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PREDATOR'S SALVATION

Sisters Of Emsharra

Gracie C. McKeever

SEX RATING: SCORCHING

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SIREN SEX Rating

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Gracie C. McKeever

Sisters of Emsharra, Book 2

Guardian Seductress : Predator's Salvation

Predator's Salvation

An intern architect at Ryan and Associates, Mateo Diaz has spent the last year learning his craft under the tutelage of partner Alex Ryan. Alex is the closest thing to family that Mateo has known since losing his own family years ago. But not even Alex has been able to elicit the complete truth behind Mateo's family's death, especially when even Mateo himself is uncertain of the facts.

Shadowing the pair responsible for her exile, LaMia Enlil discovers a perfect means to her revenge against Alex and Genesis in Mateo Diaz, her newest target, a carrier of the rarest human energy, spirit-boost, and the only remaining blood-relative of the two males from whom LaMia once sampled the much sought-after *kundalini*.

Someone else, however, has a mean score to settle with LaMia and will not stop until she destroys everything the Inanna cares about, starting with her latest pet: Mateo Diaz.

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Predator's Salvation

Sisters of Emsharra, Book 2

By Gracie C. McKeever

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PROLOGUE

New York City—One Year after the Alliance and New Regime

Mateo Diaz tried to stay awake, but he couldn't keep his eyes open.

She was calling him.

"Are you listening to me, Mateo?"

He started, eyes flying open to stare up at the girl, catching the frown wrinkling her otherwise smooth, beautiful blonde features.

She was twenty-three, a year younger than he, which was much younger than he usually preferred—young and as exciting as syrup and twice as sweet.

For these reasons, his mentor Alex Ryan thought Ginger Babcock was perfect for Mateo, but Mateo didn't want sweet and nice. He wanted dark and dangerous. He wanted a dream, one he had been pursuing for years now. No human woman could live up to his fantasy—the relentless image of power and strength and raw sexuality. No woman could bring him so close to climax and death at the same time and make him like it, make him want more.

No woman like this existed, except the one who had killed his brother, and this woman existed only in Mateo's nightmares.

He skated his hands down Ginger's arms, from soft shoulders to hands until he twined his

fingers with hers and squeezed. “Of course I’m listening to you, baby.”

Ginger grinned, suitably mollified by his low drawl, and leaned in to run her tongue from his chin to his ear. She circled the outer shell and made him tremble with desire.

Mateo closed his eyes and arched his neck, trying to get into the mood. With a little imagination, he could get through this. He’d done it before, time and time again, the only thing that could get him off with a woman—a vision of the other’s long black hair, dark skin and hazel eyes. She was so different from Ginger, so different from any woman.

Damn, he was too young to be this obsessed, especially with someone he’d never met, someone who probably wasn’t real and definitely wasn’t good for him.

Ginger straddled him and slid her hand down to his hard cock. “I want you inside me, Mateo.”

He wanted that too. At least his cock did.

Just follow your cock and go with the flow.

He hated using a woman this way, each new girl only a substitute for *her*, but over the years, it had become a habit he found increasingly hard to break. It would serve him right if he suffered the same fate as his brother, but what a sweet death that would be.

Had he always been this heartless, or had his brother’s death made him this way? Could he keep using his family’s death as an excuse to be cold and calculating without his actions finally catching up with him?

Ginger bent her head over his erection, touching the tip of her tongue to the head of his penis and lapping the pearl of liquid. She was timid like an animal at a waterhole sensing a predator nearby.

Mateo fisted a hand in her long, blonde hair and lightly urged her forward. “Suck me, Ginger. Suck me hard.”

“I don’t have a lot of experience with this.”

“I’ll talk you through it.” He hated inexperienced girls, their fragile, unformed egos necessitating much begging, coaxing and less fucking. Not like with his dream. She was all woman, confident and experienced and made to please him as he had been made to please her. His soul mate. “Ginger, I need you.”

“Couldn’t we just...”

“Just what?” His nostrils flared, her arousal a pungent aroma riding the wind to his nose. His body shuddered with his want. “Don’t tease me, baby. You know you want this, too.”

“I do, but...Alex said you were a nice guy, that you were different...”

Alex lied. Mateo was different all right, though not in the way Alex and Ginger thought.

He’d known it since he was a teen, the things he wanted, the things his body needed and craved, the things he couldn’t trust with anyone, not anyone alive.

Mateo burrowed his hands through her hair. “You’re a hot sexy woman, Gin, and I’m no different from any other guy who wants you.” He leaned close to whisper in her hair. “I want to fuck your mouth.”

She shivered, whimpering as her warm feminine musk overwhelmed the air around them. She went down on him again, eager to please now.

Mateo didn't care what motivated her, just wanted to escape in the feel of her hot mouth wrapped around his cock.

Her lips and tongue were tentative at first, almost shy.

Mateo thrust his hips to encourage her. He moaned deep in his throat when she sucked his head into her mouth, then slid her lips down his hard shaft to his balls.

He fisted his hands in her hair, holding her in place and pitching his hips in a hard, steady rhythm that had her gagging and trying to pull back. "Hard, Mia...suck me hard..."

He heard her muffled shriek as she pulled off him and opened his eyes to see the hurt and angry expression on her face.

"Who is Mia?"

He couldn't answer her, just gaped, unwilling to hurt her feelings even if she wasn't who he wanted. Not even he could be that cruel to someone who didn't deserve it.

Ginger leaped from the bed and hastily began dressing, cursing under her breath and preaching Alex and Mateo's funeral the entire time. "I don't like being the rebound woman...Alex should have told me that you weren't over your previous girlfriend...This is just so embarrassing..."

Mateo tried not to laugh as he got out of the bed to go to her.

There was no previous girlfriend. Women came and went in his life like his teachers and professors at school and university—all temporary, all forgettable—none staying in his life long enough to earn the title 'girlfriend.' He didn't have the desire for more permanent connections, had learned early on that nothing was permanent. Nothing lasted.

Why did he say that name? *Was* 'Mia' the woman in his dreams? He'd never been able to put a name to his fantasy before just now.

Mateo joined Ginger in the middle of the floor and gently rubbed her shoulder. "Ginger, I'm sorry."

She pulled away, arms folded across her generous breasts. "Just take me home."

"Sure." Then he'd come back to his brownstone, jerk off to the new vision of his mystery woman, this 'Mia,' and hope that Ginger didn't spill her guts to Alex and give Mateo's mentor more of a reason to pity Mateo and try to hook him up with another nice girl.

* * * *

"I told you there was something different about Mateo, something special, Alex."

"After what Ginger told me, I'm more sure than ever of that." Alex Ryan sighed and rubbed his eyes with a thumb and forefinger as he tightened his grip on the receiver and pressed the phone closer to his ear as if to bring his wife and her strength closer.

"He reminds me of you," Genesis said softly.

That was what worried Alex. He'd gotten past Mateo's shields a couple of times to see

inside the younger man's mind and caught the roughness beneath, the screaming carnal being clamoring to get out.

Evidently, Ginger had gotten a hint of this being the other night.

"Yeah," Alex agreed. "Well, after last night, I'm certain there's something out of the ordinary about him, and that he's been targeted. I'm still not a hundred percent certain that his *kundalini* contains spirit-boost though. There's only one way to find that out for sure."

"I know, and would it not be better to have his, as you humans put it, cherry popped by one of us in the New Regime than by those who have not yet been converted?"

Though their numbers were dwindling since the Inanna and Sebitu Alliance had been ratified, there were enough of the unconverted dissidents from both sides who still believed in the old ways, dissidents who did not have qualms about attacking and draining humans beyond sustenance, just for the joy of the kill. There were Inanna and Sebitu who thought enslaving and making choice humans their "pets" was their Goddess-given right.

Inanna like LaMia Enlil.

"He will be fine, Alex," Genesis assured. "Just like all the others."

"He's not like all the others, Gen." He didn't know how to tell her that he felt a kindred spirit in Mateo, someone whose life had been touched by his and Genesis's kind in the past, someone whose life had been devastated by an Inanna. "Give me a few more months, and I'll talk to him. Okay?"

"Only a few, Alex. Something tells me that we're running out of time. You must approach him soon before the others get to him."

"I'm on it, Gen. I promise."

CHAPTER 1

New York City—Three Months Later

LaMia paused just inside the entrance of McDougall's Bar and Restaurant, in huntress mode as her glance drifted from and touched each male patron before she caught sight of her prey.

She leered and moved forward with the flow of the crowd, eager now to get a better look at the two men she had stalked from the parking lot.

LaMia watched them now, a pair of extraordinarily gorgeous males out on the town, drinks held high and toasting their most recent business success.

No one else looking at them would guess that one of them was only half-human.

She did not know yet what to make of the other man, Alex Ryan's co-worker and intern, Mateo Diaz. The bar was too dark and too noisy to gather the appropriate intelligence, but she knew he was important enough for Alex and Genesis to befriend, and this made him important enough for LaMia to make him her next target.

There was something intimate and familiar about Mateo, something strangely inviting that had her panties damp with want and her heart shuddering with a sensation akin to...unease. She sensed that the young man was related to Julian.

LaMia smiled for the first time in a long time at the providence that had, in all likelihood, brought another Diaz descendant into her path. It was almost a guarantee that the young man also possessed the *kundalini* her body so craved.

She would make sure Mateo was not recruited into Genesis's abhorrent Harvesting Program. This was the best form of revenge against those responsible for her exile, and she would enjoy every moment watching Alex and Genesis squirm after she seized their precious pet.

* * * *

Mateo followed Alex out of McDougall's with some hesitation, more worried about being in Genesis Ryan's company again, than the crucial proposition that Alex had to divulge once they arrived at his condo.

He couldn't say what it was about the exotically beautiful Genesis that he found so disturbing since their first meeting when he'd just started with her husband's company, but he always felt ill at ease around her. Her scrutiny made him feel like a bug under a microscope.

Mateo realized he was not the only one she visually dissected—as he had come to think of her gazes—it was just the way she appeared to observe everyone, as if ever on the lookout for anyone who might do her husband harm.

What Mateo wouldn't do to have someone like this in his life, to have a woman watch his back the way Genesis watched Alex's.

When he looked at her vigilance this way, he didn't feel so bad about the prospect of seeing her soon. He began to feel more envious of Alex than nervous about his wife.

"Everything all right back there, kid?"

Mateo focused his attention on Alex as the other man paused several feet in front of him with his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels.

He smiled, unoffended by the moniker. He was used to it even though Alex, at twenty-nine, was only five years older than he was. He was used to it because his baby face had elicited similar responses from everyone he'd come into contact with at *Ryan and Associates* when he'd first started a little more than a year previous.

Despite his light beard and mustache, the secretaries and other office assistants had either thought he was one of the partner's kids visiting the office, or a high school student doing a paper on the craft of architecture. Never had they thought he was so close to being a full-fledged architect himself, not until Alex took him around the offices and introduced him as *Ryan and Associates'* newest prodigy.

"Everything's fine," Mateo assured him. "I'm just curious about this proposition you have to offer me and why you have to make it at your home."

Alex backtracked to stand beside him, put a hand on Mateo's shoulder, and gave it a warm squeeze. "It's something that's better explained in friendly, familiar surroundings."

Friendly and familiar surroundings were Mateo's own brownstone apartment in Harlem.

"You've been to my house plenty of times." Alex grinned before he arched a questioning brow. "You're not afraid of my wife now, are you?"

Mateo coughed and quickly covered his mouth with a fist, surprised Alex had hit the nail so squarely on the head, as if the man had read his mind.

The idea would have been farfetched, except Mateo had experienced the sensation of his mind being picked on numerous occasions when in Alex and Genesis's company.

Hell, it was no stranger than his empathy.

"C'mon, Matt." Alex clapped him on the back and pulled him close as he led the way to his car. "I'll sate your curiosity and tell you all you need to know. I promise."

Mateo couldn't help feeling as if he was being led down a dark and lonely path he really didn't want to pursue or explore.

He paused at the passenger side door of Alex's car and waited for Alex to disengage the power locks. His heartbeat sped when he caught the sudden, spicy-sweet scent of cinnamon on the air, as if someone were baking a cake nearby with the ingredient generously sprinkled in. The hair on the back of his neck stood up, and an icy-hot liquid sensation of lust settled in his groin in response to the enticing aroma.

Mateo sniffed the air more thoroughly, looked at Alex to confirm that he had smelled the scent too and saw Alex frown as if confused.

Mateo had an instant to glance up right before something swooped down towards them from the indigo, star-dappled sky, something large enough to be a person, but with wings spanning five feet across from either side of its back.

Definitely not human, but definitely a female.

Mateo thought it right before the woman dive-bombed towards him, arms outstretched in front of her as if she were some sort of super-heroine.

He had a moment to step away from the car and hear Alex's warning cry of "Look out, Matt! Duck!" before the woman hooked her arms beneath his armpits, scooped him up, and took off for the sky again.

"Oh, shit...Mateo! Matt!"

Okay, this could *not* be happening! He wasn't soaring a hundred yards off the ground with Alex yelling through cupped hands and chasing after him from the parking lot of McDougall's. A woman with humongous wings had not just swooped out of the sky and grabbed him. No, siree!

Mateo glanced up at his abductor, but she didn't look at him, just kept her eyes straight ahead as she flapped those big bat-like wings and acted as if he wasn't suspended below her.

"Hey! Hey...you!" What exactly was he going to say? 'Put me down' didn't seem like such a good idea when she was soaring over rooftops as if she had a hang glider attached to her back.

"Silence, human. We will be at our destination shortly."

What the hell was that? A line out of a Shakespearean play he hadn't read? She certainly spoke in the same stilted accent.

Christ, he hated heights!

Here's a hint, Matt. Don't look down.

He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth to try to make the sick feeling in his stomach go away.

Mateo opened his eyes, couldn't help himself, as they glided over a deserted area of the city in Lower Manhattan. From what he could make out by the light of the moon, it looked like some place in TriBeCa with converted lofts and narrow streets dominating the immediate area.

She aimed for the roof of one of the warehouses and smoothly landed.

As soon as his feet touched the rooftop pavement, Mateo tried to make a run for it but was stopped in his tracks by a green force field that completely encircled him after he'd taken only two steps forward.

He scowled at his kidnapper through the bubble prison as she circled him, hands clasped behind her back. He thought there was something oddly familiar about her, about the way she looked at him.

He pummeled the capsule with his fists, and she smiled at him like an indulgent parent watching her baby throw a fit of temper in his crib.

"Let me out of here!"

She raised a fist in front of her as if in a Black Panther salute and twisted it back and forth a couple of times, her movements unhurried and strangely erotic. "You will sleep now," she murmured.

They were the last words Mateo heard before he passed out.

* * * *

So, the Inanna bitch had finally made her move on Alex and Genesis' latest assignment, Mara Lamashtu thought as she watched one of Emsharra's premier huntresses swoop from the sky to take her quarry like a bird of prey swooping down on a lake to pluck a fish for its meal.

If she had not hated LaMia Enlil so much, she would have applauded her flash and style, but she did hate the exiled Inanna, hated her with every breath she took. Mara hated her every day she lived in her Sebitu skin without her mate and was reminded of what LaMia had deprived her.

They had taken Xaphan away from Mara, LaMia and that crossbreed bastard Alex Ryan, Nahemah's favored great-grandson and royal phenomenon.

Soon they would pay.

Mara stared into the sky now, her plans for revenge momentarily forgotten as she tried to follow the path the Inanna had taken with her victim and wondered why so startling and out of the ordinary an acquisition.

No matter LaMia's motives. The Inanna had met her match once when she had stepped over the line with her grandmother, Nahemah.

She would meet her match again. Only this time, LaMia would not be exiled but destroyed along with her new acquisition and his sponsors.

Mara would see to this.

CHAPTER 2

Mateo floated towards consciousness reluctantly. He stopped short of opening his eyes and instead squeezed them tighter as her fresh cinnamon scent washed over him again.

He did not want to open his eyes. He fully expected to find some grotesque being out of his worst *Jeepers Creepers* nightmare making a tasty meal out of his internal organs and keeping him alive long enough to observe his own death by slow dismemberment and evisceration.

Thing was, he didn't feel any pain or bloodletting, but that might just mean that his kidnapper had administered a local anesthetic, leaving him conscious enough to witness what would be done to him with scalpel and other sharp surgical instruments of mutilation.

Jesus, had he watched too many horror/slasher movies and *CSI* episodes in his day or what?

Yeah, buddy, just enough to be paranoid when you're plopped smack dab in the middle of one. Smooth move, Diaz. Tell us how you're going to work out of this one.

Finally, hesitantly, he opened his eyes and blinked several times to bring his vision in focus. When he tried to lick his dry lips and couldn't get his sluggish tongue past his mouth, he realized it was taped shut. He tried to sit up and get his bearings only to discover that he was also shackled, wrists and ankles, to a large four-poster bed.

He glanced around from his supine position on the firm, elevated mattress and slowly took in his lavish surroundings. He grudgingly appreciated his captor's decorating tastes.

She favored bold shades of red and green and luxuriant materials, the eclectic overstuffed chairs, sofa and accessories were all covered in some sort of lambent satin, velvet, or chenille.

The bed on which he lay in just his boxer briefs, helpless and cuffed, was covered in a rich burgundy satin comforter that made Mateo wonder exactly how much use such a mundane piece of furniture saw from a being like the woman who had made off with him.

"Ah, you are finally awake. I was beginning to wonder whether I had killed you or not."

Mateo wanted to ask her if it would have made a difference but settled for just staring at

her with his best withering look.

“Oh, most assuredly it would have made a difference. I have big plans for you.”

He frowned as she approached the bed, her slow, sexy rolling gait giving him time to enjoy the sway of her generous hips and the bounce of her lush, round breasts beneath the burgundy leather halter she wore.

Wait a minute, had she just...?

She paused at his bedside, bent at the waist to sniff the air around him, and sighed in contentment before she gave him a ravenous look that made him forget his own name, much less his train of thoughts. Her expression reminded him of the way a cat looks at an injured mouse right before it pounces on the tiny creature to finish the job it started.

At his thoughts, she licked her full, copper-tinged lips. When she smiled at him, he saw something else simmering beneath her predator’s glare: fierce desire.

Mateo didn’t know whether to be flattered or not, struck suddenly with how much her intense gaze reminded him of Genesis Ryan, as if the two were sisters from a different mother, or at the very least, countrywomen.

Was it possible—?

“I hear your mind working a thousand miles a minute. Busy, busy, busy.” She stood straight and sauntered several steps away. “All of your conjectures are for naught, however. I have suitably squelched your chance to be enlightened at the feet of the converted allies.”

What the hell was she going on about? Was she talking about Genesis and Alex? Allies of who and what?

“Am I going to have to keep you bound and gagged or can I trust you enough to allow you a small measure of comfort and freedom?”

Was she asking him whether or not he would scream or try to escape if she uncuffed him?

“That is exactly what I am asking you. Not that you could escape me. If I chose to, I could stop you before you got within twenty feet of the door. As for the tape, I did that to protect your voice and my eardrums. If you do scream, however, I must warn you, one, that we are quite isolated here and there is no one around to hear you, and two, my loft has been reinforced with excellent soundproofing materials, so have a care and do not waste your time.”

Mateo didn’t doubt her speed or intent, especially when he remembered how she had so effortlessly plucked him out of the parking lot. He didn’t doubt any of that speech about the isolation and soundproofing either. He most especially did not doubt anything she said when he realized that she was...reading his mind!

He had thought the first time had been a fluke, but he was sure of it now.

Christ, this was getting creepier by the moment, creepier than his own alien gifts.

Mateo stared at her back as she walked away from him to the stainless steel kitchen in the distance. He tried to see if he could spot the wings she had used to fly away with him, but there was nothing except the mahogany smoothness of her well-muscled back.

His fingers itched with the memory of how that smooth skin felt beneath them, as if he had been with her before, inside her, too many times to count, and craved to do it all again.

He let his gaze lazily drift down her six-foot tall, hour-glass figure from the gentle slope of her bare back to the slim curve of her waist and finally to her endless legs encased in painted-on burgundy leather pants and matching knee-high boots.

Despite his precarious state, Mateo felt his cock hardening in his boxer briefs, fantasized about putting his dick in her slick, hot cunt. What was *wrong* with him?

She turned back to him then, hazel eyes glinting with insight, leering as she stalked across the burnished parquet floor.

She sat at his bedside. "I am LaMia Enlil, and there is nothing at all wrong with you except that you are a healthy, red-blooded male."

What was this? Formal introductions before she killed him? And damn, he wished she would stop dipping inside his head like that!

He used to think it was cute as well as advantageous to know other people's feelings, especially girls he was involved with as a late teen. He had, however, gotten over his psychic voyeurism years ago when, at twenty, he'd experienced his then girlfriend's severe menstrual cramps. He'd snooped because they'd argued earlier in the day and he had thought she was just using her period as an excuse to get out of having sex with him. He had been sorry for his mistrust ever since.

LaMia was more outright and rude with her snooping than he had ever been though, and he didn't like it one bit. He didn't like someone like her tooling around in his brain and knowing every little thing he was thinking.

"Contrary to your assumptions, I am not rude. I am merely availing myself of any and all opportunities to get to know my submissive better. And you will call me Mistress or Mistress LaMia, by the way," she said then firmly placed her hand on his forehead.

Mateo grimaced.

Who the hell is this woman?

He closed his eyes and braced himself as her subtle, yet heady, cinnamon-and-female scent washed over him. He felt the tug on his brain as if she had reached inside his head to gently peel back the layers of his past.

Mateo's heart pounded a vicious beat in his chest, obliterating all miniscule sounds in the loft as he wondered if his heart would explode.

She held her palm against his forehead for several long moments, ransacking his mind, melding with his memories until she became a part of them.

He knew this woman! Knew her too intimately to deny her or forget what he had been doing with her for the last several months—but more importantly, he knew her too intimately to deny what she had done to his family so many years ago.

One woman he implicitly trusted with his body and soul. The other had taken too much from him for Mateo to trust her at all.

How could they be one in the same?

Her touch was insidious, seductive, seeping into him like the mist in his dreams, and then he realized she *was* the mist in his dreams.

He could see how his brother and father had succumb to her allure, how his father had allowed her to come between him and Mom and how his brother had allowed her to drain the life right out of him. The promise of the ultimate climax and release was too powerful to resist.

But resist he would...this time.

Suddenly, LaMia jerked back her hand and gasped.

Good! He wasn't the only one so overwhelmed by what she'd just done.

"It *is* you! At first I was not certain, did not believe it was possible that fate would actually send you to me..." She reached for a corner of the tape and viciously stripped it off his mouth.

"*Shit!*"

"Do not make me regret doing that."

Like he wasn't regretting it already, Mateo thought as he flexed his jaws in concert with his fists clenching and unclenching in the cuffs above his head.

"Speak!"

"I'm not a dog!" Mateo shot back and silently gauged her reaction. He noticed the slight upward tilt of her lips, an expression of admiration and amusement that just barely reached her hazel eyes.

So, she was enjoying this, enjoying him. Hell, he'd give her something to really admire and smile about once he was free. "What do you want me to say, Mia?" he asked, thinking two could play the game as he let the moniker slide off his tongue and saw her blink at his audacity. "You accuse me as if I tried to defraud you. *You* abducted *me*. I thought you knew who I w—"

"Silence!" She slashed the air with her hand as she leaped from the bed.

Mateo had a flash of her in Julian's bedroom the last time he had seen his brother alive.

He saw the woman's glowing yellow gaze when she glared at him over a shoulder, bared her teeth and hissed.

Mateo had a second to react as she finished draining Julian of his life-force—or whatever the phosphorescent red light that was arcing from his brother's body into the woman's was called—before she turned on him.

He charged across the threshold and hurled his body through the air, intending to knock her off Julian. He got within a couple of feet of the bed before she raised her arms in front of her and rasped, "*Kundalini*" right before zapping him with a green bolt of lightning from her fingers.

His body heated now with the memory. Lust raged through him, making his cock jut upward like a repugnant invitation.

Get a grip, Matt. Forget how much you want to drive your dick into her and make her scream like she made your brother scream. Just concentrate on now. Here and now.

“You killed him.”

“Julian’s death was an unfortunate consequence of our coupling.”

He reacted without thinking, violently kicking out with his shackled legs.

She drew back and stared at him as if he were a dangerous animal that had to be watched carefully.

Her reaction was instant and infinitesimal, just enough to let him know that he wasn’t the only one affected by their encounter.

Mateo closed his eyes, tuned into her body’s responses, felt the shimmering fire inside her, felt her vaginal muscles spasming and...was that regret hovering just on the outside of her consciousness? Regret for what had happened to his brother?

Good, he would take these and run with them.

He opened his eyes and smiled. “Why did you take me?”

“I took you for the same reasons I took your brother. I took you because...” She slashed the air with her hand again and sat back down on the bed, a tightly wound ball of energy.

Mateo’s body immediately reacted to her closeness, that energy. If he had been free, there were all sorts of ways he could have helped her unleash that energy but she wasn’t giving him a choice. Not yet. “Why?” he demanded.

“It matters not why I did it, and beginning now you will learn it is unwise to question my actions or my motives. As of this moment, you are a human with no rights and no say over what I do to you here.”

The hell he was. Human, yeah, but with no rights and no say? Where the hell did she come off? This was still America, wasn’t it?

“The quicker you learn to deal with that, Mateo, the better.”

He didn’t know what angered him more, the familiarity with which she addressed him or the fact that hearing his Christian name flow from her lips made him hotter than had she put her hand on his cock and caressed him. In fact, the more she spoke, the angrier and hotter he got.

He had time and energy to indulge his desires. He was, as she had just put it, a healthy red-blooded male, after all. He didn’t, however, like to waste his time or energy on anger and a past he could not change. Life was too short. For Ms. Arrogant Nubian Queen though, he thought he might make an exception. “I’m not afraid of you,” he said and as he peered at her, she returned his glare tenfold. He didn’t flinch, would die before letting this woman intimidate him.

“Oh, you are a spirited one, so worth the effort of taking you. I am going to enjoy breaking you in, Mateo.”

He just bet she would enjoy breaking him in if he allowed her to, but he had no intentions on allowing her to break him in.

All this time he had thought she was a figment of his traumatized, juvenile imagination, something he had conjured up to help him deal with the bizarre nature of his brother’s death. He thought she was something he had created to help him deal with the horrendous circumstances surrounding his parents’ murder/suicide.

She was real, however, and before him now, the woman at the root of all three losses, a being he had grown to despise.

Mateo pulled against his manacles. "Undo these cuffs," he commanded, sudden rage fueling his bravado. He knew very well what she was capable of, how powerful and lethal she could be. He didn't care.

"You are giving me, LaMia Enlil, an order?"

"I'm giving you an order, yes," he bit out.

She laughed, reached out a hand to smooth a stray lock of light-brown hair from his face, and his dick twitched in his boxer briefs at the unexpected gentleness of the contact. "You are absolutely precious," she murmured.

She said it like he was a cute poodle or kitten who had just done a neat trick.

Mateo snarled and jerked his wrists against the cuffs again. "Bitch. Let me out of here, now!"

Silently she stood, shaking her head as she looked down at him. She raised that infamous fist and Mateo didn't blink as a strip of duct tape appeared over his mouth to silence him.

He roared behind it and frantically struggled against his bonds.

After several minutes, he began to feel like a two-year-old throwing a tantrum, especially when he got no reaction from her except that indulgent smirk that was already becoming a familiar and irritating sight to him.

LaMia folded her arms across her generous breasts and arched a brow. "Are you quite through?"

Actually he was exhausted, but he was nowhere near through, and if she could read his mind, then she already knew that, knew that as soon as she gave him an opportunity, as soon as he saw his chance, he would try to escape.

He had no choice. If he stayed here in her company a moment longer, he would succumb as his brother had and become her willing slave. He knew it. His desire for her washed over him even now with enough hunger to make his cock throb painfully. It was a hunger that tampered with his good sense and obliterated his revulsion.

He hated not being in control of his feelings, not being in control of himself. He had learned long ago the price of losing control, the price of being undisciplined.

Then he had been a stupid grieving kid and teen with more rage and testosterone than sense and no outlet except to rebel against what he had seen as the injustice done to his family.

Looking back now, Mateo realized he had been more than a handful for a matriculating college student with a couple of part-time jobs, selfishly taking every opportunity he could to get his brother's attention, from minor infractions like vandalism and shoplifting to the last straw for Julian when Mateo had been arrested with an older teen for grand theft auto.

Short of ringing Mateo's neck and trying to knock some sense into his sixteen-year-old head, Julian spent the last months of his life working to get Mateo's criminal record expunged.

"I want you to have a chance, Matty. Clean slate, no strikes. You're a smart kid when

you're not being totally stupid about who you hang out with, and I'm not going to let the street life get you. You hear me?"

"Yeah, I hear you."

"Look at me, Matty." Julian put a hand under his chin and made Mateo meet his eyes. "You're going to graduate from high school and go to college. And with any luck, you're going to go further than I ever will. I'm not going to let you waste your talent..."

His talent had been a miniscule interest in carpentry and art. Julian insisted he could take it farther than just building furniture and houses the way he had to that point been doing during his summer internship. From a few measly sketches of buildings around the city that Mateo had done, Julian insisted that his brother could be an architect or interior designer.

"You could lay the groundwork for skyscrapers that people work and live in all around the city, or maybe the world. There's nothing you won't be able to do once you put your mind and your skills to it, Matty. Trust me..."

God, he missed his brother so much! Even now, seven years after his death, he could still hear Julian's voice in his head sometimes when he was attacking a particularly troublesome design at work or just when he was relaxing at home. That deep, slightly accented baritone had been his rock, his foundation.

And it had been silenced by the woman sitting at his side.

Mateo growled deep in the back of his throat, a red haze clouding his vision as he pulled against his shackles with renewed ferocity.

She stared at him, seemed shocked by the hate and violence roiling inside him, firmly cupped his face with both hands, bent her head, and licked his face as if to calm him.

It did the opposite.

He felt the stroke all the way down to his toes, cold heat suffusing his core. He jerked his head away from her—*anger is better than lust, anger is required to get through this*—and would have spat at her if his mouth weren't taped.

"I know how furious and frustrated this situation makes you, Mateo." She ran a long fingernail down his chest and his pectorals involuntarily flexed beneath her touch. "You will make the best of it, however, and you will enjoy it as your brother did before you."

He would make the best of it, all right. As soon as he was free and could wrap his hands around that exotic pretty neck of hers for daring to speak Julian's name, for intimating that his brother had in any way taken pleasure from what she'd done to him.

He glared at her just as she raised a hand and waved it back and forth in front of his face.

Mateo shook his head, shouting, "No, damn it! No!" inside right before he heard her say, "Sleep now."

He fought her as hard as he could, lingering somewhere between the past and the present, in the room with his brother right before his death and in the room with LaMia trying to put him under.

Mateo saw that last expression of ecstasy on Julian's face before his brother shouted his release. He saw his brother's smile through the green fog.

Had he been wrong all these years about the way Julian had died? Not a victim, not in agony, but...content, as if he had found what he had been looking for his entire life?

LaMia pressed her hand to his forehead now, seemed desperate to stop his train of thought. "*Sleep.*"

Eager to test his theories later, he finally let the darkness take him again.

CHAPTER 3

LaMia admired the way Mateo's impossibly long, sumptuous eyelashes brushed his high, chiseled cheekbones as he slept. Her pussy muscles clenched with thoughts of all the things she planned to do with him, to him, the ways she would bring him to climax and make him bring her to her pinnacle in return.

How could she tell him that she had not taken him for what he was—which was an unexpected gift and kismet—but for with whom he consorted?

He belonged to her now, the spoils of her little war with Genesis and Alex Ryan. She would enjoy him as she pleased, and right now, it pleased her to just look at him, for he was very appealing to her eyes, especially for a human.

In this intimate, isolated setting, he was much larger than she had first thought. His long legs almost reached the foot of her king-sized mattress which put him at about the 6'4 she had first guessed, but that seemed lengthier despite his being spread-eagled on her bed.

His weight had felt solid in her grasp—probably about two-hundred pounds—when she'd flown with him from the parking lot, a neat hard package of lean muscles that felt pleasant beneath her hands.

She licked her lips as she lay down beside him, caressing the firm muscles of his abdomen, slowly sliding her hand up to his left shoulder as she half-covered his body with hers. She leaned close to nuzzle his neck and immersed herself in his clean musky scent, a pleasing combination of human male and the sandalwood cologne he wore.

LaMia sighed against his skin, pressed her lips to the pulse-point in his throat and nibbled his skin. She teased herself with his salty-sweet flavor, scenting the earthy, metallic aroma of his blood as it pumped through his veins.

Ah, Lilith, she had to have him. She chided herself for not waking him from her slumber spell and indulging in the carnal pleasures his young, very virile body had to offer.

She was purposely taunting herself with the possibilities, taunting herself with imagining what he would feel like inside her, his rock-hard penis hot and throbbing against her inner walls.

From experience, she knew the longer she waited to partake, the more she would enjoy it, but for some mysterious reason, she was impatient to be with this one.

It is the spirit-boost in his blood that is calling to you, his special kundalini that so few in your race have ever experienced.

LaMia gasped and sat up suddenly when she received a flash from Mateo's brain.

Impossible! He should not be dreaming under the influence of her spell, but she saw the proof of the unusual activity as she watched the rapid movement of his eyes beneath his lids.

It was not the first time the human had shown resistance to her influence. Like Alex, the *cambion* before him, Mateo had not been immobilized within the circle of her force field. He had defied her and fought her shield.

She had previously caught glimpses of Mateo's spirit on their flight to her lair, but when he clashed with her force field, *Lilith*, her panties had gotten soaked at his vim and vigor!

LaMia lay back down beside him now, took a deep breath, placed a palm on his forehead. She closed her eyes and waited to be submerged in the dark side of his id.

He is a young boy, about nine or ten human years, and dwarfed by the various wires and machines attached to his skinny body to monitor his heart rate and brain activity.

There is a doctor in the room discussing Mateo's condition with Julian as if the boy is not there. The boy can hear every word, however, but he cannot respond.

He wants to, God how he wants to talk to his brother and let Julian know he is okay, despite being afraid, despite not wanting to tell the police that he saw his dad shoot his mom and then himself. He does not want to talk about this. Cannot. Too afraid.

He just stares at the ceiling, does not know for how long he has been in this position, in this bed. He just knows he cannot move, cannot speak. He might as well be dead, and probably would be if the doctors were not pumping his body with all kinds of fluids and other substances to keep him nourished and alive.

The doctor's expression is grave and merciless, leaving not much room for hope as he explains the vagaries of Mateo's catatonic state to his brother.

"It's very rare in children, but it does happen. And considering what he experienced, what he witnessed...well, we're not really surprised."

"But he's not brain dead right? So that means he's going to come out of it." Julian glances over at the bed, eyes filling with tears. His parents are gone and the only other person in the world that he cares about does not respond to his own name, does not respond to his brother's touch. "I know he's in there. I just have to reach him," Julian murmurs.

The doctors have performed all manner of tests—lab, imaging, and other studies—to rule out metabolic abnormalities or treatable masses. All the tests have come back negative, however, confirming their initial diagnosis: Acute Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

"Putting a big fancy name on what this is isn't going to help my brother come out of this stupor, is it?" Julian asks.

The doctor reaches for his shoulder and squeezes. "We're doing everything we can."

Everything they can do is not enough, and for days and weeks, Julian watches as they force anti-psychotic drugs into his little brother to no obvious avail.

The little boy shows no signs of coming out of his stupor no matter how much Julian sits and talks with him daily.

His body has become a prison where he is trapped, only vaguely aware of things, every once in a while hearing his name, but unable to answer.

Until one day, out of desperation, Julian catches Mateo around the shoulders and shakes him. He screams, "Talk to me, Matty! I know you're in there! I know you can see me and hear me and you're going to talk to me, damn it! I'm waiting for you, Matty. I need you. C'mon..."

Doctors and nurses rush into the room to pull Julian off of the little boy, and during the scuffle at the threshold of his hospital room, Mateo blinks and focuses his eyes on the group and shouts, "Don't hurt my brother! Leave Julian alone!" before slipping back into that other dimension.

It is the start of Mateo's long road to recuperation. He comes around again later the same day, and this time it is for good.

LaMia felt the sudden heat of his stare before his breathing sped beside her. She opened her eyes and turned her head to face him.

He was angry. That much was clear from the frosty glare he gave her with those gorgeous chocolate-brown, almond-shaped eyes.

She supposed it was about time to take the tape off again, especially since she did actually prefer hearing his deep, sensuous baritone as opposed to pilfering his thoughts. Not that she would not resort to the latter if and when she pleased or thought it would suit her purposes.

LaMia sat up beside him and waved her hand and made the tape disappear.

"I'm hungry."

"You are quite the demanding one, are you not?"

"I want a shower and some clean clothes, too."

LaMia laughed, shaking her head as she rose from the bed and stared down at him.

Rather than anger her, Mateo's audacity and impudence amused her. Each represented a rare challenge, and since she loved a challenge and had not experienced a suitable one from any of her quarry in a very long time, she decided that she would be keeping this human male around longer than even she had originally intended.

She scoffed at the fleeting thought that he had ceased to become just a means to an end once she had touched his mind and seen the past through his eyes.

Fah, no!

She bedazzled her prey, not the other way around. She enslaved the more worthy ones—these numbers were few and far between—and took whatever sexual enjoyment she could from them before allowing them to leave her service. Her release was granted grudgingly, and only after LaMia was sure she had obtained as much use and energy out of her pet as there was to obtain. The ones who were released were usually much the worse for wear, while the others

usually did not survive much past a first or second coupling.

Whether they survived after her release or not was really of no consequence to LaMia, as she was a firm believer in survival of the fittest, whether they be human, Inanna or Sebitu.

She knew most in the Alliance and humans alike would consider her mien too demanding and merciless. Knew they would consider her attitude incompatible with human conservation since it advocated going through as many males as she pleased, like a human diner at an all-you-can-eat buffet, sampling many and just discarding the used portions after she had gotten her fill.

LaMia did not believe in repeat contact. She enjoyed her variety, and only in a rare few cases—Julian, his father and a handful of others out of a century-and-a-half of hunting—had she come across any human male who had been able to hold her interest, or warranted keeping them around for longer than it took LaMia to reach fulfillment.

She did not believe in the New Regime, did not believe the old one had been broken. Despite what the Alliance would have its Sisters in Emsharra and Gaiam accept as true, there were more than enough suitable human males to chose from for any female Inanna to at least slake her hunger as needed, if not completely satiate herself.

“Are you going to uncuff me or not?”

LaMia started as if coming out of a trance and focused on Mateo’s handsome, irate face. “That remains to be seen. Do you think you have earned your freedom?”

Mateo growled and pulled his wrists against his shackles. “I don’t need to earn what already belongs to me, damn it!”

“You are having a difficult time accepting your submission. This is understandable and I will make some allowances for you, but do not take advantage of my good graces.”

“What good graces? You’ve kept me shackled in this dungeon all night, you haven’t fed me or allowed me to walk around and get some exercise or—”

“You would do well not to describe my dwelling thus.”

“What? A dungeon?”

“You do not know what a dungeon is, young one,” LaMia said and returned to the bed to sit beside him. She watched him look at her with a wary expression, knew he had sensed her past as she had read his, but did not know how much further his perceptions went beyond feeling. She had not felt him read her mind, but that did not mean he had or could not. She was learning more and more by the minute that she could not put anything past the young man, not anything at all, especially since it was plain to see he did not fear her.

Her core trembled with excitement and respect, despite this state of affairs making him a dangerous opponent, an unlikely submissive

Fah, she would break him! She had not come across a man yet that she hadn’t been able to break.

Except Julian.

This should have made her nervous, not only because she had never been able to break Mateo’s brother, but because Julian had come as close to getting inside her as any man ever had.

She would put a stop to Mateo's imagined control before he did the same.

"You need to learn sooner rather than later, that you no longer fall under the jurisdiction of the human world, Mateo. And while they may otherwise be admirable traits in the human world, your strength of mind and will cannot and will not be tolerated here."

"And if I don't submit? What'll you do to me?"

She heard his instant accompanying thought—*Don't answer that!*—as if he suddenly realized that he had not seen or heard half of what she could or would do to him. She knew he realized that he might very well have just stepped over the line.

LaMia smiled at his intelligence and sense of humor.

Never had she been so enchanted by a human before. Not even his brother, Julian, as beautiful and self-possessed a human male as he had been, could rival the fire and determination that she saw in Mateo.

Lilith, this was intolerable! She had not even tasted him yet. How much more smitten would she be once this occurred?

LaMia did not intend to find out, needed to stop this battle of wills between herself and Mateo in its tracks.

She raised a fist, twisted it back and forth before he could object, and watched him gape as the cuffs fell from his wrists and ankles.

She watched him for several moments as he sat up on the bed and silently rubbed his wrists, then she raised a hand and pointed him towards the bathroom. "Everything you need will be in there. Take your shower, return to me and we will have breakfast. Then we will begin your training and I will teach you how to please me."

CHAPTER 4

The first thing Mateo did when he got to the bathroom was look for a window, only to find it barred with imposing wrought-iron rods embedded in the window sill and the high ceiling. He couldn't have squeezed through the small spaces between the bars had he been Elastic Man.

He cursed under his breath as he glanced around the opulent white marble and gold surroundings, wondering where LaMia got the money to outfit her loft and how much the rent was for a place this size.

Like she actually has to worry about paying for anything with power like hers? She could get anything she wants just by raising and waving around that infamous fist.

He had to admit he'd thought she'd been about to zap him earlier, either taping his mouth shut or putting him to sleep again. After experiencing each more times than he cared to count in the last twelve hours, he had been in no hurry for her to chastise him either way again.

Damn, what had he gotten himself into, and why had she picked him?

She had mentioned something about converted allies last night, had insinuated that these allies had some interest in obtaining him before she had. He still didn't fully understand what she'd meant by that and whether or not Alex and Genesis had been 'converted.' His first question would have been converted into what and by whom?

"I do not hear any water running, Mateo. What type of shower are you taking?"

He closed his eyes and bit back a snappy retort. God, the woman sounded like his mother! "I'm, uh, just admiring your taste in trappings and design."

"Is it not lovely? I have a subscription to *Architectural Digest*. I had one of the interior designers spotlighted in the special Interior Design Legends issue come in to do my loft."

Fleeting, he wondered if the interior designer in question had done the job willingly or under the influence of one of her notorious spells.

But a more important issue was the woman's vanity, a trait Mateo determined to try and use against her and to his advantage as soon as he could.

She was a female after all and obviously arrogant about her abilities to bewitch and dominate those in her orbit. If he could just play to her pride, get into her good graces—

Mateo pivoted to face the door where LaMia lackadaisically leaned against the jamb with her arms folded across those magnificent breasts.

His cock instantly hardened and stood at attention at the sight of her.

Mateo cursed under his breath at the traitorous reaction of his body. He couldn't hide his erection if he tried, the boxer briefs he was wearing only enhanced the stark silhouette of his aroused penis rather than containing it.

He watched as she unfolded her arms and straightened. His heart thudded as she sniffed the air in that already familiar way, like a predator in the woods tracking game.

What did he smell like to her that would put that lascivious smile on her face as she crossed the length of the marble floor to him? Surf-and-turf? Chicken fricassee? Enchiladas and fajitas?

She paused a foot in front of him, and Mateo stood still when she bent her head to his neck.

He kept his hands clenched at his sides as he fought every instinct in him that told him to move, resist, fight her, and run. When she leaned further to put her mouth on him his breath hitched in his chest at the barely-there contact. Her full lips and agile tongue fluttered against him like butterfly wings.

Mateo closed his eyes, feeling exposed and susceptible, wondered which would kill him first, her arousing cinnamon scent or the rampant power of his knee-jerk desire.

She didn't touch him with anything but her mouth, hands clasped behind her back as if she were trying to resist some kind of uncontrollable temptation herself.

LaMia trailed her teeth along the veins in his neck until she reached the pulse point and suddenly punctured skin, quickly sinking her sharp fangs deep.

Mateo stiffened then shuddered in her grip. He fought not to pull away, unsure if she'd release and he'd leave a chunk of his throat in her mouth. He couldn't even scream and by the time he flung his arms up between them to fend her off, she had already caught his wrists and dragged them down to hold firmly behind his back.

"Be still," she rasped against his throat, and then backed him against the nearest wall before sinking her teeth back into his neck.

He felt her sucking, drinking his blood, felt the warm liquid dripping down his neck and chest as she pulled hard. He arched his throat as if to give her better access.

Mateo jerked against the pleasure-pain and she widened her stance to stand astride his legs. His cock throbbed behind the blue cotton material of his boxer briefs, wanting out, wanting to get at her.

What was she doing to him that he couldn't fight her? What was she doing to him to make him enjoy being bitten?

He pulled against her iron grip, surprised at her ability to hold him in place despite her alien anatomy and strength and furious at his powerlessness to break her hold.

She was a female, the weaker sex after all. He should be able to take her, at least put up a decent fight.

That he enjoyed her touch, that she turned him on, was a mute point. He shouldn't like what she was doing to him against his will. He shouldn't like *her*.

"Stop resisting, Mateo. I do not wish to hurt you."

"Yeah, well, you're going to have t—" He gasped and froze when she sank her teeth into him hard. A warning.

She released his wrists, pressed flush against him, slid her hands up to his head and fisted his hair as she rubbed her slit against his jutting erection and moaned.

He closed his eyes and echoed her sentiment, grinding his painfully hard cock against her, dry-humping like a desperate, horny teen at a forbidden, unchaperoned party.

She lapped at the wound she had made, carefully trailing her tongue from one nipple and back up to his neck to get every drop of his blood that had spilled.

Suddenly, she released him and stepped away. When he opened his eyes to stare at her, she looked back at him with a dazed expression in her usually sharp hazel eyes, as if she didn't know why she had done what she had just done any more than he did.

"Hurry and take your shower. We have much to discuss."

With this, she made an about face, left the bathroom, and slammed the door behind her.

Mateo sagged back against the wall as soon as he was alone, legs weak and head even lighter. He didn't know if it was the loss of blood, or just the diversion of most of it from his head to his dick that caused his dizziness and unsteady limbs.

He had been kidnapped by some kind of vampire! *What the fuck?*

If being snatched out of a public parking lot by some alien superhuman dominatrix hadn't been bad enough, this was just a thousand times more unbelievable.

Keep it, together, Diaz. Don't freak out. She's just a woman. Alien and vampire, maybe, but a woman. You've handled plenty before. You can handle her, and you're going to get out of this. Just take your shower, and go out there and have your little talk as if she didn't just drink from you like a breathless parched kid hogging the water fountain at a playground in the brutal August heat.

Mateo stood in the middle of the bathroom, looking around as if his circumstances had suddenly changed and the window wasn't barred, and a vampire succubus wasn't on the other side of the bathroom door waiting for him.

He had to get out of here!

"Mateo! Please do not make me come in there to get you."

"I'll be out in a minute."

"Good. You need to eat breakfast while it is hot."

She's cooking? Not just a vampire succubus, but a domestic diva vampire succubus. How freaking neat was that?

There was no more stalling left to do. If he didn't hurry up and get out there, he'd run the chance of earning her ire, then she'd come back in here to collect him and he'd miss getting a shower altogether.

Mateo took a deep breath, pulled down and stepped out of his boxer briefs, slid open the frosted glass door of the shower and turned on the cold water.

He loved hot showers, loved steaming up his bathroom, loved the water just short of what one of his girlfriends used to call molten lava. Considering his current circumstances, he thought a drop in temperature might be a good idea.

When the water hit him, it was like someone had dumped cold water over hot coals. Steam immediately rose up from his body with a sizzling burst. He was literally on fire with need!

Mateo leaned his palms against the marble wall beneath the shower attachment and ducked his head beneath the water. He got his body good and soaked, some of the tension slowly drifting from his back and shoulders before he grabbed the bottle of shower gel from the caddy and squeezed a generous amount into his hand.

He was sure it would have a frilly, fruity girly scent to it, but when he got a whiff, it shocked him that it smelled exactly like the sandalwood-scented soap he used at home.

Everything you need will be in there. Had she duplicated everything he had in his bathroom at home? How did she know? More pilfered thoughts and images from his brain?

He opened his eyes to glance at the bottle, but there was no type of labeling to indicate what it was, or where LaMia had gotten it. Actually, anything could have been in the bottle. How was he to know? Probably some date-rape drug or other aphrodisiac, something to make him more compliant and randy than he already was.

Like she needed to do anything to make him want her? Shit, all she had to do was sashay across the floor and he was like goo in her hands.

Mateo quickly lathered up with the gel and rinsed off before turning the shower off and stepping back out into the marble room.

He took a moment to glance at his throat in the mirror and did a double-take. There was no wound, not even a little nip or bruise. It was as if she hadn't bitten him at all.

Had she repaired the broken skin when she'd been lapping at him like a cat? Why heal him if her intent was to hurt and torture him in the first place? Did she mean to hurt and torture him or just make him submit?

Hell, the last was enough torture in itself.

Why should he have to submit to anyone, especially some arrogant dominatrix who'd taken his family away from him?

That's it, Diaz. Get yourself good and riled so you won't want her when you go out there. Work up enough righteous indignation to eradicate your lust.

His cock had other ideas though, semi-erect and slowly rising as if out of defiance at the idea of being reunited with Ms. Nubian Queen.

You go ahead and be angry if you want to, homeboy, but I'm going to get me some.

Mateo cursed his blasted cock, took one of the big fluffy white and gold-trimmed terry towels from the towel warmer, and wrapped it around his waist.

When he came out of the bathroom with the towel riding low on his hips, it was to the tantalizing smell of breakfast cooking.

He followed his nose to the enticing aroma of breakfast sausage, scrambled cheese and eggs, and pancakes in varying stages of cooking or warming.

Mateo paused to watch LaMia bustling at the stainless steel, state-of-the-art range.

Even though she had mentioned breakfast, he never would have imagined her at such an ordinary task as cooking. He just figured she could snap her fingers and whip something up.

She had an apron on over what he was beginning to think of as her dominatrix kidnapper outfit, this one in electric-blue leather.

LaMia turned at his approach, a large cast-iron skillet—containing several perfectly-formed pancakes—in her hand. This was only the second time he'd caught her looking unguarded.

The vibe she gave off almost felt human...vulnerable. The perceptions made him say, "I never took you for the domestic diva type."

"Ah, you make a reference to your Martha Stewart, do you not?"

He nodded.

"How did you think we would eat?"

Mateo shrugged, face heating with a blush. Her superior tone made him feel like a student who'd asked a stupid question in class. "I just thought you'd do that trick with your fists."

She grinned at him. "Admittedly, that particular talent comes in handy, but I...needed something to keep me occupied while you showered, and I like to cook." She turned back to the stove with her pan and easily transferred the pancakes to a large serving platter that already contained several stacks of the fluffy cakes. "Speaking of which, it is about time you were done. I was preparing to go check on you."

"Where would I go? You've got this place locked down like Fort Knox."

She smiled and said, "Just so long as you know," then turned back to her chores, doling portions of pancakes, eggs, and sausages into two plates before bringing both to the island in the middle of the kitchen.

Mateo stood watching her, admired her movements. They were as easygoing and fluid when she engaged in something as mundane as preparing a meal as when she engaged in something as extraordinary as raising that imperial fist to shut him up, or when she pinned him to the wall like a butterfly in a display case.

He tried to get a fix on her emotions, her mindset, searching her aura for any cloudy, cold patches or dark spots that would indicate mental illness or just plain evil, but there was nothing of the sort, only the emerald green of her inner spirit bordered in vibrant red.

Unconvinced, he searched further, trying to elicit some guilt and regret at what she was

doing to him, some insincerity, but he could feel or read none of these from her thoughts.

Nothing about her was false or intentionally cruel. She was what she was and implicitly believed that the things she did were right and okay no matter who she hurt. She believed that if anyone was hurt because of her actions, then this is the way things were meant to be, the natural order of things, and one did not mourn the natural order of things. Like birth and death, people came and people went. If a person 'went' then it was just their time to go.

Like his brother.

How could he argue with or combat someone like her? There was nothing he could say to make her see that the things she'd done to him so far were wrong. That the things she *planned* to do to him, with him, were offensive and unwelcome.

He watched her profile as she set two places at the table. Her smooth mahogany face shimmered beneath the light of the kitchen. Her high pronounced cheekbones gave her beautiful face a stern look that was instantly balanced out by the soft fullness of her lips.

Mateo imagined what it would be like to kiss her. He was simultaneously repulsed and turned on by the idea of her lips on his throat, by her teeth biting him. His dick twitched with the idea of her biting him in other places, yes, even there. He longed for the scrape of those sharp fangs as she held him down, longed for her tongue to dip into the slit at the tip of his cock, lapping pre-come the way she had lapped his blood.

How could he condemn what she did when he wanted what she had to offer, when he needed to be her beneficiary as much as she wanted and needed to be his benefactor?

Mateo closed his eyes, and as before, he received a flash of her in a dungeon, this one stronger and more detailed than when she had chastised him for using the word to describe her home.

She had been so insulted, and when he'd peeked inside her mind he'd understood why.

He gave in to her memories now as he hadn't before. He didn't know when his ability had graduated from empathy to telepathy as he had never been able to read anyone's mind before. He suspected his new gift had something to do with his link with LaMia.

At first he was so shocked by his new ability and perceptions he couldn't enjoy his insight into the workings of the woman's mind, although it was only a brief glimpse.

Suddenly, Mateo is awash in pain—her pain, her degradation—as he notices the heavy iron shackles on her wrists and ankles. The cuffs are much heavier and more uncomfortable than the leather cuffs with which he had been bound. The cuffs on LaMia are specially made for her kind, the iron alloy they contain meant to enervate and incapacitate as well as restrain.

The walls and ceiling are made of stone. The room is bare of any furnishings or amenities that might be found in a human prison of today. The chamber is unbearably cold and damp and LaMia lies on the floor in the fetal position, back against the wall farthest from her cell's bars, shivering uncontrollably.

She has not eaten in days and she has been mercilessly interrogated and beaten by her captors, the Sebitu, for the entire length of her captivity.

Mateo shook his head at the images and information flooding his brain, braced himself

for a new barrage as he was whisked from the cell to a lavishly appointed room, miles and miles away from the squalor of LaMia's prison.

She is arguing with an elegant and much older woman about LaMia's parents going off to war.

"You can stop them if you wanted to, Grandmother Nahemah. They do not have to be sacrificed to these useless, wretched border wars like mere—"

"Are you going to say commoners?"

"You know what I mean."

"Unfortunately, I do, Mia. But it is your parents' choice that sends them off to fight the Sebitu. They are duty bound."

"Stop them!"

"I cannot."

"Yes you can. You just do not want to. You want to see them die."

"Why would you say such a thing, child?"

"You never loved my mother as much as you loved Kalika's father. And ever since he died in the wars you have been waiting for your chance to send my mother to her death, too."

"That is a hateful accusation, Mia, and you know it is not true."

"I know nothing of the sort. I only know that I will never forgive you if you let my parents leave for Gaiaam."

LaMia talked a tough game, but Mateo was no longer fooled.

He saw and felt the scared little girl buried beneath the Amazon dominatrix act, saw the resentful young woman who could not control the fate of her parents and so tried to control everyone else around her to compensate.

He'd never felt the sort of emotional pain from anyone the way he felt it from LaMia—so piercing and all-encompassing.

When his own parents had died, he and Julian had shared their grief. Since both he and his brother were empathic, neither one had to take the full burden of their grief at any given time, each taking turns buffering the grief and transmitting solace.

LaMia did not seem to have had this option. She'd had no one to absorb her grief, too busy alienating all around her who might have, choosing to shut herself down and feel nothing but intense desire and hunger.

Just now, however, he had gotten the full brunt of all that pent-up emotion—the hate, the fear, the frustration—and not just the hankering and lust.

Emotional pain was so much worse than physical pain. It was easier for a body to recover from most physical pain. Physical pain was transient, finite, but emotional pain stayed with a psyche forever, left scars for life.

His favorite Ms. Nubian Queen was a perfect example of not practicing what she preached, carrying around a full load of emotional burdens she was either unwilling or unable to

let go of.

From her thoughts he knew Nahemah was her grandmother and Kalika her cousin. But who and what were their kind and the Sebitu? What did the Sebitu have against LaMia and her people? What crime had LaMia committed? Had she been a prisoner of the same border wars in which her parents had perished?

Mateo gasped, gritted his teeth, and squeezed his eyes tight as she psychically struck him, not hard enough to hurt him, but enough to warn him. It felt as if she had reached into his head and pinched a piece of his brain between her forefinger and thumb the way a mother might pinch an unruly child on the arm to stop him or her acting up in church.

"The last man who invaded my privacy like that lived to regret it."

"All right. I get your point."

"See that you do."

"Although you have no problem invading *my* privacy."

"You are not me. You belong *to* me and therefore have no privacy *from* me."

Mateo scowled at her logic, biting his tongue since he was *this* close to losing his temper, but good. Just where the hell did she come off? She sounded like his father whenever Julian used to complain about the old man opening up his private business mail. Their dad had shot right back that Julian didn't have any private business as long as he was living under Dad's roof. "What happened?" he asked her.

She turned to face him full and arched a brow.

"To the other guy who 'invaded your privacy.' What did you do to him?"

"The other guy was your mentor, Alex Ryan, and I psychically—as you humans call it—bitch-slapped him."

"Alex...?" He gawked. "What does he have to do with you? What does he have to do with any of this?" Mateo waved a hand to indicate her, him and the loft.

She looked him up and down, licked her lips when she got to the hard ridges of his abdomen and the blatant bulge beneath his towel.

When she returned her gaze to his, he could have sworn her eyes reflected flames. Just a flicker of golden fire, then it was gone.

Mateo did a double-take before LaMia pointed him across the room to the bed where clean clothes—a fresh pair of blue jeans, a white T-shirt and boxer briefs—were laid out for him.

"Get dressed. Then we will talk over breakfast."

CHAPTER 5

LaMia did not know how she had managed to set the table and let him stand behind her in that revealing towel—though surely no more revealing than when he had been spread-eagle on her bed in just his shorts—to read her mind as long as she had before acting.

She could not have explained the pleasant liquid warmth that flooded her center at his mental invasion. Could not have explained it if she were back in that cold, dark cell and the Sebitu were administering another vicious round of interrogation and their special brand of mental and physical torture.

She had not wanted his connection to end, had reveled in it until his mental caress had become so pervasive she'd no choice except to stop him.

Normally, she would have been so much rougher than she had been, might have mentally back-handed him as she had Alex, but something had made her restrain her natural instincts.

LaMia watched as, finally clad in jeans and T-shirt, he crossed the loft floor from her bed to the island now. She was unaware of holding her breath until he paused in front of where she was seated in the high-back barstool and leered.

The combination of his full sensual lips poised in that lopsided, dimple-revealing grin, and his gleaming chocolate eyes following her every move was devastating, a silent unprecedented assault on her senses that had her leaping to her feet for a respite.

She stumbled to the range, snatched an oven mitt from where it was hanging over the range, donned it and opened one of the warming drawers to retrieve the two plates of food.

“Anything I can help you with?”

“Nothing, no.” How could she let this human, a veritable child, unsettle her so? She was an Enlil, Emsharra royalty, a member of the elite military guard, and a master huntress. He should not be able to breach her emotional defenses as effortlessly as he had.

Lilith, this coddling could not continue. *Fah*, no!

LaMia brought the two plates back to the island where Mateo was sitting in the chair

adjacent the one she had just vacated and placed an overflowing plate of food in front of him and one at the adjacent place setting before taking her seat.

She stared at him, found it difficult to get into his mind since he had broken through her mental defenses, as if he were somehow using her energy and abilities against her.

He was as quick a study as she had first surmised, like most Inanna, a chameleon who could easily assimilate. It was a dangerous combination with which to be faced in an enemy, but facing it from a slave was a truly unparalleled and unacceptable circumstance.

She supposed it was just as well that she could not read him since she would have been sending out an unwanted spirit signal to her people just by engaging in the telepathic energy reading him would have involved.

For her purposes now, entertaining and re-educating a new slave in her lair, the Inanna tracking practice was an unwanted hindrance.

Already she had released her spirit signal more than she cared to by reading Mateo as frequently as she had since his capture. She had used her spirit light more in the last twelve hours—erecting her force field, mind-reading and shapeshifting—than she had during most of her time in exile.

She guessed she would just have to break down and communicate with Mateo the old fashioned way since, after that ill-advised bite, she knew she needed to address his obvious misconceptions. She certainly could not have him functioning under the misconception that she was in any way related to the primitive bloodsuckers his kind called vampires.

LaMia preferred obtaining her energy the progressive way, drawing it from a human's inner spirit light. But Mateo's blood...ah *Lilith*, his blood had been delectable. She had never been tempted to suck the blood of any of her prey before. Never, not even with Mateo's father and brother, and spirit-boost had been just as concentrated in their blood as it was in Mateo's.

There was just something about his blood, something about *him*, that called to every primordial instinct in her, made her act out of character, especially where her needs and feeding were concerned. Something about him made her want to taste him in the most basic way known to humans and Inanna.

LaMia glanced at him from the corner of her eyes as he lifted a forkful of eggs to his mouth and chewed. "Let us get one thing straight, Mateo, I am not a vampire."

He paused as she turned to face him full, finished chewing, and swallowed his food before he asked, "Is that a fact?"

"Yes it is."

"The bite you gave me in the bathroom says otherwise."

She remembered the leer he had given her when he had joined her in the kitchen, that smoldering look that said he had a secret and that he also knew hers.

LaMia supposed she could not hope to nurture and maintain any intimacy with him without expecting to pay a price. Mateo was as aware of her feelings and thoughts now as she was aware of his.

Nevertheless, she needed to take back control of this untenable situation as soon as

possible, take control of *him* starting now.

“Drinking blood is just one way we Inanna use to obtain sustenance. Admittedly, it is an archaic method and I must...” She paused to lick her lips, measuring the effect of each of her words to him and hating how defensive he made her feel. “I must apologize to you for resorting to such an uncivilized technique of drawing out your energy.” Biting him and reverting to the old way of siphoning energy had been an unfortunate lapse in judgment that she had yet to properly regret, however, not while the potent sample of his spirit-boost melded with her blood and yet flowed through her veins. She would not go any further and admit that she had not been able to help herself. She would not tell him that she found him irresistible and had just needed a small snack to tide her over until she began his re-education and took a full meal.

She could imagine him stomping all over her authority if he was aware of the extent of his allure, so better not to let him know.

“So you’re Inanna?”

LaMia nodded. “As are your friends Alex and Genesis. Though Alex is only a hybrid, half-human and half-Inanna.”

“I still don’t understand what all this has to do with me.”

“Alex and Genesis wanted you to join their little Harvesting Program. I could not allow them to have you.”

He grimaced. “Harvesting Program?”

She took a deep breath, released it on a long sigh and rolled her eyes. She really did not want to go into this with him but saw no other way. He needed to understand why he was here and what he would soon be facing as her slave.

She could have easily sent him the images and thoughts he needed to grasp the situation, but, in deference to her people’s infernal tracking practice, the less telepathy she engaged in the better. It was such a disadvantage, having to control her telepathy, since mind-reading came so naturally to most Inanna, but control she must or suffer the consequences.

Besides which, she rather enjoyed talking to him the old fashioned way. She enjoyed listening to him and enjoyed watching his many facial expressions—from confusion, to comprehension, to humor, and rage. She especially enjoyed experiencing his sharp thought processes when he discovered something new, and his exasperation and displeasure when he wasn’t happy with something he’d learned.

LaMia received more than her share of Mateo’s bewilderment, exasperation, displeasure and shock once she explained what the Harvesting Program and mission of the Alliance and New Regime was, and that Mateo had been targeted to be a recruit in all three.

He sat silently and gawked at her for several long moments before he started to chew and swallow a mouthful of sausage and pancakes. “Do you have anything in here to drink?”

She frowned but went to the refrigerator and returned to the island with a pitcher of freshly-squeezed orange juice. She set it down and watched Mateo pour himself a large glass before he gulped down half and poured more juice into his glass.

“Actually I was thinking of something a little stronger, but I suppose this’ll have to do.”

She burst out laughing, could not control herself. She was torn between taping his mouth shut and punishing him for his irreverence or hugging him her elation was so great.

LaMia did not think she had laughed or smiled as much in her life as she had in the last twelve hours. "I do have something stronger, but I believe you need a clear head for the ordeal you are about to face."

He looked at her as if to decide whether or not to address that, must have finally decided to ignore it and asked instead, "So, this Harvesting Program is—?"

"A silly effort by the New Regime to *preserve* humanity."

"And obviously you believe the effort to preserve humanity is silly."

"I do not believe that there ever has been a supply crisis to be solved. I believe that the Alliance and New Regime were formed as an ill-conceived attempt by some of my kind and Inanna powers that be to—"

"Assuage their guilt at letting Kalika die," he murmured.

LaMia gaped but quickly recovered to ask, "What would you know of it?"

"I know that you were jealous of your cousin and that you never forgave your grandmother for choosing her over you and for letting your parents die."

"You know not of what you speak."

He gave her a long unconvinced look before asking, "How do Alex and Genesis come into the picture?"

"Alex is Kalika's son, a half-breed *cambion*, an abomination."

"No love lost for him, is there?"

LaMia scowled and finished as if he had not spoken. "And Genesis is his traitorous guardian as well as helpmate. They are the reason I was exiled from Emsharra." She froze and stared at him. She had not meant to reveal that last part, especially with so much bitterness. She could not let him, or anyone, know how much Nahemah's turning her back on her had hurt. She could not let anyone know she actually cared about Emsharra or the people who dwelled there.

But she could tell from the knowing look he gave her that she had already let the proverbial cat out of the bag. LaMia silently gave him credit, however, for not immediately rubbing the salt in her wound, watched him as he silently watched her and digested all that she had just said.

"Ever think that maybe you're the reason you were exiled from Emsharra?"

"*Bashta!* I did what I had to do. I did what was necessary to preserve order."

"Whoa, whoa, okay." Mateo threw up his hands. "Don't get your panties in a twist. I was just making an observation."

"It is the wrong one, and for your information, I was not only exiled. I lost a very good comrade to your mentor and his wife."

He shrugged. "Casualties of war, right?"

She peered at him, unsure whether or not he was mocking her, immediately realized that

he was not being impertinent but had in fact only quoted her own ingrained philosophy to her. “You are quite correct,” she finally said.

“And you took me to get back at Alex and Genesis?”

“That was part of it.”

“What’s the other part? This spirit-boost that my energy supposedly contains?”

“Your *kundalini* does contain spirit-boost. There is no supposedly about it.”

“How do you kn—? Never mind.”

LaMia watched as he shook his head and automatically rubbed a hand over his neck where she had bitten him.

“It should not still hurt.”

“It doesn’t. It just...feels a little weird is all.”

“You will get used to it.”

He shot her a glare. “I don’t think so.”

Her pussy muscles spasmed at the defiance in his voice, juices slowly simmering and percolating. *Lilith*, this male excited her! “You have no choice, Mateo,” she said as much to see his reaction as to tell him the way of his world.

He did not disappoint her, gritted his teeth, stood from his chair, put his fists on his hips as if to keep from wrapping his hands around her neck, and glared down at her.

LaMia could almost see the well-known smoke coming out of his ears, his anger was so strong...so intoxicating.

Desire this potent should be illegal, she thought. He should not be able to make her feel so capable yet awkward, so powerful yet vulnerable. *Lilith*, he made her head spin with unfamiliar thoughts, made her heart squeeze and her body tremble with unaccustomed emotions.

“Why my family? Why me? As powerful as you are, you could have anyone you want, your own kind even, anyone more...suitable than me.”

“There is no one more suitable for me than you at this place and time.” As she said it, she realized how true it was, how true she needed it to be.

“Not even your own kind?”

“My own kind would not serve the purpose, would not serve my needs.”

“And that is to be your slave?”

“There is that, yes, but that is not the only purpose your presence serves.”

“You want to drain me like you did my brother and father.”

“As I said before, what happened to your...kin was an unfortunate consequence of our mating.”

“Unfortunate consequence? That’s bullshit and you know it!”

“We Inanna are an ancient race of predators, Mateo. We hunt and we feed. It is who we

are. It is what we do. Your world is our domain and hunting ground. This will not change.” She gave him a long hard look. “And you will lower your voice when you address me.”

He cursed under his breath and bit his bottom lip as an apparent concession to her command. He did not sit down or move his fists from his hips, however.

She reached out to him with her mind, had to, his mindset was too tempting. He was angry, certainly, but there was desire that he was doing an admirable job of tapping down. She felt his determination not to let her see how much he wanted her.

“You came back to my brother and father again and again. That’s not just nature or hunting or feeding. You could have fed from anyone at that point. You could have left them alone and moved on to someone else, but you didn’t do that, did you? Because you were being just plain cruel.”

LaMia winced as if he had slapped her, surprised at how much his accusations hurt her and her instant need to defend herself. “I did not kill your father. He killed himself.”

“After you helped him along.”

Should she tell him how damaged his father had been? What a tortured warrior’s soul he had possessed to begin with? How could she tell him that his father had not had anywhere near the mental strength and spiritual fortitude of his sons?

“I did not make your father do anything he did not want to do.”

“I suppose it was his idea to kill my mother?”

LaMia had tried to stop him. It had never been her intention for the Diaz woman to die and she would never have used her powers in such a back-door manner. She attacked her enemies from the front, faced them. “I never meant for your mother to die.” Nor had she meant for Julian to die. She had gotten too distracted by her quest for spirit-boost.

“Why don’t you just admit it? You don’t really care about anyone except LaMia Enlil.”

“Have a care, Mateo.”

“Oh, pardon me for speaking the truth and angering Ms. Nubian Queen.”

“Are you mocking me?”

“Far be it from me to mo—”

LaMia caught him off-guard when she suddenly leaped to her feet. He took a couple of steps back, defiantly raised his chin just enough for her to reach out and wrap the fingers of one hand around his neck. She growled deep in her throat and exerted just a pound of pressure on his Adam’s apple.

He caught her wrist with both hands and when he tried to pry loose her grip to free himself, LaMia lifted him a couple of inches in the air, pushed him back against the large stainless steel refrigerator and held him in place.

He did not lower his hands, but finally went still, quietly watching her. Waiting.

“Do you wish me to tape your mouth shut again? Or put you under another slumber spell? Or bind you, because these can all be arranged, especially for a slave as recalcitrant as you.”

"I'm not a slave," he rasped.

She exerted a little more pressure and watched him. "You are trying my patience, Mateo."

"You wouldn't kill me."

"Oh, really? And why is that?"

"Because you want me."

She burst out laughing, released her grip as suddenly as she had attacked him and let him slide back to the floor. "Goddess, you are so full of surprises, are you not."

He scowled as he rubbed his neck. "I'm so glad I amuse you."

"You more than amuse me, Mateo. Have you not learned that by now?" She licked her lips, looked him up and down before advancing again.

Mateo suddenly dropped to a crouch and swept her feet from under her with a quick sweeping motion of his leg.

While she was dealing with the shock of his surprising show of aggression, he leaped to his feet and ran for the door fifty yards away.

LaMia bounded to her feet a second later, paused and took great pleasure watching him sprint across the floor. She enjoyed watching the way his long, athletic legs gobbled up the ground. She enjoyed it so much that she delayed her pursuit, especially since the door was bolted shut with two locks to which only she had the keys, and a steel bar was in place across the middle of the door.

She knew he could not get out, but *shasta*, he had covered the distance quickly! She was glad she had thought twice about providing him cross-trainers. She wondered how much faster he would have gotten to the door if he were not barefoot and had on a pair of athletic shoes.

By the time LaMia made it to within several feet of the door, Mateo had managed to slide the bar up and out of its slot but froze when he came up against his next obstacle and realized he needed a key to unlock the door from the inside.

"What kind of sick freak puts locks on the inside of the door? What if there was a fire? What if you died and I had to get out of here!" He turned as she approached, bracing his back and his palms against the steel door. "Stay back and get away from me!"

"I believe these are what you need to unlock the door." She showed him the set of keys on the chain around her neck and grimaced. "You said it yourself, Mateo. I have this place locked down like Fort Knox. There is no escape for you. Not from me."

He turned and banged on the door with his fists. "No, no, no! Let me out of here! Help me, somebody! Anybody, help me!"

LaMia moved closer as he turned back to her. She sadly shook her head, hated to see him this way, so desperate and defeated, but there was no choice. He had to know how totally hopeless his situation was, that he could not leave her until she allowed it, and LaMia was never going to allow him to leave. She could not, would never be through with him. Not now, not ever.

There was too much she needed and wanted from him, the least of which was...

Forgiveness.

Fah, no! From where had that alien thought come?

She peered at Mateo, and despite not feeling his presence, she wondered if he were dipping into her head again. Who knew if perhaps he had found a back door of which she was unaware?

She took several steps closer. "You must stop fighting me, Mateo."

"And I told you to stay back."

Two more steps. "And what will you do if I do not?"

"I don't want to hurt you, Mia."

She took one more step to bring her a foot away from him. "Nor I you," LaMia whispered and reached out a hand to cup his face.

He did not flinch, but she caught a flash of his regret at having struck out at her. It almost made her ashamed for planning to take advantage but she had no choice.

"Your nobility makes you weak, Mateo."

"I'll defend myself."

"I would expect nothing less."

He gritted his teeth. "Damn it, don't make me hurt you."

She caught his unspoken *again*, but knew he did not mean his earlier attack. He was thinking about her past, a vision of her torture in the dungeon coming to her from him.

Ishara, how could he be so compassionate when it was she who was responsible for his family's deaths? She did not think she would be as forgiving were their roles reversed, and she supposed she should be thankful for his empathy. Without it, she might not have been able to do what she planned and subdue him.

LaMia caught his wrists and pulled them over his head to pin them against the door.

Mateo bent his head as if to kiss her, but whipped a leg behind her knee instead and tried to trip her again.

LaMia used his momentum to drag him down with her and flip him beneath her on the Oriental rug.

Breathless, she pulled both his arms above his head as she straddled him and he violently twisted and turned between her thighs, making her wet.

She thought twice about weaving a slumber spell despite her earlier threat. From what she had seen, he was half-immune to the effects and, like the *cambion* Alex, her force field did not totally immobilize him, which made her wonder what the effect of her collar would be.

LaMia glared down at him as he panted. His cock was rock hard and inviting as it teased the apex between her legs. She rubbed her pussy against his erection and he bucked his hips to try and dislodge her.

"Stop fighting me, Mateo. I am stronger than you."

“I might not win in a fight, but you for damn sure are going to know I was here.”

She frowned at him. “How could I not know?”

“I’m not going to beg or heel or roll over and play dead for you.”

“That remains to be seen.” It would be a shame to collar him and rein in all that emotion and heat. It would be like putting a harness on a wild stallion.

A wild stallion, however, eventually had to heel to a master in order to be ridden (LaMia surely intended to ride this one) and in return the stallion would be well-cared for, but first he had to learn the limits of his freedom and the punishment for disobedience.

As Mateo would have to learn.

Awake, he was too troublesome to handle, but she hated to keep resorting to sleep charms, hated the idea of tampering with his mind that way or more frequently than necessary. She considered it a crime to deactivate such a lively and sharp intellect.

LaMia transferred both his wrists to one hand and pinned them to the rug, reluctantly raised her other fist, and watched as he froze beneath her. Instant anger shone out of his almond eyes and washed over her like an aphrodisiac despite his trying to hide his feelings.

“Don’t, Mistress.”

She gaped, quickly caught herself and set her mouth into a stern line. She had said it, but never had she dreamed how full of surprises he was. It was the first time he had addressed her thus, and he had sounded so sincere.

She was not sure how sincere he was, however, as he had so far proven as skilled as any Inanna she had ever encountered at shielding his thoughts from her, had so far proven as skilled at reading her as she was at reading him.

LaMia hardened her resolve, deliberately deepened her voice from its natural contralto to demand, “Do not what, slave?”

“Don’t do whatever it is you were going to do to me.”

“You did not say please.”

He looked at her, silent, but she caught the wayward *And I’m not going to, Nubian Queen* before he sneered.

“How do you know you will not enjoy what I was going to do, Mateo?”

“I haven’t so far.”

She arched a brow, knew he was lying. He had enjoyed everything they had shared so far and just did not want to admit it. For good measure, she leaned in and stroked her tongue from the side of his neck to his ear, felt him tremble beneath her. “Are you absolutely certain of that?”

In response, he renewed his efforts to throw her, and shouted at the top of his lungs for help.

LaMia held him fast, thong soaked thoroughly now from his thrashing. If someone were to blow on her pussy just the right way right then, she was sure she would have come.

She covered his mouth with her free hand. “Your screams are useless. No one can hear

you up here, so *stop*.” She removed her hand and something in her voice must have reached him, for he grew still and stared at her. “I am going to collar you and bind you, since you cannot be trusted not to escape.”

He scowled. “Collar?”

“So you have no objections against me binding you then?”

“Hell yes, I do! I don’t want either.”

“You forget, you have no choice.” She might as well have told him to try and throw her for he kicked his legs out and bucked his hips with renewed vigor.

“Do you have any idea how much you entice me, Mateo? How much you are exciting me right now? Smell...” She slid her free hand into her pants and dipped a finger into her soaked cunt before bringing out her hand and thrusting her scented finger under his nose.

His nostrils flared and he shuddered.

LaMia knew he reacted out of lust and not revulsion though she was sure he would deny this. She could smell his arousal, his clean heady musk wafting up to envelop her keen senses.

She glanced down at his sculpted face, insides melting at the hungry look in his eyes, the conflicting silent plea for her not to do anything about what she saw.

She leaned in to kiss each eyelid, his long curly lashes tickling her lips as he fluttered his eyes closed. She moved down his face, gently kissing his nose and cheeks as she willed the T-shirt off his body and made it disappear.

“How’d you—?”

“Be still.” She made her own bustier disappear and covered his body with hers, reveling in the hard, broad width of his chest and all that glorious warm caramel skin finally touching her aching bare breasts as she rubbed herself against him. She groaned.

He writhed beneath her and sunk his teeth into his lower lip. “Don’t”

“Still giving orders?”

He glared up at her, and growled.

“Do you want me?”

“No,” he said but pitched his hips into her nonetheless, moaning low in his throat.

“You want me.” She released his hands and he immediately planted them on her hips and flipped her beneath him to reverse their positions.

She stared up at him, wary and nervous but no longer wanting to fight with him. She just wanted to be who and what she was, needed and longed for him to take her body and give her his willingly.

She hoped she had not made a grave error in judgment by releasing him.

“Yes,” he whispered and lowered his head to kiss her.

She was momentarily confused as to whether he was answering her last unspoken thought or her last statement, until the piquant taste of him shattered all coherent thought. His

lips inflamed her entire body, sent hot sparks shooting straight to her center, and more cream flowed out of her cunt and into her thong.

Mateo slid his lips from her mouth and she immediately mourned the loss before he trailed his tongue along the smooth column of her throat, nipping and sucking his way down to her breasts. He paused with his mouth hovering over one hard, erect nipple and looked at her. “And you want me, too.”

She said nothing, silently slid her hands up to his head and buried her fingers in his light-brown hair, the full tendrils like silk in her hands as she arched her body towards him, drawn to his heat, drawn to the erection that grew and throbbed behind the zipper of his jeans.

She did not care why he now acquiesced or that, as he had thought earlier, he was trying to ‘get into her good graces.’ Nor did she care if this entire encounter was a ploy and only a prelude to another escape attempt.

She had him now—kissing her, moving against her, touching her—and she would take him and enjoy all that his big, hard, smooth human body had to offer her.

She would worry about re-education and her responsibilities to him later.

She would worry about disciplining and punishing him later.

She would collar him later.

For now, she intended to enjoy every solid muscled inch of him, starting with his hard penis.

LaMia reached down to cup him at the same instant he closed his mouth over one of her breasts. She gently caressed him. He firmly pulled her nipple into his mouth and groaned when she squeezed him. She twisted beneath him as he thoroughly laved and sucked one nipple before turning his full attention to the other.

She explored his body with her hands, roamed the hard ridges of his abdomen, the muscles flexing in his back and shoulders as he bent over her and worshipped her heavy breasts and rejoiced in the disparities of their bodies before she flipped him back beneath her.

He looked up at her with lust-darkened eyes and smirked. “You like being on top, don’t you?”

In answer, she waved her hand in the air and made his jeans and boxer briefs disappear along with her own leather pants and thong. She heard his breath hitch in his chest at the sudden heated contact of her bare thighs against his flanks as she knelt astride him. “Always,” she whispered.

CHAPTER 6

He wanted her so badly he could taste her, every inch of her luscious mahogany skin, every ounce of her spicy-sweet flavor. He was primed, his body vibrating with hot anticipation when she squeezed her knees around his hips and bent her head to nuzzle his throat.

That he had been able to deny her for as long as he had, to say no he didn't want her when she was all he did want, was a true testament to the self-control he had honed so many years after watching his father kill his mother. He'd vowed to never succumb to the same loss of control that had resulted in the deaths of his parents, did not ever want to be that bewitched or insecure.

But here he was, bewitched by and succumbing to Ms. Nubian Queen.

Every stroke of her fingers against his chest, every playful flurry and swirl of her tongue around his flat nipples sent his body into wild paroxysms of desperate need. He wanted to get to her, wanted inside her body to feel her vibrating around him with the same desperate need that he already owned taking over her body.

LaMia laved his nipples until he was uncontrollably trembling beneath her.

He'd had no idea his nipples were so sensitive until she touched him with her hot little mouth, her quick, talented tongue. He glanced down at her, admiring the way the Cleopatra cut of her black hair framed her strong angular features as she peeked up at him beneath the bangs.

She blinked, looked suddenly shy and young, as if afraid she was pleasing him too much, or that she wasn't pleasing him enough.

Did she think he still had escape on his mind? Did she think he'd try something?

He couldn't have attempted escape if he tried. He was too weak with desire and remorse to even move.

He had never hit a woman in his life! And in spite of his merely flipping her to the ground and not actually hitting her, he was ashamed of his actions.

"Do not, Mateo. You did what you had to do."

Had he really thought she would stop wielding her awesome power, that she would let his mind be for just one moment, especially now, when he was about to enter her body in the most ultimate invasion possible?

LaMia grasped his hard cock in one hand, raising her hips just enough to tease him with the feel of her moist folds before rubbing the head up and down her slit and melding their juices.

She flung back her head and hummed low in her throat as she thumbed the pearl of pre-come from the tip of his rigid penis. She brought the digit to her mouth and sensually licked and sucked it, then looked at him as if she could devour his entire body the way she was devouring her thumb.

"I could," she assured. "Your taste inspires me."

He trembled at her words, thought that she would literally consume him, thought that he'd let her and like every second of it.

LaMia guided his cock to her opening as he grasped her hips and thrust up into her.

"Mateo!" She caught her breath, writhing against him as he impaled her and she adjusted to the breadth and width of him. "Oh, *Lilith*, you fill me so..."

She said it as if she was surprised he was so sizable and Mateo stupidly smiled, male ego setting in. He was too pleased with her words, too pleased with himself.

She caught his wrists, drew them over his head and pinned them to the floor as she covered his chest with her sumptuous breasts. She ground her hips flush against him, contracted her vaginal muscles and sucked him in as he stroked deep inside her and tried to pull back for another plunge.

He gasped as her pussy squeezed around his cock, felt her drawing a climax out of him when he didn't want to come yet. "Mia, wait..." He couldn't let her control this aspect of their relationship, too. He had to keep some control, he had to...

She sped her plunges, riding him hard and fast instead of slow. "No more waiting. There will be more when we are done. But now I just want...I need to...*Lilith*!" She clenched her knees tight around his hips, shuddering above him in the grip of an intense orgasm as Mateo released his seed inside her with a hoarse shout of his own.

LaMia lay still against him for a long silent moment, panting as her perspiration mingled with his and cooled on her body in the air-conditioned room.

He wanted to hold her, wrap his arms around her lush body and know that she was real and not a dream and that she wouldn't change back into the slave-driving Nubian Queen who had abducted him.

"I am sorry, Mateo."

He thought she was apologizing for what she had done to him, not for what she was about to do to him. He peered up at her right before a pair of steel cuffs clamped around his wrists with a resounding snap.

"Where do you think I'm going, Mia? You're on top of me. I'm still inside you." And damn it, he had gotten harder since she'd cuffed him! What was wrong with him that he got more excited when she bound him than when she didn't?

He felt something tugging his wrists, slowly dragging his body upright and glanced at the high ceiling to see the pulley and chains to which his cuffs were attached.

Where had all this come from? He hadn't even seen her twist her fist.

Mateo stared at her as she latched onto him, wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his hips while her device dragged them upward. "Mia, you don't have to do this."

"I cannot take the chance."

"Why not? I took one on you."

"That was different. You had no choice."

"Let me out of these cuffs, Mia."

"You will call me Mistress, Mateo."

He shook his head, heart twisting at the idea that he had lowered himself to call her by the hated title earlier.

"That is the exact reason why you are in this predicament now, your refusal to obey me."

Do it, homeboy. Just do what she says. It would be so easy to give her what she wants. And she'll give you a thousand times more in return like just now and you'll love it. Just do it...

He sneered and shook his head against the voice in his mind. He blamed LaMia for his confusion, his weakness, told himself that she was digging through his brain again and making him want to submit.

She cupped his face and looked at him. "Why do you fight me so?"

She sounded puzzled, like she really couldn't understand his refusal. And at the moment, he couldn't understand his refusal either, not when all he wanted to do was submit and let her take him any way she wanted to.

"Mateo...?"

"I can't..." He squeezed his eyes shut, disgusted with himself, ashamed that even now his cock grew inside her, throbbed for release, only the release she could give him. "I won't be like my father...like my brother...I won't let you destroy me."

"Oh, Mateo...I would not."

"Don't tell me that! Don't lie to me!"

She calmly returned his glare, and that just made him feel ten times more contrite than had she retaliated and punished him in some way.

As soon as he was completely vertical, a pair of steel cuffs clamped snug around his ankles. The cuffs were attached to a pulley mounted in the parquet floor below him, and slowly widened in concert with the pulley above, stretching his arms and legs out until he was spread-eagle. "What are you going to do to me, Mia?"

"Mistress."

He bent his head, nuzzled her throat, inhaled the soft cinnamon taste of her, saturated his senses with her spicy-sweet aroma before he sucked and gently nipped her. "Let me go."

“I cannot.” she whispered. “You must be punished.”

“Still?”

“Just because we found enjoyment in each other’s bodies does not negate your earlier misconduct, Mateo. You were insubordinate. That cannot be overlooked.”

“Is this my punishment then?” He bucked his hips, torturing himself when he drove his cock into her firm, hot cunt.

She squeezed her legs and arms around him and held tight. “Mistress,” she said.

“Mistress *bitch*,” he murmured and nipped her again, harder this time.

She pressed against him and moaned, apparently enjoying his abuse almost as much as he enjoyed hers.

Christ, they were two sick... *Shit, one of us isn’t even a person, at least not a human!*

“Mistress,” she insisted. She thrust her hips against him and cradled her face against his throat. “Deeper, Mateo. Please...*deeper*.”

Christ, he wanted to hold her!

He clenched his hands in frustration, did the only thing he could do to please them both and pitched his hips into her. He plunged as deep as he could, and LaMia met his rhythm thrust for thrust, until they were both bucking and writhing so wildly against each other that Mateo just knew they’d break the pulleys and he’d be free.

But after this, did he really want to be?

“Oh, *Lilith*!” She convulsed against him, holding him taut before he joined her climax with his own, fiercely driving into her until he thought he was spent.

LaMia had other ideas, however. “My sweet, sweet, Mateo.” She cupped his face and stroked his slightly parted lips with her tongue until he opened up all the way and let her in. She pushed her tongue into his mouth as if on a mission, found his ready and willing and mated with it in a sensual, teasing dance of power and capitulation.

Finally, reluctantly, she dismounted him, slowly slid her legs down his hips and thighs until she was standing in front of him in all her proud, naked glory.

Mateo looked at her and for the first time noticed the iridescent glow that surrounded her, surrounded them both.

“It is our energy merged.” She answered his unspoken question, sounding as shocked as he felt. “Your spirit light and mine together.”

He gawked at the shimmering aqua bubble that encircled them, a combination of her green light and his blue, and wondered when the pain would start, when she would begin to drain him until there was nothing left.

“I told you, Mateo. I would not.”

“What makes me different than...than my brother and father?”

She didn’t answer him, just tilted her head to one side as she looked at him with a bewildered expression on her face. She looked at him as if she didn’t know the answer, and

thought she could find it in him.

It suddenly occurred to him what she had said. That their energy had merged, and not that she had siphoned his energy or he had relinquished it, but that their energy and spirits had fused. They *had* shared, and *yet* shared, energy. “This has never happened to you with anyone, has it?”

“I doubt that it has ever happened to any Inanna.”

“Alex and Genesis?”

“I would not know.”

He knew she was hedging, that LaMia might not be sure about her countrywoman and her countrywoman's mate, but that she had her guesses.

“LaMia—”

“Silence,” she murmured and leaned in to kiss him again. She ran her tongue along his teeth, caressed the inside of his mouth and finally stroked his tongue with hers before sliding a hand down between them to gently caress his balls.

Mateo hissed and jerked against his restraints. “Mia, I want to hold you. I *need* to hold you. Undo these cuffs.”

“Not yet.”

He peered at her, heard the unsaid *I cannot take the chance* and knew she didn't just mean ‘not yet.’ She meant ‘not ever.’

She didn't trust him, could never trust him after the way they had gotten together.

So where did that leave them?

LaMia knelt down in front of him as if in answer. Since she was so tall, even with him slightly elevated off of the floor, the oddly subservient position still put her full lips level with his jutting penis.

“I don't have anything left,” he rasped.

“You have plenty, Mateo, more than you can ever imagine.”

“I can't.”

“You do not have to do anything. I will do what needs to be done.”

He closed his eyes and arched his neck. She put her mouth on him, pulling just the mushroom head of his cock between her lips and stopping.

She dipped her tongue into his slit where another pearl of pre-come had already formed and hungrily lapped at the creamy liquid before taking his hard shaft completely into her mouth.

“Oh, God...Mia...”

She sucked hard, alternately licking the underside of his shaft and scraping the top with her sharp teeth, maintaining a steady rhythm that had him wriggling in her grasp.

She reached behind him and firmly grasped his ass with both hands, pulling him flush against her mouth as she suckled him like a nursing babe, took him balls-deep, the head of his penis touching the back of her throat.

Mateo's legs trembled as his testicles drew tight against his body. He knew, had he not been shackled, his knees would have buckled and he'd have collapsed against her.

She slid one hand down to the crack of his ass, fingers creeping ever closer to his hole.

"No!" He helplessly jerked in his shackles as she entered him, slow and deep with first one finger, then another. "No...*shit*..." Oh, God, this wasn't happening! He was going to come. He was going to explode and there was nothing he could do to prevent it even if he wanted to, and he didn't want to.

Don't think that! You want to prevent this, of course you do. You just need to find the strength to tell her this isn't right and you don't want this. You don't like it, you...

She scissored her fingers inside him, brushing tender virgin tissue that had never been touched by a human's fingers, much less the fingers of an erotic alien dominatrix.

She pushed inside him as deep as she could, until she reached that fabled male G-spot and pressed her fingers against it.

Mateo gushed into her mouth with a guttural cry, bucking against her, jerking against his shackles so violently he thought for sure he'd break free from just the sheer force of his climax.

He came back to himself what seemed like hours later but he was sure it was only a couple of minutes. He opened his eyes and dazedly glanced around to see that the aqua bubble around him and LaMia had intensified, glowing brighter and stronger than ever.

She still knelt at his feet, sucking at the remnants of his erection, and milking every available drop of semen from his cock until he was limp.

He watched through heavy-lidded eyes as she came to her feet and stood before him.

She looked at him, tilted her head from one side to the other, studying him as if he were a piece of artwork she was thinking of purchasing.

She already knew she owned him though, not just his body, but his heart and soul, so why was she torturing him like this?

LaMia reached out to put her hand over his chest, and his heart sped beneath her palm. She fondled his muscles, thumbed first one nipple then slid her hand across his chest to lightly pinch the other. She bent her head and closed her mouth over one nipple, gently sucking and nibbling before she suddenly sank her teeth into the skin right above his tender areola.

He hissed, tried to jerk away. "Shit!" He glanced down at the top of her head as she drank from him, simultaneously fascinated and repulsed as the tingle where she'd bitten him radiated until his entire torso was just a blistering, quivering mass of flesh.

"Mia, I can't take anymore."

She lifted her lips just enough to mumble, "But you will. You must," before replacing her mouth and picking up where she had left off. She fed from him more fiercely and thoroughly than she had before, the loud slurping sound of her endeavors overshadowing the roar in his ears as the blood drained from his head to her mouth.

He closed his eyes and flung back his head, totally into the pain now until it was swapped with pleasure, until it was supplanted by intense longing in his chest and groin and no longer existed.

Mateo groaned and shuddered as she lifted her mouth. He immediately missed the contact, aching and bereft in the wake of her exquisite assault.

He held his breath for several moments and when he didn't hear or feel her moving he opened his eyes just in time to see her raise a fist and flick it. He flinched, didn't know what to expect. He had hoped that she would unlock his shackles, but when he remained fettered and didn't feel any pain, he wondered what she had done to him.

LaMia folded her hands behind her back and circled him like a Gestapo agent preparing to interrogate her prisoner. The only things missing from her stance were the severe uniform and high black boots.

He felt it then, the choker around his neck when he turned his head to follow her movements. "LaMia...what did you do to me?"

She finally stopped and stood in front of him again, fists on hips and legs planted slightly apart, arrogant and shameless in her nakedness. She knew she looked more than good and edible and taunted him with what he could only see but not touch. "I told you I would collar you."

Yeah, she had, but he hadn't thought she'd literally meant to do it. Why he hadn't believed her was a mystery to him when LaMia presented herself from the beginning as someone who said what she meant and meant what she said...always.

And this worried him as he wondered what her idea of 'punishment' entailed.

What more did she have planned for him?

"You will see when I return."

He gawked. "Return? From where?"

"I am going out to...gather my thoughts and decide how best to discipline you."

"Haven't you done enough to me already?"

"Not nearly enough, Mateo. You must learn what your boundaries are with me."

"This is crap and you know it!" He pulled against his shackles, of course to no avail.

"You would do well to save your strength." She waved a hand in front of her from head to toe and was suddenly clad in fire-engine red leather pants, matching bustier and boots.

"You can't leave me here like this."

"I can and I will and you will like it."

"LaMia..." He uselessly pulled against his cuffs again and then thought about what she'd said, that he needed to save his strength. Maybe he did need to and should, but...damn it! "Let me out of these shackles!" he shouted.

LaMia wielded that fist again and a strip of duct tape appeared over his mouth.

Mateo roared behind it.

"I would leave it off since, as I told you, there is no one around to hear your cries. However, you will not protect yourself, so I must do it for you before you ravage your voice and make yourself hoarse."

Gee, thanks.

“You are welcome.”

I know you’re listening to me, LaMia, listen to this: don’t leave me here alone like this...Please.

It pained him to say that last word, as if he had completely capitulated, but since demands and logic hadn’t worked, perhaps a little apology would. She didn’t need to know he didn’t mean it. He would never mean it, would never beg...

“I am sorry, Mateo. I... have no choice.”

She actually sounded contrite and this would have made him feel better, except that his arms and legs felt like they were being pulled out of their sockets.

LaMia went back to him, got up on her tiptoes to tenderly kiss each cheek in turn then cupped his face and pulled him forward so that she could plant a soft kiss on his forehead.

He watched as she took several steps back, thought he was braced for anything—an electrical jolt from the collar, a blindfold, the rack—but what she did next was far worse than any of these.

She disappeared in a flash and whirl of glowing green light.

Left alone, bound and gagged and totally helpless.

Oh, God, I am well and truly fucked.

CHAPTER 7

LaMia made it downstairs to the ground floor and outside the warehouse with one thought dogging her every step: Mateo hated her.

She knew and accepted this fact for she could not prevent it, just as she could not prevent this insidious feeling of tenderness and munificence pervading her soul and...

Goddess! She did not want to think it since it was a travesty of all that she held holy and dear to her heart but...She loved him.

Impossible! Completely insane and not within an Inanna's realm, but the facts were there, staring her in the face. She could try to deny it as much as she wanted, but denying would not change her feelings or make them go away.

Had she loved Manny and Julian Diaz, too?

She'd had tender feelings for each man, but certainly nothing like the overwhelming affection and sexual attraction she had for Mateo.

He was her slave who had taken the supreme liberty to call her Mia. And rather than his impudence filling her with righteous indignation, it filled her with a warm feeling of desire.

No one had called her Mia since her grandmother had. Hearing the moniker flow from Mateo's sensuous lips in that deep, sexy baritone as if he had been calling her by it all his life, tightened her heart in her chest as only the news of her parents' death had done so far, decades and decades ago.

Oh, he was dangerous, far more dangerous than any Sebitu she had faced on the battlefield, his allure veiled by earnest eroticism, sinister in its very purity and unaffectedness.

At least in battle she knew what she was up against. She was a trained soldier, trained to fight and kill the enemy. How could she kill a concept, or a feeling? Did she really want to kill this feeling if it meant distancing herself from Mateo?

Yes, *datma*, yes! She had to keep her distance. This had been her main reason for keeping him bound while they had mated. She knew if she had given him his freedom, if he had held her,

touched her as he wanted to—when she had been at her most vulnerable, the most vulnerable state in which any Inanna could find herself—she would have shattered.

She knew this without a doubt, for during those brief moments when he had grasped her hips with his powerful hands, his elegant long fingers holding her in place against his pelvis, she had been so close to weeping, it had frightened her.

These were human emotions, human reactions! She should not be feeling these emotions, this *sympathy* and tenderness. These feelings were transgressions against all that she held dear, against a belief system under which she had been functioning since before she had reached Inanna maturity.

LaMia could almost see now how Genesis had fallen under the spell of the *cambion* Alex Ryan. If he was anything like the human male, Mateo Diaz, so tempting and ripe, then LaMia understood her Sister's obsession with the humans and preservation.

At least Alex was half-Inanna, an abomination granted, but he did have the blood of superior beings running through his veins.

And Mateo? He was just a simple human who had managed to weave himself into the very fabric of all that she was in less than twenty-four hours. He had bewitched and seduced her with his intellect and inner strength until she did not know how she had survived for so long without him in her life, until she did not know where she began and he ended.

Was it just the spirit-boost that attracted her and made her weak for him? Or was it more, something deep in his heart and soul that called to her heart and soul?

She knew of Inanna who searched the Great Above looking for that special *one*, that bond mate to complete them, much as humans searched for their soul mates.

Her parents had firmly believed in the concept of soul and bond mates, said they had not felt complete until they had found each other.

She used to wonder at the myths, wonder whether there was someone in the Universe that the Goddess had made especially for her.

LaMia knew the answer to this already; she was just still in denial. She had left her someone back at her loft bound and gagged and enraged with his captor for making him come so hard and in such an unaccustomed and unorthodox manner that his psyche was teetering on the sheerest thread between acceptance and refusal even now.

Shasta! Why could he not be Inanna? Why in all of *An* would the Goddess send her a human, one of the lowest of life forms in the Universe, with whom to fall in love?

Did she truly believe this anymore, that he was one of the lowest of life forms? Did she believe it about any of his species? How could she when faced with all the many intoxicating and unpredictable facets that made up Mateo Diaz? How could she believe a species that could produce such an exciting, fascinating and truly unique individual could be anything close to the lowest of anything?

Mateo was brave, intelligent, resilient and strong. He was everything she could ever ask for in a bond mate, a perfect complement to her warrior's soul. He was everything she had been unconsciously looking for in her life, all the hopes and dreams to which she had never wanted to give a name, a dream come to sleek, tall and handsome life.

He was also brazen, rebellious, stubborn and willful beyond belief, and she knew that these last four were what made him the most attractive to her.

The situation was intolerable and going over it again and again was getting her nowhere, taking her in the same circles with which she had been walking around the neighborhood where she had made her home for the last year.

The walk was supposed to have cleared her head, but LaMia was more confused now than she had been when she had left her loft. She was more confused than when she had left her sl...no, she could not think of Mateo as a slave any longer. He had long since ceased to be anything so mundane and subservient. Even bound and gagged he wielded more power over her than any Inanna assembly member lowering the gavel on her exile sentence, or any Sebitu interrogator assigned to torture essential Inanna battle strategies out of her.

She was in no shape to discipline him and she knew it, but discipline him she must, discipline him she would. She could not let him get away with disrespecting her, would not have been a good Mistress if she did. She would not have been a good Inanna.

LaMia stopped suddenly and glanced up at the nearest street sign. She barely recognized the street name as one located in SoHo, not far from where her loft in TriBeCa was located, an area dominated by quaint, narrow cobblestone streets and converted lofts.

This early on a Saturday, there were not too many pedestrians on the street, which served LaMia's purposes just fine as she did not want to waste another minute mulling over what she wanted to do. She needed to take action and just do it before she lost her nerve.

Imagine her, clever huntress, relentless soldier, and proud royal driven to nervousness by a mere human being...a human being named Mateo Diaz, of course.

She knew she was taking a chance using her power in public, deserted streets or not. She did not want to telegraph her actions to any stray Inanna in the vicinity, but she needed to get back to Mateo as soon as possible. She had something unpleasant to do and she wanted to get it over with as soon as possible. She was sure that Mateo would concur and be grateful for her return.

LaMia glanced both ways before stepping into the recess of an abandoned warehouse. She quickly energized her spirit light with a wave of both hands in front of her until she was surrounded in its luminous green vortex and flashed from the street.

* * * *

Mara had been tracking LaMia since last night to no avail. The stealthy Inanna had taken her quarry so quickly and flown away that, up until a minute ago, Mara had only been able to nail down LaMia's general location as somewhere near the SoHo area.

This information had only been gained through the most gargantuan effort of reading what little residual psychic energy LaMia had left behind during her partial shapeshift. Had Mara been Inanna, she would have attuned naturally to the woman's signal, could have tracked the Inanna, much easier, if not necessarily more accurately.

As the situation stood now, Mara had suffered a substantial power drain in her efforts to find LaMia and LaMia's prey. In addition, she had been so obsessed with her hunt that she had not stopped to feed in a couple of days.

She needed sustenance and soon so that she would be at optimal fighting condition if she were to have a chance against the Inanna, but first—

Mara watched her nemesis now with great curiosity as LaMia stepped into an alcove and used her spirit light to teleport out of the area.

No!

Mara stepped out of the shadows and ran across the street as the last of LaMia's emerald-green backwash evaporated around her.

She inhaled the sickening spicy-sweet scent of what was left behind by the Inanna and slammed her fist into the sandstone wall of the alcove, leaving a fist-sized dent as sandlike quartz grain and lime showered down onto her black leather-booted feet.

Goddess, LaMia was growing careless in her mature years to use her powers in broad daylight the way she had just done. True, the streets were nigh on uninhabited, but it was still a foolish mistake for the Inanna to flash out of sight like that.

Which led Mara to a couple of very important conclusions: either the effects of her exile had turned LaMia Enlil feeble-minded, or the Inanna had fallen and fallen hard for the human male. Mara was inclined to believe the latter. There was no other explanation for such sloppy behavior unless reckless emotions were involved.

She had nothing against emotions as a rule, just thought that there was a time and a place for all of them. Her time and place for emotions other than anger and hate had passed. Her bond mate had been taken away from her. It did not mean, however, that she did not recognize the signs of blind infatuation and bond mating in another.

Ishara! What gave LaMia the right to find her bond mate and be happy when Mara was bereft of hers? What gave LaMia the right to be content? Whether it be with a human or Inanna, Mara did not care. She just knew that a bond between LaMia and the male she had abducted the evening before could not stand. She would not allow it.

Mara had missed her chance to intercept the Inanna just now, but did not doubt that she would get another chance and soon. She had found LaMia once; she would find her again.

* * * *

“You cannot go in there right now, Alex. She is with—”

Alex flung the door open to see his great-grandmother in a passionate embrace with Tenebrion of Gaia.

He was not surprised. All of Emsharra and Gaia knew about the love affair, one that had simmered unquenched for centuries before the Alliance and New Regime had allowed Emsharra's Highest and Gaia's Supreme to come together as potential bond mates.

Alex was looking forward to the handfasting announcement like everyone else, but until then he had other pressing matters to talk about with Nahemah.

He bowed at the waist, did not miss the protective way Tenebrion held one of her hands with one of his and massaged her shoulder with his other. “Apologies Highest Nahemah, but I have to speak with you. It's of an urgent nature.”

“I tried to stop him.” Nahemah's chagrined and long-suffering aide-de-camp leaned

against the doorjamb behind Alex, arms folded across her breasts as she gave him a censuring look.

"It is quite all right, Irkalla. I will speak with him." She turned to Tenebrion and smiled. "You do not mind, do you?"

"Not at all. This is more important. What we were...discussing can wait."

"Thank you." Nahemah caressed his cheek.

Tenebrion took her hand, turned it and planted a gentle kiss in her palm.

Damn, their hankering was thick in the air!

They made Alex wonder how he and Genesis seemed to other unmated Inanna. He knew he and his wife could get pretty hot and heavy in some public places. Some of Emsharra's guards had recently caught them going at it down by the Hubur river in Uruk, and he was sure the news had gotten back to his great-grandmother from the way she'd smiled at him his entire last visit.

"I will speak with you at a later date, *shimsa*." Tenebrion kissed Nahemah's hand once more then turned to go. "Alex." He bowed his head and continued out the door past Irkalla.

"Irkalla, you may leave us now."

"Yes, Highest." Irkalla backed out of Nahemah's office and closed the door behind her.

"Gee-Gee, I need you to authorize an intervention and rescue for—"

"I know what has happened, Alex."

"Then how can you—?"

"Engage in amorous endeavors while the fate of your friend is uncertain?"

"He's not just a friend. He was, *is*, a recruit."

"Had you approached him? Had the program been explained to him?"

"You know it hadn't, Nahemah. I was about to make a proposal to him last night when he was snatched." Alex paced the cream pile carpet of his great-grandmother's office before coming back to stand before her. "We have to go after him, Gee-Gee."

"The Emsharran assembly has no jurisdiction in the matter. Mateo is not one of ours."

"She'll kill him given enough time, and you know it."

Nahemah winced, but her voice was no less calm than usual when she spoke. "That is an unfortunate consequence, but not our concern."

"How can it not be our concern when the entire agenda of my mother's program promotes the conservation of human life?"

"Alex..." She put a hand on his shoulder and gently squeezed.

"We have to get him back before she depletes him."

"What is it that makes this child more special than any of the other recruits?"

How could Alex explain what he had learned about Mateo's family, his past? How could he explain that he didn't want the kid to suffer at LaMia's hands anymore than he already had,

that he didn't want life's vagaries to totally claim Mateo? Or did Nahemah already know all this?

She'd known about *his* existence and the assassination attempts that had been made on him and done nothing. He didn't blame her, and he well understood the assembly's position of non-interference in the human world unless it directly affected the well-being of Emsharra or its people.

Observing while the exiled Genesis protected him and remaining confident that Genesis could keep him out of harm's way and get him to Emsharra safely had been as far as Nahemah and the assembly had been able to go.

But once Alex and Genesis had entered the portal between worlds and crossed the boundary onto Emsharra's soil, they had become the responsibility of Emsharra sovereignty.

The fact that Genesis had successfully completed her mission to get him to his great-grandmother at no small sacrifice to her person was beside the point, as far as Alex was concerned. Because had Nahemah and the assembly interceded sooner, it would have saved him and Genesis so much pain and trouble.

"Alex, you are still learning the ways of the Inanna. I know some things we do or allow may seem harsh or even capricious, but it is our way. We are changing, but change takes time. It has only been a year, after all."

And twenty-eight years before that when the assembly had—

"Let your mother die."

Alex grimaced at hearing her confess her and the assembly's failing to him out loud.

He thought often about what had happened to his mother, and Genesis' friend, and always found the entire episode that had led up to Kalika Enlil's death so totally useless and avoidable.

He empathized with Nahemah, but not nearly as much as he empathized with Genesis and his dead mother. "You didn't let her die. That sounds like she was sick and allowed to just fade away. My mother was executed."

"It was the law and our duty at that time, Alex. I do not expect you to understand or sympathize, and I will not ask for your forgiveness. I leave the granting of that to my Goddess."

Alex lowered his eyes, feeling like the recalcitrant great-grandson that he was, feeling as if he had just been spanked. "You're right, Great-Grandmother. I spoke out of turn."

"Not out of turn. You are entitled to your feelings. Just know that sentimentality and feelings rarely have a place in the decisions of the assembly."

"Point taken."

"Come." She led him to a plush plum settee adjacent her large cherry desk where they both sat. "Now, tell me what is bothering you."

"I can't just sit idly by while Mateo languishes at LaMia's mercy."

"Perhaps you will not have to."

He hated when she played I've-got-a-secret with him but had learned over the last year that playing cards close to the vest was, in addition to their calm, cool logic, an Inanna trait. He'd

learned a lot from his wife, one of the coolest and most logical females he had ever met, but he still had a long way to go before he could claim anything close to Mr. Spock-like impassivity.

“We have been receiving flashes from her beacon, but not nearly enough to identify an exact location. She is an exile, after all, and not prone to broadcast where she is or what she is up to.”

“So you are tracking her?”

“Not actively tracking as much as keeping surveillance.”

“What’s the difference?”

“One means we are interfering and one means we are just observing.”

“What good is observing if you’re not going to do anything with the information you’re gathering?”

“I did not say we were not going to act. It is not the right time yet.”

“When will be the right time, Gee-Gee? When LaMia decides to turn herself in?”

Nahemah glared at him and Alex reminded himself that LaMia, as evil and cruel as he thought her, was his cousin and still Nahemah’s grandchild. Whether she grew to be four- or five-hundred years old—which with Inanna anatomy and barring gross injury was not outside the realm of possibility—LaMia would always be Nahemah’s child.

He thought about the strides that were being made daily to ensure that humans might live half as long as Nahemah and her wayward only grandchild. There were strides to ensure successful, long-lasting bond mating between humans—even humans without spirit-boost—and Inanna or Sebitu.

The Longevity Project was as near and dear to his heart as the Harvesting Program was to Kalika’s and Genesis’s, and for obvious reasons. Any project that gave him an extra hour, an extra day, an extra week with Genesis, was well-worth his passion and research. Not to mention, he’d like to have kids with her one day and watch them grow to be at least a ripe young two-hundred.

Extremely healthy as a rule, Alex was already seeing the effects of his and Genesis’s first encounter when she had bitten him. The chemicals in her saliva had bonded with and accelerated the natural regenerative properties of his own spirit-boost, increasing his life-span threefold according to all the Inanna scientists who enjoyed poking and prodding the *cambion* guinea pig.

“You are not a guinea pig, Alex. You are a unique human being who may turn out to be the savior of both our races.”

Alex felt his face heat with a blush as Nahemah giggled at his reaction.

“But I know you are not here to listen to me eulogize you. You want to find your friend and punish LaMia for what she did to you and Genesis.”

“We survived and that’s what’s important.”

“But both of you very nearly did not.”

She didn't have to remind him, and he had never felt secure in the knowledge that LaMia still lived and breathed, able to reverse all that they were daily trying to accomplish as she freely hunted and fed in the human world.

"I know how you feel about Mia, Alex. It is natural for you to harbor ill-will after her actions at the portal."

"Genesis almost died."

"But she did not."

Sentimentality and emotions may not have had a place in the decisions the assembly made, but where a grandmother's loyalty to her only grandchild were concerned, the rules of the assembly all became null and void. "You haven't given up on her yet, have you?"

Nahemah peered at him, cupped his cheek as she had earlier cupped Tenebrion's. "She is my blood, Alex," she murmured. "I will never give up on her."

"Nahemah..."

"You worry for Mateo Diaz, who is not your blood. How can I do anything less?"

He nodded, silently assenting.

What could he say after what his own mother had sacrificed for him before he had even drawn a breath, before she had even laid eyes on him?

After a long moment of choking down his emotions in silence, Alex finally cleared his throat and turned to face his great-grandmother full. "Nahemah, Genesis and I need your permission to go after LaMia and bring Mateo back."

"Child, you do not need my permission to do what you want to and intend to do regardless of what I say. But you do have my blessing."

"And six sentries?"

"One."

Alex frowned. "*One?*"

"I will send Xevera with you. She is the oldest of my guard and well-skilled at using the Inanna tracking practice. Together she and Genesis should be able to locate LaMia with better-than-average accuracy."

"Good enough." Alex nodded and grinned. Ever since Xevera had greeted his naked, exhausted figure carrying a seriously injured Genesis through the portal between Emsharra and the human world, he had liked her, even if she barely cracked a smile at any of his jokes.

Now *she* was one of the most Spock-like of Inanna he had ever met.

"I do not think I will ever understand these Trekkies you told me about, or their and your infatuation with that show."

"You have to watch it one day, Gee-Gee. You'd like it, and would really be able to relate to the Vulcans. They're your kind of people."

Nahemah chuckled and shook her head. She put her hand on his shoulder and stood to indicate that their meeting had come to an end. She led him to the door, suddenly stopped, caught

him around the biceps of both arms, and turned him to face her.

Alex looked into the nearly-unlined, pecan-brown face that he admired so much and asked, "Yes Nahemah?"

"Have a care, Alex. LaMia is a master at concealment and she has had much time to practice her craft in the human world. Do not get your hopes up."

"I won't."

"And Alex..."

"Yes?" He stared at her, had never seen his great grandmother hesitant before. The alien behavior was enough to make his heartbeat speed his with doubt. "Gee-Gee, what is it?"

"Do not kill her. Bring her back to me in one piece."

"What if that's not possible? What if she attacks us? What if she's killed Mateo? What if—?"

She shook him lightly. "You and Genesis must make it possible, Alex. Do you understand me? It is not for you to deal with LaMia. I created the problem, I will deal with her."

"Okay," he murmured.

"Neither LaMia or Mateo fall within the jurisdiction of Emsharra," she reminded him, "and what you are about to engage in is an unsanctioned rescue. However, I ask that you bring her to me alive to deal with the situation in an appropriate manner."

Alex nodded, did not care about the politics of the assembly or Nahemah's blood bond. He only wanted to get Mateo back before LaMia damaged him irreparably. "We'll bring her back alive." *And please God, let Mateo still be alive.*

CHAPTER 8

Mateo jerked up his head and glanced at the door when the temperature in the loft suddenly spiked right before an emerald green swirl of energy appeared near the door several yards away from him.

He squeezed his eyes tight against the painful throb of his cock, erection twitching and bobbing in front of him like a dog doing tricks and begging for attention from its master.

How much more wild would his little friend act once she appeared? Would he even be able to keep himself from coming at the mere sight of her, or would he embarrass himself as soon as he got a whiff of her spicy-sweet cinnamon scent and shoot his load before she even reached him?

Damn it, he didn't even have the option—a pale substitute though it would have been—to take off some of the edge and get himself off!

Mateo was exhausted even though he had stopped struggling as soon as LaMia had zapped out of the loft and left him alone. It was no difficult feat to drop his chin back down to his chest, relax his body and sag against his restraints.

It was a stupid ploy that had never worked when he used to misbehave and then fake sleep to get out of a beating from his father, so he was sure it wouldn't work with Ms. Nubian Queen, especially not when his partner was standing at attention ready for action.

But it was worth a try, anything was worth a try to knock LaMia 'You-Must-Be-Punished' Enlil back down to earth where mortals breathed and dwelled. Anything to get her to see him as the independent man he was and not some nameless, insignificant pet or slave.

God, how he wanted to see her face when she finally materialized and noticed him.

* * * *

LaMia took a deep breath and tried to center herself as soon as her spirit light de-energized and she stood still facing the door several feet inside her loft.

This was the part of the relationship between herself and a slave that she did not enjoy,

never enjoyed. She did not derive pleasure from disciplining her slaves or causing pain. Punishment was a duty and a necessity for her, much like feeding. It was just another part of her responsibilities and LaMia took her responsibilities seriously, always had.

She was determined not to succumb to Mateo's many charms, determined not to let him sway her with any arguments or objections he might raise. And she knew that he would raise objections since it was human nature to avoid unpleasantness, to avoid pain.

Besides which, to Mateo's mind, he was an unwilling captive, a pawn in her game of vengeance against Alex and Genesis.

LaMia would not concede that he was unwilling or a pawn now. He had ceased to be either the minute she had sunk her teeth into him and he had liked it. He had ceased to be unwilling the minute he had laid his hands on her and reveled in the exotic new sensations of her body. He had ceased to be a pawn the minute he had swapped energy with her and had survived it with minimal physical damage to tell the tale.

How all this had affected his mental health, was another matter of course.

For now, LaMia just wanted to convince Mateo of the rightness of what she was about to do, convince him of the rightness of their joining and that he had a choice and was far more dominant and important to her than any pawn or slave had ever been.

LaMia suddenly noticed the eerie silence of the loft. She would have thought Mateo was playing hide-and-seek with her if she was not one-hundred percent certain that he could not have escaped his restraints. With Mateo, however, she had learned to expect the unexpected.

She turned from the door towards the room, not knowing what she was anticipating, but it certainly was not to see a listless and quiet Mateo.

Lilith, she had killed him!

LaMia sprinted across the floor, panting as she got to him. She stared at his bowed head, hands aching to touch him, fingers itching to tunnel through his silken wavy hair.

She noticed his impressive erection a second before he lifted his head to glare at her and her heart did a little dance of ecstatic relief in her chest.

Never had she been so happy to be the subject of such heated anger and hostility in her life. She nearly sighed in contentment and gave herself away before she fixed her face into a stern scowl to keep from smiling. "I see your time alone and restrained has done nothing to improve that recalcitrant disposition of yours."

He jerked against his bonds as if to leap on her, but the shackles stopped him.

LaMia knew had he been free, he might have charged her like a bull.

Her vaginal muscles clenched at the idea of being brought down and buried beneath all those hard muscles, imprisoned beneath his sandalwood-scented, masculine weight.

Lilith, she was getting wet thinking about her subjugation! That had never happened to her before. Visions of being overcome by a male—Inanna or Sebitu—had never been high on her list of sexual fantasies, so to have these musings about a human male was utter madness!

Eager to hear his deep, honey-touched voice, LaMia waved a hand in front of him and made the tape across his mouth disappear.

“Let me down from here, Mia.”

“Correct me if I am wrong, but I did not hear a thank you, please, or Mistress anywhere in that sentence.”

“Thank you. Now please let me down, Mistress,” he growled.

She stepped closer, tilted her head back slightly to peer at him and licked her lips. “Say it like you mean it, Mateo.”

He leaned forward just enough to caress her eyelids with his breath, and he might as well have touched her with his hands as the effect was just as potent.

LaMia closed her eyes and stopped short of shivering as she moved closer and wrapped her arms around him. “You are not getting out of your punishment that easily,” she murmured.

“Not even if I say I’ve reformed?”

She pulled back slightly to look at him, the corners of her mouth twitching upwards. “Have you reformed, slave?”

“I’m not a slave.”

“Wrong response, but it does answer my question. You have not reformed.”

Mateo straightened as much as he could in his restraints and stared down at her, the grim expression of a stubborn man splashed his features.

LaMia’s heart lurched in her chest before speeding at the determined look in his dark-chocolate eyes.

She had never looked forward to the prospect of disciplining one of her slaves before, but the challenging look shining out of his eyes made her eager to see just how strong he was, eager to see how much he could take.

LaMia circled him, trailing her fingers down from his muscular chest to his hard-ridged abdomen until finally landing on his narrow waist. She wrapped her arms around him, pressed her body close to feel his firm, round male ass flex against her center. Her pussy clenched and gushed in response. She leaned a cheek against his well-built back and slid her hands up to his chest to lightly pinch each nipple.

Mateo hissed in a breath and trembled beneath her touch.

“Do you have anything else you want to say before I start?”

“Will it make you change your mind?”

“No.”

“Then I don’t have anything to say.”

* * * *

LaMia stepped away from him, slowly, as if she really didn’t want to leave him.

That thought comforted him.

She came back around to his front, waved her right hand, and a whip appeared in it.

More than a whip. It was an I-mean-business flogger with countless strands of extra thick and heavy leather.

To his chagrin, his cock grew harder, his entire body, in fact, strung tight like the strings on a guitar just waiting for the maestro—or in this case, his Mistress—to use and play him like the instrument he was.

The way she made him feel...God help him, he enjoyed it, loved it. It made him wonder if there might be something wrong with him for liking the things she did to him.

Mateo had never seen himself 'that' way before, a deviant pervert who got off on pain and haunted the bondage and discipline section of sex shops looking for his next twisted fix.

LaMia gave the flogger and experimental swing, snapping her wrist and making the leather whistle and pop through the air.

She really didn't need to demonstrate how her mini weapon of mass destruction worked, but he realized it was all a part of her game, all a part of her plan to intimidate him.

She didn't intimidate him though. She turned him on, her and her sexy clothes and her threatening flogger.

Mateo shuddered with longing, hadn't been this horny since he'd been a teen, and even then girls had been plentiful for him, especially girls who liked the wounded, traumatized bad boy type, each one believing she would be the one who could fix his broken soul.

Those girls had been children, mere babes unskilled in the age-old art of seduction, lacked the proficiency to deny and reward in the same breath and make their recipient enjoy the torture.

LaMia approached and Mateo steeled himself for what he thought was coming, no easy feat considering he'd never been whipped before, and despite his vivid imagination.

He had been an untrained child until today, a complete tyro when it came to knowing how much torment his body could stand, totally ignorant of the many ways a man's body could be turned on and made to come.

LaMia had shown him, had broken him and fixed him and broken him again and made him love every minute of his destruction and rebuilding.

He would show her how much more he could take.

She touched the broad, rounded tip of the smooth wooden handle to his chest, trailed it down his body in a zigzag motion before she circled around to his back again.

Mateo strained his neck and turned his head to glance at her.

"You must trust me, Mateo. I can do this without leaving a mark."

He did trust her, the realization shocking the shit out of him. He didn't know how or why he felt about her the way he did after what she had done to him, to his family, but he couldn't deny his emotional surrender. "I'm not worried about a mark. I'm worried about the pain," he confessed.

"I worry about both, for your scars and pain are mine."

"This hurts you as much as it will me, is that it?"

“Exactly.”

“Bullshit. That didn’t work when my dad said it, and it damn sure doesn’t work for you, Ms. Nubian Queen.”

“Mistress,” she murmured.

He felt her slide the handle down from his shoulders to the small of his back and pause. She hovered so long at his tailbone, he twisted in his restraints to try and see what she was doing before he felt her trail the handle down further to the crack of his ass.

Mateo froze, heart pounding hard and bird-fast in his chest. It felt like all the blood had drained from his head at one time and gone straight to his penis he grew so instantly hard.

She eased the tip just inside his hole and stopped as if waiting for a signal from him.

Oh, she was good, had probably been going around for centuries disciplining and enslaving men until they didn’t know whether they were coming or going, until they could no longer see straight, or say what they did or didn’t enjoy, men far older and more sophisticated than him.

Despite all this, Mateo would not be her easy prey. He didn’t care how ancient a predator she was.

He instinctively clenched his ass around the handle and groaned. “Is that all you have for me, Mia?”

She removed the handle and he felt her uncertainty before she said, “We will leave it for another time.”

He said nothing despite his need to defy her, too confused by his hunger for her penetration, too overwhelmed by his lust for her to risk speaking.

“Remember with each lash I deliver, you brought this on yourself, Mateo.”

“How many?”

“I will start you off with only thirty this first time.”

He gritted his teeth, determined not to balk. But there was no such thing as *only* when someone was talking about delivering lashes to his person. What only? Only went in front of five, maybe ten, but not thirty.

“I trust there will not come a time when I will have to do this again, or when I have to administer so many unless, of course, you wish it.”

“Why would I wi—?” Mateo gasped and jerked against his restraints as she flailed him.

The pain was white heat on his ass, made multicolored stars flash before his eyes. He hadn’t thought it possible that it could get any harder, but his cock grew and throbbed for release. “You couldn’t have *warned* me?”

“So you could brace yourself and make your pain worse?”

He felt rather than saw her shake her head and held his breath for the rest.

“I told you to trust me, Mateo. The less tense you are, the less painful this will be.”

"I doubt i—" His breath hitched in his chest as the next blow landed in the same exact spot as the last. He bit his bottom lip, refused to scream, but hoped she was planning on switching up sides because if she kept this up he thought he'd be crippled on his right side.

"You will not be crippled, Mateo. You will survive this and as a result you will know how you should and should not behave with me."

Was she going to preach to him the entire time while she beat him? He could take one but he didn't think he could take bo—

She hit him again, the leather strands impacting his back this time with an explosive crack. The sound was almost as bad as the slap.

From here, LaMia built up a steady rhythm. Her strokes were commanding, measured and spaced out as if to give him time between each to think about why and what she was doing.

There was no violence or anger behind the blows, just firm, loving care that made his anger seem that much pettier and without provocation.

Mateo lost count somewhere around her twentieth lash, the snap and crackle of the whip transporting him to another plane of consciousness, one well beyond what he had experienced while in a catatonic state in the hospital all those years ago. This current state had him floating outside his body in a near-death experience of bright lights and inner peace. There was no pain, just an overwhelming sense of bliss, more intense than when LaMia had gotten down on her knees to give him the blowjob of his life. He felt like a monk who had attained Nirvana.

When Mateo finally came back around to himself this time, he felt like he had lost a day instead of minutes.

He was free of his shackles, laying half on the Oriental rug and half in LaMia's lap. When had she taken him down? And when had she gotten the cool wet cloth that she was using to wipe his perspiring face?

She slowly moved the cloth down his body to his now flaccid cock where she tenderly stroked and wiped it clean.

Damn, he had come and he couldn't even remember having done it. He didn't even know whether he had enjoyed it or not.

"I hate you, Mia. Christ, I hate you," he whispered.

"I know you do, Mateo. But that is okay as long as you know I did this for your own good."

Drawn by her cinnamon scent, he buried his face against her full soft breasts and wrapped his arms around her tight. His own body shook with uncontrollable desire. He hadn't been so overwhelmed with emotion and need since waking up in the hospital to find out his brother was dead. He hadn't had such a catharsis in a long time, if he ever had.

LaMia returned his hug and Mateo closed his eyes and felt himself drifting off to her strange soft utterances. He thought she was speaking to him in her native tongue since he didn't understand her words, just knew that they were comforting.

So...very...comforting.

CHAPTER 9

For the second time since she had taken him, LaMia sat at his bedside watching him sleep while she hungered for him, watching him sleep when she wanted to wake him but dared not for fear he would never survive her amorous attentions and demands without a repast or respite.

Neither he nor she had eaten since breakfast, and even then neither had taken a full meal, certainly not enough to sustain them through some of the erotic visions running through LaMia's mind, the erotic scenes she wanted to act out with him.

Too many things had gotten in the way—Mateo's escape attempt immediately coming to mind—for either to have worried about feeding their bodies.

Feeding was, however, all LaMia could think about now. She could think of nothing else when she watched Mateo except how she wanted to sink her teeth into him again as he sank his cock into her pussy and make her entire body tremble with the joy of it.

She suddenly leaped to her feet and paced beside the bed, shooting periodic glances his way, admiring the smooth-muscled contours of his back as he lay prone with one cheek pressed against a pillow, noticing the red-hot glow of his caramel skin after her punishment.

She had kept her promise not to leave any marks, but it was an empty one.

What good did not marking his body now do, when what she had done to his family years ago had marked his psyche ten times worse and more permanently?

LaMia turned and staggered in the direction of the bathroom.

Before food, she needed a shower, needed to wash away the guilt that had been clinging to her ever since she had arrived back at her loft to find Mateo motionless. Her remorse had been growing ever since she had pilfered that vision of him as a boy in the hospital.

Never before had she contemplated the aftermath of her actions, the consequences of her hunts and kills. Faced with Mateo's wounded state of mind, however, brought all her sins to glaring life and forced her to see the pain and suffering her avarice caused.

LaMia slid open the frosted glass door of her shower, turned the hot water on full blast

tempered with just a touch of cold, disrobed, and stepped into the steamy tiled room.

She lathered up a luffa sponge and scrubbed her body from head to toe, but it did not matter how hot the water or how hard she scrubbed. She could not wash away the blood of Manny and Julian. Nothing could wash away this or the traumatized look of a ten-year-old little boy, or the sorrow of the seventeen-year-old young man he would become. She could not erase the anger and confusion of the twenty-four-year-old she had kidnapped and tortured.

It did not matter that Mateo had enjoyed what she had done to him. He had not asked to be here, had not asked to be taken.

What was she going to do with him now?

To keep him here with her, knowing how he felt—about her, about his position—and that she did not want to do him anymore harm, would only compound all the transgressions she had committed over the decades, especially the ones she had committed against Mateo alone.

LaMia's chest tightened at the idea of letting him go, of not seeing his gorgeous face again, or not seeing his chocolate-brown eyes alternately lit with rage, lust, and sarcasm and all touching something wanting in her makeup, all filling a void in her that she had never realized existed before this revealing weekend.

She had not cried since her parents' deaths, not since she had been an angry, impressionable and proud youngling of fifty. The alien pressure in her chest, the salty sting of tears in her eyes and on her cheeks, surprised her as much as her earlier realization that she had fallen in love with a human.

Lilith, this situation was impossible!

She did not want to let him go, but she could not keep him, not at the risk of constantly being reminded of her downfall and un-Inanna-like weakness.

LaMia slid down the tile wall, sat on the built-in bench jutting from the back of the shower stall, bent forward and let the steamy water pound her head, washing her tears down the drain the way she could never wash away all her sins.

* * * *

Mateo jerked awake disoriented, but quickly remembered what had happened to him and where he was when he registered the warm stinging ache of his ass and back.

He reached for LaMia without opening his eyes and was surprised when he didn't find her in bed beside him but even more surprised that he was not shackled.

He opened his eyes and slowly scanned the loft. He was disappointed when he didn't see her anywhere and wondered what he would have said to her had she been in bed with him.

Ms. Nubian Queen didn't exactly strike him as a pillow talk or cuddling-after-sex kind of girl. What would they talk about really?

How was your day at the office? Designed a new office building, did you? And what about you, dear? Captured and enslaved any new men today? Collared and tortured any new pets?

Not exactly *The Brady Bunch* or *The Cosbys*.

But were either of these ideals what he wanted?

Before this weekend, Mateo had never given much thought to his single status, to the possibilities of a long-term relationship. He'd frankly never found any woman worthy enough to make him consider changing his life and letting someone into it beyond the casual.

He'd dated his share of women here and there over the years, had sex with many of them, and made friends with much less.

He didn't consider his life particularly lacking, but he guessed when he actually got down to it, before this weekend, he had only been drifting along on a tide of quiet complacency. It was an existence that wouldn't brook or make room for just any regular woman who could never understand all the things he had been through as a child and a teen, a woman who would never be able to accept him with all his scars.

Was that LaMia's attraction? That she knew everything there was to know about him? That he couldn't hide anything from her if he tried? Was it her intimate telepathy that made her so alluring to his mind and soul, made him want her as a mate?

Mate? Not girlfriend?

Christ, he had adopted her thought processes and speech patterns.

What more would he pick up from her if he stayed around her any longer? How much more complacent would he be? How much more would he allow her to do to him in that complacency?

Despite his confusion and guilt about his feelings for her, and his not fully reconciling her connection to his family's deaths, the idea of leaving her and not finding out all that could be between them, made him ten times more miserable beyond anything he could have ever comprehended before she had come into his life.

We Inanna are an ancient race of predators...

To blame her for what she'd done to his dad and brother would have been like blaming a shark for taking a bite out of a man or a seal swimming in the ocean. The ocean was the shark's domain, and anything in the water was subject to the shark's discretion.

The human world was LaMia's domain, and hunting and enslaving men was her nature, what she did in her domain.

God, how did Alex do it? How did he love and stay with Genesis?

It was obvious that they adored each other, but did their relationship work because Alex was half-Inanna? Did this legacy make it easier for him to accept the part of his wife that had preyed on men before him? Had Genesis hunted men as LaMia did, or was she the exception to the rule?

Mateo carefully turned onto his side, propped up on one elbow, chin in the palm of his hand as he momentarily contemplated leaving and leading a life without her right before the sound of the running shower finally seeped into his consciousness.

There was another sound echoing throughout the loft, something so alien and amazing Mateo jerked to a sitting position and immediately regretted the pressure this exerted on his ass cheeks.

Crying? Ms. Nubian Queen? No way.

Mateo flung off the comforter that was covering him and, naked, climbed out of bed. He marched towards the bathroom unsure of what he would say when he got there, but determined to see what he could do to help her.

What did a human submissive say to comfort his upset Inanna Mistress? What could he say to comfort his LaMia?

Mateo paused on the threshold of the bathroom, the room of their first heated encounter.

He closed his eyes against the memory of her sinking her teeth into his throat in this room and trembled at the sudden wave of hunger and need that washed over his senses.

She had marked him long before she had collared or beaten him. From the first moment when she'd drunk his blood and tasted him, he'd belonged to her.

And she belongs to you.

The thought emboldened him, powering his legs across the long length of the bathroom to slide back the frosted glass door behind where LaMia sat bent over, hands wrapped around her middle, crying her eyes out.

Mateo almost bent over himself with the pain of her emotions, her embattled aura a fierce collage of images and vivid colors that instantly assailed his senses.

God, she was in so much pain!

He steeled himself against the psychic onslaught, stepped into the shower, got down on his knees in front of her and took both of her hands in his. He barely registered the sting of the shower's hot water on his tender back he was so focused on her. "Mia, talk to me."

She looked at him. "Why are you here?"

He wondered if the pain had made her delirious, wondered if she questioned his presence in the bathroom or his presence in her life altogether before LaMia answered her own question.

"I should not have brought you here."

A grin tugged at his lips before he asked, "Having second thoughts about enslaving me?"

"Yes," she said, serious and grim as she stared at him.

"Too late. I'm already your slave, and your responsibility."

"Please, Mateo. Do not joke at a time like this."

"What better time than when you're in a blue funk?"

"Is that what you call my...emotional breakdown?"

"Emotional breakdown?" He chuckled and gently squeezed her hands "You haven't seen an emotional breakdown until you've been in a catatonic state in a hospital for several days pumped up with anti-psychotic drugs."

"How can you joke about something like that, especially when it is me who was...is the cause of your suffering?"

Mateo couldn't answer her, only knew that he no longer blamed her for what had

happened to his parents or his brother. He couldn't explain his feelings to her, not verbally, so he settled for the next best thing.

He released her hands and gripped her thighs to gently push her legs apart.

"What are you doing?"

"What does it feel like?" Mateo slid one hand between her legs, slowly inserted his middle finger into her hot cunt and closed his eyes as she sucked the digit in and squeezed her vaginal muscles around it.

"It feels like you are being an impudent slave," LaMia panted.

"But you like it, don't you?" He watched her close her eyes, bite her full bottom lip, and nod her head.

Mateo took his cue, slid another finger into her wet depths, thrusting deep before scissoring his two fingers and stroking her inner walls.

"Oh, Mateo..." She sighed and slumped back against the tile bench, opening herself up to his invasion, accepting her due.

"That's it, baby," he murmured. "Just relax and let me do this for you."

Do whatever you wish, mishva, she sent the silent message to Mateo and he jerked up his head to stare at her serene mahogany features.

He would remember that unfamiliar word for later and ask her about it. He didn't want to think what it could mean, didn't want to hope, and throw his concentration off from his more important task now at hand.

"Please, Mateo...I want your...mouth on me..."

"And you'll get it, impatient Mistress. Just hold on." He pulled back and plunged his fingers inside her, rhythmically pumping as he reached for one of her breasts with his free hand and gently rolled and pinched a rigid, cherry-red nipple.

LaMia arched her neck and slid forward on the bench as she groaned. "Mateo, please..."

He removed his fingers from inside her and his hand from her breast as she writhed in her seat. He spread her with his thumbs and quickly replaced his fingers with his mouth, first taunting her swollen clit with his lips and teeth before driving his tongue into her musky-sweet depths, his moans joining hers.

Christ, she tasted delicious! Sweet and spicy, tart and tangy. All the things that she had proven herself to be to him over the last twenty-four hours.

Her hands crept up to his head, grasped a clump of hair at his nape with both hands and firmly held his face in place against her.

You don't need to hold me, Mia.

I know, but I want to...have to...

I'm right where I want to be. Tasting you...enjoying you...

Do not stop. Do not ever stop...

She vibrated beneath his mouth, relentlessly climbing towards her orgasm as he retreated to lick her vulva and pull her labia between his teeth.

She pitched her hips into his face and Mateo added his thumb to the mix, flicking and rolling her engorged clit right before her cream spurted into his mouth. "Mateooooo!"

He caught her hips with his hands and held her as she trembled beneath his mouth and he lapped the last of her feminine juices with relish.

Mateo moved from his knees to crouch in front of LaMia as she blinked, opened her eyes, looked at him with a lust-hazy expression, and beamed.

"That was...incredible," she murmured.

"I take it you're pleased."

"Very well pleased, slave."

He took one of her hands in his and dragged her to her feet as he stood. "There's more where that came from."

* * * *

LaMia watched as Mateo turned off the water, stepped out of the shower, and retrieved a towel from the towel warmer. He returned to her, holding it open.

Feeling unbelievably eager and shy, LaMia stepped out of the shower and into the towel.

He gently rubbed her down from head to toe, his slow sensual ministrations making her as wet between her legs as the rest of her body was becoming dry beneath his hands.

"Mat—"

He wrapped her in the towel and swung her up into his arms, his strong and sure embrace making her feel like the most tiny and treasured woman alive.

She hooked her arms around his neck, and admired his chiseled, determined features before bending her head to nuzzle his throat and inhale the heady male scent of him as he took her from the bathroom to the bed.

There he paused, and LaMia released her hold so that he could gently lay her in the center of the mattress and unwrap the towel from around her.

She glanced up at his face, watched him as he watched her and licked his lips like he was preparing to dig into a king's feast.

How many times had she looked at him with that same hungry expression and thought she could consume him in one sitting? How uncomfortable had she made him with that look?

Mateo looked anything but uncomfortable now, however. He looked more certain and confident than he had been since she had acquired him. As well he should since he had her right where he wanted her, on edge and shivering with wanton anticipation.

He climbed into the bed beside her and she turned into his body, wrapped her arms around his sleek, moist shoulders and pulled him close. He returned her embrace, bent his head and slid his tongue into her waiting mouth, sharing the taste of her as he slid a leg between her thighs.

LaMia moaned as he teased her slit with his bare knee. She bit back a whimper when he pressed and rubbed that same knee against her inflamed clit. He held her tight, crushed her breasts against his hard chest, and absorbed her keening cries.

Mateo pulled back to nip her full lower lip. “You deprived me of this, Mia, deprived me of holding you and enjoying all these beautiful luscious curves.” He emphasized his point by skating his fingers from her shoulders to her generous breasts to the plush curve of her hip before twining his fingers with hers and lightly squeezing.

She nuzzled his throat again and asked, “What can I do to make it up to you, Mateo?”

He answered by flipping her onto her back beneath him. He stared down at her for a long silent moment, searching her face for something she was not sure was within her to offer.

Taking her composure for acquiescence, he slid his hands beneath her and finally tossed her onto her stomach.

LaMia gasped but tendered no further protest, curious to see what he had in mind for her, and excited to feel his big hard body against her in any position. She wanted—

Before she could finish the thought, Mateo covered her body with his, dragged her arms over her head, clasped both of her wrists in one hand and pinned her hands to the bed.

She knew she could break free if she wanted to, but she did not want to. She wanted his rough handling, wanted his cruelty and reveled in the reversal of their roles. She wanted him to set her free with her subjugation.

LaMia moaned her assent and wriggled beneath him, her ass bumping into his hard cock. “Mateo, please...”

“Shhh, Mia. Don’t talk, just feel.”

She had thought that this is what she had been doing all her life. Feeling. She had thought that this is what she had been doing for the last twenty-four ho—

He slipped his free hand between her and the mattress, immediately found her clit with his thumb, teasing it for several intense seconds before caressing her moist folds, then dipping two fingers into her sopping pussy and stroking inside her.

Once she was violently thrashing beneath him as much as his crushing firm weight would allow, Mateo removed his hand.

“No...” *Do not stop!* She frantically twisted her head to glance over her shoulder and see what he was doing, watched as he mixed her copious juices with his pre-come, rubbing the erotic mixture all over his erection before taking his lubricated shaft in hand and guiding it towards her virgin back hole.

She whimpered as he teased her rosette with the head of his penis, sliding it up and down her crack before thrusting into her.

“Mateo!”

He slid his hand beneath her again, found her clit with his thumb and expertly brought her to a frenzied edge of no return when he penetrated her in the front with two fingers, and filled her back hole with his hard-driving strokes.

“Mateo, it is too much...I cannot...”

He brought his mouth close to her ear and murmured, “You can and you will.”

She sunk her teeth into her bottom lip when he echoed her harsh words back to her, then pressed her face against the mattress as he sped his thrusts and undulated his hips in an athletic, sensual dance that pushed LaMia over the brink and sent her soaring headfirst into an orgasmic abyss.

She screamed. This and her intermittent pants just barely drowned out Mateo's long groan as he climaxed several seconds behind her.

He did not linger once he was done. He simply flipped her from her stomach to her back, cupped her face in both hands, tunneled his fingers through her hair to her nape before bending his head to kiss her with heated ferocity that made LaMia's head spin. “You're mine, Mia.”

“I belong to you, yes.”

“And I belong to you.”

She wrapped her arms around him, not caring if he lied to her, just wanting to hold him and savor the aqua glow of their energies merged in ecstasy.

CHAPTER 10

Sunday morning dawned outside of LaMia's tall, barred windows warm and bright and Mateo sprawled at the foot of her bed, propped on his elbows, chin cupped in his palms as he perused her latest issue of *Architectural Digest*.

He made mental notes on how he would improve her space, especially with an eye towards injecting a more masculine feel in selected nooks and crannies.

There was no doubt that LaMia had impeccable tastes, but it did run in the direction of the girly side. And if he were going to be staying here he would hope that despite his status as a slave, she would make some preparations for his comfort.

"The next thing you know you will be demanding equal closet space." She plopped down at the foot of the bed beside him and smacked his bottom.

"Ouch."

"Whoops! I am sorry!" She leaned in to kiss his cheek and wrapped an arm around his shoulder, pointed her chin at the page he had stopped on and said, "That is a nice arrangement."

"I thought so."

"I see you marked the page."

"Among others."

"So, you are just going to move right in and start rearranging my life, is that it?"

He grinned at her ironic tone. "Unless you want to move in with me, but I have to warn you, my place isn't nearly as roomy as this, though it's nice."

"Where do you live?"

"In a brownstone in Harlem."

"Hmm." She nodded. "Do you think I would fit in there?"

He turned his head to glance at her, lovingly scanned the regal jut of her cleft chin, her

exotic sculpted cheekbones, her glowing mahogany skin, and thought that LaMia Enlil would fit anywhere she wanted to fit. "You'd do okay."

She shoved his shoulder with hers. "Smart ass," she said and leaped from the bed.

"Where're you going?"

"I want to take a shower."

"You just had one a little while ago."

"A real shower where I actually get clean without molestation."

He leered and wiggled his eyebrows. "Are you sure you don't want to be molested?"

She stared at him for a long moment, seemed to be debating the wisdom of letting him join her then finally nodded. "I am sure and I hate to admit this but you, uh...have worn me out."

He playfully pouted. "Oh, you poor baby."

LaMia bent at the waist, brandishing her fist in his face. "Do not think that you have gotten the best of me by any means, Mateo. A short respite is all I require to recuperate and handle you."

"Oh, I'm counting on it."

She turned and flounced away, mumbling under her breath about arrogant big-headed slaves who needed to be put in their place.

"I'll start breakfast while you shower."

"It is the least you can do," she flung over a shoulder before disappearing into the bathroom and leaving the door open.

Mateo chuckled, shaking his head as he sat up to finish the article he had been reading. He took a few more minutes to flip through another couple of pieces, dog-eared several pages with designs that caught his eye then put the magazine down and finally got dressed in the fresh jeans, T- and button-down shirts that LaMia had provided him.

He was in the kitchen crouched in front of one of the myriad cabinets searching for a pan so that he'd at least have breakfast started by the time LaMia finished her shower, when he heard the muffled blast.

Mateo lurched to his feet and gaped at the glowing blue smoke slowly evanescent inside the door across the room.

He started forward and froze when he saw the three figures materializing out of the haze—two he recognized and one he didn't. "Alex! Genesis!" He ran across the loft to meet them halfway, the three of them converging in the center of the room in a flurry of hugs.

After a moment, Alex pulled back and peered at Mateo, amber eyes raking his friend from head to toe while he blatantly poked and squeezed various body parts as if to make sure Mateo was real. "You're okay."

"I'm fine."

"Great, because it's time for us to get going, while the going's good, and before some scattered dissidents pick up our trail, if they haven't already." Alex caught him around the biceps

of one arm and tried to drag him to the door but came up short when Mateo pulled back.

“I’m not leaving.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course you are.”

Mateo stood his ground and shook his head. “Look, I appreciate you guys coming to my rescue—nice entrance, by the way—but I’m not going anywhere.”

Alex looked at him as if he had announced he wanted to get a sex change operation. “What are you suffering from, some crazy Stockholm syndrome?”

“I wish it were that simple.”

“Mateo, we don’t have time for this.” Alex tried again to drag him towards the door, but Mateo resisted, jerked his arm out of Alex’s grasp and took several steps back.

“No.” He shook his head.

“Matt—”

“Alex, he cannot leave. She has collared him,” Genesis said.

Alex looked at the choker around Mateo’s neck at the same instant Mateo’s hand flew to his throat to caress the warm silver ornament.

He’d forgotten LaMia had put it on him. It seemed like she had done it to another person in another place and time, not to who he was now, but the Mateo Diaz he used to be. He was different now, too different to return to the life he once had, the person he once was.

“So we’ll just take him with us and cut it off on the way home.”

“We cannot.”

Alex turned to the stranger shadowing his and Genesis’s steps, a tall and intimidating raisin-brown woman grasping a long engraved scepter in one hand.

Mateo assumed the scepter was the weapon responsible for disintegrating LaMia’s door.

“What do you mean we can’t, Xevera?” Alex asked.

“Yeah, what do you mean we can’t?” Mateo echoed.

Xevera pinned him with eyes the same shade as Genesis’s, only more striking since they shone out of a darker face. Her stern look softened infinitesimally right before she addressed him. “If you cross the threshold of the door, you will die.”

Mateo gawked.

LaMia had never detailed exactly what was the purpose of the collar. He had assumed it had been put on as a means of restraint, a device to discipline him if he got out of line, maybe to jolt or incapacitate him but not to kill him. “Die?” he murmured, warily fingering the choker now.

“No.”

Mateo pivoted to lock eyes with LaMia standing just outside the bathroom door clad in a red paisley kimono.

She stared at him with an appealing expression as if she was begging for his forgiveness. His stomach lurched right before she said, "You will not die. I never activated the collar. You can remove it and..." She closed her eyes and took a deep breath before continuing. "You may leave any time you wish."

Mateo searched the choker now, found the clasp on the side and easily unlatched it.

"Good, now can we please get the hell out of here, Mateo," Alex said.

Mateo ignored his mentor and boss for the first time in their relationship and spoke to LaMia. "What if I don't wish to leave?"

"Do not be silly. Of course you wish to leave," LaMia said. "Why would you wish to stay?"

Mateo heard the hopeful tone in her question, crossed the floor and closed the space between them.

"Matt, we don't have time for this."

Alex might as well have been speaking Chinese to him for all the attention Mateo paid.

All he could see was LaMia in front of him. All he could hear were her hectic thoughts of self-flagellation. All he could feel was her pain as he stopped in front of her and reached out to cup her face.

"I killed your family. How can you ever forgive me? How can you look at me with anything except disgust?"

"It is a shame you will never know the answer to all those questions."

In unison, everyone turned to the open door where a woman stood leaning against the jamb.

But rather than her stance communicating calm menace as had her voice, the woman just looked plain tired.

"Mara," Alex, Genesis, Xevera and LaMia all chorused.

It appeared that Ms. Mara was well-known in their little circle of friends.

"What are you doing here, Lamashtu?" Xevera took a protective position in front of Alex and Genesis.

"I am here for the same reason you all are here. To retrieve the exile."

"We are here on a sanctioned assembly mission. I do not believe you can make the same claim," Genesis said and Mateo immediately knew she was bluffing. He didn't know how he knew or what Genesis meant by a 'sanctioned mission,' wondered whether or not they had come to do something worse to LaMia than just 'retrieve' her.

"So you say, apostate," Mara scoffed.

"Mateo and LaMia fall under Inanna jurisdiction, not Sebitu, Mara. We are taking them both back with us...alive."

"Neither of them falls under the jurisdiction of the Alliance or the New Regime. One is a lowly orphan human—"

“Hey, I resent that remark!”

Mara sneered at Mateo and continued as if he hadn’t spoken. “And the other is a disgraced exile and murderess.”

“The fact remains that we’re taking LaMia with us back to Emsharra to be judged by Quna Nahemah and the assembly for her abduction of Mateo Diaz,” Alex said.

Mara took several threatening steps forward. “I have already judged her and *you*, *cambion*, for the murder of Xaphan Pazuzu. And I will have my revenge.”

“Neither of us is going anywhere with any of you,” Mateo said.

“It is all right, Mateo. I will go with Alex and Genesis peacefully,” LaMia whispered.

He turned to her. “No you won’t. Why should you?” He turned back to look at Alex and Genesis. “Doesn’t what I say matter? I’m here of my own free will.”

“She kidnapped you, Mateo,” Alex said.

“I know that, but...” He averted his eyes, blushing so fiercely his cheeks felt like they were on fire.

“*Lilith*, you are in love with her!”

Mateo met Genesis’ disgusted and shocked expression. “What if I am?”

“How truly touching all of this is. And if it is so, that you love the Inanna bitch and she loves you, then it is fitting that you should die together,” Mara said, teetering where she stood.

Alex instantly jumped on her infirmity. “How long has it been since you last fed, Mara?”

“From the looks of it, I would say days,” Genesis put in and moved closer to Alex, putting herself between her husband and the Sebitu.

Mateo noticed LaMia mimicking Genesis’s action, sidling closer to him, and his heart sped at the gesture. He glanced at her from the corner of his eyes, and caught her intent an instant before she flung herself in front of him.

Mia, no!

Mara opened fire. Her bolt, aimed at Mateo’s chest, struck LaMia in the back dead center.

Mateo yelled and caught her in his arms as she went limp from the force of the blow.

Genesis and Xevera instantly, simultaneously activated their shields and battered Mara’s with a volley of massive discharges and fulgurations that sent the debilitated woman to her knees in seconds.

Mateo watched as the two Inanna continued firing until they had completely breached Mara’s wavering force field, their lightning strikes finally pummeling their target true.

At last, the assault stopped and the two Inanna cautiously approached the Sebitu female crumpled and sizzling on LaMia’s glossy parquet floor.

Genesis knelt beside Mara wielding an electronic device that she waved over the downed woman’s body from head to toe. After a moment, she glanced back at Xevera standing sentry

behind her, and shook her head.

Mateo sat stunned at the sudden violence that had erupted to invade his and LaMia's day.

One moment they were discussing redecorating and moving into each other's digs like a normal modern day couple and in the next moment a woman was lying dead in the living room.

"Nahemah's not going to be happy about this. We were just supposed to recover Mateo, take LaMia into custody, and leave," Alex murmured as if to himself.

"I do not want to consider how Mara's death will affect the Alliance," Genesis said.

"We were well within our rights. We defended ourselves against an attack. Lamashtu is collateral damage," Xevera put in.

Mateo gawked, couldn't believe they were all so nonchalantly discussing the politics of Mara Lamashtu's death while LaMia lay dying in his arms. "I don't give a fuck about your Harvesting Program or the New Regime and the Alliance! Someone help her! She's...she's dying..." Mateo choked down the tight knot of anguish growing in his throat as he cradled LaMia close to him.

Genesis approached with her little electronic box, crouched at LaMia's side and waved the device over her body as she had Mara's.

Don't shake your head. Don't shake your head and don't tell me she—

"...will be fine. Her vital signs are low but steady. She will not die, although she deserves to *after what she has do—*"

Alex pulled his wife away an instant before Mateo released LaMia and reached for Genesis's throat with one hand as if he meant to choke her. "Matt, take it easy."

"Don't tell me to take it easy!" He felt the tears stinging his eyes, fought them back. He did not want to share his grief for LaMia with any of these people, could not bear to let Alex and Genesis's politics and logic tarnish something so new and fragile.

He glanced up to see Alex whispering something in Genesis's ear, couldn't make out what his mentor had said to his wife, but could guess when Genesis's face immediately softened as she looked down at Mateo and LaMia in his arms.

He couldn't stand that look. It reminded him too much of the look the doctors had given him when he'd woken up in the hospital to the news that his brother was dead. "I don't want your pity," he spat. "I want your help. Do something to help her."

Genesis bent at his side and tried to pry LaMia out of his arms but he wouldn't let her go. "Mateo, please. Let us take her so we can do as you wish and help her."

Seeing her point, but still reluctant, he released LaMia and watched as the one they called Xevera swung her up into her strong capable arms and headed for the door. "Where is she taking her?"

"To Emsharra where she will be properly cared for and get the best treatment she needs to recover."

Mateo got to his feet to follow but Genesis pulled him into her arms and hugged him

close. He didn't know why she did that, but as soon as he felt her arms around him, the waterworks started, wracking his body with sobs as he returned Genesis's hug and held on tight.

She patted and rubbed his back as she soothingly cooed to him as if he were a baby. "Shh. All will be well, Mateo. All will be well."

He slowly pulled away from her and nodded, but didn't speak. He couldn't, rendered mute by the unbearable idea of never seeing LaMia's smile again, of never hearing her tell him he must obey or be punished.

Mateo suddenly smiled at the memory of his punishment and became rock hard at the profound pleasure and pain of it.

Alex glanced at him and shook his head. "Damn kid, you've got it bad." He clapped Mateo on the shoulder and gave him an encouraging smile. "Don't worry, Matt. Xevera will get her to the Emsharra labs and the Inanna there will fix her right up."

"They'd better." Because he didn't think he could survive losing another person in his life who meant so much to him.

CHAPTER 11

Emsharra Settlement—Two Days Later

LaMia grudgingly opened her eyes, annoyed by the bright light penetrating her lids and scorching her eyes. She brought the inside of her elbow up to her face, covered her eyes with her arm, and cursed as someone blithely hummed as he or she opened all the blinds in the room.

“Tsk, tsk, child. You always were like a hibernating bear coming out of your slumber.”

LaMia lurched to a sitting position at the familiar commanding voice and immediately regretted her folly at the ache in her back and head.

Nahemah soundlessly crossed the plush cream carpeting and sat beside her on the extravagantly outfitted four-poster bed.

Lilith, she was back in her old bedroom! With her grandmother!

“Yes, it is I and not an apparition.”

“To what do I owe the honor?”

“Certainly not your sunny disposition.”

“If you are going to insult me, I believe I will be taking my leave...” LaMia flung back the covers and threw her legs over the side of the bed before a sudden wave of dizziness overtook her senses and she flopped back onto the mattress.

“Do not be such an unpleasant child. You are already in a difficult position. Do not compound matters.”

“Surely you are not here to drop the gavel on another sentence of banishment. Is that not akin to beating a dead horse?”

“Why must you be so contrary, Mia?”

“I am just being...” She was about to say ‘realistic,’ but wearily closed her eyes at the pointlessness of it all. There was no reason to take her anger and despair out on her grandmother.

Nahemah had done only what she had been duty-bound to do, as had LaMia. She opened her eyes to peer at her grandmother. "I do not wish to fight with you any more, Grandmother."

Nahemah sighed as if in relief. "I am glad to hear that."

LaMia watched her grandmother's unguarded face. It was one of only two occasions when she could remember the great *Quna* Nahemah thus, so obviously vulnerable. The other time had been when Nahemah had witnessed the execution of her other granddaughter.

LaMia closed her eyes against the vision of Kalika falling beneath a barrage of bolts fired by her Sister executioners.

Lilith, what did I do? "Why am I here and not in the penal complex awaiting my sentence?"

"I have other plans for you, Mia."

LaMia knew what her grandmother had in mind before she said, "You wish me to join the Harvesting Program."

"Among other things, yes."

LaMia had to admit it was a fitting punishment, and only what she deserved.

Nahemah put an amiable hand on her shoulder. "Do not think of it as a punishment, Mia. Think of it as a way of redeeming."

And that was what she wanted, was it not? To right the wrongs that she had done Kalika and Alex and Genesis and... "Where is Mateo?"

Nahemah smiled as if she had a secret. "Your captive?"

"Is he well?" *Please tell me that he was not harmed by that vindictive Sebitu!*

LaMia felt the heat of a blush race to her cheeks at the ironic thought. She might have been referring to herself but for the Sebitu part.

It shamed her to remember all the things she had done to him, shamed her and made her fidget in her bed as she gushed into her panties with sudden hot desire and hoped Nahemah did not notice her discomfort.

If her grandmother did notice, she did not let on, simply looked at LaMia with a neutral expression and said, "Mateo seems to be none the worse for wear after his captivity. He even spoke to the assembly on your behalf, begged for leniency."

"He...he did?"

"Do not look so shocked, child. I am sure you are well aware of his feelings for you."

As a matter of fact, she was not. She only knew what her feelings were for him, only knew that she was hopelessly in love with a human.

"Your love is not hopeless, Mia for he feels the same way."

"He...does?"

"Although Goddess knows why," Nahemah grumbled.

"Are you insulting me again, Grandmother?"

“Not at all.” She shook her head. “However, Alex is certain the young man is suffering from some condition called the Stockholm syndrome, that he is identifying with his captor and has some misguided loyalty to his hostage-taker in spite of the risk you put him in.”

“And what do you think?”

Nahemah shrugged. “What I think is of no consequence. It is what your young man thinks and he presented himself before the assembly as a level-headed adult in control of all of his faculties, with a deep-seated sense of right and wrong and abiding sense of compassion. The assembly was impressed by his address at the proceedings. He was quite fervent and—”

“Proceedings?”

“You were tried in absentia for violating the Alliance treaty,” Nahemah stated matter-of-factly.

LaMia held her breath waiting for the rest. As an exile she was not sure what the sentence was for the offense with which she had been charged and tried. “Will...will I be executed?”

“Do not be ridiculous, child. If you were not executed for the offenses you committed against Alex and Genesis, then certainly you will not be executed for kidnapping Mateo.”

“Oh...” She averted her eyes, did not know what else to do. Should she say thank you?

“Your gratitude is not required, but your assent and service to the New Regime is.”

“I will agree and commit, but I...”

Nahemah arched a brow, prompting. “Yes, young one?”

“I do not believe I am deserving. After all that I...after what I have done, the people I have injured...”

“My dear heart, none of us in Emsharra is without blood on our hands. You, of all people, should know that.”

“Yes.” LaMia nodded.

“Before you count your blessings, however, do not think, *for one minute*, that you are exonerated in the matter. And do not think that because you are not being executed or imprisoned that your offense was not egregious.”

LaMia's face turned hot as she met her grandmother's glare. “Yes, Grandmother.”

Nahemah shot her a disappointed and outraged look before shaking her head. “You kidnapped, enslaved and *collared* a human being, Mia.”

“I know it was wrong.” *But he liked it!* LaMia had to bite her tongue to keep from saying the words out loud, but she knew Nahemah had heard her from the small grin that tilted up the corners of the older woman's generous mouth.

“Yes, well, that is neither here nor there. The fact remains that he is an adult and seems to know his own mind and he has somehow found it in his big human heart to forgive you. This in and of itself was your final salvation in the eyes of the assembly.”

He forgives me? Oh, Mateo... Where are you?

“Your young man is just outside waiting to see you. Impatiently, I might add.”

“Can I—?”

“I will let him in shortly and leave you two alone to talk. But first—”

“Yes, Grandmother. I agree to your terms. I will join the Harvesting Program and make amends.”

“Such enthusiasm. That is the spirit.” Nahemah patted her own thighs once before she stood, put a hand on LaMia’s shoulder and gently squeezed. “You owe him much, Mia. Do not squander the second chance this young man has engendered for you.”

“I will not, Grandmother,” LaMia promised.

* * * *

Clad in the blue and gold-trimmed linen tunic and slacks of Emsharra royalty, Mateo couldn’t have been more uncomfortable had he been in a suit and tie. He fidgeted in his seat outside of LaMia’s bedroom right before Nahemah came out.

He jumped to his feet to meet her as she closed the door. “Is she awake? Can I go in now?”

Nahemah put a hand on his shoulder in that soothing way that, after less than a day, he had already become accustomed to. He wondered, vaguely, if she were casting some spell on him with the touch as he had such a feeling of well-being and tranquility.

“Patience, young one.”

“Yes, Nahemah.”

She gave him a stern look. “Mateo, what did I tell you to call me?”

“Um, Grandmother,” he mumbled and averted his eyes, still uncomfortable with the term even though she had welcomed him into her family with open arms and had insisted he address her so familiarly.

Christ, the woman was royalty, the Highest of Emsharra!

“I am also a grandmother and great grandmother. And since you are like a brother to Alex, and practically bond mated to my grandchild, that makes you my grandchild also.”

The key word in all that being ‘practically.’ He didn’t know how things worked in Emsharra and whether or not they believed in shotgun weddings. Not that he needed to be forced into anything with LaMia. Question was did she still want him as her mate and slave now that she had been welcomed back home and offered a position in the Harvesting Program? Or would she see him as a constant reminder of a past she wanted to forget and reject him?

Nahemah squeezed his shoulder. “Have faith, child.”

“Yes, Grandmother.”

She patted his shoulder and pushed him towards the door. “Now go in and see your *shimsa*. You two have much to dis—”

“What does that mean? *Shimsa*?” he asked and watched Nahemah’s face flush with color. His heartbeat sped right before she answered.

“It is a Sebitu term of endearment. It means ‘sweetheart.’”

“Oh, okay...”

Nahemah grinned and raised an inquiring brow. “Is there something else?”

“And, uh...*mishva*?”

“Why that one means ‘my love’ in Inanna.” Nahemah smiled. “Is there some reason for the vocabulary lesson at this time?”

Mateo shrugged, tried to seem nonchalant but knew he was failing miserably. Nahemah was much older and more skilled at reading minds than LaMia was, and LaMia read him like a big-faced digital watch.

Right now it took every ounce of restraint in him to keep her from knowing that his heart was soaring from happiness and relief.

“Go to her.” Nahemah gave his shoulder another friendly squeeze then turned on her heels, walked down the long, plush-carpeted hallway and left him alone.

Mateo took a deep breath before opening the door and entering the bedroom.

He was immediately struck by the lavishness of the blue and gold accessories, and the head- and footboard of the bed along with most of the room’s wooden furnishings all elaborately engraved with the Enlil royal emblem of a calligraphic “E.”

Even had he not seen LaMia sitting up in the sumptuous elevated king-sized bed surrounded by what seemed a hundred plump, blue-and-gold goose-down pillows, he would have known this was her bedroom. It had ‘vain royalty’ written all over it, not to mention the spicy-sweet cinnamon scent that wafted to and enveloped his senses as he stood on the threshold of her room.

“Well, it is about time you came in to see me, slave.”

“I was unavoidably detained.”

“Come here to me.”

Mateo’s steps were light with confidence and euphoria as he quickly made his way across the room to her bedside.

“Kneel slave,” she murmured and Mateo knelt on one knee as he took one of her hands in both of his. “Did I say you could take such liberty and touch me?”

“I beg pardon, Mistress. I was so taken with your presence, I couldn’t help myself,” he said, loving the game and not releasing her hand.

He could tell that LaMia loved the game too when she leered and turned her hand in his to slowly stroke his knuckles with her thumb.

Mateo’s breath hitched in his chest at the simple contact.

He had not touched her, or been touched by her, in two days, hadn’t known just how much he’d missed her until this moment. He’d known he missed her a great deal, but currently the reality of her swamped his reason like a raging tornado and made him lightheaded. “I’ve missed you so much,” he fiercely whispered and squeezed her hand.

“And I have missed you.”

“Does that mean you still want me as your slave?” he asked and watched her eyes immediately fill with tears. He reached out a hand to touch her cheek.

“That is a silly question. Of course I still want you as my slave...that is, if you still wish to be my slave?”

He chuckled at the shy wonder in her voice, all too smitten by the alien dominatrix who had stolen his heart and made him hers. “I wish it,” he murmured, stood and climbed into the bed beside her.

“Did I give you permission to take even more liberties, impudent slave?”

“No, but I’m willing to take the punishment later on for a taste of you now.” Mateo gingerly wrapped his arms around her, wary of her injury and surprised when she returned his embrace with breathtaking strength.

“When she fired on you, I thought I would not be in time. I thought I would lose you. I thought—”

“—you were dead.” He pulled away slightly to peer at her, imprinting each feature on his memory one by one so that they would always be with him, during every waking hour when he wasn’t with her, and during every hour that he slept. “You scared me.”

“For once,” she mumbled and he chuckled at her half-hearted pout. “Actually, I scared myself. I have never acted so impulsively so...selflessly before.”

“How did it feel?”

She grinned, leaned in to press her lips against his throat, nibbled and sucked his skin for several long moments before raising her mouth just enough to say, “It felt good.”

“As good as this...?” He slid one arm around her shoulders and the other hand between her legs, instantly found her clit with thumb and forefinger and went to work tormenting the swollen kernel of flesh before he drove two fingers into her hot and sopping cunt.

“No, never...” She gasped and held him tight as he worked his fingers inside her, alternately stroking and plunging until she was writhing from his manipulations

“Mateo!” She suddenly stiffened in his embrace, pulling him flush against her, and Mateo cursed the royal Emsharran garb that kept him from feeling her against him skin to skin.

As if reading his thoughts and to compensate for the deficiency, LaMia furiously licked his throat all over, like a chef preparing and tenderizing a piece of meat before she cooks it.

She sunk her teeth into him deeply and he shuddered against her right before she gushed her completion into his hand.

LaMia lay still in his arms for a long moment, lazily lapping at his throat and cleaning away any stray blood as she healed her bite.

He pulled away to stare at her, face fixed in a solemn mask of anxiety. “Am I still your *mishva*, Mia?”

She froze as if surprised he knew the term, then smiled and pulled him back into her arms to cradle her face against his neck again. “You will always be *mishva*, Mateo. Always...”

EPILOGUE

Emsharra – Two Years Later

Mateo cradled his baby son against his chest as LaMia looked on from her sickbay bed and smiled.

“He is a beautiful child, is he not?”

“Even for a half-human?” Mateo teased.

“Even with me as his mother.”

Mateo came close and sat on the edge of the bed with her. “Julen is a lucky boy. As is his father.” He palmed his wife’s face and immediately saw her tears.

She had been overly sensitive and hormonal during her pregnancy and consequently more demanding with Mateo, as if to get back at him for knocking her up and temporarily taking her place in the Harvesting Program during her incapacity.

To date, he had been on several missions to scan and ascertain the suitability of potential recruits under the guidance of Alex and Genesis.

For the first time in his life, he had found a practical use for his empathy, was not only accepted into the ranks of the Harvesting Program, but respected by the Inanna and Sebitu because of his gifts.

Working on the Harvesting Program with Alex and Genesis and various other alliance squads from Emsharra and Gaiam was exciting and fulfilling, especially when he was able to use his empathy and newfound telepathy to comfort a frightened recruit that had been targeted for retrieval as he had once been. But no amount of respect, or recovery missions could compare to his joy at having a wife and now a son to come home to at the end of the day.

Mateo knew his wife, on the other hand, missed the thrill of the hunt and he was eager to give up his spot in the Program to become Mr. Mom to Julen just to see LaMia in her element again.

She couldn't fool him. As fulfilling as their home life was, as exciting and unpredictable as their sex life, LaMia had spent more than a hundred years as a warrior and predator. Anything less than being in the middle of the action wouldn't do for her, not even motherhood and being a wife.

He didn't begrudge her, only wanted to see her happy.

"I am happy, Mateo."

"But I know you miss it."

She averted her eyes, tried to avert her thoughts, but he caught the *I never really had a chance to get used to the Program before my pregnancy*.

"Do you blame me?"

"How could I after you have given me such a gift?" She reached for Julen and Mateo relinquished his hold to put the baby in her arms.

"Still, as soon as you're well enough, your place is waiting for you with one of the retrieval squads." He stared at her and noticed the frown. "What is it?"

"Alex and Genesis only grudgingly accepted me into their ranks the few months that I served with the Program. Not that I blame them. They have every right to their enmity."

"It'll pass in time. Alex and Genesis are too intelligent and forgiving for it not to."

"You are being optimistic."

"No, just practical." He shook his head. "Besides, with Julen's cousin on the way as Genesis is expecting her own baby soon—"

"Genesis is expecting?"

Mateo hadn't meant to let it slip, but LaMia was bound to find out sooner or later. Better sooner than later and before she heard it from someone else.

He nodded. "So you see, Genesis and Alex are bound to come around."

"You sound like Grandmother."

"Nahemah is a wise Inanna. You should listen to her."

"I will listen to you." She cupped his face as the baby slept between them.

"You know, even if they don't come around, you still have me and Julen."

"And that is all that I need."

They sat silent for several moments, mentally swapping their hopes and ideas for their future and that of the Harvesting Program, mind-touch such a natural and integral part of their communication now, neither of them noticed when they were doing it.

Mateo was so wrapped up in his wife's thoughts, he barely heard Alex when he came into the room and wouldn't have noticed him before he reached the bedside had LaMia not poked him in the side.

"Don't think you can fall down on the job just because you're a new father."

Mateo bounded to his feet. "Is there a new recruit?"

"You know there're always new recruits. But if you're asking me if we have a specific human targeted, yes we do. So your presence is needed in the Great Above."

Mateo nodded, and leaned in to give LaMia a kiss. When she thrust out her tongue to tangle with his and burrowed a hand in his hair, it took everything in him to break away not to get back in the bed to ravish her.

"Don't worry. I'll take good care of him while he's out," Alex said.

"I know that you will." LaMia grinned, uncharacteristically shy as she averted her glance again. Finally, she met Alex's gaze and whispered "Congratulations on the upcoming birth of your baby."

"Thanks," Alex said, acting as if he wasn't surprised she knew.

Mateo appreciated his reaction, especially when Alex came close to caress Julen's hair then reached for LaMia's hand and tenderly squeezed it.

"Genesis will be by shortly. She's anxious to get in some practice and meet and dote on her husband's new cousin."

LaMia laughed and squeezed Alex's hand back. "I look forward to it."

"The rest of the retrieval squad is waiting. I'll leave you two alone for a little while to say your farewells." Alex slapped Mateo on the shoulder. "See you outside."

Once they were alone again, Mateo peered at her. "Are you okay with—?"

"Genesis's impending visit?"

Mateo nodded. "If you're not comfortable..."

"Our meeting is overdue. There is much we need to discuss. There is much I need to apologize for."

He leaned in again to give her a firm kiss on the lips, lingered several moments sampling her strength, reveling in her hard-won willpower before he pulled away to cup her face. "I'm so proud of you."

"And I am proud of you." She took his hand and twined her fingers with his. "Alex is waiting. You must go now."

"I'll be back as soon as I can."

"And your son and I will be waiting for you, *mishva*."

PREDATOR'S SALVATION

Sisters of Emsharra, Book 2

THE END

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Bashita: An Inanna curse, equivalent to bullshit.

Cambion: A hybrid male born of a human and Inanna or Sebitu.

Datma: Inanna curse, equivalent to damn it.

Emsharra: Province of the Inanna existing in the Universe of the Great Above.

Enlil: Royal family of Emsharra.

Fah: An Inanna curse, equivalent to fuck.

Gaiam: Province of the Sebitu existing in the Universe of the Great Above.

Inanna: Ancient superior race of beings that subsist on the energy and life-force of humans. Enemy of the Sebitu before the Alliance and New Regime.

Inanna Tracking Practice: System by which Inanna locate their kind.

Ishara: Goddess of the Great Above, worshipped by the Sebitu.

Kundalini: Inanna term for energy; life-force.

Lilith: Goddess of the Great Above worshipped by the Inanna.

Mishva: Inanna term of endearment meaning “my love.”

Nahemah: The Highest and Quna of Emsharra.

Quna: Female royalty. Inanna term for Queen. The Highest and Quna are one and the same.

Sebitu: Ancient superior race of beings that subsist on the energy and life-force of humans. Enemy of the Inanna before the Alliance and New Regime.

Shasta: An Inanna curse, equivalent to shit.

Shimsa: Sebitu term of endearment meaning “sweetheart.”

Sister: Female inhabitant of Emsharra.

Spirit-Boost: A rare, regenerative component found in some human life-blood, or life-force. Much sought-after by Inanna and Sebitu alike for its aphrodisiacal and intensely orgasmic qualities.

Spirit Signal: A distinctive tracking beacon that each Inanna emits whenever they use psychic energy. Some psychic activities emit more of a signal than others (i.e., erecting a force-field, shapeshifting, telepathy and using one's spirit light emits more of a signal than say feeding on and siphoning from a human.)

Spirit Light: An Inanna's primary power source used to attack, defend or feed (i.e., discharging a lightning bolt, erecting a force-field, siphoning human energy, or teleportation, among other activities.)

Supreme: Leader of the council and ruler of Gaiam.

Tenebrion: Supreme of Gaiam.

***The Great Above:** Includes everything between the surface of the Earth and the bottom of Heaven, a domain presided over by Enlil, Lord of Air. The Earth is the bottom layer and part of the Great Above.

***The Great Below:** Includes everything beneath the surface of the Earth. Besides the depths of the seas, it consists principally of two layers: the Abzu and the Netherworld.

The Highest: Leader of the assembly and ruler of Emsharra.

***The Netherworld:** Referred to as “The Land of No Return.” It is located underground beneath the Abzu.

***The Seas:** Considered to be the water remains of the primordial mother goddess. Consists of saltwater and surrounds the land surface of the Earth, the seas is considered inherently hostile and dangerous to humans.

*From The Sumerian Universe, Ancient Sumeria “In the Days when Gods Walked Upon the Face of the Earth” by James W. Bell © 2002-3–<http://www.jameswbell.com/m001universe.html>

AUTHOR'S BIO



Gracie McKeever is an author from the Bronx, and aside from several side trips along the way, has lived and worked her entire life in the New York City area. She has been writing since the ripe old age of seven when two younger brothers were among her earliest, captive audience for various short story readings and performances.

An eclectic and voracious reader whose audience has grown outside of the supportive family members, she's had the great fortune of being able to incorporate two of her favorite passions and talents—reading and writing—as a book reviewer for several online e-zines, both as a regular staff member and freelancer.

Her short stories, novellas and poetry have seen exposure in various lit and art magazines and other venues—online and in print. Of particular note, heard over the airwaves on KFJC's morning show, *Dancing In The Fast Lane With Ann Arbor (Unbedtime Stories)* out of Los Altos Hills, CA (*New Life Incognita* was the story of the month for March 2000). She's also proud to be a member of the ("Worlds' Oldest Active Homeless Paper") Street News family and has seen numerous articles, poems and novel excerpts published within its pages as well as having had a poetry reading on Pseudo On-line Network (Street News Review).

In 2001, Gracie caught the erotica bug, sinking her teeth into her first erotic e-book for a review, and hasn't looked back since, an instant affinity for the genre spawning her first erotica title, *Beneath The Surface*, published in 2006 by Siren Publishing, Inc.

Visit Gracie's website at
www.graciecmckeever.com

Other books by Gracie C. McKeever at
www.sirenpublishing.com/graciecmckeever.com

The Matchmaker



The Matchmaker, Book 1

Beneath the Surface : Terms of Surrender : Manifest Destiny

Angela Calminetti, mother of five, New Age practitioner and gifted psychic and telepath, is proud of her family ties and does everything she can to make sure that all of her younger siblings are as happy in love and marriage as she is...whether they want her to or not.

Note: Each book is written to stand alone.

Beneath the Surface

Former Madison Avenue ad exec EJ Vega just landed a seven-figure advance from Renegade Publishing. Older sister Evelyn convinces him he needs a fashion makeover before he goes on his first national book tour and has just the person in mind to turn his wardrobe inside out. EJ, too late, recognizes the handiwork of his oldest, matchmaking sister Angela, and by the time he realizes what he's gotten himself into, a very hot and uptight personal shopper has invaded more than just his wardrobe; she's invaded his soul.

From a broken home and driven by past demons, Tabitha Lyons is the proprietor of flourishing *Lyons Style, Inc.* and knows success when she sees it. In EJ she sees not just success, but sexy and sin with a capital "S." She doesn't want to turn his wardrobe inside out as much as she knows EJ will turn her world upside down...

Sensuality Rating: Scorching

Genre: Contemporary Paranormal/Psychic/Interracial

STORY EXCERPT

BENEATH THE SURFACE

The Matchmaker, Book 1

By Gracie C. McKeever

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“I have your two o’clock here, Tabitha. Mr. Vega?”

“Send him in.” Tabitha sat behind her desk and hit Escape on her keyboard.

Eric strolled in just as his dossier reappeared on her screen, and Tabitha swallowed at the sight of him, suddenly wishing she had stuck with her usual formality when they’d been on the phone and kept their relationship on a strictly last name basis. She didn’t want him to get the wrong idea, especially since her own treacherous hormones already had the wrong idea and had her pussy muscles clenching in response to his tall height and broad shoulders filling the doorway as he paused on the threshold.

Instant attraction. Not only was it not good, it was unprecedented.

Tabitha stood up behind her desk and proffered a hand across the glass top as he approached, thinking Evelyn had somehow bamboozled her and that her brother’s profile did not do him a bit of justice. There was nothing about the man that needed to be “made over.”

He was inhumanly gorgeous, the black hair he had mentioned in his profile was sleek and wavy, worn in a longish but masculine and neat style combed back off his forehead and glistening beneath the fluorescent lights of her office.

Tabitha slowly moved her gaze down, taking in the aquiline nose, angular jaw, and cleft chin—the cleft he had neglected to mention in his profile as he had mentioned his dimples—immediately drawn back up to his indigo eyes, ridiculously long-lashed, so dark and intense they almost looked black.

She almost smiled when he grinned and she noticed the big dimples to which he had previously alluded, mentally taking his measurements and surprised he had been so accurate with his description. Most men—most people—boasted, overcompensated for some shortcoming or were too humble with their self-assessment. Rarely had she met anyone who’d been so accurate. Accurate and modest. *God, the man can’t be this perfect!*

Tabitha slid her gaze down further to take in his outfit and amended her last thought. Today was not Friday, but he was definitely dressed down.

Okay, he *wasn’t* perfect. Thank God for small favors.

His sense of fashion seemed to come straight from a discount store. Actually, a discount store would have been a step up. She could easily see the man perusing the aisles of a

neighborhood thrift shop. Not that there was anything wrong with that. She frequented some of the better thrift shops herself when she was on the hunt for that perfect item for a client and not that his clothes were ill fitting, quite the contrary.

He had the kind of body on which clothes hung well, any clothes, pulled off the casual ragged, torn-up look with sensual style rather than coming off as a slob.

Tabitha glanced at her clock as he caught her smaller hand in his big one and gently squeezed. The resultant energy tingled all the way up her arm until she thought he had one of those practical joke buzzers in his palm, but there was nothing touching her palm except his smooth, warm skin.

He noticed the direction of her glance and grinned, showcasing those dimples to their fullest effect. "Come on now, you have to admit I'm on time."

Tabitha arched a brow. "Just," she said coolly.

"Let me guess, you're the type who turns up to all her appointments at least a half-an-hour early, am I right?"

"Why don't you have a seat and we can get started," she said, ignoring his quip. That he was so on target about her was totally beside the point.

He released her hand slowly, his body heat and intensity overwhelming and invading her comfort zone so much, it made her think twice about walking across the room to close the door before she finally did just that.

When she got back behind her desk and sat down, Eric was still standing and running a hand over the glass top admiringly, glanced up at her with a knowing look.

"I knew you'd be a glass and chrome type."

Tabitha glanced at him with a start, entranced by his long fingertips stroking her desk, imagined him caressing her skin instead of the smooth cold glass, her body wantonly arched beneath his manipulations. "Excuse me?"

"I got a definite vibe from your voice on the phone the other day." He glanced around her uncluttered office and nodded. "Cool, Spartan, functional."

His matter of fact appraisal made her feel as if her character had just been attacked, that maybe she should defend herself, but he spoke up again before she had a chance.

"Don't get me wrong. I like the look. It suits you."

"Not quite an apology."

He arched a lush brow. "Do I owe you one?"

"No, I suppose you don't. You were just making an observation after all." She leaned her elbows on the desk, folded her hands and leaned her chin on her clenched fingers as she looked at him. Two could play the intuitive game. "What type are you?"

"Eclectic, whatever feels good at the moment."

"Mmm-hmm." Just like she thought. A free spirit. He probably would have been right at home at Woodstock.

“Is this part of the interview process?”

“Everything you say to me here is basically part of the interview process. I get to know what you like, your general style, it helps me when I finally have to go and pick things out for you. That is, if you’re not with me at the time I make the purchases.”

“You mean I have that option?”

“If you have the time, of course you do. Most of my clients don’t use the option. Time constraints are one of the main reasons people hire me in the first place. Your time is valuable, so why not let me do what I do best while you’re using your time to do what you do best?”

“I like that philosophy.”

Most men did. Most of her clients of the male, no-time-or-desire-for-frivolous-nonsense persuasion where shopping was concerned, did. Must have been something in the Y chromosome, some anti-shopping gene.

Tabitha looked at her monitor and hit the Enter key twice to make room for additional information. “Now, you mentioned eclectic...” Tabitha paused to glimpse his outfit. Not quite as out there as some of the Woodstock fashions she had seen, but definitely unconventional for the business world in which she moved. The white T-shirt tucked into a pair of blue wash-and-wear Levi’s hinted at firm well-muscled abs that tapered down to a slim waist, would have been more suitable attire for a *Grease* revival. Same went for the black distressed leather blazer that clung to his broad shoulders and had Tabitha’s fingers itching to divest him and see if his physique was as hard as it looked.

He had the anarchistic artist look down to a science, and she wasn’t sure yet whether or not it was a façade, or a well-honed image he’d perfected just for their meeting today, because Eric seemed like the type to go out of his way to shock.

Eric finally took the seat across from Tabitha’s desk, resting his right ankle on his left knee and giving her a good view of a comfortable, well-worn black desert boot.

“So, let’s get back to your sty—”

“I don’t like suits and ties. I did the whole corporate dress for success deal years ago, and I’m not interested in reimmersing myself. What you see here is as dressy as I usually get.”

True, the customer was always right, but Tabitha took offense at his tone, as if he was too good for a suit and she wasn’t; as if he were attacking her tastes without even knowing what she might have planned for him.

“There are a lot of things we can do with slacks and a suit jacket that don’t involve a tie.”

“There are a lot of things I could do with a tie that don’t involve clothes at all.”

If she’d had liquid in her mouth, she might have spewed it across the desk in his face. As it was she had to tamp down a strong urge to laugh, and instead frowned to show her displeasure.

Her look didn’t go a long way to putting him in his place, however.

He simply grinned at her, a smug boy who had just put his second grade teacher on the spot with his risqué comment in front of the class.

“Other than the suit and tie aversion—”

“I’m fairly easy.”

She just bet. “That helps a bit.” Although she didn’t consider the subject closed by any stretch of the imagination.

He’d insulted her and Tabitha did not take well to insults. Rather than dwell on it though, she typed in “easy and casual” on his profile, then peered at him. “Would it be safe to say blue or black are your favorite colors?”

“Today they are. Tomorrow it might be something that’s at my fingertips when I reach into my closet.”

Tabitha shifted in her chair, crossed her legs to stem the sudden flow of wetness in her panties. She’d never found wise-asses a turn-on, but there was something intrinsically sexy and inviting about his grin, something raw and challenging in the depths of those indigo eyes.

She highlighted and underlined “easy and casual,” already envisioning him in a charcoal single breasted suit and vest to highlight those beautiful dark eyes, and a black T-shirt underneath. There, no tie! “Any colors or materials you don’t like?”

He shrugged, but rather than give off uncertainty, the motion emitted his indifference.

Tabitha stopped herself from flinging her mouse over the pad, and stared at him across the desk as he merely arched a thick brow. “This is not the best way to build rapport, Eric. I need cooperation from you to make this work. This relationship has to be a two-way street, give and ta—”

“Okay, okay.” He chuckled, put up his hands as if in surrender. “You’re absolutely right. I have to apologize for dragging you into this.”

That was more than she expected, but less than she deserved, and Tabitha waited for the other shoe to drop. She was sure he had something up his sleeve, especially when she realized what he had said. “Dragging me into what?”

“Vega vendettas and power struggles.”

“I’m not following.”

“I have to be honest, my sister damn near twisted my arm to sell me on the idea of a makeover and personal shopper.”

“You don’t have to feel obliga—”

“*But*, now that I’m here I’m getting used to the idea of having a fashion consultant.”

“Let’s get something straight, I can’t work miracles.”

“I don’t expect you to.”

“And I won’t do anything to your wardrobe you don’t want me to do.”

“I leave myself and my wardrobe at your total discretion, Tabitha.”

She stopped herself from sputtering at his silky warm murmur, the sound of her name on his lips, still waiting for that big size twelve desert boot to drop.

At the thought, he did lower his right foot to the polished parquet floor, rolled his chair closer before leaning his elbows on her desk.

Tabitha purposely held her ground, though she was tempted to roll her chair back an inch or two, his clean musky scent riding the wind to her nostrils and making her light-headed.

It should have been illegal for a man to smell as good as he looked.

“Well, ah, that’s good to hear.”

“And I promise to cooperate and be a good boy for the rest of our meeting.”

She didn’t think he could or would keep that particular promise, not even if he tried, not a “good” bone in that big well-built body.

“Scout’s honor.” He raised his hand and grinned at her silence.

“Were you?”

“Was I what?”

“A Boy Scout.”

“Even better. I was an Eagle.”

She wasn’t that up on what the qualifications for an Eagle Scout were, but she was sure they were pretty extensive and doubted that Eric’s footloose and fancy-free mien had held him in good stead with the fraternity.

“I could show you my merit badges,” he said at her doubtful look.

“I bet you could.” *What did they give merit badges out for?* She was certain he’d excelled in totally different areas of achievement and socialization than had the rest of his troop. And despite his aversion to suits and ties, she could imagine him in the little green shorts uniform, politely helping an old lady across the street and shamelessly flirting with her all the way.

Tabitha bet he had nice legs too, to go with the rest of that hard body she’d been secretly ogling since he’d arrived.

“What about you?”

“Me?” She raised a brow.

“I can see you in a little Brownie’s uniform selling cookies door to door.”

The double entendre didn’t escape her—she knew he’d meant it not to—his smile slow and seductive as he sat back in his seat waiting for her response.

“I was entirely too busy with more important activities to indulge in that particular whimsy.” Too busy surviving, she thought.

Tabitha had never had to sell cookies door to door, but she’d had to barter, borrow and steal for a meal more times than she liked to count.

She especially remembered a period when her mother had neglected to come home for several days after Tabitha’s father had left them. Everyday for a week she had come home to an empty house, and an even emptier refrigerator before going out to the neighbors to play “Whimpy from Popeye” with promises that her mother would gladly pay them Tuesday for a meal today.

No, hawking hundreds of boxes of overpriced cookies for top-selling honors and a cheesy overrated prize had not been high on her list of eight-year-old priorities.

“So, back to least favorite colors and materials?”

“I’m not too fond of orange and pink, unless they’re on a woman. As for materials, I like anything that’s washable.”

She wanted to ask him if that jacket he was wearing was washable since it looked like it had been through the ringer. Distressed leather had been a trend back in the 90’s, which looked to be about when he had bought the jacket. Of course, leather and blazers were pretty timeless...

“Before you ask, yes, it is.”

“I’m sorry? Yes, what is?”

“The jacket’s washable.”

Her jaw dropped but she quickly coughed into a fist to cover her shock. “What are you, a mind reader?” she asked and watched as he fidgeted in his seat, for the first time since he’d come into her office looking uneasy, as if she had hit a nerve.

ADULT EXCERPT
BENEATH THE SURFACE

The Matchmaker, Book 1

By Gracie C. McKeever

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He closed the space between them, reached for her, cupping a breast.

She gasped, not realizing he'd undone the top several buttons of her blouse and unlatched her bra until she glanced down and saw his hand against her naked copper tone flesh. "You're fast," she blurted.

"You have no idea." He pressed her against the wall, lightly pinching and rolling an already hardened nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

Tabitha moaned and Eric covered her mouth in a scorching kiss that sent her stomach spiraling in a pool of molten liquid draining straight out of her vagina.

"Is everything all right in there, sir?"

Eric dragged his mouth away from hers long enough to say, "Everything's fine!" He stared down at her, licking his lips like a hungry predator. "More than fine," he murmured, making slow sensual circles with a forefinger around her right nipple.

Tabitha moved away and slapped at his hand. "You're absolutely incorrigible."

"Guilty as charged."

She stopped herself from smiling. She didn't want to encourage him, not that he needed much encouragement to be the total scoundrel that he was.

God, when he looked at her like that—indigo eyes smoky and heavy-lidded, plainly proclaiming exactly what he wanted to do to her—Tabitha wanted to give in, give him anything he wanted, do anything to please him.

She had to get away from him before she fell any deeper under his spell.

Tabitha moved to the opposite side of the cramped room—not nearly far enough—warily watching him, didn't realize she was panting until she saw her breasts heaving from the corner of her eyes. She reached up to latch her bra and button her blouse with shaky hands under Eric's glittering watchful gaze, couldn't drag her eyes away from his. "You messed up my clothes."

"I was actually trying to get them off."

"You don't stop, and you'll mess up those clothes." She pointed her chin at his outfit.

"If I'm going to buy them anyway, will it make a difference?"

“Yes, it will. They’ll know what we were doing in here.”

He took a couple of steps towards her and before she knew it, he had her pinned against the wall again. “They already do,” Eric whispered.

“Eric...” Her next words died on a groan as he lifted her skirt and palmed her sex.

He caressed her through the crotch of her pantyhose for several long torturous moments before he slid his hands up to the waistband and pulled down her panties and hose in one rough swift motion.

“Eric, please do—”

He got to his knees, buried his head beneath her skirt and in an instant, Tabitha felt his mouth on her.

Unconsciously, she gyrated her hips, grinding her pelvis against his mouth, felt him open and explore her with his fingers before his tongue penetrated her.

Tabitha gasped and would have tipped over had he not held her steady, gripping and spreading her ass cheeks as he pushed his tongue into her pussy as deep as it would go, burrowing and circling like some piece of earth moving equipment—how freaking appropriate!

She felt his fingers again, thumb and forefinger rhythmically stimulating her clit, zinging hot flashes of sensation straight to kitty town.

God...she was...going to...explode!

Tabitha bit her bottom lip hard to keep from crying out, tasted blood in her mouth as an orgasm crashed down on her sudden as an epileptic seizure. She stiffened, then convulsed as Eric got to his feet and held her close.

She lay her head against his chest—just resting, just catching her breath, she told herself—listened to his speeding heartbeat echoing the pattern of hers, slowly opened her eyes and stepped out of his arms to see him smiling down at her.

“C’mere, I’ll kiss the hurt and make it better,” he said and leaned close, smelling of her juices, tasting of her essence, caressing her lips with his, sliding his tongue into her mouth.

REVIEWS for Beneath the Surface

"Ms McKeever has created a tight family group around psychic telepath Angela, whose words of wisdom and guidance help all around her. There's a strong sense of realism and locale in this book that really drew me in, and the attraction between EJ and Tabitha just grabs you. Even their banter is sexy, so you know that when they finally go to bed it's not just sex, it's something else, something amazing. The supporting cast is just as great, from bitchy Jade to lovable Frankie, the fast-talking sisters and the rest of Eric's family. With plenty of romantic twists and entanglements, this will keep you reading to the very last page. You're sure to love it—and there's more to come in this fantastic series. Keep a look out for the next book! **5 Magic Wands.**" —Autiotalo, *Enchanted Ramblings*

"*Beneath the Surface* is Book 1 in The Matchmaker series. The story is a phenomenal start to the matchmaking talents of Angela Calminetti, EJ's sister. Angela wants all her siblings and family happy and in love. She uses her telepathic abilities to make sure that this happens.

EJ and Tabitha, they have to struggle to make it to happiness, the two are stubborn and try to best each other. But they are miserable without one another. EJ knows Tabitha is the one because she reminds him of his first love Sinclair. Sinclair committed suicide when EJ was much younger and he has never really trusted his heart to another woman. Tabitha is different, for the first time in years EJ wants to tell her the truth about his telepathic abilities. Tabitha has had a rough life and is not very trusting of anyone but Eric James seems like he is worthy of her trust. Gracie C. McKeever shows that the bond between EJ and Tabitha will be long-lived and everlasting. And that the two are each others pretty match. *Beneath the Surface* is an outstanding book that is captivating. I definitely recommend this for readers. **4.5 Stars**" —Chantay, *Euro Reviews*

"*Beneath the Surface* is the first book in The Matchmaker series and a wonderful beginning. Tabitha is a great heroine with plenty of backbone to stand up to whom and whatever. This makes reading about her a pure joy. EJ is not your typical author and it doesn't take much to transform him into incredibly sexy and totally hot. This couple has a fiery relationship both in and out of the bedroom and readers won't be able to get through the pages fast enough. The love scenes are full of desire and fraught with sensuality. Gracie McKeever has penned a book that will have readers desperately seeking the next volumes in the series. **4.5 Blue Ribbons**" —Angel, *Romance Junkies*

"Gracie C. McKeever has compiled one wonderfully enjoyable read full of rich, full characters. This story will make you laugh, shed a few tears and make you wish the next tale was available. The witty banter and complex characters make *Beneath The Surface* an engrossing read. Gracie C. McKeever has a new fan in this reviewer and I eagerly await her next tale. **4.5 Roses**" —Noemi, *A Romance Review*

"Ms. McKeever captures intense love scenes loaded with earthshaking passion and desire. Eric and Tabitha burn up the pages of this book every time they give into the uncontrollable longing inside of them. At times, I felt like a voyeur watching the steamy embraces. Their passion is only the backdrop for an intense connection that bonds these two souls into one. The feelings and link they share [are] very special and unique. It is what we are all searching for out of life.

I will read *Beneath the Surface: The Matchmaker* many more times through the years to remember the beautiful love story of Eric and Tabitha. I look forward to the next installment of the series. **4 Hot Tattoos**" —Ophelia, *Erotic-Escapades*

"Ms. McKeever has succeeded in taking an often-used story line and breathed new life into it. Both Tabitha and Eric are full of such life and anguish that you laugh and suffer right along with them. This author has the talent to draw you into her story and you can really feel the sexual chemistry between the hero and the heroine. The author also sets things up so there will be more books in the series, something I will look forward to. I highly recommend this book. **4 Flowers/Excellent**" —Char, *May Reviews*

"EJ and Tabitha are a wonderful couple, and throughout the book, I enjoyed the interaction between them, especially how their past makes them closer. Stubborn isn't strong enough to describe these two, but their resistance to taking a chance at love never gets to the irritating stage. Their chemistry is excellent and the desire they feel never fades as the super hot sex gets better with each encounter. Definitely have a significant other available when this book is done. The interaction with the sisters was good and brought a break from the intensity of EJ and Tabitha's developing relationship...The paranormal link is very well-done, and was not only a selling part of the book but completely plausible. *Beneath the Surface* is a entertaining book and I look forward to reading the rest of the Vega siblings' stories when they come out. **4 Stars/Orgasmic**" —Anya Khan, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*

"I really enjoyed this story. Gracie has a very nice voice and a terrific sense of pacing and story momentum. I loved the prickliness and baggage of both the main characters and the way they struggled against each other and against their own baggage. Eric's sense of responsibility and purpose made him instantly likeable. Tabitha's complex character and the way she strives for logic and reason in emotions and things inherently irrational made her a heroine to eagerly follow and root for.

One of the most interesting things about this book was that, unlike many paranormals, it was more contemporary than paranormal. The characters live in the real world and their issues and growth is easy to comprehend and sympathize with. The paranormal aspect of this story was masterful. It didn't beat me over the head and it didn't hide in the background until the very last moment.

This is the first book I've read by Gracie McKeever but it won't be the last. **4 Hearts**" —Maura, *The Romance Studio*

"*Beneath the Surface - The Matchmaker* has a wonderful flow and was a joy to read from start to finish. The loves that the Vega family had for each other could easily be felt throughout the story. I absolutely enjoyed following E.J. and Tabitha as they navigated the rocky road of their relationship. They are both strong and independent and it was fun watching them struggle as they tried to build a relationship without giving up control. This book is full of suspense, surprises, laughs and really heated sex scenes. I got such a feeling of comfort and joy when the story ended. **4 Angels**" —Lisa, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

"What do you get when you take a man and a woman with very different personalities, add an impossible to resist sexual attraction, and some meddling family members? You get Gracie C. McKeever's *Beneath the Surface*, one heck of an enjoyable read. Not only does it turn up the heat, it will make you laugh and cry and look forward to the next tale in Ms. McKeever's The Matchmaker series.

EJ is the type of man that it would be easy to underestimate. Only as you get to know him, do you see beneath his laid back exterior. When EJ decides to woo a lady, he does it relentlessly and with style. Tabitha's cold, business-like exterior protects a heart and soul that have been sorely battered. When she confronts her past, it will bring tears to your eyes. With interesting secondary characters to move the plot along and add some spice of their own, *Beneath the Surface* flies by at a quick pace.

Witty banter and complex characters make *Beneath the Surface* a delightful, engrossing read. Gracie C. McKeever has certainly caught my interest and I will be eagerly awaiting her next tale. Don't miss out on this wonderful new series." —**Vicki Turner, *Romance Reviews Today***

Other books by Gracie C. McKeever at
www.sirenpublishing.com/graciecmckeever.com

Sisters of Emsharra Collection

by Gracie C. McKeever



Even though both are Inanna, Genesis Enki and LaMia Enlil have varying views on how best to serve Emsharra.

When Kalika Enlil entrusts Genesis with the safekeeping of her outlawed child Alex Ryan before her death, Genesis' way is set to take up the New Regime's torch. Only one woman, the leader of the insurgents and Kalika's nemesis and cousin, stands in Genesis's way to protecting Alex from assassination: LaMia.

LaMia does not believe in the New Regime or its doctrines and is willing to do what she must to see it and the alliance between Emsharra and Gaiam fail. She will even go as far as kidnapping and enslaving Mateo Diaz who has already suffered at her hands in the past more times than a human should endure. It's Mateo's misfortune, however, that Genesis and Alex wish to recruit him in Emsharra's Harvesting Program.....and Genesis and Alex are LaMia's mortal enemies.

STORY EXCERPT

GUARDIAN SEDUCTRESS

Sisters of Emsharra, Book 1

By Gracie C. McKeever

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Alex stirred beneath the covers, yawned and stretched his arms over his head. He froze when he opened his eyes and saw her standing over his bed.

"You are awake."

"You have a funny habit of stating the obvious." He pushed himself up to sit against the pillows and headboard of his bed, stared at her. "Where is she?"

"Kate is gone."

Alex's eyes widened. "You killed her?"

"Of course not. I released her."

"Where?"

Genesis gritted her teeth, the green-eyed monster holding her tongue. Why was he so concerned about where and how Kate Summer was? The woman had tried to kill him! True, she had been bedazzled and under the influence of Inanna or Sebitu enchantment at the time, but that was beside the point.

Finally, Genesis sighed then said, "She is home, asleep in her bed. When she awakes, she will have no memory of what happened."

"Lucky her. I wish I didn't remember what happened. Starting with my father's death."

Alex closed his eyes, the sooty lashes so long and thick they brushed his high cheekbones in a sensual stroke that made her heart somersault in her chest at how vulnerable he looked. Vulnerable, totally sexy, and very fuckable.

Genesis' pussy muscles clenched as if applauding in agreement. She saw his rich bronze complexion redden as if he had heard her thoughts and was blushing in response.

Had she slipped? Was she broadcasting? Lilith! Genesis felt heat rising to her face, signaling her own unusual blush. Where was this modesty coming from? She had had thousands of men in her lifetime, had killed at least that many. Shame and embarrassment did not customarily figure into her mentality.

True, she was worldly-wise and experienced, but never had she been around a man who could read her thoughts as well as she could read his. Never had she been so exposed, so naked when not in the act of feeding and sex.

Vulnerable.

Was this why being around Alex made her bashful as a turkey at Thanksgiving? His ability to so effortlessly strip her when she least wanted to be stripped? His ability to make her feel...powerless?

As if to anchor herself, regain some control, she reached out a hand to grab one of his and squeezed. "You will be fine."

"That remains to be seen." Alex opened his eyes to glance at her. "How long was I unconscious?"

"Several hours."

"Several hours!"

"You lost a lot of blood. More than you realized."

"She hit a vein then?"

Genesis fidgeted, did not like where the conversation was going; was not ready to answer his questions. He might get curious about how he had healed so quickly, about... "I believe so."

Alex held up his arm, inspecting the bandage, stark white against his darker skin.

Since she had rescued him from Kate Summer, she was able to read him much more clearly than before, as if saving him had bonded them in some way. Consequently, she felt his surprise at the lack of blood and pain, though his face remained neutral.

Genesis realized that this situation went both ways. If she could read him, then that meant he *could* probably read her too, hence that earlier blush.

"Want to tell me who and what you are?"

Genesis started as if coming out of a trance. "What I am?"

"I already know you're not quite human. But I'm wondering if there's an alien abduction or anal probe in my future."

She smiled at his ironic tone, except that probing his anus sounded like a delicious idea about now, more attractive than the inquest she knew he intended to conduct. She definitely would not mind more closely inspecting his butt, ready to admire it more up close and personal, feel the steely power of his ass cheeks in the palm of her hands when he pumped into her.

Genesis glanced at him, and noticed him blushing again.

"I don't know whether to be flattered or frightened."

"Perhaps a little bit of both," she blurted, sure now that he was reading her, and decided she had to be more careful with her shields around him.

"So, uh...what do I call you?"

"My name is Genesis. I am Inanna."

Alex frowned. "What is an Inanna exactly?"

How could she tell him hers was a race of predators and his species was the prey? Genesis quickly blanked her mind to stop him receiving any of that. She could have taken the

easy way out, she supposed, and let him see for himself, see the pictures of her past inveiglements and victims. But she would not be a coward, at least no more than she had been already in deserting Kalika when she had. She had come this far, had promised to tell him that his mother loved him.

And Genesis always kept her promises.

"You will not believe me."

"Lady, you disappeared before my eyes and turned into a hawk at my father's funeral. Then hours later you subdued my psycho ex in a blue ball of light. I think I'm more than open to any explanation you have to throw at me."

Genesis went to the foot of his bed and paced before it, pausing to stare at him and say, "It is difficult to explain."

Lilith, she would rather be doing anything in the world right now than this. Like stripping him of his briefs and slowly ravaging his body. She would start at his head, sliding her tongue into his unresisting mouth, tangling it with his, tasting his spicy flavor. Then she would move down his chin, plant her lips against the pulsing vein in his neck...

"You're doing it again, Genesis."

She jerked her eyes to his, saw the small grin, his slow murmur touching her core and teasing her clit with its sensuality. "I am sorry." She hurried to the overstuffed chair adjacent the bed, sat down and crossed her legs as if to strangle her misbehaving pussy into submission, stop it from throbbing with heat, so wet she thought she would float away on the tide of her cream. Genesis did not think she had ever wanted a man so much.

"I knew your mother," she blurted as if bringing up Kalika could stop her rampant desire. Not likely, but it had been worth a try for her to steer the conversation in another direction.

"In what capacity?" Alex asked now. "You can't be more than twenty-five."

"I am...a bit more than that."

He tried to scan her, she felt him probing around the edges of her mind, pushing for entry, and backing off in frustration when he could not glean her thoughts.

Impatient, was he not?

"How much is a bit?"

"I am the equivalent of two-hundred human years."

Alex arched a brow. "Two-hundred?"

Genesis nodded, scratching the surface of his mind where his thoughts were clambering to make sense of her statement, how he instantly discounted her claim as preposterous. She heard all this, felt his frustration at his perception of being lied to. He was a man who dealt with logic after all, facts. Abstraction was not something he could deal with, not something he wanted to deal with despite his own illogical "gifts."

"Inanna have been around for centuries. We...subsist on the uh...energy of others."

"Energy that you obtain how?"

Lilith, he was going to make her say it out loud? "We extract it from humans during sex."

"Okay." Alex nodded, got out of bed, and took her by an arm to lead her to the bedroom door. "I think it's time for you to go back to the mental ward where you came from, lady."

ADULT EXCERPT

GUARDIAN SEDUCTRESS

Sisters of Emsharra, Book 1

By Gracie C. McKeever

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Genesis lost patience with manually removing her clothes, instead used enchantment to make her pants and boots disappear. She went to him on the sofa in just a pair of burgundy lace thongs.

Alex sat on the edge of the sofa as she approached. She paused, standing astride one of his legs before she bent and planted a knee against his erection. He moaned, pulled her closer and ran a palm from her crotch up to her plump breasts, pinching each hardened nipple in turn before he lowered his face to her center and took a deep breath. "You smell like sex," he whispered before burying his face in her satin-covered folds.

She pushed him back, the thong mysteriously disappearing as had her clothes before it. "Eat me, Alex. I want to feel your tongue in my cunt." She thrust her hips at his face.

He groaned and drew his arms around her, cupped her ass cheeks and pulled her flush against his mouth to do her bidding.

The first touch of his tongue sent heat spiraling down from her chest to gather in her pussy in a pool of liquid fire. Feminine juices trickled down her thighs as he sucked her engorged clit into his mouth. Genesis arched her neck and buried her fingers in his close-cropped waves, reveling in the silken caress of curls against her palms as she fisted his hair.

He spread her with his thumbs, nibbled and sucked her labia, then closed his mouth over her, and buried his tongue deep before pulling out to stroke her soaked folds like a painter. Tremors violently rocked her body and when he replaced his tongue with two thrusting fingers and went back to sucking her clit in the rhythm of his plunges, Genesis flung back her head and softly keened. Alex reached up a hand too late to cover her mouth.

The taste of herself on his hand drove her wild, and before either of them knew it, she had him on his back straddling his hips, the blue light of her spirit ignited and encircling them both in a wavering glow. Genesis caught his hard shaft in one hand and guided it to her pussy, rubbing the mushroom head of his cock up and down her slit until it was thoroughly coated in her cream.

"I need you inside me, Alex. Now."

He circled her waist with both hands, and pitched his hips up as Genesis impaled herself on his shaft.

They moaned, began moving together. Genesis rode his dick, and Alex thrust inside her and rolled his hips for several long silent moments.

"Shit," he hissed. "I don't want to come yet."

It was the only provocation Genesis needed to squeeze her vaginal muscles tight, and milk his cock.

"I want you to," she whispered and leaned down to cradle her mouth against his throat. "Come for me, Alex. Come now."

She sank her fangs into his neck, felt his blood spurt into her mouth at the same instant that he shuddered and spurted his semen deep inside her cunt. Her spirit light shimmered around them before Alex's, bright and deep red, rose from his body to fuse with hers and form one purple light that surrounded them.

"Oh, God...Oh...God!"

"Yes. That is it, Alex. Give me all. Give yourself to me. Yessss..." Genesis mindlessly arched her back, fingernails digging deep into Alex's shoulder blades as she planted the heels of her hands into his collarbone for balance when his *kundalini* blasted into her body. She rode the wave of her climax for several long minutes, Alex panting and thrashing beneath her before she realized what she was doing.

Lilith, no!

Genesis immediately stopped moving, felt Alex convulsing between her legs, his fingernails driving deep into her hipbones where he held her fast.

It is not too late, cannot be too late. He is alive. He is not a dry empty husk...

She glanced down at him as his shudders subsided, shocked when she saw his face changing from feline to human to feline and finally back to human again. She looked further to see fine, shiny black fur receding back into his upper body, the hair on his head withdrawing back to its original close cropped length.

Genesis put her hands on his shoulders and shook him when her shock subsided. "Alex!"

He opened his eyes, a beatific expression shining out of their amber depths as he stared at her and rasped, "More, Gen. I want more of you. I need more."

REVIEWS for Guardian Seductress

"What would a world look like in which human were the prey and two races fought over how to properly conserve or use this prey? Step inside Gracie C. McKeever's fabulous *Guardian Seductress: Sisters of Emsharra, Book 1* to get a taste....

Kalika Enlil paid the ultimate price when she loved a human and then gave birth to a cambion, a half-human, half-Inanna male child. She charged her friend, Genesis Enki, with keeping him safe in the human world. Now, 28 years later, Genesis is forced to fight her own people as Kalika's cousin, LaMia, killed cambion Alex Ryan's father and is now aiming for Alex.

Alex is unaware of his true origins and doesn't initially believe the story of Genesis. After all, she doesn't look old enough to have been present at his birth and who in their right mind would believe a story about another world where succubi-like creatures drain humans for their life force? Genesis will have to keep Alex safe from both the Inanna and the Sebitu while he develops his own powers.

Guardian Seductress is the first book in a series about the sexy Sisters of Emsharra and it is a winner! Gracie C. McKeever has done an exceptional job of world building as the reader is immediately drawn into Genesis and Alex's plight. Their romance is both sweet and spicy and readers will cheer Genesis for being willing to break the social taboos of her culture that amount to nothing more than a form of racism against humans. The sex scenes are tasteful but steamy and sure to heat up anyone's warm night!

Gracie C. McKeever does a wonderful job of explaining the intricate details of the world of the Inanna and Sebitu. Explanations for concepts such as kundalini, the life force necessary for survival, are all provided in the context of the story as well as in a very useful glossary at the end. The idea of the conservation of humans was an interesting twist and one this reviewer had never seen before. Kalika had high hopes for Alex as she envisioned him as solving both the problem of a shrinking food supply as well as ending the war on the borders between the Inanna and the Sebitu.

Readers of urban fantasy and erotica would do well to take a peek at *Guardian Seductress: Sisters of Emsharra, Book 1*. The story is both highly enjoyable as well as thought provoking. Gracie C. McKeever is obviously a gifted writer and it is well worth adventuring into her fantasy realm to explore the world of the Sisters of Emsharra. **4.5 Klovers** —Anne, CK2SKwipsandKritiques.com

"Death is a concept that Alex Ryan understands. His mother was the first to go. Then his father died in a tragic accident. Now, a strange woman by the name of Genesis comes to him swearing that his father's death was not an accident after all. To top that off, she claims that she is not human and that her people are the ones killing off his family. According to Genesis, Alex is the next to die.

Genesis does not take her duty of guarding Alex lightly. Now that her people have found out the whereabouts of her charge, they are intent on destroying him. Alex is the only cambion (half human/half Inanna) in existence. According to her laws, he must die. Genesis refuses to let that happen.

I was surprised at how much I enjoyed *Sisters of Emsharra 1: Guardian Seductress*. It was loaded with action, titillating sexual encounters, and most of all, a good romantic plot line. No matter what was happening around Alex and Genesis, they never stopped eyeing each other as if they were a double scoop of Moose Tracks ice cream...I really liked the characters and the story. Both Alex and Genesis seemed so lonely that I could not help but hope they would find something in the other that could cure their solitary existence. In one way or another, they were always on the outside looking in. That was what made them perfect for each other. I was hooked on these characters and the world they lived in. This was my first time reading Gracie C. McKeever and I'm betting it will not be the last time. I

found *Sisters of Emsharra 1: Guardian Seductress* thoroughly enjoyable. **4.5 Stars**" —**Suni Farrar, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews***

"*Guardian Seductress* is a chill-tingling fantastic read. Genesis has strong characteristics throughout as she keeps Alex in her care at all costs, and Alex is interesting as he tries to come to terms with the crisis landed in his lap. Ms. McKeever pens a fabulous tale. When Alex was confronted with the woman with hazel eyes, I think I was just as frightened as he was. I kept looking for claw like fingers to jump from the pages. Ms. McKeever fashions a gripping story that this reader enjoyed very much and look for the others in the series. **4 Cups**" —**Cherokee, *Coffee Time Romance***

"*Guardian Seductress* is a shape-shifting, paranormal, fantasy thrill ride that will keep readers on the edge of their seats. Genesis is different in so many ways and all the things she can do will shock and amaze you. She is attracted to Alex and tries to fight it, but as usual that never lasts long. Alex can't believe what Genesis tells him and thinks she's nuts, until he experiences first hand just what she can do. He has no clue about his past or what happened with his mother and Genesis is there to make sure he finds out. I have read several books by Gracie McKeever and each one has its own appeal. Her writing is creative and readers will love her flair for intrigue. **4 Blue Ribbons**" —**Angel, *Romance Junkies***

Other books by Gracie C. McKeever at
www.sirenpublishing.com/graciecmckeever.com

Single Titles



Spells Cast in Shadows

Driven by recurrent dreams to take an ill-advised predawn ride around her ranch, Montana Freeborn stumbles across something in the road from those wildest dreams: a real live centaur. At least she thinks so. By the time she reaches the supine figure trampled beneath the hooves of her prize Appaloosa, she begins to wonder if her eyes deceived her, since before them now is a man, a magnificent, unconscious and very naked man.

Cast out from his tribe as a punishment for causing the death of a fellow Sapphiran, Seth Phoenix is an arrogant young centaur of royal heritage infatuated with the human race, and now, after a twist of fate, forced to count on one of its ranks for his survival.

His one chance at redemption—brokered with the Black Elf by his desperate mother, Thyra Phoenix—could be the key to his mother's freedom, or his own downfall...

Sensuality Rating: Sizzling

Genre: African-American/Paranormal/Psychic/Shape-shifter/Urban Fantasy

STORY EXCERPT

SPELLS CAST IN SHADOWS

By Gracie C. McKeever

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Nearing the edge of the grove where the forest began and the ranch ended, Montana raised her face to the dimly lit sky, reveling in spring's airy fingers gently lifting her hair and lightly brushing her face. She hadn't closed her eyes or taken them from the road for more than a second before the shadow appeared out of the darkness without warning.

Sunny instantly reared up, blowing rollers as he tried to avoid colliding with—*Pony-man*.

"Whoa, Sunny, whoa, boy!" Montana gripped the horse's reins, squeezing her thighs tight against his flanks as she tried to calm the animal. Good thing she wasn't having one of her clumsier moments, or she'd have taken a header off the horse right to the hard ground!

She looked on in horror, heart pounding in her ears as Sunspot's front hooves came down, knocking the creature over and pounding his torso into the ground.

She watched him roll from his side to his back. As he moved, his lower half transformed, changing into two human legs before her eyes.

She couldn't believe it. Had she really seen a half-horse, half-man?

Sunspot grew quiet beneath her, prancing and walking a wide berth around the figure on the ground. Montana leaned forward and rubbed his glistening neck, gently murmuring to the horse. "It's all right boy. Everything's going to be just fine." When she was sure he was okay and hadn't hurt himself, she carefully dismounted and crept to the stranger's side.

What struck her first wasn't that he was indeed a man and not the centaur she had initially seen—and she *knew* that she had—but that he was naked, just completely and totally *na-ked*.

Montana pulled in a deep breath as she crouched beside him to check for injuries. Her fingers glided over the hard, smooth curves of his chest and abdomen, all the while trying to avoid that sizable area of his anatomy several inches lower and resting peacefully against one thigh.

God, he was magnificent!

Not that she'd been exposed to that many naked men before, except maybe when she indulged in her guilty pleasure, watching hunk-inhabited soaps every once in awhile. Or when she'd splurge on one of those novelty beefcake calendars embellished with pictures for every month of shirtless cowboys clad in snug jeans that hugged all the right curves.

As far as beefcake and shirtless went, her unconscious stranger was beautifully formed from head to toe. Long, lean-muscled flanks curved up into a slim waist accented by a sectioned

abdomen and well-defined pectorals. He had a swimmer's body, elegant, poised, and powerful, even in repose.

Her clit swelled beneath her jeans, and Montana simultaneously squeezed her eyes and her legs shut as if this could stop her tsunami-force lust.

She bit her bottom lip, contemplating. Heart speeding, palms moist, she itched to touch him, feeling like she was about to do something intrinsically illicit as her hand drifted of its own accord, closer and closer until her fingertips caressed one male nipple.

She brushed her hand across his chest, acquainting herself with his smooth pecs, then drifted further down to his abdomen....lower, lower until she made contact with the hair around his cock. She froze.

Montana's eyes shot open when she realized what she was doing.

Shit, she was horny! How else could she explain this instant hot attraction? Why did she have a sudden uncontrollable urge to molest an unconscious man as he lay injured?

Montana stopped gaping long enough to scold herself for her unconscionable act as she berated her foolishness in not heeding Jason's warnings about riding around the ranch in the dim light. She could just hear the I-told-you-so's now, which gave her some pause.

She needed to get her injured stranger some help, but how to do that without going back to the ranch and submitting to an interrogation or righteous censure?

She certainly couldn't lift him herself. True, she was made of sturdy stock at five-nine, one-fifty, and was in pretty good physical condition having worked hard all her life on the ranch and at various positions with the Forestry Service, but this man had to be six-four and two-hundred pounds of solid muscle. Dead-weight muscle at that. Not to mention he was naked.

Montana realized she had more qualms about the latter than the idea of actually trying to lift and carry an unconscious and injured man to the house by her lonesome.

She pivoted and marched back to Sunspot to retrieve the heavy blanket from beneath her saddle, returned, and crouched beside the stranger before gently covering him with the coarse material.

The stranger.

Her stranger, she thought, feeling connected to him and oddly possessive, as if he belonged to her and she to him.

Montana pulled the cell phone from her belt, flipped it open without much hope of getting a signal. She had to walk several yards away toward the ranch until she was out of a dead zone and able to get an open line. She dialed 911, glancing over her shoulder to make sure Sunspot and her stranger were okay. He'd disappeared.

ADULT EXCERPT

SPELLS CAST IN SHADOWS

By Gracie C. McKeever

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He pulled back to peer at her for a long moment before he bent his head to tease her slightly parted lips. Montana opened her mouth to him on a long moan and flung her arms around him, almost throwing him off-balance.

Seth planted one palm against the wall adjacent them and lowered her to the carpeted steps with his free arm. He pushed her legs apart with his knee as she wantonly sprawled across the several bottom steps, then he cupped her moist pussy with a palm. "Shall I please you before you take your leave?"

"Yes, Seth. Please..." She grasped his soft 'locks with both hands and held on as he lifted her T-shirt up past her breasts. She writhed beneath him anticipating the feel of his lips on her a second before he wrapped his hot mouth around one nipple. "More, Seth. I want more of you..."

His hair was like cotton balls in her hands, and she reveled in the soft feel against her palms, reveled in the musky clean scent that wafted up to her from his skin and hair as she inhaled deep and held him tight.

Seth slid a hand into her panties, slowly eased two fingers into her wet pussy, and Montana immediately clamped down on the two digits with her inner muscles, desperate for more.

He laved, nipped, and sucked both nipples until they stood at attention, then found her engorged clit with his thumb and flicked it. He scissored his fingers inside her, working them in concert with his thumb and making Montana shudder.

She gripped his hair so tight her knuckles hurt, and still he tortured her. "If you want me to beg, Seth..." She gasped as he hit a particularly sensitive area deep inside her. "I will. Please..."

"I only want you to feel." Seth slowly licked his way down from her breasts, to her stomach until his mouth was poised over her hot center.

Montana felt his heated breath against her even through the satin of her panties. She pumped her hips in rhythm to his manipulations right before he ripped her panties off and buried his face between her legs.

"Oh, God..." She didn't know whether it was the sound of her panties shredding beneath his hands or the insistent way he caressed her pussy with his tongue, but she almost came on the spot at his gentle brutality.

He covered her pussy with his mouth, teasing her sensitive nub with his tongue before pushing it deep inside her and stroking her wet folds.

REVIEWS for Spells Cast in Shadows

"Montana Freeborn cannot wait to take one of her ritualistic pre-dawn rides. She has had one of those sensual dreams again about the pony man, the centaur that saved her life when she was a child and she wants to clear her mind. When she takes her prized horse Sunspot out on the road, something out of the dark catches her attention. Without warning her horse collides with some kind of creature. When Montana takes a closer look she is shocked to see it is the centaur from her dreams but the horse part of him is quickly disappearing, giving way to human legs. Trying to find a signal to call for help on her cellular, Montana wonders away from the man but when she turns back around he is missing from the area where he was only moments ago.

Seth Phoenix has made the mistake of his life when he takes his best friend Nyssa too far away from the protective barrier between the human world and theirs. Seth has been fascinated by humans for his entire life. But his fascination has led his best friend to her death and he must be punished for his actions. In most cases, Seth would be sentenced to death but his mother, Thyra has made a deal with the Black Elf in hopes of sparing her son's life. Now Seth has been banished from his homeland and made to live out the rest of his life as a male human. Seth is horrified but he knows he has brought this on himself.

When Montana and Seth meet face to face, they cannot fight the attraction that they feel for one another. But there are forces supernatural and human that do not want to see these two together and they will go to great lengths to make sure that happens.

Spells Cast in Shadows is quite a befitting title. It really sets the mold for the theme of the story. Because of the magic that has occurred in the darkness of shadows, Montana and Seth are thrown obstacle after obstacle but their attraction to each other is strong. And they both are determined not to be without each other. Within this book, readers will see that the forces of evil will do anything to try and prevail over that which is good. But some times it takes a higher force to maintain the goodness. This is the second book that I've read by Gracie McKeever. She does wonderfully when describing scenes in her stories and those scenes make for incredible visuals. Gracie McKeever is a talented author and you will want to read her work! This book is a definite must read. So, what are you waiting for? Go and buy the book! **5 Stars** —Chantay, *Euro Reviews*

"Seth Phoenix, a young centaur, fascinated with humans, is to be punished for causing the death of one of his own kind. His mother appeals to the Black Elf to choose banishment rather than death for her son, but bargains at a high personal price. Seth must declare his love to a human female before two moons have passed or his mother will leave her beloved husband and give herself to the Black Elf. Seth is forced into human form and human life without knowing the terms of his mother's bargain. Montana Freeborn has memories of being saved from drowning by a "pony-man" as a child. She's dreamed of him many times, and as she's grown older the dreams have taken a clearly erotic twist. With Seth in human form, will her dreams become reality?

Spells Cast in Shadow is a well-written book with captivating characters. This book includes the use of dark magic to manipulate lives, murder, intrigue and an amazing love story within a love story. The hero and heroine face many obstacles in discovering their love for one another. There are several plot lines developed within the story, some of which could have been expanded to add even more depth to this book. I hope Ms. McKeever will pick up the threads to tell the stories of Montana's friend, Jason's and that of Seth's brother Endre to make this a series. The possibilities make my imagination soar! Seth and Montana struggle mightily to resist the lure of each other. Their resistance raises the heat level at every encounter until they surrender to the needs of their bodies, even if not acknowledging the desires of their hearts. Seeking to please themselves and each other physically, they please this reader with the passion they ignite. This book is one I'll read again and again. **4 Stars/Hot" —Ginger, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews***

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