggered out of the elevator and onto the fourth floor of the Hotel Ruthven only a few minutes before dawn. After the blissful hours she'd spent with Vance, she wanted nothing more than to curl up beneath the blanket on her bed in room 416 and dream of her vampire master.

But the sounds of distressed voices met her ears as she trudged down the hall, and by the time she got to room 414, she could see the source.

Veronica and Malice, the ubiquitous blond identical twins, stood outside their room with the Ruthven's human manager. Both of the vampires' faces were streaked with blood-tinged tears.

"But we don't have any money right now," Veronica sobbed.

The human manager threw his hands up. "I'm sorry... I simply can't extend your credit any further."

"You would throw us out to meet the dawn?" Veronica jabbed an accusing finger at the manager. "You would sign our death warrants?"

"I would send you down the block to the Order of St. Germain." The manager heaved a sigh. "They run a shelter for vampires in need of a daytime retreat."

"A homeless shelter!" Veronica launched into fresh sobs. "How could you do this to Malice? You know of her delicate nature!"

Malice dabbed at her eyes decorously with a lace-trimmed handkerchief.

"Look..." the manager sighed again, "...Melaina is no longer the empress at court here, which means she's lost her royal privileges. She can't run up an indefinite tab here anymore, and unfortunately..." His gaze darted from one twin to the other. "And unfortunately, you ladies were on that tab." He scrubbed his forehead with his

hand. "When you make other payment arrangements, I'll be happy to have you back. But until then, I simply can't keep you on Melaina's tab one more day."

"But we don't have an empress now!" Veronica cried. "That wretched Eden the dhampire has ruined *everything*!" More sobs. "*Everything*!"

Because saying it once, apparently, was not enough.

Phaedra stepped between the wailing vampire and the beleaguered manager. "I think I can help, if you'll give me just a minute."

"Your Highness." The manager bowed.

Wow, that was weird. She'd gotten used to passing as a relative unknown among the vampire community. Sometimes even *she* forgot she was royalty.

"I'll be right back." She turned to the twins with what she hoped was a comforting smile. "Wait right here, okay?"

They nodded in unison, as she'd somehow known they would.

Once inside her own room, she made a beeline for the wall safe. A quick turn of the combination yielded the jewelry bag she'd brought with her from the castle. Reaching inside, she retrieved two choice pairs of diamond earrings.

Back in the hallway again, she handed the earrings to the shocked manager. "Would you accept these on behalf of the twins as collateral?"

The manager looked down at the gems sparkling in his hand. "But, Your Highness... surely..."

"Do you doubt their authenticity?" She smiled. "I can assure you they were purchased at Houston's finest jeweler, and are worthy of a sultan's bride, much less as payment for a modest hotel room."

The manager rose to his full height. "Of course I will accept these as payment on their behalf." He pocketed the jewelry and bowed to the twins. "I will apply the full appraised value to your tab, which should keep you in room service and warm beds for some time to come."

As he disappeared down the hall, the twins clutched at Phaedra's hands. "Oh, how can we ever thank you?" Veronica snuffled. "You have saved us from certain death!"

Phaedra brushed off their thanks. It wasn't really such a big deal, was it? After all, it was what her mother would've done.

* * *

"How do I look?" Phaedra turned around in front of the full length mirror in the dressing room at Black Pearl.

"Good enough to eat, and then some." Vance stood up, looking pretty scrumptious himself in black leather pants, boots, and a vest that displayed his sculpted chest and flat abs to their best advantage.

"I have to compliment your taste when it comes to dressing me." She studied her reflection, admiring the pink concoction of straps that formed her costume for that night's exhibit. It perfectly matched the slave collar she'd worn day and night since he'd given it to her several weeks ago, not to mention being the exact shade as the pink patent heels he'd chosen for her. Combined with her bubble gum colored hair and the right makeup, she knew she would bring Vance honor that night in front of all their guests, both Masters and slaves.

"Shall we?" He offered her his arm, which she took, enjoying any opportunity to be close to him. She sighed, a mixture of contentment and regret. A mere touch of his hand could reduce her to a puddle of pink goo. If this wasn't love, what was?

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" He led her down the familiar stairwell to the dungeon door.

"As ready as I'll ever be." She craned her neck to smile up at him. "I'm glad Tamara is going to assist us, though... she can cover any of my mistakes." Phaedra sighed. "I wish she didn't have to, though. If the last few weeks of practicing our scene didn't get me ready, I think we'll have to write me off as a failed slave."

"Never." Vance let out a low, sexy laugh that made her insides quiver. "You are *anything* but a failed slave. And if we didn't have a room full of guests waiting on our

performance to open the exhibit, I'd have you against the wall, showing you just what a successful slave you really are."

The dungeon door opened at that opportune moment, revealing Eris' anxious face. "Master, they're waiting on you."

Vance sighed. "Tell them they need wait no longer. We're here."

Eris nodded, and they followed him through the door into the dungeon.

The human servant took his place in the center of the room, where Rakesh sat waiting in white tiger form. He looked straight into Phaedra's eyes, and she gasped.

"It's all right," Vance whispered in a voice only she could hear. "His senses are sharper in animal form, and that provides us with an extra measure of security."

She nodded, still surprised at the look of knowing intelligence in those crystal blue feline eyes.

"Allow me to introduce tonight's host... Master Vance and his one and only personal slave, Phaedra!" Eris gestured to them with a flourish.

Vance led Phaedra into the center of the room, where she knelt at his side in the pleasure pose. Even with her head down, she could sense the presence of the many vampires, human servants, and even a totem or two. Eris knelt beside Vance as his human servant, and Rakesh lowered himself into a submissive feline stance.

Phaedra's heart overflowed with warmth. They were all coming together with the same intention -- to help Vance and reflect well on him as Master and vampire.

Vance launched into his welcome speech, but Phaedra drifted away mentally, lost in the gushing tide of her emotions. Something deep inside her had been touched, leaving her helpless to stop the flow of feeling it had awakened.

Was this how it felt to belong somewhere? Had she finally stopped drifting, no longer to be the eternal leaf blown about by every wind?

For the first time in her life, Phaedra felt a sense of purpose. Vance, powerful vampire though he was, needed her.

And she needed him.

Maybe it wasn't the life she'd planned to have, but it was a life that meant something to her. It was a life with the man she'd grown to love.

There, she'd finally admitted to herself. She loved Vance.

Telling him, however, would be a different matter.

"Sir..."

Vance halted in the middle of his welcome speech. Every head in the room turned to Mr. Charles, making his way through the crowd.

"Sir," he said again when he'd reached Vance's side. The older man spoke in a whisper, but Phaedra's Fey senses could hear every word. "Tamara is gone."

* * *

Vance knew it wasn't good to panic. Once again, he called up his reserve of control. Focus first, panic later. Tamara had to be found.

They'd combed every inch of the property, finding no sign of her. She slept in a room on the third floor of the building, a sort of dorm for subs in training, and rarely left the building, except...

Except to smoke.

"Royce --" he turned to the bouncer, "-- where does Tamara usually go to smoke?"

Royce blanched. "The back alley. But, Vance, you know all the doors were locked tonight to keep regular customers out. I would've had to unlock one of the doors to let her out."

"What about the extra key Cash keeps under the bar?"

Royce went to the bar at vampire speed, looking at the tray under the register where the bartender kept the extra key. "Gone."

Vance let out a string of curses. "Someone took that damn key, and we'll probably find it when we find Tamara."

Rakesh stalked toward them, still in tiger form. "I can find her," he said in a hoarse voice, speaking with difficulty through a mouth ill-formed for speech. "Let me get her scent, and I can find her."

He paused for a second to process what Rakesh had said. "All right, let's go." He turned to Royce. "You stay here with Phaedra." He grabbed the Fairy by the arm and steered her toward Royce. "Do *not* go anywhere by yourself." He turned back to Royce. "Don't let her out of your sight." He didn't add the truth... that Royce would die a second death if he let anything happen to Phaedra.

Because -- whether he wanted to admit it or not -- Vance knew in that moment he couldn't live without her.

* * *

"The smell leads this way," Rakesh said in that eerie tiger voice of his.

Vance had taken him to Tamara's room upstairs to get her scent, and Rakesh had immediately picked up a trail. They'd gone to the ground floor, where the bar and dance floor were, and from there had followed the scent to the rear exit.

"It's unlocked." Vance kicked the door in frustration.

"You will find her in the alley." Rakesh looked up at Vance. "But I warn you, you will not like what you find."

"I don't smell blood." Vance inhaled deeply.

"Not blood." Rakesh's blue eyes bored into him. "Death."

Vance pushed the exit door open, and let the tiger lead him into the dark alley. Cigarette butts littered the pavement. An occasional beer bottle glinted in the pale moonlight. But other than that, Vance saw nothing.

"Behind the Dumpster," Rakesh said, using his totemic ability to read his master's mind.

Vance trudged toward the Dumpster, his feet carrying him where the rest of him was unwilling to go. She had been in his care... so young...

What had once been Tamara was tossed behind the Dumpster. Drained of all blood, the only thing of any color was the mass of flaming red hair flowing from her head.

Vance fell to his knees and wept.

* * *

"All right, everyone, let's all remain calm!" Phaedra stood on a bar stool to address the increasingly panicked crowd gathered on the club's main floor. "The police will be here soon to take your statements, and we need everyone to be here for them." She cupped her hands around her mouth to better project her voice. "So please, let Mr. Charles do his headcount, and when the authorities get here, let's cooperate with them in every way possible!"

And people thought Phaedra was just another spoiled princess, Vance thought, his heart swelling with pride as he watched her take charge during utter chaos. She'd stepped in to make sure everyone was safe, dispatching club employees to pass out bottled water or bottled blood to the exhibit guests, making everyone gather on the main floor, and in general keeping things from descending into total mayhem.

The woman was born to be queen, whether she knew it or not. And she was *his*.

"Vance Carmitru?"

He looked up to see a cop, the hard-boiled plainclothes variety, holding up a badge.

"I'm Vance Carmitru," he affirmed. "And the owner of this club."

"Alvin Davis." The cop put his badge back on his belt. "Regional captain of the Texas Slayer Squad." He drew Vance aside. "We've got our top investigator doing an energy reading of this place right now, but it's safe to say that our friendly neighborhood serial killer paid you a visit tonight."

Vance felt his heart stop beating. All of his guests had been sitting ducks. Phaedra... "Are you sure?"

"Same MO... severed carotid arteries, victim's totally drained of blood... unless it's a copy cat, then yeah, I'd bet my badge on it."

"I got a read on the perp's energy signature." A petite brunette appeared at Alvin's side. "It's definitely the serial killer."

Vance squinted down at her. "I know you from somewhere."

"Agent Katya Stern." She held up her badge. "Also the fiancée of Rex Fontainebleau."

"Ah, Crimson Hungers." The vampire bar a few blocks away. "Yes, I've been there on more than a few occasions."

"What did you find?" Phaedra had joined them with Royce at her side.

"We'll need to interview everyone and try to get statements from the vampires first." Katya glanced at her watch. "We'll need to start with them so they can all find shelter before sunrise."

"How did you get here so fast?" Phaedra asked her.

"I was just down the street at Crimson Hungers when I got the page from Mr. Charles." Katya folded her arms over her chest. "Did you know the vic personally?"

Tears filled Phaedra's eyes. "Not very well. I'd see her when I left after closing. I'd be heading back to the Ruthven and she'd be going out for a smoke."

"She had a routine of going out to the alley to smoke." Katya sighed. "The killer had obviously been watching Tamara, and knew she'd show up in the alley for a smoke eventually." She took out a pad and began jotting down notes. "You said the extra key is missing. We're checking the alley for it."

"It's likely the victim took the key with the intention of letting herself out for a smoke, and the killer was waiting for her out there." Alvin shook his head. "Leaving a body to be found during a special event like tonight sent a very special message from the killer." The captain sighed. "Human servants and subs are in just as much danger as anyone else in the vampire community."

"But what's the motivation for this?" Phaedra threw up her hands.

"Some say it's about court politics." Katya shrugged. "There's a vocal minority who are vehemently opposed to Eden the dhampire taking Melaina's place as empress, even though Master Cain appointed her as his successor of House Black Rose... and you know whoever rules Black Rose is also going to rule the court."

"Wait." Phaedra held up a hand for silence. "Who is this Eden everyone keeps talking about?"

"The soon to be crowned empress of the gulf coast court," Vance explained. "A dhampire is the offspring of a human and a vampire, which gives our lovely Eden a

rather unique set of powers. Some in the community object to her as ruler because she's half human."

Phaedra's blood boiled. "Oh, I guess a half-human isn't worthy to rule? As if that's what being queen is about." She snorted. "My mother was half-human, and she was the most beloved queen in the history of the Fey. And if this Eden is one-tenth the queen my mother was, she'll stick by her people no matter what. Nothing but death can keep a queen from serving her subjects... because that's what a queen does. She *serves*. She puts her people first -- none of this *let them eat cake* crap." Green sparks shot from her eyes. "A ruler lives and dies for her subjects. Otherwise, she's not fit to rule."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, daughter."

Every head turned to watch the King of Terra Mystica limp toward them, leaning heavily on his cane. "Because I have come to bring you home."

Chapter 11

"You see, daughter," the king continued, once they were settled in Mr. Charles' office, "the royal physician has ordered me to rest. As you can see, my arthritis has taken a turn for the worse." The king shrugged, chuckling good naturedly. "Kings do not rest. They abdicate the throne or die." He smiled at his daughter. "I'm choosing the former."

Phaedra's heart sank like lead. "But, Daddy... I have a life here."

Vance squeezed her hand in a silent show of support. She returned the squeeze gratefully, but she knew he wouldn't hold her there. He'd let her go if it was what she needed to do.

But what about what she *wanted* to do?

Or did that even matter anymore?

"Daughter, you said it yourself -- a ruler lives and dies for her subjects." The king took her other hand. "You've learned every lesson I sent you out here to learn, and are ready to return home and assume your duties as queen." The king's voice dropped. "And quite frankly, I would rather you not take up residence in a neighborhood with a serial killer roaming its streets." He glanced at Vance. "No offense, young man."

The eight-hundred-and-sixty-two-year-old Vance nodded politely. "None taken, Your Majesty."

"Daddy, could I have a word with Vance?" She gave her father a significant look. "Alone, please?"

"Certainly." The king stood with difficulty. "I'll be just outside, talking to that charming Agent Stern."

Phaedra sighed as she watched her father hobble out the door and turned to Vance. "I have to..."

He placed a finger over her lips to silence her. "I know."

"It's not that I want to go." She fought back the lump in her throat. "But he needs me. The Fey need me. I can't let them down."

"It's not in you to do so." He brushed her hair back from her face in a gesture that made tears impossible to deny. "I saw the strength in you from the first moment we met. All that self-willed fire of yours, when turned to the needs of others, is what legendary monarchs are made of." He cupped her chin in his hand. "I have no doubt that I've made love to the greatest queen the Fey will ever know."

"Anything I've learned about being a loving ruler..." Her voice broke on the words, tears flowing freely. "Anything I've learned about noble service or caring for the needs of others, I learned from *you*." She covered her eyes with her hands, feeling her heart shatter in shards within her chest. "And now I have to learn to live without you."

"You won't be without me." He pried her hands away from her face. "Haven't you heard that old saying... diamonds are a girl's best friend, but collars are forever? Go back to your people, my princess. I will find my way back to you." He kissed her hands one at a time. "This isn't over."

She repeated those words to herself as she walked out of the club with her father to the Rolls Royce he'd arrived in. She repeated them as they left the bright lights of Houston, all the way to the green pastures of Terra Mystica.

This isn't over. This isn't over.

* * *

"Okay, Kismet." Phaedra picked her way down the steps to the castle dungeon. It said a lot about the peace enjoyed by the denizens of Terra Mystica that they'd never once had to use said dungeon in the castle's entire history. "Is this some kind of pre-coronation shower? Because I totally would've registered at Neiman's if I'd known about it."

She'd been back at the castle for two weeks, and preparations for her upcoming coronation were in full swing. Somehow, the buzz of shopping and planning a ball weren't the thrill they'd once been. She supposed it was the constant ache of Vance's

absence keeping her from enjoying herself to the fullest. When she'd found the note on her dressing table telling her to come to the dungeon at the appointed time that night, she'd immediately suspected Kismet of trying to distract her with a party. But the windowless room appeared empty.

Phaedra reached out and turned the dimmer switch, casting a warm glow through the room. Before her eyes could adjust, her Fey senses detected something.

"Vance!" She ran down the remaining stairs two at a time and into his waiting arms.

"I see Kismet managed to smuggle my note to you." He held her away from him just far enough to look down into her eyes. "Thank you for working this humble vampire into your busy schedule, Queen Phaedra."

"I'm not the queen yet." Her body burned for him, longing for his touch, to feel his lips on hers, the fullness of his hard length inside her. "Come upstairs with me... we can make love until dawn."

"Which sounds delicious," he said, planting a kiss on her lips that made her moan for more, "but first things first. You left something at the club which I've come to return."

He reached into the pocket of his black jeans and pulled out her pink collar.

"I wasn't sure..." She bit her bottom lip. "I didn't know if we could continue on like we were, now that I'm..."

"Ruler of all the Fey in Texas?" He unbuckled the collar. "Who was it that said the greatest queens are also servants?"

"I think that may have been me." She held her breath, waiting.

"My beautiful future queen," he said, brushing her hair back in his old familiar way. "Is there room in your life for both the crown and the collar?"

Damn, another lump in her throat. "If the collar comes with you... always."

He fastened it around her neck, punctuating the action with another kiss. "And what about another piece of jewelry?" He reached into his pocket again, this time to retrieve a small velvet box. "Perhaps this ring could fit into your plans."

Phaedra took the box, trying to think above the sound of her heart pounding. Inside was the most beautiful pink diamond ring she'd ever seen.

"You know I can never refuse new jewelry." She looked at him through tears of joy.

"Queen Phaedra," Vance said, dropping to his knee in front of her, "would you do me the honor of becoming my wife? I realize this isn't the proper protocol for proposing to a queen, but..."

"Screw protocol." She pulled him to his feet. "All I want is *you*."

"Making our two worlds fit together won't always be easy." He held her face in his hands. "But it *will* be worth it. You've shown me that walls around my heart didn't make me strong. *You* make me strong, with your love, your example... you've made me a better man, Phaedra, and I'm not about to let you go."

"You don't have to let me go." She melted into his arms. "I'm yours, body, heart, mind, and soul, 'til undeath do we part."

He brushed her lips with a kiss that soon burned with all the passion denied during their separation. "Make love to me, Vance." She pulled back to look up at him. "This girl wants nothing more than to be yours again."

"Well, we *do* have this lovely dungeon all to ourselves." He raised an eyebrow at her. "I don't suppose that bite-preventing ward of yours has worn off?"

She gave him a sly smile. "Why don't you try it and see?"

As he sank his fangs into her neck, Phaedra knew she'd found another way to give herself to him... her vampire, her Master, the man who'd truly made her a queen.

Alecia Monaco

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