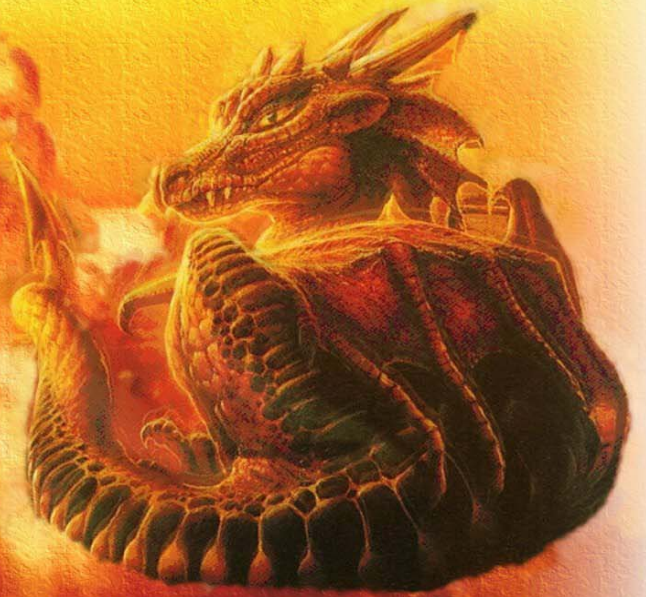


# Kelly Armenta

*Inside every  
Dragon is a  
Little Demon*



**EBOOK FORMAT**

# DRAGON LUST

\$7.99 (US)



## Chapter 1

I'm soaring, golden wings stretched out to capture the currents as I ride the black velvety night air. Stars twinkle across the sky as the full moon edges over the tops of the tall pines laid out below me and reflected off the ocean water lapping the shore below me. The moon is dark red, caused by the pollution still being pumped into the atmosphere despite the Elves' best efforts. Humans will never learn.

The feeling of freedom is incredible, and I twist my body into a spiral looping several times, the tips of my wings just missing the tree tops. Below me I feel life everywhere. A family of squirrels stirs in their nest, as I pass. To my left a herd of deer freeze, nostrils flared to catch my scent, their hearts accelerating as I, the hunter pass over their heads. But tonight I need to fly, to throw myself across the sky and taste the scents on the damp night air.

And then, I am not alone. Looking up I see a dark shadow plummeting down from above. Fear clenches at my heart and I veer sharply left. The shadow is closer now, dropping from the sky like a stone heading straight to me. Black wings, black body cloaked in night, its size eclipsing me. An anguished cry escapes my throat as I plummet to the ground.

Silver arms reach out to catch me, cradling me against a muscular chest. Multifaceted eyes gaze down at me from a sculpted face. I'm no longer in Dragon form, my golden body and wings having shifted. Above us the black beast bugles an angry scream which splits the night and chases gooseflesh across my naked skin. I feel its anger pressing down on me, pressing in on me, invading my mind. I close my eyes and bury my face against my protector's chest, breathing deeply of his sharp musky scent, letting him fill my nostrils and sooth my burning throat and lungs.

I open my eyes and I'm in a cavern. I can feel the weight of the Earth pressing down on me from above, comforting. The clean smell of rich dirt fills my senses. I am surrounded by Dragon, cradled gently against the soft belly of a huge silver beast. I can feel its warmth pressing into my back. Turning my head I gaze into his huge silver eye and thoughts of love and caring overwhelm me. A golden tear slides down my cheek and is flicked away by the Beast's tongue. In my mind I hear him speak my name, telling me I must go. Turning I wrap my arms about his body, clinging to his strength. No please don't send me away my mind screams yet I'm torn away like a leaf in the wind. Golden crystal tears cover my pillow as I wake sobbing in my bed.

"Did I disturb you?" I asked once I could speak, my red rimmed eyes blinking in the first rays of morning light seeping in under the blinds of my first story apartment window.

Sherry eyes, ringed in long silky grey lashes blink back at me from amidst the fluffy down comforter on the other side of my queen sized bed. A soft rumbling purr the only sound in the stillness. "I moved when you began flapping your arms, I can do without another puffy eye, thank you."

“I’m sorry; perhaps you should sleep in the other bedroom. That way, at least one of us would get some rest.”

A delicate snort was all the reply I received, but then Merecats seldom listen to reason. Or was it just Mi that is difficult? I honestly couldn’t say, having never met another Merecat.

Rising out of her warm nest of covers, Mi stretched her sleek mottled grey and tan body, sat down, wrapped her tail about her front paws, and stared back at me while I finger combed my long golden red hair.

Golden red....again! Damn these dreams kept stealing my shimmer! A low growl rumbled up from my chest....holding my arms out in front of me I stared unhappily at the sun kissed golden toned skin. And I bet if I checked in the mirror my ears would be pointed too!

The process of shimmering isn’t easy; it requires major concentration for me. Keeping shimmer requires little or no effort, unless I’m distressed or excited. But acquiring or dropping shimmer is dang difficult. Yet walking around all golden hued hadn’t been allowed since I was two when my Mother finally taught me how to shimmer for safety’s sake.

Taking a deep breath I closed my eyes and reach down into myself. Relaxing was a requirement, and I’d trained myself to reach deep meditation quickly through martial arts and recently, yoga. Pushing up into a sitting position, I dropped my mental shields and felt the world around me expand. Another deep breath and I pushed the picture of what I wished to see in the mirror out from my mind, down the center of my body, then outward toward my skin. Muscle shifted like water flowing around a pebble in the stream, and I felt my breasts become smaller, my hair shorten to shoulder length. Sweat dotted my forehead and my muscles quivered slightly. Letting out the breath, I flopped back on my pillows and lay there while small tremors racked my body.

I knew when next I looked in the mirror all that would look back at me was shades of boring brown; muddy brown hair and light brown eyes. A slender body with

high small breasts about five foot five, with normal ears. A nobody to draw anybody's attention, a plain Jane.

I was a disguise, and everything except the height hid the real me.

Oh, I'd tried different heights, but found I had troubles with bending over and banging my head on desks and counters, or hitting the floor too fast when I reached for things. It just wasn't worth the extra effort it took to remember to adjust. So I didn't bother. Besides, no one except Mi and my Mother had seen the real me in years.

"Well that's that then." Mi interjected firmly.

In a smooth motion the feline jumped across me and onto the floor padding toward my small kitchen. A sigh of relief escaped me when she cleared my body and landed safely on the edge on her way to the floor. Having 35 lbs of cat using you for a spring board was never fun.

"Hey can you start the coffee, please?" I asked softly. Raising your voice to a Merecat was both unnecessary and unwise. Mi might be trapped in cat form as she had been for nearly a thousand years and therefore smaller than I, but that didn't mean she couldn't and wouldn't knock me around if I mouthed off. I've never been certain if that wasn't why my Mother left her with me. Though she claimed it was so I wouldn't be lonely. However, I secretly suspected it was because the two of them had already spent over two hundred years together and my Mother was simply tired of being bullied.

The rich smell of French Roasted coffee wafted through the doorway, teasing my nose and making my mouth water.

In the past six months my system had literally gone haywire, and I'd developed two overwhelming vices....sweet light French Roasted coffee, and fantasizing about men! Most days I wasn't sure which addiction was worse, but so far coffee was the only one being satisfied. I was hoping to fix that very soon.

According to Mi, that's why I kept having these dreams. Something about unexpressed passion, coming of age, growing into powers, bla bla bla.

I was much too exhausted to think about it at the moment, maybe after I'd had my first cup of coffee. To do that, I'd have to get out of bed. And while Mi could

make the coffee appear from thin air, I preferred the old fashioned method which is why I prepped the coffee pot every night before bed. That and I just loved the smell of fresh grounds. Besides, Mi's telekinetic skills freaked me out a little. Does anyone like seeing their coffee floating at them through mid air?

Pushing back the covers I swung my legs over the bed's edge and rested my forearms on my thighs. Shimmering took a lot out of me, but lately my recovery was improving in leaps and bounds. Six months ago I would have been flat on my back for another hour. Happy freaking twenty fifth birthday to me! Signing heavily I reached for the mint green lacy robe I'd left at the end of the bed, and staggered toward the kitchen, making a quick detour to the bathroom on the way.

Mi was at the window seat staring out through the early morning fog at the limited traffic passing on Pacheco Avenue, mostly quiet at this time of day. The inhabitants in my neighborhood primarily worked nights and slept days. I just happened to be one of the few exceptions, the past six months having turned my regular schedule upside down.

My apartment was situated between Golden Gate Park and the Zoo right near the Sunset Reservoir in the Sunset District of San Francisco. It was an area that had been developed from 1920 to 1950 and for twenty years or so had enjoyed an all American, all human population. That is, until the summer of 1972 when a young scientist purchased and illegally imported rare South American Birds for the Zoo just up the street.

The birds had been Hoatzin. Somewhat similar to pheasant or turkey; these prehistoric looking birds came with neon blue eyes and a Mohawk, and were quite the spectacular find, since they had never been outside the Amazon Jungle and no one had ever seen anything like them before.

The young scientist hoped the 15 birds he'd shipped into the Port of San Francisco would make him famous. Unfortunately for both the scientist and the 2 billion humans that didn't survive the deadly virus the birds carried, it did.

Of course, I wasn't alive then, in fact I wasn't born till several decades later. The world I'd been born into didn't resemble the pre-1973 world much, primarily because as the viral plague spread across the United States unfettered that summer, non-humans figuratively stepped out of the shadows and into the light for the first time.

And in an effort to save not just the human race, also many non-humans primary food sources...Elves and Shifters worked together with Vampires and Weres to assist Humanity fight the spread of death which crossed the country carried in the bellies of insects who feasted on dogs and cats, cattle and birds, infecting these carriers who in turn infected other insects and spreading the disease ever eastward.

By fall more than two thirds of the human population was dead and the country nearly ground to a halt. It would take the cold putting the insects into hibernation and every scientist left working through that winter to come up with a vaccine. The sheer number of dead hindered efforts to inoculate survivors, so pixies and demons were enlisted to distribute the drugs cross country as both races still had access through the Everlasting and could travel great distances faster than any other human or non-human.

Secondary plagues spread across the landscape as entire towns died off and in many places the deceased were left where they fell. As payment for their assistance, demons were allowed to release the Nameless from the depths of the Everlasting and these minions swept the country gathering up any dead not already burned or buried.

Millions and millions of bodies disappeared in a blink of the eye and entire sections of the US became virtual ghost towns overnight. Necromancers, who had had little to offer, stepped forward and assistance to those that could or would cross over was offered. Some spirits however, refused to depart.

During the worst of it, very little help came from other countries. Officially America was an infectious wasteland that no one wanted any part of. Unofficially, non-humans began streaming in from Europe, England, and Australia, most willing to assist in any way for the chance to live openly.

Canada and Mexico slammed shut our borders and huge barbed wire fences stretched across all points of entry.

While America lost two thirds of its population, we managed somehow to survive. And some fifty years later the humans were still trying to adjust. For some it was a matter of just going back to work. For others after the shock wore off it was like awakening to a world both scarier and less real. Yet still the day to day life went on. Farmers and ranchers returned to their fields and herds. Businessmen went back to the business of business.

Food and fuel was plentiful; as our stockpiled supply far exceeded the demands. However given our now relatively limited work force, and our need to travel greater distances between towns and cities as people gravitated toward the major cities, our dependence on outside countries for fossil fuels became a pending concern. Once again the Elves were the first to step forward to work with the humans as they began developing other sources of energy.

Elves had fled to Earth from the Everlasting two thousand years earlier, and had been forced to withdraw as humanity spread like wildfire across this world wreaking destruction. In the past century most had retired to their mounds to escape the increasing pollution of the land above. Consequently, their numbers began dwindling, and births were nearly non-existent.

When those Elves left living above brought news of the death decimating the human population, there was a huge rift between those that wanted to let the humans die out and those that would save them.

Shaylee Helyanwe is my Mother, an Elf born on American soil over two hundred years earlier. As with the majority of Elves brought into this world, she has special abilities. Abilities that many elders believe are a weakening or a bastardizing of the true Elvin blood. Shaylee is a healer that can shift, and one of the few that had argued to save the humans. In fact, she disobeyed her Queen to do so. And in the end she and nearly a hundred others had been banished to the land above, their fates destined to be directly entwined with the humans they sought to save.

It was while these refugee Elves were busy sharing new technologies with the Humans that the third plague hit us. Unfortunately the last plague was man himself and not so easily inoculated against.

Two years after the first plague swept the US, just when we were starting to get back on our feet; criminals began invading our country in droves. Overnight, holes began appearing in fences stretching across both the Canadian and Mexican borders. Into these breaches slipped the worst elements the world had to offer, mostly, but not entirely all human.

At first the influx was just a trickle, and then a steady stream, and finally they came in such numbers that entire cities along the borders were overrun. Gangs began spreading inward toward other cities, preying on survivors and stripping towns like locusts during a drought.

Fearing the country itself would be lost, Congress and the Senate convened special sessions and in complete agreement with the President ratified new laws designed to ensure our continued safety and freedom.

Non-humans were officially recognized and granted all rights and privileges. Special law enforcement units were created to police and maintain the rights of all US Citizens. Along the borders elite units ran by the military, and comprised of the most vicious non-human races, were deployed. No prisoners were taken, nor were any spared. Within weeks the flood of illegal emigrants was stopped and our borders were once again a no-fly, nomad zone.

Within a year, many of the towns that had been overrun were starting to become empty as the criminals that held them were systematically hunted down and permanently dealt with.

Yet some of the smartest and most vicious criminals survived to spread inland managing to lose themselves in the larger towns as they slowly spread their webs of crime into the heartland of our nation. Deals were made with the less trustworthy non-humans, and some became very powerful indeed.

Many were still around and working hard to stay that way.

For the past forty years or so, the biggest game in town was the successful pursuit of gene-splicing. After all, a little Elf or Vampire gene therapy could extend a humans life indefinitely. Perhaps some Were to add strength, or how about mixing just the best of everyone and making yourself invincible. Several species of non-humans has faded back out of public existence, concerned their powers would be too tempting to the humans. And there were others that secretly worked against the human's efforts, attempting to slow the spread of knowledge they felt was too powerful to be trusted in the hands of mankind.

Nearly everyone still human wanted a piece of the action.

And many non-humans had their own reasons for wanting to unlock the codes. The Elves, for instance, had lost their ability to conceive. For them, gene splicing might mean the survival of their species. And for those that had succeeded, guarding their secrets became the ultimate game of life and death.

## Chapter 2

Staring at my computer screen while my mind wandered wasn't finishing the manual I was supposed to deliver to the publishing house this afternoon. Sighing heavily I stretched and rubbed at my lower back. I still had about three more pages to type. I should have finished already, would have finished it if I could stop daydreaming about sex. Sex in the bedroom on the bed on the dresser, sex on the floor in the bathtub, sex on the counter in the kitchen, sheesh could a person do sex on a refrigerator? Was that comfortable?

I think what bothered me the most was the men...or lack thereof. Shouldn't I be picturing men? I mean, I was having these urges to have sex 24x7 and I could see myself having sex just about anywhere and everywhere and yet I wasn't getting visuals of men just vague fuzzy images. Was it because I didn't know many men, or hadn't met the right one yet? It was like my body was tell me to HAVE sex and it didn't really care with whom I did it. I didn't like to dwell on it. Especially since the only time I clearly saw faces was when I was dreaming. And then it was the same handful of faces I'd been seeing for the past six months, and in color. For some reason my men came color coded....red, copper, green, bronze, black, white, brown, silver, grey and blue, in varying shades. Obviously if my mind was trying to tell me something, I just wasn't sure what it was.

Worrying, that's what it was. And if I didn't do something about it soon, I'd suspected something was going to explode!

Not that I had any experience with sex. How could I when I'd spent the majority of my life under my Mother's keen attention. I'd only been living on my own, if you didn't count Mi, for just over a year. In fact this past year was the longest I'd ever spent in any one place. It's hard to meet boys when you're never alone and never in one place for very long. At least it had been for me.

I wasn't a prude or anything, far from it. I had no issues with the whole concept of having sex, with nudity, or multiple partners; in fact I had no preconceived ideas about it at all. I'd just never felt the urge before....If I had to describe it, I'd say it was like being five. At five you don't think about sex, or know about sex, or want to have sex. Well, ah, not unless you're a pixy and only live to be twenty in which case five is OLD. Six months ago I was mentally five! Lately, it felt as if I'd skipped ahead a generation.

Did I mention I'd never had sex? And yes that probably made me the oldest living virgin! Mi just claimed it made me a late bloomer, and was encouraging me to "get out, live a little". Was that good advice from an old cat? After all I'd never seen her with anyone, best not to repeat that too loud.

If she really wanted to help she'd just find a man and bring him home for me. But instead of helping, she kept doing things to acerbate the problem. For instance this afternoon I'd come home from the grocery store to find Mi literally pawing through explicit all naked male magazines. I'm not even sure I want to know where she got them! I know the few brief glimpses I had were enough to send me practically screaming from the room.

That had been about two hours ago. No wonder I couldn't concentrate.

Reaching over my computer screen I pushed open the window. The morning fog had burned off leaving a slightly overcast afternoon sliding toward dusk. In the distance I could hear the ocean waves. The surf was pounding against the sand...slow

and steady... crashing ....again and again..... Dropping my face into my hands I groaned softly.

“Tsk tsk tsk. You know Iatna the White killed his mate when she refused him, then spent the next 500 years mourning her death.”

“Go away; I don’t have time for your Dragon fairy tails. I have to finish this tonight and drop it off so I can get paid.”

A loud hiss split the air and thirty five pounds of angry Merecat landed on top of my antique cherry wood desk, sending papers and file folders airborne in every which direction. “It is not a fairy tale! I was there.” Mi informed me coldly. “Pay attention fledgling I’m trying to tell you something important!”

“Mi! Drats, now look what you did!”

“Leave it.”

“I can’t, I told you I have to turn this in tonight. If I’m late I won’t get paid.”

“You don’t need the money. You’ve got more than enough for the next several hundred years. Besides,” Mi said, lifting her right paw and sending her pale pink tongue over the half extended claws, “it’s already finished.”

How can you be mad at someone that does your work for you? Frowning slightly I turned back to my computer, and clicked the print button. I didn’t need to look to know she had indeed somehow completed the last three pages. Too bad she only did that when she was annoyed at me or I wouldn’t have to work at all.

“You don’t have to.”

“Stop reading my mind.”

“Stop shouting your thoughts at me, is it my fault you lack control?”

Grunting I pushed back my chair and went to pick up the last chapter off the printer. After stacking the additional pages with the rest of the work I scavenged a large paperclip out of the top drawer and slipped the completed manual into a manila folder.

“I laid out your clothes on the bed.” Purred Mi, a look of censure in her sherry colored eyes. “I need you to drop me off across town. And don’t forget our deal.”

Giving the cat an irritated look, I left my spare bedroom, which also doubled as my home office. I loved the room, the antique desk and chair matched the pretty trundle bed I'd purchased for my Mom to use when she visited. It was very feminine without managing to be frilly. Mostly I used the room to write technical manuals for a local publishing company. The work wasn't taxing and paid my bills. But best of all it only took a few hours a week. The rest of my time was spent...in other pursuits.

On the bed Mi had placed my outfit. Fifteen minutes later after a quick shower, I slipped into my sexy matching chocolate brown panties and bra before pulling on a button up brown blouse over a tan colored ankle length skirt. The skirt was tasteful and swung comfortably around my legs. A pair of chocolate brown thigh high boots with two inch heels lay on the floor at the end of the bed. Smiling, I reached for the boots and pulled them on. Their buttery softness feeling wicked against my naked skin. Where had Mi found these, I wondered. They weren't my style at all! But I loved them. Running my hand over the leather, I smiled again deciding to wear them. What the heck, the skirt covered them to the ankle and no one but Mi and I would know the difference.

Grabbing my purse and keys I headed for the door. Mi was already there waiting. All of her body except the tip of her tail faded from sight as I reached for the doorknob. My Mother had allowed me to move here as long as I stayed Plain Jane and Mi kept an eye on me or as Mom put it, kept me company. The two of them had agreed it would be safe enough. But none of us thought it a good idea to advertise the fact that I lived with a creature few humans knew existed outside the Everlasting.

My apartment was really the first floor of a two story home. My rent paid for half the basement, the entire first floor and my own private entrance. Upstairs lived the owner, Mrs. Delia Long who I was pretty sure was a wereleopard as well as a retired nurse, and whom I suspected also knew my Mother and was on her payroll in the "Keep Lexi out of trouble" gang. Mrs. Long kept mostly to herself. We got along famously as we rarely ever had contact.

Most the houses in the Sunset District didn't have garages so cars were kept on the street or parked around back of the house if there was room. I would love to say I owned a little red sporty car, but the truth was, my car was just like me, or the me I presented to the world. Sensible and brown, but this isn't to say it wasn't capable of 140 on a straightaway. I know, because I like to drive it that fast when I feel the need to fly.

Using my keys I opened the door on the passenger side and held back just long enough for Mi to slip in before placing both my purse and my manila folder on the floor.

A few minutes later we were driving toward the Market District and Mi was playing with the buttons on the radio, nearly giving me a headache as she trolled through the various stations at sub-eardrum blasting volume before finally settling on someone crooning something from the early '60's, loudly. My fingers tapped along on the wheel as I steered through early evening traffic.

Most non-humans were just on their way into the office about now. Meanwhile the human tourists were coming back from places like the zoo and the park, headed back across the bridge and over to Oakland or the East Bay where it was safer for them once the sun set. We may have been living side by side for the past fifty years, but unless you liked to walk on the wild side something's just didn't mix. Oh, there were still plenty of housing areas within San Francisco where the humans lived; mostly below Monterey Boulevard down to Daly City was still primarily human. And of course humans worked the Business and Market Districts during the day and the non-humans ran their businesses at night.

For the most part, the system worked. We live in harmony with the rare exception now and again. Most non-humans view the humans as sheep. Not because we don't believe they aren't intelligent, it's more that you either fall into the "I'm older than humanity and therefore must guide them" sect or the "I need food" sect. So of course it makes sense that the majority of non-humans have a care for the humans amongst us. Besides, we've been policing ourselves for thousands of years. The only

difference these days is that non-humans serve and protect right alongside the human police and military forces. And it doesn't hurt that the current President is a non-human, as are a surprisingly large number of Senate and House members. Mostly we non-humans like to refer to the plague as the great equalizer.

"I won't be home till late." Mi informed me during a break in the music. "Feel free to bring a man home, use him, and keep him there until you're certain he can't walk."

Swerving slightly I glared at the empty space beside me as it hissed back at me. "I haven't forgotten our deal! I told you I'd go, but I didn't promise I'd bring anyone home unless I feel comfortable."

"Fine, might I suggest you have two or three drinks first. That should do the trick."

"Alcohol? You want me to drink alcohol? Isn't that supposed to be a baaaaad thing? I mean the way you and Mom go on and on about it, you'd think it was the next plague or something."

"Your Mother is entirely too restrictive, and this is exactly why you are in the condition you are currently in. If she'd have let me leave you for that week in the mountains outside of Denver like I'd wanted...."

Five minutes later I gratefully pulled up in front of a small apothecary store, reached across the car and opened the door. Seconds later the front door opened to the sound of a twinkling bell. I breathed a sign of relief as I pulled the door shut again, turned down the stereo into a less deafening range and pulled out into traffic. It was moments like this that I remembered why I'd been so anxious to move out on my own. Mi and my Mother were normally rational individuals; however the two of them tended to disagree on the general state of my education when it came to certain life experiences. And neither of them was averse to saying so, in detail, lengthy mind numbing detail.

Ten minutes later I was pulling into the parking structure of the publishing house down in the Business District. It had taken me most of the drive to finally relax

my shoulders and neck. Something about being hissed and lectured at that left me decidedly tense, or maybe it was the music.

My boss was up on the twentieth floor and I wandered to the elevator, purse and envelope in hand, pushed the button and watched the numbered lights count downward as the elevator drew closer to my level. The doors swung open and three gentlemen stepped out in front of me, either not seeing me or simply not finding me important enough to notice. One inadvertently hit me with his briefcase and I snarled slightly under my breath, angry with myself more than the idiot. This is what I wanted, Plain Jane. But sometimes it really irked me. Biting back my sarcastic remark, I stepped in and pushed the correct button.

By the time I reached my floor I'd rearranged my features into pleasant bland and turned left toward the receptionist's desk. Margie, a petite black haired werewolf looked up and smiled a greeting at me. "How are you Lexi?" She asked in a voice I always equated with jazz and what I imagined smoke filled bar room singers must sound like.

"Fine, just fine." I replied, smiling back. I'd been coming here for nearly a year and she had always been kind, although the way she looked at me sometimes made me wonder if my shimmer was starting to slip around the edges.

"Ms. Sullivan is in, just go on down the hall she's expecting you."

I turned left and stopped suddenly as a moment of indecision hit me and I turned back to Margie asking, "Are there any clubs near here you would recommend?"

Flashing a smile, Margie looked around the reception area, currently empty except for the two of us and leaned forward with her hands against the counter. "What are you looking for?"

I'm not sure what my face looked like, some combination of eagerness and uncertainty because she smiled, you know, that "ah ha" woman smile. "We planned to close early as you are our last appointment tonight, so once you see Ms. Sullivan, I was going to meet up with some friends over at the Salty Dog for a little fun. You're welcome to join us. Are you game?"

Was I? Ah, I wasn't sure, what do you do when your body tells you one thing and your mind another? Dive in with both feet my mind whispered and I smiled. Sounded good to me, so I nodded.

Twenty minutes later I was back in the elevator this time with Margie who was busy changing clothes, werewolves having no issues with public nudity. I tried not to stare as her button up blouse was exchanged for something that left the lacy parts of her bra exposed and she stepped out of her skirt to reveal a skin tight micro mini made out of some type of stretchy material. Out of her bag came a pair of four inch spike heels to replace the tasteful flats she'd been wearing in the office. We were nearly to the seventh floor when she turned to me expectantly and I had a sudden feeling I was most inappropriately dressed for our upcoming adventure. Mi should have warned me!

"Was that what you were planning to wear?" Margie asked with a smile.

I don't believe I've ever felt shy in my life, but at that moment I was damn close. "Not going to work?" I asked tongue in cheek. Her sharp laugh had me smiling back at her. "Would you believe me if I told you I'd never seen the inside of a club before in my life?" I asked nervously. Worried she would think I was a total loser.

"Oh goodie," she didn't exactly squeal, but she did laugh, clap her hands and a wicked look crossed her delicate features. "This is going to be such fun!"

"Are these appropriate?" I asked, lifting my skirt to mid thigh to expose my sexy boots.

"Wow," She replied her eyebrows wiggling up and down. "Not bad. How much are you in love with this skirt?"

"Not that much."

Nodding, she turned to the display panel as we reached the first floor and pressed the twentieth floor button and back up the building we went. At her desk, she used her scissors and whacked off about ninety five percent of my skirt. Part of the bottom became a micro wrap top which tied between my breasts, replacing my now unnecessary bra. My button up shirt I got to keep, but she tied it tightly below the other knot leaving a vast expanse of stomach uncovered. Lucky for me I worked out in my

basement. Although I suppose I could have improved my abs with shimmer, I didn't really need to. Stepping back she gave a slow nod. "Take out the rubber band in your hair and flip your head over." She advised. When I had done as she asked she fluffed it around my face then pulled out some face goop, proceeded to doll me up then proclaimed us all set.

Back into the elevator we went and down to the first floor. We made a quick stop at the ATM just down the block, and I deposited my check and pulled out cash, then we set out for the Salty Dog. I must admit, I was feeling quite excited.

### Chapter 3

The fast throbbing beat slipped into my blood quickening my pulse a block before we turned a corner and could actually hear the music flowing out the front door and onto the sidewalk in front of what I hoped would be the Salty Dog. I could feel my pulse rate speed up and beside me I felt rather than heard Margie's near whine of excitement.

People lined the sidewalk, held back from entering by a neon green velvet rope stretched across the sidewalk barring the door's entrance. Behind the rope stood a huge muscular man with a shaved head and bare chest. He was in what I called the G-Man pose, overly muscular legs spread slightly, one wrist held loosely in the other hand. I suppose when your arms were big as tree trunks crossing them wasn't an option. My inner me sized him up and I actually licked my lips as I watched him scan the crowd, his eyes constantly moving as the folks waiting to get in stood semi-patiently under his cool stare.

Thinking we'd need to stand in line too, I was surprised when Margie marched us right up to the rope, earning us some rude remarks along the way. "Evening Margie," the giant of a man replied politely, "who's your friend?" his eyes zeroed in on me and his nostrils flared. A frown lowered his bushy eyebrows into a solid line and he

suddenly didn't look as "cool" as he had a moment ago. My insides went from Mmmmm to Yiiiiieee and down deep inside I felt golden hackles stand up at attention. Margie jerked as if hit as did those closest in line to us. All chatter at the front went quiet for a heartbeat as I looked back at Mr. I'm-bigger-than-you-little-girlie, looking back at me.

"Calm down," Margie hissed, her hand wrapping around my upper arm and giving it a painful squeeze.

Giving myself a mental shake, I forced a smile and tried to look harmless. Hmm I was fairly harmless, normally. In fact I wasn't sure what had just happened.

Tough guy raised an eyebrow bared his teeth slightly and turned back to Margie, "On your head," he told her with a shrug as he lifted the rope and allowed us to pass much to the dismay of the others in line.

I noticed he didn't step back as we passed and I had to fight the urge to clip him with my shoulder as I stepped around him. I could feel his eyes tracking me through the doorway and when I chanced to look back, he was pressing his finger against his earpiece speaking into his watchband. Probably not a good sign.

Just inside the door I stopped, looking out at the packed in bodies swaying and gyrating below me, wanting to take it all in. The place was huge and dark except for the neon lights flashing everywhere but not so dark you couldn't see tables lining three sides of the room and the bar stretching across the length of the fourth. The stairs we were standing on were fairly wide and could easily fit four or five people abreast. They led down directly onto the dance floor which seemed to stretch forever.

Non-humans were everywhere and from the scent of them, they were having one hell of a good time. Hey this girl had never been to a dance club nor had sex and there seemed to be plenty or near plenty of both going on just about everywhere.

The air was a haze of musk primarily wolf and leopard...and something I couldn't place? My nose, never one of my best attributes went on overdrive and nearly shut down from sensory overload. When I shook my head, my vision went double as my infrared kicked in to compensate for the low lighting. I reached for the railing just

as Margie grabbed my arm again tugging me down the stairs. Gulping a deep breath, I started down after her wondering how she managed in her spiked heels.

At the bottom she plowed left, dragging me toward the bar where she ordered two drinks with names I'd never heard of, and promptly shoved one into my hand. I tried to offer her money, but either it was lost in the translation or she didn't want any as she waved my offer away, snagged my wrist again and proceeded to drag me toward the opposite side of the room.

You might think that a normal person would have been irritated at all the dragging and pulling going on, but honestly I was having a hard enough time keeping myself from falling flat on my face at the moment to really care. In fact I was struggling not to panic and flee back the way I'd come, and might have if I could tell which way was up.

In no way could you say I gracefully crossed the room. Maybe one day I'd be able to negotiate a packed dance floor the way Margie could, but while she slipped easily through narrow openings, I was left in her wake like a tin can tied to a bumper. And like the proverbial tin can, I bumped and bounced my way through a sea of hot sweaty bodies all of which were beginning to smell rather yummy.

Mercifully we eventually made it to the other side of the room, but by then I was nearly clenching my teeth and I could feel the sweat pooling down my back. Inside I was shaky and I was nearly heaving, my heartbeat a frantic tattoo in my chest. Worse on worse, when I glanced down at my arm there was a distinctive golden tint to it. And my hair was growing...I could feel it brushing my back below my half top. Crap, I was afraid if I checked a mirror I was not going to like what I saw.

Margie pulled us up at the edge of the dance floor in front of one of the booths and turned back to me. The look of shocked surprise on her face confirmed my fears, yet I couldn't help smiling as she looked down at my wrist still firmly grasped in her fingers. It was as if she knew she hadn't released me, but couldn't figure out how I'd changed during the trip across the dance floor.

“Hi,” I said, my voice coming out about an octave lower than it normally sounded. “It’s still me.”

She shook her head and her nostrils actually flared. She tried for a weak smile and nearly made it. Then she looked at my chest and burst out laughing. Apparently not just my hair and skin had morphed in the drag across the floor. Her makeshift top was suddenly indecently small for my real me chest.

Through it all she maintained her grip on my wrist and when the laughter subsided she turned us both to present me to the table, and the six men seated there, all of whom were staring hungrily back at me.

On a normal day, I probably would have smiled and made inane chit chat. Been ignored while I sipped the drink still in my other hand, or given I was in a club for the first time, I might even have tried batting my eyelashes, because I’d heard that that could bring men to their knees.

Unfortunately today wasn’t going to be normal because I didn’t do any of those things. No to be truthful, I panicked.

And my panic apparently caused mass hysteria.

Have you ever seen one of those nature shows where the lion leaps out of the grass amidst a herd of wild zebra? Well that’s not such a bad analogy as to what happened next. Although in my own defense, I never actually leaped or shifted, in fact, I don’t believe I moved at all, although I do think my eyes whirled. Ever seen golden multi-faceted eyes whirl in a dark dance club with neon lights bouncing across the room?

I was my own light show.

I think even that would have been okay, except apparently in the animal world panicked Dragon trumps all. Even slender, large breasted, five foot five golden skinned, red-gold haired scantily clad Dragons.

Did I mention I was part Dragon? No well hmmm, aside from hiding it all my life it really hadn’t been much of a topic of discussion. At least I’d never actually scared small children on the streets, or had I? Perhaps that was why my Mother moved

us around a lot. Funny are the thoughts that will run through your mind in the midst of a crisis.

My girl whom I affectionately referred to as Goldilocks, or Goldy for short because I'd liked the story as a child, unfurled her wings and tried to claw her way out from inside me. I'm not certain if she wanted to have sex then and there, or if she was actually trying to protect me. I am sure I'll never know.

I on the other hand, simply refused to allow her to do so. And somewhere in the midst of our disagreement, some two hundred plus petrified were animals attempted to flee the scene in a most disorderly fashion. This, of course, excited my girl and had her snapping at those passersby that came within easy snapping reach. Thank goodness I didn't break any skin; it would have been simply too much for my girl to handle.

And so there I stood, trying to control my inner Dragon, at some point I believe I knocked down and placed my foot in the middle of one particularly attractive Werelion's chest. I think Goldy was actually sizing him up as a potential mate but he obviously wasn't up to the task as he continued to struggle and for some reason managed to wet himself before passing out from sheer fright.

I think his wetting himself is what actually took the wind out of Goldy's wings and allowed me to firm my grip enough so that I could shove her back down into her inner cave. She went with a huff and a flounce, not at all happy with me.

Heaving a sigh and looking around the now empty club, I realized two things; one, I was in deep trouble; and two, I wasn't alone.

A hush fell over the club as the last strains of music died away. Chairs and tables were overturned and lay at odd angles around the room. Everyone had made it to safety, except the poor Werelion I'd singled out of the pack who didn't look like he'd be going anywhere real soon.

But me and Peewee weren't alone; somewhere in the room were at least two others. Turning my head to the left I swept the room at eye level, and found...nothing.

"Ah, it appears she's come back to her senses," Spoke a masculine voice directly over my head. "So much for business tonight."

Goldy tensed in her cave, a sense of hope and interest echoing up from her direction even as I flowed away from the sound toward the center of the now empty dance floor and craned my neck back to see into the darkness.

The flashing lights made it difficult to focus but I could just make out a walkway encircling the building at street level. A railing ran the length of the room and there directly above where I'd been holding my pitifully poor mate auditions stood two men looking down at me, their faces hidden in shadow. The one on the left appeared rather tense, both hands gripping the railing as if he was forcing himself to remain still. The other stood calmly, his forearms braced negligently on the top railing as he leaned over and watched me from the shadows. In the dimly lit room, the second man's eyes met mine and his voice eased over my skin like a warm caress, though he spoke not to me, but the other man.

"Do not tease Jace, such temptation leads to power, which is always difficult to control. It's obviously been a while since she's been exposed to...such a feast of the senses. Under similar circumstances, any of us would have responded the same."

The first man blew out a deep breath and unclenched his hands from the railing. In the dim light I could see him flex his fingers several times as if trying to get the blood circulating. "I believe the question is...how can that be."

"Hmmm," replied the other more velvety voice. "Perhaps we should introduce ourselves and ask."

"No doubt a good start."

"Do not be frightened little one, we mean you no harm." And so saying the second man, he of the velvety voice, vaulted the railing and dropped the 10 feet to the floor gracefully landing not six feet from where I stood. The other man landed next to him almost immediately and stepped forward bringing with him a scent that caused air to whoosh out of my lungs as Goldy figuratively sat up at attention.

As the one called Jace took a step forward, and I immediately threw up my hand, palm outward. "Hold it right there." I wheezed, bending forward at the waist and sucking in air. Mentally I scolded Goldy, arguing it was surely undignified to be

caught wheezing and gasping for breath because two incredibly gorgeous men had suddenly dropped out of the sky at your feet. She refused to heed me, practically jumping up and down in her cave going “give me, give me,” like some greedy child, which in turn nearly knocked me off my feet.

We had words, and she finally calmed down when I promised I’d consider one or both for sex if she’d just ease off and stop making us look like an idiot. Grumbling she circled her favorite sleeping place and curled up with her tail over her delicately rounded snout. Her eyes looked up at me one last time with a “you’d better not blow this” look before they closed. She hadn’t gone to sleep, and I could still feel her intense curiosity, but at least I wasn’t staggering about like a drunk anymore.

When I stood up again, both men were smiling as if they knew full well the conversation that had just transpired. A look of horror crossed my face as it dawned on me that I’d lost my shields somewhere amongst the sweaty bodies on the dance floor. Totally mortified, I slammed them into place.

“Ouch.” Muttered Jace, “I guess that’s what we get for ease dropping.” He remarked as he gently rubbed his temple and blinked repeatedly.

The other man just chuckled softly and watched me through his dark blue eyes.

Where does a girl go from here I wondered. Any fool could tell they were waiting for me to make the first move. That said something, a lot of something for both of them. Taking a deep breath I stepped forward and did the one thing you do when meeting someone new, I stuck out my hand. “Hi I’m Lexi.” I said as my fingers slipped into the palm of the man closest to me, the one not Jace.

“And I am Gareth, welcome to the Salty Dog.” He replied.

I would have liked to have my hand back given that I was receiving mini shocks from where our skin touched, but he raised it slowly to his lips, bent at the waist and leaned over it like a precious flower, his eyes never leaving mine as his lips brushed my knuckles. My eyes widened and that pesky whirling threatened to start up again. Closing my eyes I counted to five. When I opened them I realized mine weren’t the only eyes in the room that were multi-faceted. Smiling, Gareth blinked his eyes back

to solid dark blue, lowered my hand and stepped back. One last look and I turned to Jace.

“And I am Jace; and you are most welcome.” He too raised my hand to his lips and this time it was eyes as green as the summer grass that gently whirled above my fingertips. Then he stepped back and his eyes flattened back to a piercing green.

“Are you aware that your name means protector of man?” Gareth asked with a wry smile.

I shouldn’t have been surprised, but there it was. “Yes, but I’m sure you couldn’t prove it by the folks in here earlier.” I added lamely. “I am sorry...about that. I don’t know what came over me, that’s never happened to me before.”

Gareth chuckled again and Jace smiled brightly.

I grinned back at them and added, “Actually, no one here tonight was purely human....so strictly speaking no humans were harmed.”

“Would you like another drink or do you prefer to keep this one?” Gareth asked me as he moved toward the bar across the room.

That I had managed to hold on to both my drink and my purse struck me as quite odd. Much like the fact I’d been worried about scaring small children in the midst of the earlier crisis.

Glancing down at my glass I realized it was still full! Miracle of miracles! I shook my head and raised the glass to my lips, I would have swallowed it down too, except Jace’s hand was suddenly on mine preventing me from doing so.

“I believe what Gareth was subtly trying to say is that Absinthe and...our kind do not combine well. Please let us make you something a little less....fiery shall we say?”

I suppose I could have said something inane like, “Our kind? Who said anything about me being an ‘our kind?’” But it was perfectly clear that that cat was out of the bag, having ripped it into the proverbial shreds. No use in stating the obvious. Besides that old saying...it takes one to know one, or in this case two was absolutely true.

What I did say was, “Fiery huh?” Afraid I’d burn down the place on top of clearing it of all customers?

The watch on Jace’s wrist beeped loudly and I jumped, almost dropping the drink. Jace’s fingers shifted down my wrist and I nearly swallowed my tongue as his fingers slid over mine then wrapped around the glass. For one all too brief moment his hand cupped mine then my fingers slipped away, leaving him holding it. Smiling again, he motioned me toward the bar.

It took a second, but I managed to pull my eyes away from his and unlock my knees. Getting my legs to work took another half second but then I was on my way. I expected Jace to take my elbow, oh who am I kidding? I was hoping he would! But when his hand didn’t magically appear, I looked back and noticed he was still standing where I’d left him, watch to mouth, finger in ear, deep in conversation. Mouth, hand, ear, he seemed quite busy, but his eyes....were just for me.

## Chapter 4

“What is that saying....? Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine.”

“Catchy, who said that?” I asked as I stepped up to the bar and leaned my forearms across the long smooth black surface. My bare midriff brushed against the cold edge and I sucked air and shifted back slightly. I was pretty sure if I turned around; Jace would still be looking at me and with my rump pushed out in the air like it was chances were he was nearly seeing the whole show, thanks to Margie and her scissors. Grinning, I lifted one foot and placed it on the black metal rod at shin level running the length of the bar. There were no bar stools, just a ledge to rest a foot on. If you wanted to sit, you got a table.

Gareth leaned down flicked some switches and the flashing neon lights instantly subsided, replaced by soft backlighting and some sultry jazz just loud enough to tease the senses. One sandy blonde eyebrow raised in question as Gareth looked at me over the bar. In his left hand was a bottle of Champagne, and he reached behind him for one of the hanging flutes. Apparently we were celebrating. I couldn’t read the label, but it looked expensive. “Humphrey Bogart, Casablanca.”

“Oh, I’m sorry I don’t get out to movies that often. Is it new?”

Such inane conversation when what I really wanted to say was, can I see you naked...now....please?

Deciding that would probably be a mite too forward, I satisfied myself with admiring the delectable parts I could see over the top of the counter.

Of the two men, Gareth was the more ruggedly handsome in a Paul Bunyan sans mustache sort of way. I knew who Paul Bunion was because my Mother had dragged me through Minnesota one summer and I felt comfortable comparing the two. Not that he was twenty feet tall or anything, in fact I'd say he topped out around six foot which still put him a good five inches above my current height in boots. But he had a woodsy outdoors look about him that gave off the impression he'd feel comfortable slogging along on a deer trail with an ax over his shoulder. Very manly!

Piercing wide blue eyes gazed out over high cheekbones, a nicely shaped nose, and cupid bow lips made the completed picture very nice. His sandy blond hair was cut close at the sides while managing to stand straight up on top, and for some reason made me think of fresh mowed grass. His arms, shoulders, and chest were nicely muscled and well defined; he looked solid but not overdeveloped like the guy at the front door. He was wearing black fitted slacks and a black pressed shirt unbuttoned at the throat. His sleeves had been rolled half way up his arm, revealing tanned forearms covered in light brown hair. On his wrist he wore a watch the same as Jace and the door guard, a communicator obviously.

"And here I thought everyone knew the classics. 1943, won three Oscars... cynical nightclub owner reconnects with his old lover who comes to his club needing help. Any of this ringing a bell?" He asked hopefully, blue eyes shining at the memory. "Opening night was really something." Gareth recalled as he slid my drink toward me before reaching up for two more glasses which he proceeded to fill.

My mind did a double take as I looked back at him in shock. 1943 I hadn't been a scrap of a dream or a glint off a test tube, let alone alive and attending grand opening nights at the theater! "Hmmm must have missed that one." I muttered reaching out to

wrap my fingers around the stem of my drink and pulling it closer so I could stare into the explosion of tiny bubbles.

“Something about my comment surprised you, and not in a good way. Yet I can’t image why? You look,” he hesitated, seeming to searching for the right word, “dismayed.”

Yeah, dismayed, that was a good word. Get yourself together, Lexi before you blow it. I had no right to complain when I’d struck pay dirt my first night out, times two! The odds of that happening had to be, off the chart! Dragons were damn rare; in fact for all I knew these may be the only two males west of the Mississippi! Surely fate was smiling my way. Yet I hated lying, and knew from first hand experience that not everyone appreciated the miracle of science that was me. Hadn’t my attempted previous forays into sexland taught me that? Honesty wasn’t always a good thing and it certainly wasn’t always healthy. For sure it could leave a girl panting for something she wasn’t about to get.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to kill the mood.” I replied, “Sometimes I just think, funny thoughts.”

Gareth just stared back at me for a moment. I liked that he didn’t seem the prying type as he let it go after a moment and glanced over my shoulder. His comment was aimed behind me at Jace, and I turned slightly to watch him striding toward us. “Crowd control?”

“Handled, Nick’s men will be along in a few to take care of sleeping beauty over there.” Jace responded, his hand waving in the general direction of the Werelion still blissfully sleeping on the floor across the room. “I’d like to see him relocated before he wakes. I’m concerned his embarrassment might overcome his good sense when he comes around. Besides, one of his pride buddies is out in the street glaring at the help.”

“I take it he doesn’t usually suffer from performance anxiety?” I asked with a straight face, caught between mortification and the obvious situational humor.

“Abasing yourself in front of a stronger creature isn’t a bad thing. I think the problem is going to be that you look...ah....”

“Yes?” I asked sweetly and finally managed to get in that eyelash batting move I’d been hoping to try.

Both men laughed and I couldn’t help that my smile turned slightly wicked.

“Female.” Gareth responded, I was going to say, “Female.”

“And is that a problem?” I asked, lifting one eyebrow in question.

“Well let’s just say that that particular Leo...swings the other direction and dressed as you are, you don’t appear his regular date type.”

I must have looked confused, because Jace softly ran his knuckles down my forehead smoothing out my frown before reaching to take the glass Gareth held out to him. A look passed between the two as Jace held up his own glass in toast. “To foolish lions!” He said, then threw back his head and downed his drink.

Smiling ruefully, Gareth raised his glass to his own lips, sipping instead of gulping.

I carefully took a swallow. The bubbles tickled my throat and I nearly sneezed at the sensation. I’d never had Champagne before, but tonight was about new things and I was in the mood to try them all.

The silence was companionable as we each finished off our drinks. Gareth was refilling the glasses and I was mulling over the conversation, something about it had seemed off, when the door at the top of the stairs opened and two men came in. Both looked similar to Mr. On Your Head, who I assumed was the ‘Nick’ guy who’d been manning or bearing...well you get my meaning, the door earlier. The others must have been somewhere in the crowd before I sent everyone fleeing for the exits. Sloppy of me not to have noticed them, but then everything about tonight was a wee bit sloppy.

They both reeked of large cat, perhaps leopard. And both dipped his head toward Gareth and Jace before turning their “hard” stare on me. It’s a bodyguard thing I’d seen more times than I could count.. Not hard to spot in a crowd. Usually I turned my head and slowly moved in the opposite direction, but tonight I held my ground and

stared right back at them until they both dropped their gazes, proclaiming me the winner.

Yippee, I'd never done that before.

I couldn't help the small satisfied smile that ghosted over my face and didn't realize that both Gareth and Jace were watching me like hawks watch a tasty morsel on the ground. Both looked concerned, like I was about to, what...take over or something. Hardly? Schooling my features into something more soft and cuddly, I took another sip of my drink and sent a flirty wink toward Jace.

He sighed deeply and waved the hired men toward the downed lion. Between them they carried him out through the doors at the other end of the bar. I assumed they led to another set of stairs and possibly a back alley.

Both Gareth and Jace kept an eye on the three until they'd safely bundled Peewee out the door. I breathed a sigh of relief and went back to sipping my Champagne. Now that the fourth wheel was gone, I was all for getting back to checking out the still standing competition. And that's exactly what I did as I let my eyes run over Jace who'd apparently edged closer while I'd been busy watching the rescue mission.

Where Gareth seemed rough hewn, Jace appeared slimmer and more refined round about the edges. Like Gareth, he too had wide set eyes over a well shaped nose, but his cheek bones were less pronounced and his lips were slightly thinner. His short dark brown hair was the color of the coffee left several hours in the bottom of the pot when Mi or I forgot to turn it off. He had a pronounced widow's peak and adorable cowl licks on either side of his forehead that had my fingers itching to play.

Gareth was clean shaven, but Jace had that I just crawled out of bed and didn't have time to shave look I didn't usually find appealing, but which seemed to actually work for him. His overall appearance screamed look at me aren't I sexy, in a surprisingly well manicured way.

He was dressed in a dark green shirt which looked like raw silk tucked into well worn jeans that clung to his trim hips and thighs like a second skin. Standing next to

Jace, it dawned on me that he was likely the shorter of the two men by maybe an inch. Something I hadn't noticed earlier, probably because of Gareth's more muscular build.

I think I purred. Then refused to blush when Jace gave me a look that said he was enjoying my perusing and yes, thank you very much. My eyes flicked between the two of them and I'm certain any idiot could tell I was doing the eenie meenie miny moe song in my head. Of course I substituted Dragon for tiger; after all it just seemed more appropriate.

Gareth abruptly put down his drink and flexed his arms as he lifted them over his head locked his fingers together, and pushed his palms toward the ceiling in a huge stretch that thrust his chest forward and threatened to send distressed shirt buttons flying across the room.

My eyes nearly popped out of my head. Nope sad to say, I wasn't much on the subtle. Maybe that will come later when I've got a few sex sessions under my belt. At the moment I was too impressed to care.

And then Jace was there blocking my view as he reached across the bar for the bottle of Champagne, his arm brushed against me as he refilled my glass first, then his own. My subconscious had to appreciate that his move was subtle but effective. And I found myself focused in on the vee of his shirt and the dark curling hair just out of sight.

My finger rose of its own volition tracing down one side of the silky fabric and up the other. Back and forth I went, each time dipping slightly lower as my finger played across the soft curls. I could feel the heat radiating up from his skin as I skimmed just above the surface. His heart beat was strong and steady, not at all like the wild thing mine had become. Warm breath brushed my temple and my blood turned to liquid heat.

I might have leaned forward just then, except a movement from Gareth pulled my eyes in his direction. I blinked several times and would have dropped my hand, but Jace's was somehow wrapped around it and those delicious shocks were jumping though my skin again.

Gareth must have decided he was too far away, because he lifted himself onto the bar and simply flowed over it with a strength and grace that made Goldy shift restlessly in her cave. He slithered to the floor behind me and it was clear the dance we three were doing had proceeded to first base as he softly pressed against me from thigh to shoulder. His hand came to rest gently at my waist and I suddenly felt very small and delicate against the length of him.

My head dropped back against his chest clearing the way for his smooth cheek to nuzzle my ear. Gooseflesh covered my arms and legs as Gareth warm breath feathered my neck and I shuddered.

I felt my arm lifted and guided toward Jace's shoulder as his warm breath brushed the inside of my elbow. I opened my eyes and was captured by his as he flicked the tip of his oh so hot tongue across my inner elbow in a delicate pattern that somehow made me think of other places.

My knees buckled and I would have fallen in a boneless heap but Jace was suddenly there pressing against me with his lower body, supporting me with the leg he'd slipped in between mine so that we each straddled the other's leg. Then he began squeezing and releasing. At the apex of each squeeze he lifted his one leg slightly so that I rode his thigh, the soft material of his jeans pressing under my skirt against my bits of lace. Blood pooled and my breath came in small gasping pants.

Gareth's hand slid across my bare stomach and on up my ribcage, wrapped round my body just below my breasts so that the weight of them rested upon his arm. His fingers danced under the bottom of my make shift top and I realized my blouse had come untied and the only thing keeping my breasts covered was the small remnant of fabric from my skirt.

Meanwhile Gareth's other hand slid over my waist his open palm coming to rest on the patch of bare skin between my belly button and skirt. He pulled me in tightly against his chest basically thrusting my lower body more firmly onto Jace's thigh so that the pressure instantly became more intense and caused Jace to reach for my hips with both hands so he could better control our movements.

My hair slid to one side as my head rolled on Gareth's shoulder while my exposed neck became fair game for the kisses he rained up and down its length. His fingers tugged at my top and a breast sprang free, one dusky nipple exposed for a brief second before Jace's lips closed over it and he began sucking and gently biting.

I moaned and clutched at Jace's shoulder with one hand while reaching for Gareth's leg with the other. Behind me, Gareth made low encouraging noises as he ground the length of himself against my bottom and kneaded the breast not currently in Jace's mouth.

Pressed between the two of them like I was I could feel both of their erections and I instinctively struggled to move in time with their thrusts grinding myself against Jace's leg as my breathing became more and more ragged.

My muscles clenched as molten fire spiraled up from the center of my body, my limbs quivered and my movements became more urgent as my first ever orgasm spilled out my core through my veins and into my limbs.

Both men stilled as I lolled against Gareth's chest. When I managed to open my eyes I immediately fell into Gareth's deep blue gaze and for a moment my shield held firm then crumbled like twigs in a forest fire. Laid bare, I felt both men slide into my mind as their combined emotions cascading over me in waves setting off a secondary orgasm that had me moaning and clutching at both of them. Their pleasure at my oh so obvious pleasure was so intense I nearly passed out from the sensory overload.

Gareth growled and clutched me harder to him. Trapped in his eyes, I felt his finger dip inside my waist band and hesitate there, I was so wet and hot for him to touch me I actually whimpered and tried to raise my hips.

His lips turned upward and he glanced across my body at Jace who was also smiling. With a nod Jace dropped to his knees, reached up under my skirt and as one they pulled down both my skirt and my panties exposing my golden red curls...and froze.

“What the hell!” Jace exclaimed in surprised horror, his fingers digging into my thighs just above my boots where both my panties and skirt had slipped to, like twin flags at half mast.

Gareth leaned over my shoulder, looked down the length of me and his grip became painful in what I was certain was an involuntary reaction. His eyes widened and I could feel the confusion swirling behind them.

Jace released one hip and tentatively covered my curls with his hand, pressed his palm flat against my pubic bone and then released the pressure, several times. Like a kid, bouncing a ball. It wasn’t unpleasant, just odd. His face looked stunned, as if he couldn’t quite believe what he was looking at.

Then his finger slipped through my curls and into my warm wet opening. I moaned again and moved my hips against him. He abruptly withdrew from me and stared up at me in shock.

I was pretty sure that wasn’t the reaction I was hoping for. Now what had I done wrong? Good God they weren’t both going to wet themselves and pass out were they?

Both men jerked at my stray thought, I got a angry squeeze and a low growl from Gareth and a dirty look from Jace which told me I was broadcasting on frequency KYMS, or in other words, keep your mind shut! Something I should be doing but simply wasn’t up to at this exact moment, especially given the warmth pooling between my legs.

Ah they didn’t think that one small touch was not going to be enough to satisfy me, did they? What a horrible thought! Whatever their latest problem was, I just hoped they’d figure it out soon and get on with it already.

“What are you?” Jace demanded as he leaned back on his heels and looked up at me. The dirty look sliding toward anger, as if I’d deliberately misled him and this was some horrible joke.

I couldn't quite figure out what the problem was and my own confusion swam into the pool and started doing laps around the general swirling mix already percolating my head. Both of their minds pressed in on me demanding answers.

Behind me Gareth broke the silence, his voice low and hoarse sounding. "This can't be."

Jace suddenly threw up his hands and gestured toward my uncovered parts as if to say...*No? Then how do you explain this!*

I still wasn't sure what 'this' was, but I was damn sure I didn't like the way he had pointed at my parts as if I seemed to be lacking some vital piece of equipment. As far as I knew I had all the right female stuff, so what the hell was their problem?

Their minds whirled faster and I suddenly caught a glimpse of something not quite....female...male...both? The word hermaphrodite whispered through my mind. And down deep I felt Goldy bare her teeth in disgust.

What the hell? And what in all that was uncommonly unholy was that? "Let me go!" I shouted, I'd had enough and I was starting to get pissed. I'd rather die a virgin! If that's what turned them on, then...I couldn't even think of a fitting adjective. Damn damn damn! Did they think I was some sort of mutant hyena! If that was the case I was so out of there! I started struggling in Gareth's arms just wanting free. Talk about a mood killer.

And then it was like a night at the movies and I think I actually gagged as a parade of women flashed through my mind...all having breasts and odd penis like appendages in varying shades of color. And Jace and Gareth were there, and I caught glimpses of them doing...*things* I didn't want to think about. Oh God, oh god, oh god, that was just...*sick!*

My mind shuddered at the filmstrip flashing across the back of my retinas. *Make it stop* my mind begged and Goldy came screaming out of her cave in a wave of angry golden spitting mad Dragon beast. This time I didn't even try to stop her!

One second Gareth was holding a slender golden hued woman, and in a blink of an eye I had shifted and his arms stretched around the belly of a seventeen foot long, fourteen hundred pound very pissed off Dragon.

Jace dived out of the way as the tip of my tail lashed toward him. He made a loud cuff cuff noise in the back of his throat and we in turn hissed back at him.

I was up on my hind legs and tail and I rotated my head on my muscular neck until I was gazing into Gareth's eyes. I pushed my face toward him, spread open my wings and jaws and roared.

I think he actually leaned in. I had to admire his courage because he didn't flinch and he didn't let go, though I gave it my best call of the wild. He wasn't exactly excited but he was struggling to maintain his composure. I could hear his thoughts skittering around inside me and cocked my head to the side in abrupt surprise. Where I'd expected to find anger or fear I was suddenly flooded with a piercing happiness, fierce excitement poured out of him and into me rocking me backwards.

Then a blue tear slipped from his eye slowly crystallizing as it rolled down his cheek. It made soft plinking noise as it struck the floor at our feet.

Behind me I heard Jace sobbing softly. His thoughts were a chaotic mix of overwhelming relief sliding toward chest thumping exaltation.

My God you'd think I'd just offered food to a starving man.

Goldy sat back on her metaphysical haunches and looked around in confusion as if to say....now what?

## Chapter 5

The door at the top of the stairs burst open and several men ran inside weapons drawn. Confused and unsure how to handle the situation, Goldy took one look at the intruders and flung us into the air. The room had vaulted ceilings and I was agile enough to navigate the dropped lighting fixtures.

“Out!” Yelled Gareth turning to track my flight.

I ignored him my attention for the guards watching in horror as I made a line drive at them. Bullets exploded around me and I screamed as one ricocheted off the muscle at the top of my wing. My hardened scales prevented the bullets from doing and damage, but it still ticked me off that they’d shoot at me.

“Mistake!” I hissed as I dove at the men who were suddenly scrambling to get the door open. One golden claw reached out and delicately grasped the leather gun holder of the nearest guard. Braking sharply with my wings I tossed him into the rest of the men and down they all went in a tangle of legs and arms. I flapped my wings and hovered over them. It probably wasn’t polite for me to be scaring them but they shouldn’t have taken pot shots at me.

A draft of air shoved me forward and I grasped the railing with one claw to prevent myself from plowing into the men who had gone sheet white and were staring not at me, but directly behind me. Turning my head showed me that I was not the only

Dragon in the room! A bearded muscular blue was hovering to my left his midnight blue scales reflecting the light and creating tiny rainbows of color around him. To his right a trim green with a long delicately barbed tail hung mid-air.

“Get Out.” Gareth told the men again, his eyes trained on me. I didn’t even bother turning around as I felt the night waft in when the door was opened and they all escaped.

We hung there for a second each taking the other’s measure, waiting to see what we would do.

Jace flapped his wings glanced at Gareth and looked back at me. “We’re sorry. Please come down and we’ll explain.”

“You first.” I responded, not so much because I didn’t trust them, it was more that I wanted to savor my first real view of another Dragon in flight. Besides I still wanted them and hanging around in the rafters wasn’t getting me any closer to getting the dirty deed done. Although I was apparently missing parts, and not entirely sure they still wanted me. Damn that was a depressing thought!

Heaving a sigh, Gareth winced. “Now we’re a dirty deed.” And shaking his head he dropped below site.

Jace watched him go then gave me a somewhat indignant look. To which I responded...”What!”

“You have no idea.” And he too dropped back and down.

I craned my neck and watched him glide to the floor and land. It took him a single step to shift from Dragon to man and he glanced up at me and raised one eyebrow. Gareth had already shifted and was behind the bar again pouring himself something substantially stronger than the Champagne we’d had earlier.

Both men looked up at me expectantly so I reached down into my core and felt myself shrink and shift back to human form. When I opened my eyes I was balanced in a seated position one foot on the railing, one leg dangling in open space, my only clothing the thigh high boots.

Apparently I'd lost my top and skirt in my struggle earlier. Looking down I spotted them in a heap over by the dance floor right next to Jace's foot. Ha, no wonder Jace had given me the eyebrow. Probably thought I was going to be all nervous and embarrassed because they both were fully clothed, meanwhile I'm sitting on the railing nearly bare and exposing my unmentionables.

Damn if they weren't right!

I didn't actually cover myself with my hands, but I did quickly ease off the railing and into the shadows. I had two options, go down the stairs naked or....taking a running dive I cleared the railing, shifted and sailed down to the floor below. My wing tip brushed the bar and Jace grabbed my clothes and held them out reach.

Not fair!

I landed right next to Jace and leaned in over him, my delicately rounded muzzle opened to show just a glimpse of teeth. I thrust my front leg at him, extended my claws and waited. He just smiled at me and held my clothes behind his back. Humph, so he wanted to play eh?

I used my other front leg and gently walked my claw up his stomach, like a game of itsy bitsy spider. At the top of his shirt I hooked in a nail gave him my best Goldy smile and sliced down the front of his shirt to the top of his pants in one smooth motion. I hesitated at his jeans, turning my head to the side and staring intently at him with one very large golden eye. He held perfectly still as my nail did a little tap tap tap and slipped into his waistband.

He didn't say anything, just politely handed me my clothes. It only took a moment in the shadows to make myself somewhat decent. My makeshift top was a total loss as were my panties, torn by either Jace or me during my attempt at escape. I pulled on my original top, tied it off under my breasts, and slipped into my skirt then headed back down to the boys for what I hoped would be a really really good explanation. The jury was still out on the maybe something more.

Jace was holding a drink and actually smiling at me as I wandered back down the stairs. Gareth was leaning his elbows on the bar and had his face buried in his

hands, his fingers were worrying at his hair and I wondered if he was going to create miniature bald spots. That wouldn't be pretty.

He tensed, but eased up on his scalp.

"So talk."

"How about we start over?" Jace suggested, putting down his drink he turned to me and held out his hand. "Hi I'm Jace, part owner of this dive, and green. And this is my partner and best damn friend you could want in any world, Gareth, blue."

Gareth stuck out his shaking hand, though he kept his face buried in his other one.

"Hi I'm Lexi; I like long walks on the beach and boys that know how to show a girl a really good time." I said, tongue in cheek.

Gareth burst out laughing and Jace joined him. Jace pulled himself together first and offered me another glass of Champagne. Gareth produced another bottle from under the counter which he opened and left sitting on the bar. I took the glass feeling a strange sense of *deja vu*.

"So Lexi, are you in town long or just passing through?" Jace asked, obviously taking the lead role in the inane conversation play.

"Been here about a year."

"Oh, have you...ah...met any others like yourself?"

Feeling an imp on my shoulder I looked at him blankly and responded. "You mean girls that like long walks on the beach?"

Heaving a sigh Jace reached for the not Champagne bottle. Gareth handed him a tumbler and he poured himself about two fingers and downed it in one gulp. The man did like to throw back the alcohol, or maybe it was just me?

"Just you." He replied, closing his eyes tightly and rolling the glass across his forehead.

Grinning I looked around for a chair. "Is this going to take long or shall I stand?"

Heaving a sigh Gareth flipped off the music and most of the lights, grabbed both bottles and his glass and walked to the end of the bar.

“You sure that’s a good idea?” Jace asked, not even bothering to open his eyes.

Gareth just grunted and continued walking toward the doors Peewee had been taken out earlier.

Jace put down his glass and spoke into his watch, asking Nick to lock up for as they were retiring and yes, ‘she’ was going with. I heard the last as I was walking away, wandering after Gareth’s disappearing back. Jace caught up with me and held the door.

“To the left.” He told me as we stepped into an alcove with several doors. One had the word Emergency Exit painted in big white letters on it. The others were black and blended in with the walls. He took out a card key and pressed it against a reader on the door farthest from where we’d entered. The door swung open on well oiled hinges and I found myself in another foyer at the end of which Gareth was patiently holding open the doors of a very posh looking elevator.

Hmmm, welcome to my parlor....I thought to myself and stepped into the elevator. Gareth pushed number 3 and down we went. Three subfloors? Wonder what’s on the first two.

“Hang around and you’ll find out.” Jace whispered in my ear.

“I’d ask you to stop doing that, but it’s not really bothering me.” I informed him smartly. After all, there were levels and then there were levels. At the moment he was only picking up stray thoughts since I’d raised my shields earlier. I wasn’t thrilled with the thought of either of them picking through my childhood memories. Most things you just don’t share with total strangers. Besides if they were capable of finishing what they’d started earlier...I just might.

Gareth actually banged his head against the elevator doors and groaned. Jace hissed air between his lips and swallowed the rest of his drink.

By the time the doors slid open I was having a hard time holding back my laughter and both men knew it. Jace grabbed my arm and practically yanked me out of

the elevator. Another foyer and another swipe of the card key...gee these guys were pretty serious with their security. Made a girl wonder what they were hiding, their virtue maybe?

“None of your business.” Gareth practically snarled at me. Yanking open the door and causing it to slam back against the wall.

“Okay.” I replied putting up my hands palm out. “I’m not saying anything.” Nice to know I wasn’t the only frustrated one around here.

“You really shouldn’t torment him like that.” Jace growled next to my ear as we walked through the door. The room we entered was narrow with a table next to the door, a statue of a Dragon in flight its only adornment. On the wall were huge colorful pictures in greens and blues. Not really my thing but I suppose if you were a bachelor...ah....

“Yes!” Jace answered my question stiffly.

This was fun and something I hadn’t done since I was little. Mi only liked to play when she could torment me. I think I actually managed to offend him. Tee hee.

“You are the most...who is Mi?” Gareth demanded. He’d actually moved through the far doorway and turned back toward us.

I ignored him.

Jace propelled us toward him by taking my arm and practically dragging me down the room-hall. Several steps through the doorway was a step down living room with dark blue and green leather couches and chairs spread out around the floor. Blue and green, hmmm seemed to be a theme. A huge entertainment center took up the opposite wall and more of those paintings took up the open wall space. There was a matching hall on the other side of the room down which I guessed might be bedrooms and perhaps a bathroom. If the color scheme continued through the rest of the place, it wasn’t going to take a genius to figure out whose room belonged to whom. Floor lamps and coffee tables seemed to be strategically placed around the room. Not big readers I guess. Yep this place just screamed man or maybe ‘help me’ I couldn’t tell which.

Gareth took a step toward me he looked angry enough to wring my neck. Jace dropped my arm and actually stepped in front of me slightly. “Now Gareth, where’s your sense of humor? You have to agree it could a little upgrading. Maybe a few touches of...gold?”

“She’s being rude.”

“Perhaps she doesn’t know any better. She may have been raised by wolfs for all we know.”

Wolves, ha! Not hardly. Although there was that one summer in Wyoming...

Snorting softly I walked around Jace, went over to the nearest couch placed my drink on the matching table and flopped gracefully down. I’m fairly certain I flashed them.

Smiling to myself I adjusting my skirt, propped my arm across the back of the couch, crossed my legs, and slouched into the corner. Now maybe we could get down to some explaining. I had no idea what time it was and if these two weren’t going to put out I was going to have to find someone else that would. Wasn’t that a lovely thought?

“Could you please speak like a normal person?” Jace asked in an exasperated voice. “And for your information, I don’t put out. I make love, or enjoy sex, or share recreational activities. And we never said we weren’t interested.”

“Oh, so you are? My lack of, ah...spare parts isn’t going to be a problem for you? I wasn’t sure you liked...you know....”

“Know what?” Demanded Gareth with a frown.

“Girls.”

“Oh God I need another drink!” Jace muttered as he made a bee line to Gareth, the lose ends of his torn shirt flapping behind him.

Gareth looked like he was in shock and was still holding both bottles. I could see that his knuckles were white and wondered how the delicate glass had managed to stay intact.

Jace took the bottles from him and set them on the nearest table, taking a second to fill his glass nearly to the brim. “Why are you staring at me?” He demanded as I watched him pour the booze.

“Just wondering what you’ll look like with washboard abs, bloodshot eyes, and a big bulbous nose.” I replied sweetly.

He gave me a dirty look but managed to sip instead of gulp. “This is why drakes leave home.” He muttered glaring down at the drink in his hand.

Gareth glanced between the two of us, gave himself a shake and stepped down into the living area heading toward a chair about four feet to my left. I watched him out of the corner of my eye and couldn’t help thinking what a shame it was the way he was mashing his beautiful cupid bow lips together.

“Thank you.” He muttered as Jace sputtered and coughed alcohol out his nose.

## Chapter 5

“Once upon a time...” Began Gareth and Jace looked at him like he’d grown a second head.

“You’ve got to be kidding me?” I exclaimed. Next they’ll be telling me they knew the Brothers Grimm personally!

“We did, but that’s beside the point.” Gareth remarked darkly.

“Just how old are you?”

“Would you believe me if I told you I don’t remember?” Gareth asked quietly. He’d pulled up a table, leaned back in his chair and propped his feet up. In his hand he was rotating the liquid in his half full tumbler in slow lazy circles.

I looked at Jace who had flopped down in the middle of my couch. He’d placed his own drink on the table in front of him. One arm lay low on his stomach just above his waistband and part of my mind was busy imaging my fingers running across his naked skin. His chest was scrumptious all covered in mahogany hair. Just below his nipples it arrowed into a thin line that made its way over his belly and disappeared into his pants.

It was a nice visual and I was wondering what it would feel like under my fingers, yummy. Jace’s fingers twitched and I knew he was picking up my thoughts. I

was so tempted to reach out and touch him and probably would have, except my eyes followed the hair trail up from his fingers and I was shocked to discover that Jace didn't have a belly button. Pushing up from my slouch I leaned in to get a better look.

I hadn't noticed our difference earlier.

I raised my head and met Jace's eyes. Apparently he had, they both had. I could feel Gareth also looking at me. Glancing down, my fingers inched toward my tummy and my own cute little innie.

Oops.

I'm no fool; I raised my shields full tilt and leaned back into the couch.

"Well that went well." Jace muttered, rubbing his head as he'd done earlier. For some reason my raising shields seemed to pain him.

"So," Gareth began, his eyes once again focused on his glass. "What's a girl like you doing in a gin joint like this?"

I was pretty good at reading between the lines; after all I'd grown up with Mi. At the moment I was pretty sure what he meant was more along the lines of what's a girl like you doing breathing? Or more appropriately, how is it possible a girl like you is breathing? Or maybe, who made you?" Because when it came down to it, that was the real question.

"Would you believe me if I told you I don't remember?" I asked, throwing back his response at him. From the look he gave me I was pretty sure he didn't believe me.

"I liked it better when she wasn't shielding so hard." Jace muttered. "This static she's producing gives me a headache."

Oh so that's the reason for the wincing and rubbing. Interesting, I didn't realize I gave bad static. I hadn't realized I gave static at all. Have to discuss that with Mi next time I see her.

"What bothers me more is that she feels she needs to."

"Yeah," Jace agreed resting his head against the back of the couch, "that's a problem."

“Why don’t you ask her why she feels the need to shield from us?”

“Because banging my head against the wall doesn’t feel good? I noticed it wasn’t helping you in the elevator.”

“Not true, she’s still breathing isn’t she?”

I didn’t particularly like where this conversation was going and decided it was time to get back on topic. “So boys, what’s a girl need to do to get some sex around here?”

Jace cracked open an eye and looked at Gareth who looked back at him with a frown. “She’s in an awfully big hurry think its biological?”

“Makes you wonder.”

“She won’t tell she doesn’t trust us.”

“We can’t force her.”

“We could enslave her and keep her forever.”

“Forever, do you think that’s possible?”

“I don’t know, she won’t tell us how old she is.”

“I’m not certain that would be wise.”

“You are probably right Gareth; let’s not forget she’s missing dangly parts.” Jace responded sarcastically. “And you know what that means.”

“No I don’t, but I’m almost afraid we’d break her. She seems awfully delicate.”

“Maybe we should just show her to the door.”

“Yes we should, she won’t appreciate us.”

“She has a sharp tongue.”

“She undoubtedly will be more trouble than she’s worth.”

“Sometimes those are the best kind.”

“Usually.”

“She’s golden.”

“And not just her Dragon, she’s a myth.”

“She’s a virgin.”

“So she claims...”

“I can’t remember if I’ve ever been with a virgin.”

“It’s not something you’re likely to forget.”

“How is it possible that she’s a virgin?”

“She won’t tell us because she doesn’t trust us.”

“She’s a miracle.”

“That’s the problem.”

“This will probably end badly.”

“No doubt, for us.”

“I don’t want to show her to the door.”

“I want her to trust us.”

“I want to rip her clothes off and make her scream to the heavens while I ride her.”

“Hmmm.” Gareth agreed with a nod.

Interesting and informative and apparently they had arrived at mutual consensus. One I was hoping I was going to enjoy if I’d been following their tennis match correctly. I was smiling when Gareth sat forward placed his glass on the table, stood abruptly and held out his hand for me. Beside me Jace pushed up from the cushions at the same time, and also offered his hand. Did these two ever do anything alone?

“Before we do this gentlemen, let’s just be clear.” I began, eyeing them both. “There will be no enslaving or keeping. I’m not looking for a permanent anything.” That is unless either of them could impregnate me, and after viewing the non-existent belly button I was pretty sure that wasn’t going to be an option. From her cave Goldy blinked a golden eye and whispered, “Not fertile.”

So there it was there would be no offspring from tonight’s union even if it was possible. I didn’t realize I’d been carrying one, but a weight shifted off my shoulders. Indiscriminate sex could be dicey, it was a relief to know there wouldn’t be complications of the mini me version.

Nope I was just here for the sex. I'd found Dragons, just not those tailor made for me. In the meantime, it wouldn't hurt to take these two for a test drive. I just hoped I didn't crash and burn at a hundred and forty.

"Then let us enjoy the moment, shall we?" Gareth responded, grasping my hand and lifting me off the couch.

Taking a breath I dropped my surface shields and felt Jace gently squeeze my hand in thanks. I squeezed back and we proceeded to do the snake thing toward the opposite side of the room with Jace in the lead through the couches and into the hall. There were five doors I could see, two on each side and one at the end. We walked past the first two and Jace pulled us to the second door on the left.

When it opened, I caught my breath in wonder. His room was a huge cavern; the floors were packed dirt covered with finely woven throw rugs. The walls and ceiling were rough hewn as if dwarfs had chiseled the space out of a mountain. Shimmering veins of iridescent quarts marbled the walls and ceiling creating a soft glow from the recessed lighting fixture over the bed.

And what a bed!

Situated dead center was the largest box springs and mattress I'd ever seen. It literally looked Dragon sized. I had to wonder how they'd got it in here through the doors.

"Not difficult if you have telekinetic friends." Jace commented.

Ah.

Not surprisingly the room was done in various shades of green. I supposed that had Gareth been in the lead we might have ended up across the hall in a room done in blues. Of course if this worked out, we could always give that a try too.

Both men actually shrugged then nodded.

Jace pulled us across the room behind the bed and through the connecting arch into a huge bathroom with a walk in closet. As we crossed the threshold the floor became a creamy colored marble that matched sinks, shower, toilet area, and huge sunken tub. Gareth released my hand and wandered over to the bath, turning on the

faucets and adjusting them so that steam began rising as the tub quickly filled.

Glancing around me I noticed a decided lack of salts or bath oils. I suppose it would have been too much to ask, this being a bachelor pad.

Gareth turned to look at me and lifted one eyebrow. He was out the door and across the room before I could stop him and back in less than a minute carrying a small vial which he unstoppered, held over the water, tipping the end so that several drops fell into the steam. Immediately the spicy sweet sent of cinnamon filled the room.

Thank you I whispered in my mind.

He dipped his head and smiled back at me.

While Gareth was testing the water Jace led me to a chair, seated me on it, and proceeded to kneel in front of me so he could assist me out of my boots. Taking them with him into the closet, he disappeared around the corner. I took the opportunity to use the toilet, which was recessed behind a separating wall and when I came out both men were already naked and seated in the tub opposite each other.

The lights were dimmed and soft music wafted out of hidden speakers. Someone had retrieved the Champagne and my glass stood on the side of the tub halfway between the two of them. Glancing down I noticed the stack of fluffy green towels and couldn't help but smile. It looked like everything was set.

"We only require you." Replied Jace holding out his hand to me.

Taking a breath I untied my top, and let it slip down my arms. When I was free, I placed my fingers in my skirt waistband and slowly pushed it down my legs, stepping clear as it pooled at my feet. My hair swung loose at my back and I bent at the waist pulled it into a twist and tied it in a knot at the top of my head. Small tendrils escaped near my temples and immediately curled in the heat. When I was fairly certain it would stay, I stood straight and reached for Jace's outstretched hand.

The water was just perfect and I sighed in genuine pleasure as I slipped into the liquid heat. Closing my eyes I leaned my head back on the rim and simply relaxed.

Jace's fingers wrapped around my ankle and lifted my foot into his lap so he could massage my arch with his thumbs. I could feel the hair on his thigh against the

back of my calf as it brushed against me in the water's motion. I turned slightly so my knee wasn't at an odd angle and Gareth slid in behind me pulling me into his body and cradling me against his chest. His hands ran up and down my arms and gently kneaded my shoulders. I was thinking a girl could get used to this when he cupped my chin and turned me toward his descending lips. His mouth hesitated just over mine and our breaths mingled. He smelled of warm rich whiskey and something earthy. I breathed in the scent of him and felt my nerve endings come alive. He tastes like magic I thought then his soft lips brushed mine. He went slowly, softly as if he knew this was my first real kiss and wanted to make it memorable. He nibbled gently across my bottom lip and when I parted for him, he flicked his tongue against my teeth seeking entrance. Instinctively my jaw relaxed and my teeth parted so he could slip his tongue in, its gentle tip flicking here and there as he sought to learn the contours of my mouth, coaxing and teasing. Embolded I tentatively touched the tip of my tongue to his, eliciting a hum from deep in his throat.

His arms flexed and he lifted me onto his lap slipping his thighs under me so I was seated on him as I would a chair, my back cradled by stomach and chest, my one foot still in Jace's lap. With one hand he held my chin the other slid down my arm and to my inner thigh.

A gentle pressure forced my legs apart so that they slipped to either side of Gareth's leaving me slightly out of the water and completely exposed. Jace released my ankle and slid his fingers up my calf shifting forward in the water and off the seat he trailed his palms up the inside of my leg. I opened my eyes and watched him watch me as he bent and kissed the tender skin under my left knee. My breath caught in my throat. He looked so damn sexy with his green eyes sparkling like twin emeralds as he slowly made his way ever higher.

Gareth and I both watched as Jace bobbed in the water kissing and licking up my thigh until he was between our hips. Lifting himself onto his knees he raised his shoulders and chest out of the water and leaned his torso over us, hovering at the juncture of our legs as he ran his hands down then back up the outside of my thighs.

His palms flattened out as he skimmed them over my hips and waist to my ribs. My breath caught and I bit down on my lower lip as Jace flexed his fingers and ran them up the outside of my breasts then over the tops to my collar. He took a moment to trace the delicate bones and then his hand slid over my heart and rested there briefly. He leaned forward and laid a gentle kiss where his palm had been and I couldn't tell if I was feeling my heart against my skin or if I was picking up his thoughts of my rapid heart beat against his lips. Either way, I felt my insides melt as a liquid heat spread outwards from my core.

A soft moan escaped me. Somehow we maintained eye contact as he slowly kissed his way down across my breast and pulled my nipple into his mouth. My back arched, eyes slipping shut as my fingers found Gareth's thighs and dug in, holding on tightly.

Below me Gareth's shifted, and I was suddenly aware of his erection pressing hard and hot into the small of my back while Jace's brushed lightly against my inner thigh. Gareth's fingers slid into my hair and he turned my head back toward him, his mouth found mine ready and open as his tongue slid in all hot and wet and hungry.

Fingers slid into my patch of curls at my pelvic and my hips shifted. At my breast Jace sucked harder his teeth sending delicious tremors through me.

I let go of Gareth's leg and reached for Jace. His skin felt so smooth and hot beneath my palms as I ran them over his sides and up his chest digging my fingers into the springy hair between his breasts. I'd never felt anything like it, and buried myself in the soft mat, swirling his curls around my fingers. I loved the sensation.

At my breast I felt Jace smile; obviously he found my infatuation with his hairy chest amusing.

Gareth's grip on my hair tightened slightly, reminding me I wasn't paying as close attention to his kissing as he'd perhaps like me to. My fingers stilled on Jace's chest as I focused in on the way Gareth's tongue felt sliding in and out of my mouth. I may not be experienced, but no one could accuse me of not being eager, as I began to match him move for move. Our mouths melded and for an instant nothing else existed.

I actually turned in the water and climbed to my knees in his lap so I could reach him easier.

Wrapping my hands around his neck I pressed my breasts into him and discovered Jace wasn't the only one with a nice hairy chest. Mmmm I thought leaning back just enough so I could get my hands between us and into those delicious sandy blond curls. Something about a well muscled chest covered in springy hair just did it for me.

I think he appreciated my attention because he was making that humming sound again deep in his throat. His hands cupped my bottom and his fingers began kneading. I could feel Jace behind me and his hands slid down my thighs, gently separating them so they slipped to either side of Gareth's and I was once again straddling him. Jace slid in behind us pressing me forward until my pelvic was firmly against Gareth's erection. Jace's arms wrapping around my body his hands sliding over my breasts, cupping and squeezing, and rolling them against his palms.

The kissing was mind blowing and Jace's hands on my body felt so good, but I'd developed an needy ache down low that urged me on, whispering there was something I was missing, something more. Jace pressed more firmly against my bottom, pushing me into Gareth and the needy ache blossomed, creating little pools of liquid desire churning in my tummy. He pressed again and this time Gareth rose to meet the thrust.

Back and forth we went, my most feminine parts brushing again and again against the length of Gareth until I thought I would explode from the sweet agony. My head dropped to Gareth's chest breath coming in deep rasping gulps. I wanted...no needed more. I was so empty...but the rubbing and thrusting continued and I, I couldn't think as the pressure built inside of me. My heart raced and I held on weakly to Gareth feeling him sliding back and forth on the sensitive skin between my legs. So close, and then I was moving with their rhythm no longer a passive participant. My hips undulated forward taking Jace's pressure and creating a sweeter more intimate caressing that had warmth building low and throbbing, and then exploding outward,

washing through me in a wave that clenched my muscles as it vibrated up my body leaving me drowning in pleasure.

Jace's squeezed me gently and pulled me off of Gareth's lap. The two of them turned me. Gareth reaching out to pull my back against his chest and I was once again seated on him. Jace moved between our legs and lowered his mouth to my stomach, my eyes fluttered open and I stared deep into his emerald eyes as he delved his tongue into my belly button before dipping lower. And then his mouth was covering me, his breath so hot it sent shivers through me. He used his fingers to separate my folds and then his tongue flicked over me causing me to arch my back. I moaned and reached for something to hold on to. Gareth hands slipped under mine and palm to palm we entwined our fingers.

Jace used his tongue and lips on me all the while watching me, trapping me in his gaze as the pressure started to build and my breath shuttered in my throat. I came this time with a sharp cry as my body spasmed in Gareth's arms.

"Lexi."

I opened my eyes to find Jace leaning over me the strong length of him poised between my legs. I fell into his eyes as he gently pressed his head into my body. Gareth squeezed my fingers and shifted his legs, lifting me slightly so that Jace slipped in deeper.

"So tight." Jace whispered and I could see the beads of sweat standing out on his forehead. His hands were braced on the seat to either side of Gareth, his arms and shoulders flexed to prevent his weight crushing me.

Just the tip of him was inside me, even now beginning to fill that aching emptiness with his hard length and I lifted my hips to him, silently asking for more. He smiled then; a sweet and wonderful smile and I felt my heart catch.

"This may hurt." He warned me and I understood that he was holding back because he didn't want to frighten me.

"Please..." I whispered and my mind echoed my plea.

He dipped his head, flicked his eyes toward Gareth who lifted my hands still entwined with his and wrapped them around my body holding me tightly. Jace eased back slowly nearly sliding himself all the way out. My breath caught and I would have objected except he held there a second then pressed forward. He worked us that way for several minutes, each time sliding deeper until he was about a third the way inside of me and I was having a hard time not squirming in Gareth's arms.

My hips arched to meet him with each thrust trying to pull him in deeper but each time he stopped, holding back from me, teasing me. I was becoming frustrated wanting more, wanting all of him, my mind nearly screaming, give me give me! And on his next gentle thrust I raised my foot out of the water and wrapped my leg around his thigh simultaneously raising my hips to meet him.

He made a strangled sound and his eyes went wide as I grabbed him with my leg and yanked him into me. His hand slipped and as he plunged forward I snaked my other leg around him, catching him with my body as he rammed full force into me.

I screamed...I admit it. It wasn't a small yip or a happy cry; it was a full throated blood curdling scream. We all froze. Well we almost all froze, deep inside me I felt Jace jerk and I opened my eyes in surprised wonder and found Jace's horror filled eyes staring back at me from mere inches away. Gareth's hands were on his shoulders bracing him off us, my legs still wrapped tightly around his hips holding him to my body.

"Sorry." I muttered and Jace jerked inside me again causing me to suck in a breath. "It wasn't as bad as it sounded." The pain had been bad but thankfully it was a one time thing.

"I have never caused any woman to make a noise like that! You sounded as if I'd killed you!"

"Are you hurt?" Gareth asked, his voice a deep rumble that vibrated through my body.

"Yes I think she may have unmanned me." Jace responded.

I couldn't help smiling at his attempt at humor. Gareth gave a friendly squeeze to his shoulders as if to say buck up.

Was I? Aside from the overall tearing of my hymen I didn't think so. I did a mental check of my body parts and came up all systems go. Nothing broken, nothing maimed. There had been pain, but it was quickly subsiding especially when I concentrated on the long full length of Jace buried deep in me.

Mmm I'd never had anyone inside me before and I decided I liked it, very much and could we please get on to what came next? Or more importantly, who? After all the night wasn't getting any younger and while technically I'd moved from virgin to novice, the only way to become expert was to practice. I liked doing things well.

They both breathed a sigh of relief but Jace gave me a look, part chagrin, part embarrassment? Taking pity on him I smiled, leaned forward and gently kissed his lips. My fingers traced across his cowlick and down to the tip of his widows peak and he dropped his forehead to mine. We sat that way for a moment.

"Are we ready to try again?" He finally asked.

I couldn't help but laugh, it was too cute and I reached for him. Sensing my need Gareth lowered Jace on to us so I could wrap my arms around him to hold him tight. I used my hands to stroke his back gently, letting him know with my touch that it was okay, that everything would be alright.

My fingers slid over his shoulders and down his arms as he pushed himself up off my chest pressing his hips against mine as leverage. My eyes widened and I grinned eagerly up at him.

Certain that he wasn't going to leave me this way I let my legs slide down the back of his thighs then shifted back against Gareth, sinking into the cradle of his body and letting my head fall back against his shoulder. He mouth turned toward me and pressed feather light kisses across my brow and temple. Nice safe arms wrapped around my body, giving me a squeeze of my own. I turned my face into the vee of his neck, inhaling the warm musky scent of his body and touched him with the tip of my tongue. He hummed and covered a breast with his palm. I arched into it and gently

sunk my teeth into his neck. Jace made a low sound in his throat and I fluttered my eyes in his direction. He grinned and slowly slid himself nearly out of my body. I made whimper noises and he hesitated lifting an eyebrow as I glanced up at him, my teeth still holding Gareth's sensitive skin between my pearly white teeth. Raising a hand, I ran my fingers across his chest, letting my mind fill with the pleasure I felt from the warmth of his skin and the texture of his hair.

The smile slipped from his face replaced by something darker, more urgent. His eyes shifted, became more translucent absorbing the light and I was captured in their depths as he eased forward into to me, until his entire shaft was buried deep. Then he ground his hips to me and my eyes narrowed as heat spiraled up my body. My mouth went slack and my fingers clenched in his chest hair, I had to fight to keep my nails from digging in as he rode my body. With each thrust his face became more defined, the skin over his cheekbones more pronounced. His eyes began a slow seductive whirl that pulled me in and left me breathless. I could feel him inside of me, between my legs and in my head his pleasure teased at me, flicking along my nerve endings. His desire grew, spread up from the depths of him, burning my skin from the inside out. I moaned and raised my body to him, offering myself to the strength of his need. I wanted this, wanted to give this to him, to myself. His breathing grew harsher, his actions more forceful and I raised my hips to match each thrust wanting him deeper and stronger inside of me.

I felt the weight growing in me once again and I relaxed into the pressure as I sensed Jace's eager anticipation washing through my body and I came writhing and screaming. Jace's thrust once more into me grinding against me, his back bowed and his eyes closed and I felt him explode deep inside while I came and writhed some more.

When I came back to my senses, Jace was kneeling in the water between our legs, his head on my thigh his long dark eyelashes resting against his cheeks. His breathing nearly as ragged as mine, and he must have sensed my glance since he cracked open one eyelid giving me dopey looking smile. "Wow." He said.

## Chapter 6

When I could sit without fear of bonelessly sliding under the water, Gareth placed me on the seat beside him, reached over and picked up my glass of Champagne. As he handed it to me, he leaned in and kissed me then sat back and simply watched me with his beautiful blue eyes. His look said enjoy the moment, I'm next. And my heart gave a little flutter at the thought.

I glanced at Jace and found him sipping his own drink his eyes smiling back at me over the rim of his glass. He looked extremely relaxed and fairly pleased with himself. Not unlike Mi when she won an argument with my Mother. I slumped down in the water and noticed it was nearly tepid, tiny gooseflesh stood out on my arms and I rubbed at them with the hand not holding my drink. Funny it hadn't felt cool a few minutes ago.

Jace put down his drink stood up and leaned over the edge of the tub giving me a fantastic view of his nice tight ass as he reached for the towels. I could have helped myself, but the truth was I didn't want to, so I reached out and ran my finger over the top of spine and into the two little dimples just above his cheeks. He jerked and nearly dropped the towels as he turned to look over his shoulder at me in surprise. I just looked back at him and sipped my drink thinking all the while...nice nice nice...

Gareth put down his drink and slid under the water. He rose like Poseidon to stand before me hand on hips. I nearly swallowed my tongue, and my libido did a tap dance of joy! This was the first glimpse I'd actually had of him without his clothes and

it would have been impossible not to appreciate the masculine beauty of him. My eyes traced the path from his wide shoulders across his deep well defined chest to his tightly muscled stomach. My grip on my drink tightened as my eyes caressed his lean waist and hips and I noted that he was very happy to see me. His erection stood between us, long and hard and I had the overwhelming urge to run my tongue over the length of him. I shifted forward on the seat and reached toward his hips, my glass disappeared from my hand and with nothing to hinder me; I cupped him with my fingers, amazed at the silky smoothness of him and the heat that warmed my palm spreading up my wrist.

He sucked in a breath and stepped toward me as I tightened my grip and gently tugged him in my direction. I allowed my fingers to trace his length, now wrapping them gently around the breadth of him then skimming my fingers from base to tip, listening to his breathing as I discovered just where he liked to be touched.

He tasted faintly of cinnamon and something earthy, a flavor I was beginning to associate with him alone, something uniquely Gareth. That was my last thought as I ran my tongue over him and slowly drew his penis into my mouth.

A quick study, yeah that was me. And eager, did I mention I was eager? If nothing else, I'd discovered two things about myself that night; one I liked a well muscled chest. And two, I really liked oral sex! I'm not certain if I was that good or if I was picking up pointers from Gareth and Jace, both of whom I could feel sharing my pleasure. But it wasn't that long before Gareth's legs started trembling and his breathing became ragged. Wow what a rush! I think I could have gone on like that all night, working him with my mouth and hands, but apparently that wasn't to be as with a strangled cry, Gareth grasped me under the arms and lifted me onto the side of the tub. His lips found mine as he spread my legs and thrust himself in me.

I was fairly sure that would leave bruises tomorrow, but couldn't really worry about it when all I could concentrate on was the way he stretched me tight, filling me up. He wrapped his arms around my back and held me as he plunged into me over and over until the liquid fire started swirling and my limbs became tense as I raced for that piercing pleasure. I leaned back in his arms and brushed against Jace who was kneeling

at the side of the tub his green eyes bright. I reached a hand to him and he slipped his shoulder under my head supporting me, kissing me. My eyes closed and I clutched at Gareth urging him deeper, harder. A growl rumbled up from his chest and he leaned forward and covered my breast with his mouth, sucking my nipple hard and I came for them. Stars danced behind my lids and waves of pleasure exploded through my body. My legs wrapped around Gareth's hips and I rode the ecstasy as he thrust into me once, twice more and experienced his own orgasm. His pleasure swamped me and I screamed and came again.

Jace helped us back into the water and we sat slumped together in a tangle of arms and legs. My hair hung in damp strands and I seriously considered leaving it like that, but knew I would be sorry if I did since it had a tendency to look like a rats nest if not properly dealt with. I'd get right on that just as soon as my limbs started working again.

Taking pity on me Jace reached over and grabbed the shampoo off the floor, floated me to the middle of the tub, his palm under my back allowed me to tip back my head and wet my hair. He floated me back onto Gareth's lap and proceeded to lather my hair, his fingers gently massaging my neck and scalp. When he was done, Gareth tipped me back, reached over and pinched my nose before pressing me under the water. He was waiting for me when I came up and his lips met mine in a soft sweet kiss that made my heart do a strange flip flop. I smiled up at him and he gave me a squeeze, gathered me into his arms and stood.

Jace flipped the stopper letting the water drain and reached for the towels he'd left laying on the side of the tub. Gareth refused to put me down so Jace bundled my hair into one towel and flipped the other onto the floor so Gareth could step out onto the marble without killing us both.

We were half way to the bed when my stomach growled, loudly. Jace gave me an amused look and headed out the door his towel wrapped around his hips. Gareth took me to the bed, pulled back the covers and still holding me in his arms, scooted to the middle then proceeded to drape me across him as he propped himself up with

several pillows. The lower half of my body slid between his legs and my upper half lay across his chest so that my breasts were pressed into his stomach and my head was cradled on the soft mat of his chest. My arms slipped to his sides as I snuggled in against him, enjoying the heat coming off his body and the warm spicy sent of him. He brushed my towel to the side and ran his fingers over my back, drawing butterfly shapes across my skin. My eyes slipped closed and I let myself go, simply enjoying the feel of him surrounding me.

I roused a few minutes later when Jace returned carrying a tray heaped with what looked like roast beef, cheeses, and fresh fruit. He climbed onto the bed and placed the tray near my elbow. “Allow me.” He said, swatting my hand as I reached for a slice of meat. And he picked up a piece wrapped it around some cheese and held it to my lips.

I hadn’t been fed since I was, well I couldn’t exactly remember when but I was fairly certain I’d still been in diapers.

“Diapers, what is a diaper?” Gareth asked, his voice sounding puzzled.

I had an instant vision of a pooey diaper strapped to the bottom of an infant and felt both men wince in disgust. Oops, slipped again. Too bad I just didn’t have the energy to care at the moment. Besides, if they’d wanted to kill me they would have done so already, unless they were trying to romance me to death, in which case I’d go happy.

Jace chuckled and shoved a slice of apple in my mouth.

Fifteen minutes later I pushed Jace’s hand away as he aimed another piece of cheese in my direction. I felt like I was going to explode and was certain my tummy was no longer its normal flat self. Resting my cheek against Gareth, I realized I had no idea what time it was and that I should probably get going. Somewhere upstairs was my purse and my car was still in the parking structure at the publishing company.

“Please stay.”

“Yes stay.” Jace agreed, sliding off the bed and carrying the tray out the door. I was still resting against Gareth when he returned and disappeared into the bathroom.

His towel was gone and he was carrying a wooden handled brush in his hand when he returned. Gareth slipped the towel from my hair and handed it to Jace who in turn handed him the brush.

Jace climbed back onto the bed after getting rid of my towel, killing the music and dimming the lights in the bedroom. He'd left a light softly glowing in the closet, I suppose in case one of us needed to use the restroom in the middle of the night. Or maybe it was just so we could see each other; I could only imagine how dark the room must be with all the lights off, it wasn't like there were windows below ground.

I propped myself up on my hands and enjoyed the feel of Gareth running the brush through my hair. Jace stretched out on his side, using a couple of pillows to prop himself up with. His green eyes appeared thoughtful as he watched the two of us.

"Lexi, if you keep looking at me like that, I'm going to take it as an invitation."

Hmmm, was that a bad thing?

"It is if you want to walk tomorrow."

I wasn't sure what Jace meant, but I honestly couldn't care less about tomorrow, not when this could be a once in a lifetime opportunity.

"Were you planning on leaving town?" Gareth asked quietly.

"No." I mumbled; chin resting on the back of my hands. I hadn't planned on leaving, but it might not be an option.

"Then this," He responded, waving the brush in a circle to include the three of us and choosing to ignore the unvoiced portion of my comment. "Does not need to be a once in a lifetime opportunity."

I closed my eyes and let my hands slip back to his sides, pressing my cheek against his skin I responded with a heavy sigh. "You were right earlier; I will undoubtedly be more trouble than I'm worth. Better to just show me the door. Because what happened upstairs earlier...is going to cause problems."

"Lexi," He whispered and his hand stroked over my hair. "Whatever the problem, let us help you."

“Please trust us. We can protect you.” Added Jace as he slid toward us and slipped his fingers through my hair.

What would that be like I wondered? To feel safe and secure and not have to hide who I was, to not have to shimmer to conceal myself?

Both men hugged me tight and I could feel them pressing in on my mind with their concern. A sob escaped me and I felt the fear like a sickness wash up from my center, drowning me in waves of despair so that I clung to them sobbing. I’d had no idea how weighted down I’d been by the need to conceal myself from the ever present gut wrenching pain of not knowing who your enemies might be. I was terrified just knowing that somewhere out there they were waiting for me to make that one critical mistake.

Tonight I had exposed myself, I had broken the rules. And in doing so I had placed my needs over the safety of others. Now I had no way of knowing who would pay. I had no right to drag Gareth and Jace into my problems, just the thought of them injured or killed made me cry all the harder. I needed to go.

“No!” Growled Gareth. “We cannot let you go thinking you were to blame for this evening.”

Jace pulled back enough so I could lift my eyes to Gareth. The look on his face was fierce and his eyes were darkest pools of midnight blue. I glanced at Jace who just looked angry. “It’s true.” Jace added. “We felt you before you ever entered the building.....such power. It’s been centuries...”

“And there you were this brown little mouse. It was shocking. We had hoped...”

“You... it was you that incited Goldy!”

“We called to her, your reaction was...unexpected.”

“You had no right and you have no idea what you’ve done! What we’ve done.”

I said trying to push back from his arms, from his body.

“Then you will tell us and on our honor, we will make it right.”

What I would have said next was lost as the air turned cold and the room was suddenly full of death.

Vampires! God I hated the blood suckers. The thought stuck in my head as I was flung through the air. I flipped and landed on the balls of my feet facing a skinny brown haired sucker who had the look of a madman covering his face. New, was my next thought as he struck out at me. New and slow! I countered with my forearm blocking his strike, raised my left foot and struck out viciously at his left knee. The bone gave with a loud snap and as he was crumpling to the floor I shifted my hand sliced open his chest and pulled out his heart. He exploded in a cloud of dust and I turned to see Jace and Gareth busy with several others. Goldy sat up for the first time in hours hissing eagerly.

I jumped up on the bed and felt the brush hit my ankle. Reaching down I grabbed it, snapped the bristles off and jumped on the back of the nearest attacker. He staggered under my weight and while he took the step that would have kept him from falling, I rammed the sharp pointy end of the wooden handle deep into his chest. I spun as my feet hit the ground and struck out swiftly and two more baby Vampires exploded. Death by brush, that's got to suck. I thought to myself and couldn't help smiling at my own joke.

Jace and Gareth looked like they were doing just fine so I slipped from the room hunting any others that may not have joined the initial rush. Down the hall I went my feet silent on the carpeting. I pushed my senses out, feeling the space around me, searching. Goldy sniffed the air and tipped her head sideways, and he was on me, I twisted and tried to block but his fangs sank deep into my bicep slicing the skin and pissing me off. I grabbed a handful of his greasy hair and yanked him off me. I could feel the blood dripping down my arm and I held him while he struggled, his dirty nails scratching at my arm. I shifted my arm healing immediately and protecting the areas he could reach. His nails made an irritating scratching noise as they grated across my scales.

I grabbed his hand by the wrist and sharply bent it backwards, snapping it and causing him to hiss at me. I still had a grip on his hair and I gave him a nasty shake leaned forward and spit in his face. Did I mention I hate Vampires?

“Lexi are you going to play with him or dispose of him?” Gareth asked from behind me. I hadn’t heard him come down the hall, not good.

“You don’t think it would be worthwhile to question him?” I asked giving the Vampire another shake as he continued to claw at my arm with his good hand. Reaching out I grabbed his second wrist and gave it a squeeze, letting him know I was that close to breaking that one too. He glared back at me with beady little eyes. God where did they find these kids? This one couldn’t have been more than sixteen or seventeen. Someone had set up shop in the past six months in the city and these little beasties had been popping up all over the place.

Most newly risen didn’t last past their first month, too psychotic to handle the change. Those that did survive were usually more civil minded as the Vampire Council in general hated bad press and therefore tended to clean up their own messes. Someone must have slipped through their net, because turning under age babies was not only frowned upon, it’d been declared illegal and the special force hunters had standing licenses to kill first, ask later. Of course Vampires tended to leave little evidence of their passing so few questions were asked.

One thing was for certain, babies were much easier to kill than those older more powerful Vampires.

Jace joined us a look of disgust on him as he brushed at the fine power covering his torso. Gareth stood in the hallway and leaned a shoulder against the wall, his eyebrow raised in query.

I sighed and yanked the kids face upwards so I could stare into his eyes. Wading through the undead’s memories was never pleasant the newly undead even less so. The last time I’d done this had been with Mi and I didn’t like it any better now than I had then. It was so much easier to just stake the little bastards. Billy, no Bobby was his name and he had found himself wandering around the graveyard two or was it three

nights ago. The sun burned him and he'd hidden during the day. He'd met one of the others down in the bedroom last night and had come for the promise of food. He was so hungry, afraid and sad. He missed his sister and Mother.

I pulled out and glanced at Gareth with a look of horror. I didn't want to kill the kid; he'd done nothing wrong just protected himself! What kind of monster does this to someone then leaves them to fend for themselves? The thought made my stomach curdle and I suddenly felt nauseous. I couldn't do it, I just couldn't.

Jace crossed to me and his face looked like an empty mask but in his eyes I could see the sorrow. He thrust his forearm in Bobby's face holding it there as the kid bit down and began sucking. I gagged and released the hold I had on his hair, my hand shifting back to normal. Jace gave me a pained look and sank his own hand into the boy's hair, his hold not quite as tight as mine had been. He turned back to the boy and I could feel him sinking into the boy's consciousness. I wasn't sure what he did but after a few minutes he walked the boy to the couch and gently disengaged himself. The boy looked stunned as Jace urged him to sit.

Gareth had disappeared down the hall and came back wearing pants and holding what looked like a robe and a spare pair of jeans. He was speaking into his communicator. He tossed the pants to Jace who grabbed them out of the air slipped into them and buttoned them closed. He helped me into the robe and I pulled the belt tight just as the door swung open down the hall and Nick and three of his buddies stepped into the room.

Jace went to them and they spoke quietly, after which two of the guards bundled Bobby out the door. Gareth wandered over to speak to Nick and Jace and I wandered over to the kitchen to the left of the front hall. I needed something to wash the gritty taste of ash out of my mouth. Jace joined me, his hand slipping into mine, fingers squeezing. Their kitchen was massive, on the same scale as his bedroom and looking around I wondered what some of the gadgets did. I could cook, but it wasn't my forte and half the things in here I'd never seen before. There was a huge island in the middle of the room with several backless barstools tucked under. The room was mostly

copper, with cherry colored cupboards, dark grey marble countertops and a massive refrigerator. Pots and pans hung from a rack and wine glasses hung from wooden slats that took up one side of the room. In the far corner was a closed door, I wasn't sure where it led but I was guessing king sized pantry maybe? It was the only room besides the bathroom that wasn't done in blue and green. I would have smiled at the thought but right then I wasn't really feeling up to it and rubbed my forehead instead. The digital clock on the stove indicated it was close to three and I felt a weariness settle around me.

Jace pulled me to a bar stool and went to get glasses and water from the fridge. He poured three and after giving me mine, carried the other out to Gareth. They came back together to find me sitting on my stool with my face in my hands.

"What will happen to him?" I asked my voice sounding weary even to me.

"He'll be taken care of, he'll be fine."

"Sure, if you call being undead fine." I muttered.

Gareth's voice sounded tired. "Come to bed." He remarked. "Nick's men will guard the door, we're all tired. Join us Lexi, please."

I slipped down from the chair, Gareth reached for my hand and I reached for Jace's. I followed Gareth down the hall. Damned if he didn't take us to his room, and yes it was blue. I thought we would fall into the bed, but Gareth pulled us into the bathroom and all three of us took turns rinsing off in the shower. All clean and dry we crawled into bed and pulled the covers over us. I ended up in the middle with Jace curled around me from behind, my cheek and arm resting across Gareth's chest. I had never slept with a man before let alone two. But it had been a long emotionally exhausting day and it only took me half a second to fall asleep.

## Chapter 7

I couldn't breathe, not surprising given that I had a thirty five pound cat sitting on my chest. Not how I usually liked to start my day, or was it still the middle of the night?

"Can you get off me?" I wheezed pushing up on my elbow as Mi removed herself from the center of my chest, sat down beside me, and wrapped her tail around her front paws. I rubbed at my eyes with one hand and looked around. Jace and Gareth were still sleeping on either side. Funny they hadn't sensed her presence, but then maybe she had managed to step over them and only used me as her path of choice.

"What are you doing here? Has something happened to Mom?"

"Your Mother is perfectly fine; it's you I'm concerned about, I sent you out to find a suitable indiscretion, not barricade yourself in some subterranean cave with not one but two drakes! I would have been here sooner, except your Mother contacted me in a panic, apparently she felt something had happened to you. From the company you are keeping, I see her concern is not unwarranted." Mi finished with a sniff.

I frowned. "I tried suitable, it wet its pants and passed out on me."

"I suggested sex," Mi continued with a touch of sarcasm, "not dining, could you not make them see the difference?"

"You've already heard about last night...?"

She blinked at me and tilted her head to the side, the tip of her tail flicking in annoyance. Hmm maybe she didn't know everything? And then she slipped into my mind riffling through my thoughts like some jacked up mugger might rifle through a stolen purse. I bit my tongue as her mind dug through events of the past hours, slowing as she brushed past the highlights. Apparently my time in the tub was way more interesting than the party with the Vampires. She took so long pawing through those memories that I actually squirmed and nearly blushed, she'd finally seen enough and released that thread of memory so she could unravel the time leading up to it. Again she took her time during our little humpty dumpty fest upstairs and again I squirmed and had the overall feeling I'd been caught necking on the porch like an errant adolescent.

Mi flashed her fangs at me in what I supposed was a kitty cat smile and proceeded unwinding the reel. I felt her hesitate when she came to the part where I'd turned to the six men at the table and I could feel her searching their faces, memorizing them. Her thoughts invited me to do the same and their images flashed behind my eyes as she labeled them for me.... leopard, bear, lion, wolf, jaguar, and hyena? Obviously something about them caught her attention. I supposed she would tell me later as the reel started unwinding again. Mi hissed softly as we watched me shimmer crossing the floor and the hair down her back centerline raised slightly as I walked down the street toward the door of the dance club. In fact, seeing the power being aimed at me through Mi's eyes was nearly enough to raise my own hair. Interesting that I hadn't felt the power at the time, or perhaps I had, just misinterpreted it as nerves or excitement?

The slide show switched off as I was entering the publishing company just before I'd spoken to Margie. I blinked several times and happened to glance at Gareth lying on his side facing toward me, his arm resting on the bed between us fingers clenched tightly. I jerked my eyes to his and discovered he was staring not at me, but at Mi visible on the other side of me as she sat looking back at him, seemingly unaffected by the look of absolute hatred aimed at her. Shocked I swung around to find Jace also

wide eyed and appearing very angry. Both men looked as if they were carved from stone, so still were they. Only their eyes moved.

“Mi?” I demanded my voice lowering slightly. I was wondering what she had done to them to cause those looks. And truthfully I was hoping it wasn’t going to spill over on me. “Whatever you’re doing to them, stop it!”

Mi ignored me. She did that a lot. Instead she stood up on all four feet and spoke directly to Gareth. “I know you Gareth Ak Trirth. You and Jace R Bok. You have grown wrym, but you are still no match for me. I am here to harm neither of you, merely to ensure you do not harm yourself or any...others.”

Gareth growl was low and threatening and I actually turned over on my knees and backed toward the end of the bed. This looked more than serious and I decided being naked amidst the three of them might not be such a great idea. No one spoke out loud yet I suspected there was plenty being said. They were all shielded so tightly I couldn’t hear anything.

No one tried to stop me as I padded across the floor and into Gareth’s walk in closet. Grabbing the first thing I could find I pulled on a cream colored button up shirt which came nearly to my knees, rolled up the sleeves, and shoved buttons in holes before crossing back to the bed.

All three sets of eyes were watching me closely as I stood at the end of the platform and stared back at them. Thank goodness we’d left a light on in the closet. I would have turned up the overhead lights, but it seemed unfair somehow with me being dressed and them so not. And despite the tense atmosphere, I couldn’t help admiring both men. I was beginning to wonder if this would be the last time I’d ever see them like this. Mi had a way of complicating my life, or maybe it was just who I was that did that for me.

Mi had moved nearly to the end of the bed and was sitting with her back to both men watching me. I suddenly had the sense that I was about to get that explanation I’d been promised. “So I’m guessing you three know each other?” I asked, climbing onto

the bed with one leg while allowing the other to dangle off the side. I might need a quick get away.

“They are honor bound not to injure you if I release them.” Mi informed me in voice that seemed full of hidden meanings. Apparently I was a little slow this morning, if in fact it was morning, since I was totally lost.

“Cat!” Hissed Jace in a voice laced with poison. If we were going to get physical here I wasn’t so sure letting them go was the right decision.

“Me?”

“You are with me, and they.....retain some animosity toward me.” Mi explained. “It would make sense for them to strike at you since they cannot injure me. But what I’ve just explained to them is that hurting you is neither wise nor prudent.”

Not to mention how much it would just plain suck to have them try. “So you release them and what? Do I get to play twenty questions or is someone just going to tell me what is going on?”

“I would prefer we leave,” Mi stated with a sigh. She looked disgruntled, “but I realize you will only come looking for answers on your own and have decided it is safer this way. So we will explain.”

Mi curled her front paws under her body as she lay on the bed next to me. Her tail wrapped around her and I wasn’t surprised that the tip flicked back and forth. For all that she looked calm; there was too much tension in the room for any of us to be. She blinked up at me and must have dropped whatever hold she had over the men. Jace quickly raised himself to a seated position while Gareth rolled to his back and put his arm over his face. Both of them looked to be doing deep breathing exercises. No one likes to be controlled I imagine it wasn’t fun for either of them, especially given they couldn’t retaliate.

I suppose I was expecting Mi to speak so I was somewhat startled when Jace’s deep voice began, “Millennia ago we lived in a world that was very different from this one. It was a world of beauty, but one destined to die. And just as this world borders the Everlasting, so too did our world. When our planet began ripping itself apart

though earthquakes and volcanoes, we sought the help of the Merecats, the keepers of knowledge, to guide us into the Everlasting. It was our only option.”

“It was our death!” Gareth rasped.

Jace and I both looked at him and Jace nodded slowly. “A slow death, but our death nonetheless.”

“We did not know what the consequences would be.” Mi murmured, her voice sounding sad and tired. “No one suspected until it was too late.”

“Too late.” Jace agreed, bowing his head and glancing down at his clasped hands. His fingers were entwined and I could see that they were white with the pressure he was exerting.

“We began changing.” Gareth continued, his arm still covering his eyes, he spoke in a voice that seemed to lack all emotion, as if he was holding himself back from feeling anything. “We learned to shift in the Everlasting. We thought it was a wondrous new gift. This ability to become any shape or size, many shifted and never came back. It was as if they could no longer remember who or what they had been, or perhaps they simply no longer chose their Dragon form. Our females....” He said and a broken sound escaped him and he stopped speaking, as if the thought was too horrible to express.

“The females, even those who didn’t shift were changed.” Mi continued. “They became infertile, asexual. They no longer required the drakes to become impregnated, and yet their clutches wouldn’t hatch.”

Jace looked at me, his eyes full of pain. “In human form, our females lack the appropriate physiological structure to allow them to mate, male to female.”

“In short,” Gareth explained. “They have dangly parts.”

The room fell silent for a few minutes as everyone pondered their own thoughts. That an entire species had been warped so cruelly was too tragic to contemplate, yet it certainly explained their reaction to me. But something wasn’t right; there was still something they weren’t telling me.

Jace drew in a deep breath and Gareth slowly drew his arm away from his face and pushed himself into a sitting position. His eyes were blue fire and his voice was very low, “Faced with a life of sterility and their physical changes, our females went mad and...worse they sought to end their lives.”

“They killed themselves?” I asked quietly, thinking how utterly horrible that might be.

“Dragons mate for life.” Mi added softly. “Or they did.”

Jace bared his teeth and glared at Mi. “Dragons are very difficult to kill.” He spoke harshly, his green eyes flashing as he turned to look at me. I could see the anger and pain in his expression.

“We did what we had to.” Mi responded her sherry colored eyes calm.

“You killed our mates!” Gareth yelled, his voice ringing off the surrounding rock and reverberating through my skin and bones, the anguish in his voice cutting me to the quick.

“She begged us.” Mi told him softly. “It was done out of mercy. And I am sorry. Sorry for your loss these past six hundred years. Sorry that we could not prevent the change. Sorry that we did not know and could not halt it. But mostly I am sorry that it has taken so long to find some way to make this right.”

I glanced sharply at Mi as bits and pieces mentally fell into place and I realized I was the grand scheme. Amazing since I’d always thought I was simply a freak of nature created in some underground lab by my missing father and over protective Mother. A lab pet that had to be kept hidden lest secrets buried in my DNA be used for some nefarious reason or other. I wasn’t sure if I should be angry or not. If what Mi said was true...was I expected to what? Repopulate the entire species, all by myself? Was that even possible...could I even reproduce?

“You were...created in a lab?” Jace asked softly, his face holding an odd mix of curiosity and confusion.

“Worse,” I told him bitterly. “I believe I actually began life in a glass beaker.” I so didn’t want to be having this conversation. I didn’t want to feel their pity or horror

and simply raised my shields, ignoring the quick intake from Jace and the way Gareth stirred on the bed. My gaze dropped to my hands held loosely in my lap so I neither saw nor felt the gathering anger around me.

“Don’t you dare!” Snarled Gareth. “Don’t you sit there and withdraw from us, hide like you have anything to be ashamed of!”

He was practically yelling at me and I wasn’t sure how I should take that. I didn’t have long to decide because he leaned forward, grabbed my wrist and yanked me across the bed and into his lap. The abruptness startled me and I struggled wildly. He growled at me and wrapped his legs around my body, completely surrounding me with arms and legs then rolled me onto my back and pinned me to the bed. His eyes were like blue diamonds, hard and unyielding as he stared down into my eyes.

“You are insulting me, again.” He informed me coldly.

“Wh...what?” I stuttered, completely confused.

He leaned in closer and spoke slowly as if I was some kind of arrested development victim. “You are insulting me.”

“Us, she is insulting us.” Jace replied though his voice didn’t contain the level of anger in Gareth’s, it still held a steely thread that confused me even more. So much so that I lost my shields again and immediately felt the pressure of both men pressing in on my mind. It was like having a fresh smelling fuzzy blanket wrapped around you so tightly you can’t move. Not unpleasant but slightly suffocating over an extended period. I could actually feel their total rejection of my earlier comments. Their urgent need for me to...like myself? It was so odd that I simply stopped struggling.

At the end of the bed Mi made a strangled sound and I glanced in her direction. I couldn’t be certain, but she looked....extremely pleased. As if everything was going according to plan. I didn’t have long to ponder her reaction because Gareth apparently didn’t like my ignoring him and took the opportunity to give me a meaningful shake.

“I’m....sorry?” I responded. I may not be sure of what I was apologizing for, but I’d been raised to be respectful of my elders and right at that moment I couldn’t help feeling like a naughty child being scolded.

“Naughty child...” Barked Jace and then immediately covered his face with his hand. I suspected so he could prevent himself from smiling.

Gareth looked slightly pained. I think he would have said something but Mi chose that moment to delicately clear her throat and we all glanced at her.

“Copper, green, silver, red, bronze, brown, white, black, grey and blue, these are the new colors we made for you.” She remarked in a sing song voice. Her eyes blinked slowly as she looked directly at me. “But only one gold, just one.” And she dropped her head as if weighed down by a great sadness. “Beware the red and the white who are like thieves in the night and will steal your very essence. And the black will attack to take you back into the Everlasting. But the green and the blue shall be your friends true..... Heed my words Lexi, do not return home. I can no longer protect you myself.” She told me abruptly. Then she turned to Gareth and Jace. “The six you entertained upstairs last night, are not what they appear. Guard her well; she is our gift to you and the future of your race.”

When she finished speaking she simply faded until all that was visible was the tip of her tail, then that too was gone.

I wanted to call her back, to stop her, but I was too shocked to speak.

“I think...we get to keep her.” Jace whispered almost reverently.

“Only one gold?” Gareth responded.

He looked me over in an almost territorial manner. As if he was seeing me in a new light and I suddenly remembered Mi’s warning that Dragons mate for life. I was pretty young to be mating for all eternity, besides; you don’t grown corn by hiding your kernels under a basket. I’d been raised with the understanding that somewhere out there were a host of potential mates, not life mates, mates and that it would eventually be my job to track them down and try them on for size, so to say.

“Do you think the new colors she referred to are female?” Jace asked, his voice sounding excited.

I found my voice and told them both. “No, they’re all males, my males. Tailor made for me. Or should I say I was tailor made for them since they’d been created first.”

Jace looked disappointed then curious. Gareth looked....annoyed? Was it the thought of competition? I wondered.

“What to do you mean you were tailor made for them?” Jace demanded.

I jiggled my hands, still held tightly in Gareth’s, asking for permission to be let up. He released me reluctantly and settled back onto the bed, one arm resting on a raised knee, his eyes watching me intently.

I pushed into a sitting position and straightened the shirt I was wearing so it was no longer bunched under my arms and twisted about my waist. When I was done I folded my legs to the side of me, giving myself time to decide how much to tell them. Mi had given them the overview, but there were still things they didn’t know, things we’d never told anyone and that could get us all killed.

Gareth reached forward and brushed my cheek with the tip of his finger, gently. “The more we know,” he spoke softly, “the better we can protect you.”

Beside me, Jace reached for my hand, entwining his fingers through mine. “Trust us.” He urged.

Taking a deep breath I glanced between the two and slowly nodded. Mi had trusted them, and I trusted Mi. “You might have noticed my ears?” I asked calmly. “They are pointy because my Mother is an Elf.” I began, a smile lifting the corners of my lips as I noted the blank expressions on both Jace and Gareth’s face.

“How is that possible?” Demanded Jace.

Gareth nodded suddenly. “Your glass beaker comment earlier.”

I winced then signed. This was going to take some time and I realized I was already weary. Giving myself a mental shake I continued. “Fifty years ago when humanity nearly wiped itself off the face of our continent or at least here in America, my Mother was one of the first to come forward to help. She is a healer and felt her skill was needed. Consequently she was banned from her home,” I was a little bitter

about that, since by virtue of her expulsion I had never seen the wonders of Faerie. The closest I'd ever come was stories and once we'd driven past a set of mounds deep in the Mount Spokane Park on the outskirts of the Selkirk Mountains of Washington. But I digress. "I assume you were here at the time and know what it was like. I only have the stories to go by. Suffice it to say that she spent her time like so many others, working in government and private labs all over to create a vaccine to stop the spread. She met my father in one of the non-government labs and apparently they fell in love, or lust or maybe it was just two brilliant minds with a deep appreciation for each other. I really couldn't say since neither Mi nor my Mother ever talked about him, or mentioned him by name."

"Who is your father?" Gareth asked.

"I have no idea." I told him honestly. "All I know is that he was a Dragon and a scientist and that he had been working on mapping DNA when he met my Mother."

"The first steps to gene-splicing." Jace responded in an awed voice. "The human's non-human holy grail."

"Hmmm." I responded, biting my lower lip and glancing at him with a meaningful look. "Apparently he succeeded. And I wasn't the first."

"So the colors Mi referred to?" Gareth continued, picking up the thread. "Were they created before or after you?"

I signed. "Understand living with my Mother growing up was like...having infrequent visits from the Queen. She was extremely protective of me, but her work took us all over and we...didn't spend a lot of girl time together. Long chats were not her thing. And Mi," I continued waving my hand in a helpless gesture. "Well you can guess what that was like. I mean, I'm twenty five years old and I didn't even know about what the Everlasting did to Dragons until today. Most of what I know I overheard or guessed at."

Jace played with my fingers, gently plucking at them. It was like he was trying to comfort me while worrying at some problem so that half of his attention was elsewhere. "Could you describe him?"

I thought about it for a moment and gave a shrug. “I think he’s silver.” I replied thinking of my reoccurring dream and wondering. “I’m not certain, it’s just a sense I have.”

“Is he alive?” Gareth asked, having picked up on my use of the present term.

“As far as I know he is.” I replied, again taking a moment to think about it.

“Though where he is and what he is doing is a mystery to me.”

Gareth and Jace exchanged glances and I wondered what they were thinking. I was really going to have to work on my skills if I wanted to read them.

Jace smiled down at me. “Plenty of time for that.” He assured me.

I sighed again and lay back on the bed, Jace eased down next to me and slipped a shoulder under my neck so that my head was pillowed on his upper chest. I realized I was very tired, all these emotions were exhausting. Or maybe I was suffering caffeine withdrawals. All this talking and no coffee or sex, hmmm made me wonder if I’d licked my addictions? No that couldn’t be or I wouldn’t be thinking about coffee and well, now that I thought about it I’d gone more than an hour at least without obsessing over sex. Although, Jace did smell good and if I thought about it for a moment the thought of rolling over and taking advantage held some appeal. I’d have to seriously think about that just as soon as I finished dredging up my history.

I let my eyelids close as I continued my story. “After the vaccine was developed and the massive quantities distributed, when everything started calming back down, my Mother started working with my Father. My Father had two partners, scientists like himself who were also Dragons, and I believe they all came over from the Everlasting together. Knowing what I know now, I can see how that might create a strong bond. He obviously trusted them. I don’t know exactly how long it took to break the code or when they started experimenting on mixing and matching DNA. But I do know that at least ten of the embryos were successfully implanted in women and that live births resulted. All male all different colors spanning the course of generations. All of this was done in secret.”

“Were they trying for males?” Gareth asked, his voice sounding confused.

“No, originally all embryos started out female. Something in the process caused them to switch to male no matter what they tried. Until twenty six years ago.”

“If they discovered the means to create females,” Gareth demanded, “then why aren’t there more of you? Why only one?”

“Because someone killed my Father’s partners and tried to kill him too. The same someone that wanted the science for themselves. Fortunately I had already been implanted in my Mother and she and Mi had gone into seclusion. They didn’t want anyone to know that my Mother was pregnant and they didn’t want to take any chances with a potential miscarriage. Apparently that had been the biggest problem with females; something to do with the Mother rejecting the female infant’s hormones. I know from Mi that my DNA had had to be altered prior to insemination.”

“Altered how?”

I turned to look at Jace and smiled gently. “Let’s just say I’m not one hundred percent Dragon, I believe Mi told me once that I was supposed to be the best of the best. I’m not sure what that means except Mi watches me closely just in case I develop new and interesting talents.”

## Chapter 8

Jace padded back into the room carrying a large mug of coffee for me. He handed it over and crawled up on the bed stretching out across the foot, laying on his stomach with his head on his crossed arms so he could watch me. Gareth was standing beside the bed having just returned from the restroom.

I smelled my coffee, inhaling deeply. The aroma was heavenly even though it wasn't French Roast, at least it was nice and light and tasted all syrupy sweet, just the way I liked it. I noticed Jace and Gareth both watching me intently when I opened my eyes and took my first sip.

"What?" I asked, looking back at them.

Jace actually raised his face and fanned himself while staring back at me in wide eyed awe.

Gareth too looked startled. "Your pleasure is...ah..."

"Physical." Jace finished for him. "You are ummm broadcasting in full sensory."

"I can taste the coffee." Gareth muttered, he made an icky face and said. "A little sweet, but I'm glad you are enjoying it."

"Really really enjoying it!"

“Yes thank you.” I told them, “I’ll try to rein in my enthusiasm. What time is it?”

Gareth shook his head and reached for his watch on the table next to the bed. “A little after nine he said.”

No wonder I was so tired. We must have only had a few hours of sleep before Mi showed up. I would have flopped back on the bed if I wasn’t holding my coffee mug. I really wanted a nap. Of course if I drank all this coffee, I was really going to need something to do since caffeine just had that affect on me. Hmm now what could I do in bed with two naked men?

Jace sat up immediately, reached for my coffee and shoved it into Gareth’s hand. His grin was ferocious as he stalked me across the bed. “I told you last night, if you continued to look at me like that I would take it as an invitation. Consider yourself warned.” This was said as he grabbed the bottom of Gareth’s shirt, pulled it over my head and tossed it onto the floor behind him. His arms went around me and we went down in a tangle of arms and legs and lips. When I came up for air, he was buried deep inside me while I straddled him, riding him hard. My hands were planted on the bed on either side of him fingers digging into the mattress my breath coming in ragged gasps as the pressure low and deep inside me built to near explosion.

Jace grasped my hips and helped direct me. I could hear his breath deepening, coming faster as we moved in time with each other. Our motions quickened and each thrust created slivers of passion deep, exploding outward until my body clenched around Jace and a soft cry escaped me and I was swamped in waves of ecstasy. And Jace was there with me, holding tight to my hips and pressing up and into me as I felt him come deep inside.

I might have collapsed forward onto his chest except Jace was kindly propping me up with his hands on my forearms. When the tremors died down to a manageable level I cracked open my eyes and noticed he was smiling up at me. A very satisfied smile in fact, possible because I couldn’t quite remember how I’d gotten to this point, it was all rather one large pleasurable blur.

“Lexi,” He urged softly, “see me.”

His low voice pulled my gaze to his and I looked into his eyes and my breath caught in my chest as I realized he had dropped his shields and I could see him, truly see him for the first time. My own inner shields wavered then like a breath I let them go and fell into Jace and all that he was. He allowed me to see the pain and heartache, his broken dreams, friendships and his courage as well as the hope that shone in him. And there were a host of memories, of flights at night, whispers in the darkness, struggles and quiet moments. And as they flashed before me I felt a desire like flames licking around the edges of my awareness, a desire to hold something true and lasting. And in his eyes I tasted his need to share his existence with someone for all time, a worthy mate, and his excitement at the prospect I presented. Even as I understood his primal urge there was a generosity of spirit within him and he let me see that he would share if and when it became necessary, not because he wanted to, but because he understood it was necessary. His fingers squeezed my arms gently and his smile turned a little secretive and I caught a flash of....pride?

He chuckled. “Think,” he told me softly, “you may live a thousand years, but you will always remember me as your first lover, the first drake to ever touch you intimately. No one can take that away from me. I have never been anyone’s first anything.” And his smile seemed a little sad. “Being the first for the potential savior of our race seems pretty damn special to me.”

How does one respond to a comment like that, of course he could sense everything I was feeling, and right at that moment I was feeling pretty humble, overwhelmed with perhaps a smidgen of gratitude thrown in. He was so right, I would remember last night forever.

It occurred to me at that moment that one’s first taste of passion should be momentous and for a second I thought about the fainting lion upstairs and just how badly it could have gone for me. A thousand years with a horrible memory could have had catastrophic results. Not that I’d have allowed myself to be abused or anything, but what if it had been unsatisfying, or worse, boring? Good God! I’d had sex with two

total strangers, and I had gone about it like a dehydrated person in the desert, willing to drink anything to satisfy my craving. Not realizing that it could have poisoned me for life. Come to think of it, a smidgen didn't seem to describe just how grateful I suddenly felt!

Sometimes working through the consequences to your actions makes you feel amazed to be alive. I was feeling pretty amazed and lucky! Lucky that the sex had been....absolutely freaking fantastic! And I wanted more, which said more about Jace skills than any flowery comment ever could. In fact, it wasn't quite a compulsion, but I had to wonder if it might become an addiction.

I cupped Jace's soft five o'clock shadowed face in my palm, bent down over him and said, "Thank you." I wasn't certain what else I could say but I was sure he could feel how important his actions were to me too.

He chuckled again and reached for me, pulling me in against his chest for a tight hug. "Fortunate indeed." He whispered against my temple, his lips leaving little kisses across my brow. "And you, my sweet, can consider me your beverage of choice anytime you feel the need."

We lay that way for a while, the silence between us peaceful. I dozed, my mind and body sated. I believe I could have stayed that way for another hour or two except Jace apparently had other plans and he let me know by running his hands over my backside lightly rubbing and kneading.

"Again?" I asked, in a sleepy voice.

He just laughed and gave me a playful swat on the bottom. "Mmmm I am going to like keeping you." He replied and I bolted straight upright. "Whoa," he remarked, grimacing slightly as my abrupt move.

"Mi abandoned me!" Obviously it hadn't really sunk in until now.

"She didn't abandon you." He told me calmly. "I'm sure we aren't free of her. She just withdrew from the field of engagement gracefully."

"What?" I couldn't figure out what he was talking about...withdrew from the field...huh?

Jace took a moment to disengage me from his lap and sat me on the bed beside him. He took a deep breath and spoke slowly. “Your cat knew you wouldn’t be going home.” He told me calmly. “For a couple of reasons, the least being that you made somewhat of a spectacle of yourself last night, although even that could be explained if necessary. Nick and his men are our main concern and Gareth is busy dealing with that little problem right now.”

Oh so that was where Gareth was. I leaned forward and glanced around Jace wondering if Gareth had left my coffee. Jace reached for my mug and handed it to me. It was cold but I didn’t care. He shrugged and gave me an expectant look. I sighed and asked the question I knew he was dying for me to ask. “And?”

“And,” he continued with a pleased look. “She knew we were planning to keep you anyway.”

“Hey no keeping or enslaving, that was the deal.”

“We never actually agreed to that. Besides it’s a moot point now. We all believe this is the safest place for you.”

“I didn’t agree.” I grumbled as I sipped my room temperature coffee.

Jace tilted his head to the side and gave me a look. “Lexi, Lexi, you can’t be that naïve.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked with a frown. I hadn’t had enough sleep or coffee to talk in riddles.

“Sweetheart you agreed the moment you walked through our doors last night. And might I say I admire the restraint you showed in not muscling Nick out of your way. Although staring down our security took some nerve. We would have kept you then, even before we knew what you are. But if you don’t believe me...ask ah...Goldy was it?” He replied with one eyebrow raised. “I don’t think I’ve ever known anyone that’s named their Dragon.”

“So that conversation last night, was that some kind of joke?” I asked, not sure I liked that he was so sure of himself.

He smiled and held up his palms. “Wait,” he requested. “Perhaps you don’t realize just how ah...territorial we Dragons are? To have found one in our territory and a female...”

“Oh, so it wouldn’t have mattered who I was, only that I am Dragon.”

“Yes.” He agreed with a nod, and then frowned. “No wait, it does matter. But please understand when we first felt your power, well you my dear are quite intoxicating. And Gareth and I, we would have done...just about anything to have you. Fortunately,” He continued with a smile. “All you wanted was sex.”

I glared at him when he laughed.

“Don’t be angry,” He coaxed me with a teasing light in his beautiful green eyes.

It was darn hard to stay angry at him when all he wanted was to pleasure me. Besides it was nice to be wanted by anyone, let alone two incredibly sexy men. Guess this wasn’t such a bad gig and it wasn’t like I had a lot of options. “So,” I said with a nod and a change of subject. “If I’m to stay here, I’m going to need my things. Any chance we can go get them?”

“How about we shower and eat first? By then Gareth should be back and we can give you the grand tour. We’re also going to need to discuss security and I’ll need to get you fitted with a scanning device so you can access the entrances.”

“Scanning device? I thought you just used a card key.”

“That was just for your benefit.” He replied then held out his forearm and turned it over for me. He picked up my finger and ran it over the skin just above his wrist and I felt a small hard bump. “The guards get card keys with random access codes that change frequently. We use a different method.”

Implants? “Hey Jace, you aren’t doing anything ah...illegal out of the club are you?”

“Nooooo.” He replied as he climbed off the bed and headed for the door. I held my now empty coffee mug and climbed down after him and followed him naked out the door and into the hall back to his bedroom. I squeaked in alarm at the large pale haired

guard standing out in the hallway. I hadn't even known he was there and had just given him an eye full. Jace just laughed at me and wandered into the bathroom.

"You might have told me he was out there." I demanded.

"I could have." He told me with a grin. "But next time you'll pay closer attention and that might just save your life. We will need to work on that since you'll be staying here with us."

Heaving a sigh I followed him into the bathroom. Damn I'd like to be righteously indignant but the man kept making valid points and I'd lived with Mi long enough to know better than to disagree, especially when it came to matters of personal safety.

The shower was great, all that water and slippery soap led to other things and I realized I had bruised my bottom on the side of the tub that morning. I knew it because Jace pressed me up against the shower wall several times while I was soaping up his chest and it had been just a bit tender. Nothing to prevent us from enjoying each other though and we were both laughing as we stepped from the shower. Jace was pretending to stagger, like he couldn't walk straight and was making complaining noises that neither of us believed. I backed out of the shower and turned to grab one of the towels he'd set out for us and noticed Gareth sitting on the tub watching to two of us intently.

I froze like a deer in the headlights and nearly dropped my towel. Jace glanced at me strangely and went to the sink so he could fix his hair. Gareth just watched me, his deep blue eyes searching my face. His body looked relaxed sitting there and I wondered what he was thinking.

"That you look beautiful." He replied as he stood and walked toward me. "And that next time Jace can make the arrangements while we stay in bed."

He looked so big and ah...yeah I was suddenly playing with my towel, shyly. I'd just had sex in the shower with Jace and one look from Gareth and it seemed I was ready to go again. I had just enough time to wonder if I'd ever get anything done again

since these two might just be a full time job, when he reached me and I was in his arms and he was kissing me like we'd been apart for days not hours. My God the man was like starter fluid on charcoal and I was pretty much feeling like the marshmallow on a stick at the moment. When he let me up for air I had to hold on to him so I didn't collapse in a heap at his feet, because that would have been oh so romantic. I smiled weakly at him and he gave me a look and raised one eyebrow.

I was wondering if I could make it to the bedroom when he turned me around and lifted me off the floor. I squeaked in surprise as he raised me above his head and placed his lips on the exact spot where the tub had bruised me during our session earlier that morning. I sucked in a breath and realized he must have been....umm with us in the shower, and couldn't help blushing.

He laughed when he placed me back on the floor and I would be lying if I didn't feel all gooey inside at his manly show of strength.

"Sorry." He told me his blue eyes dancing as he glanced at Jace who rolled his eyes at the display.

I leaned into him, wrapped my arms around his back and placing my head on his chest I looked up at him and....batted my eyelashes.

Jace laughed. Gareth narrowed his gaze on me, his smile slipping from his lips and the next thing I knew I was seated on the vanity with Gareth between my thighs, both of us gasping for air with his head resting on my shoulder and my legs wrapped round his waist. Damn I didn't think that bruise was ever going away!

"Do you know if your father added rabbit to your DNA?" Jace asked breathlessly, I glanced at him and found him leaning heavily on the counter as if his legs truly were having a hard time functioning properly. He looked slightly glazed, not unlike I myself felt.

"I really couldn't say." I rasped.

Gareth actually groaned. "Peter Rabbit hasn't got anything on her! It's more like Thelxiope!"

"Who?"

Jace glanced at me sharply, his eyes speculating. “She was one of Achelous’ two daughters, a Greek sea goddess and a playmate of Persephone. The sisters lived on the islands of Sirenum Scopuli, you might have heard of them?”

“You don’t....play the lute do you?” Gareth asked jokingly and I had a bad moment while I considered the golden flute my Mother had given me as a child. One of the few things she had brought with her from Faerie.

“Not exactly.” I replied, thinking Sirens don’t exist...do they?

“You’d be surprised what exists.” Gareth mumbled into my shoulder. He sighed and lifted his head so he could give me a kiss before leaning back and looking at me.

“Or maybe he mixed in some demon and you’ve got some succubus in you.” Jace offered. “Although shouldn’t she look more...energized since she’s sucking the life out of us?”

I reached up and pushed my matted hair back from my face and gave them both a lopsided grin. “Or maybe it’s just that you don’t want to say no?” I suggested. “Are you telling me that this,” and I waved my hand to indicate the three of us, “is unusual for you?”

Hmmm, the look they exchanged said it was very unusual with a capital U. I couldn’t help tensing slightly wondering if I was doing something wrong. I’d only been a novice for a few hours, was I already involved in weird sex? Too much sex? Would that make one an expert quicker? Had I gone from virgin to sex maniac at lightening speed? Did I care? Did it matter? I hated doubting myself and this whole soul searching worry over my morality or lack thereof seemed pointless given my nature. Besides, I was just discovering the benefits of sex, no way was I going back to virgin or near virgin status. So if that made me amoral so be it. As they say, the genie was...out of the bottle.

“Not unlike Pandora I imagine.” Gareth replied grasping a handful of my hair and letting the wet red-gold strands slide through his fingers. “If you’ll be patient with us we poor immortals will attempt to keep up.”

“See that you do.” I informed them in high pitched imperious voice then added. “In the meantime if you could assist me in standing? I think I could use another shower.”

Apparently so did Gareth or maybe he just like being in me because he dropped his pants at the counter pulled off his shirt and carried me into the shower. I can honestly say the only thing my feet touched during our time in there, was the backs of his thighs and the opposite side of the shower wall.

## Chapter 9

“Do you happen to know where my clothes went?” I asked Gareth, looking around Jace’s bathroom and not seeing them. Jace had apparently fled and he must have taken them with him. Looking around I noticed that the room was spotless, the towels clean and neatly folded and I briefly wondered how that could be. Come to think of it, I walked to the bedroom and looked out at the bed and room. The entire place was neat and tidy as it had been earlier when Jace and I came through the door, though I’d been distracted over my exhibitionism at the time and hadn’t really been paying attention. All trace of Vampire dust and disheveled bed covers gone. Interesting.

I turned back to find Gareth watching me. He had pulled his black slacks back on, but his burgundy colored dress shirt was lying on the counter. I took a moment to admire his muscular chest and the way the individual drops of water clung to his fine springy blond hair, the drops shown like tiny rainbows in the light. His torso was an upside down pyramid, all sculpted and yummy looking. He made a sort of strangled sound and I glanced up to see him looking back at me in wide eyed disbelief.

“I refuse to apologize for admiring your body.”

“I’m glad you find it...worthy.” Gareth replied and chuckled though his voice sounded rather shaky.

I wandered back to him and gave him my best non-threatening smile. His arm snaked around my waist and he pulled me in against him. My fingers itched to touch him so I walked them up his chest, pursed my lips and asked. “Can I not admire you without it turning to sex?”

He flashed me a smile and I could feel his erection pressing against my stomach through his pants. “It’s very hard.” He replied with a straight face.

I laughed and gave him a kiss, then helped him into his shirt. We made certain that each button was in its proper hole before I stood back and looked at him again.

“About my clothes?” I asked as I ran Jace’s comb through my hair, roughly working out the snarls. Obviously I was going to need to replace his brush. Gareth took pity on my scalp and after removing the comb from my fingers seated me on the edge of the tub so he could finish the job.

“I’m sure we can find something for you to wear.”

“Seriously?” I asked, wondering what these two men could have that would fit a size six.

“Seriously.” He replied, finishing up my hair and taking the comb back to the vanity. He offered me a toothbrush which I used while he waited. I took a moment to check my appearance in the mirror. It was odd seeing me looking back. I took a second to fluff my bangs off my forehead and felt pleased that the only non-red gold hair on me, my eyelashes, were long and darkest brown and slightly curled. I’d always thought they were one of my best features, the way they ringed my large golden eyes. Of course I didn’t get to see them much, given that I’d spent the majority of my adulthood as Plain Jane.

“Personally, I like your hair. And your nose is very pert.” Gareth informed me then leaned in and placed his face next to mine so we were both framed in the mirror. The differences were marked, but we made a striking pair. He was just so big next to me that I actually looked dainty. A word I wouldn’t have used to describe myself, but then I was used to my Mother and her somewhat ethereal beauty.

He took my hand and we wandered back to the bedroom and there laid out on the bed was a beautiful fitted sundress the exact shade of Gareth's shirt with little gold seed pearls sprinkled all over the bodice and neckline areas. On the floor was a pair of matching high heeled sandals with gold straps.

Gareth hesitated briefly then turned to me and I couldn't tell if he was more surprised or just plain shocked. "Quick," he whispered urgently. "Repeat after me."

I looked at him strangely but motioned for him to say whatever it was he was going to say.

"Peace be I summon thee, through water, sky, and fire, but mostly earth. Abide and bear no ill. My thanks be thrice fold given and no harm shall come to thee through me. You are safe here, for I am Dragon and therefore your protector."

I didn't dare ask he just looked too serious so I just repeated the phrases. When we finished he urged me to bow, low and when we came up there was a little....person standing before me not more than two feet tall and painfully beautiful. I sucked in a startled breath and stared into a tiny face dominated by huge black eyes, a small nose, high cheekbones and rosy red lips all surrounded by the blackest hair. It was wearing a dark one piece that covered it from shoulder to ankle and its feet were bare. I wasn't sure if it was a male or female until she tipped her head and her long hair spilled to her knees then she spoke in a high piping voice.

"Greetings Goldilocks. We are most honored to be in your presence." And so saying she curtsied in a low sweeping gesture that took her nearly to the floor before bobbing back up again. Within me Goldy stirred, opened her eyes and blinked slowly. "I am Areth." She continued then held out a most delicate hand to me and asked. "May I?" Enchanted, I reached for her fingers and felt her fall into me at the touch.

One second she was there on the floor and the next she was standing in my cave hands behind her back as she gazed into Goldy's eyes. They seemed to recognize each other, though how that could be I had no idea, but Goldy gently stretched her neck toward Areth who unclasped her hands took another deep curtsy then rushed forward

and wrapped her arms as far around Goldy's muzzle as she could reach, all the while sobbing great heart wrenching sobs.

I of course froze unsure what to do with myself as it wasn't every day I picked up a beautiful miniature hitchhiker. At my side I vaguely felt Gareth reach for my hand and gently squeeze it. I say that because all of my attention was focused on the scene within me. Areth sobbed for several seconds then lifted her head and gazed deeply into Goldy's eyes. They must have spoken though you would think that I'd have been able to hear the conversation since, after all, she was me. Goldy meanwhile stood and dipped her neck so Areth could climb aboard. I had an inkling as to what was coming when Goldy let out a bugle, stretched out her wings and leapt from her cave straight at me.

The change was instantaneous, I had two legs, and then I had four crouched on my hinds next to the bed with Gareth still holding my now front claw. On my neck sat Areth, holding tightly to one of my neck ridges. I carefully turned my head so as not to impale her on my second set of horns, those that sat at the top of my head. My horns were not unlike a goat's, except I had two sets, one shorter set directly over my eye ridges, for all the obvious reasons. And the second set which swept off the very top of my head, about three feet long, very straight, and razor sharp.

Areth's sweet piping laughter filled the room and she gave my neck a squeeze before indicating she would like to be put down. I complied by dipping my head and neck to the floor so she could dismount. When she was safely on the floor I flicked my tail and shifted back.

"My thanks she exclaimed breathlessly. And curtsying again she told me in a very serious voice, "I am honored to serve you My Lady." And with that she disappeared in a blink of an eye.

I don't think my chin hit the floor, but it was a near thing. Serve me? What exactly does that mean? "Ah Gareth," I asked my voice sounding strained even to me. "What just happened?"

“Hmmm,” Gareth muttered. “I’m not quite certain, I’ve never....” He took a deep breath and picked up the dress off the bed, beneath it laid out neatly was a very brief pair of gold and burgundy panties and matching lacy bra. I raised an eyebrow put my hands on my hips and just stood there looking at Gareth. “Have you every heard the story of Beauty and the Beast?” He asked quietly as he plucked the panties off the bed with one finger and held them up for inspection.

“Sure, its non-human required reading in elementary school. Bad human refuses gift from disguised enchantress who turns his shallow self into a beast as an object lesson until he learns to appreciate more than what’s just skin deep. I always thought it was unfair that they stressed the ‘can’t impose will on humans part’ especially since it ends...and they lived happily ever after. Sure like love conquers all! What’s that got to do with anything?”

“You don’t believe love can conquer all?” He asked quietly.

“How am I supposed to know? I asked reaching out to pluck the panties off his finger and stepping into them. I grabbed the bra next and nearly blushed as he watched me pull it on which didn’t seem to make any sense to me since I’d been wandering around stark naked since I met him. He was practically humming by the time I adjusted myself into my cups and reached for the dress. Lucky for him I was more in the mood for an explanation or he’d have been flat on his back in the middle of the bed. But right that second I was nearly freaked out about what had just happened and in desperate need of an explanation.

He sighed and helped slip the dress over my head, then turned me so he could close the tiny row of golden buttons that ran up the back. The dress fit perfectly, as if it had been made special just for me and I took a second to admire the feel of the fabric against my skin. Gareth led me to the bed and seated me on it while he knelt at my feet and slipped my sandals on. His warm hand on my ankle nearly distracted me but I gritted my teeth and held firm.

“Do you remember how Beauty had a magical maid that dressed her?”

Did I, wasn’t it something about a bureau that came to life? “Okay sure.”

“In the real story it was an Elemental.”

“An Elemental huh? And what exactly is an elemental?”

“Areth.” He replied with a shrug as he stood back and admired me. “She is an Earth Elemental, a Pygmy or if you prefer, a Gnome. I’ve actually never seen her before. Jace did the original conjuring when we moved in. I only know that she has never before revealed herself willingly and I’m as much at a loss about what just happened as you are.”

Deep inside me Goldy thumped her tail for attention, when I looked at her she responded, *Friend*. Okay so she had Goldy’s seal of approval that could only mean one thing, we’d be seeing her again. “Soooo,” I asked, looking down at myself. “The dress?”

“The first of many I’m sure. In fact you’ll find all sorts of helpful items pop up whenever you need them. She also keeps the place neat and tidy which is why the room was clean when you noticed it earlier.”

“So she’s been with you all this time and you’ve never seen her and she cleans and takes care of you in return for what?”

“Some days,” He told me with a lopsided smile. “It’s just good to be a Dragon.”

“That’s hardly an answer.” I told his back as he headed out the door. I had a few seconds of uneasiness over the dirt floor in my new heels but managed to get across the room without breaking my neck. It wasn’t that the floor was difficult to walk on; it was more that I had only ever owned a single pair of high heels and it was going to take me a while to find my balance. Let’s just hope I wouldn’t need to run or fight in the very near future.

Gareth was in the hall standing in front of what looked like a new picture on the wall. It was massive, nearly as tall as me in an intricately carved wooden frame painted a dull gold, complete with its own softly lit lighting fixture. That hadn’t been there last night, nor this morning when we’d come back to bed. I wobbled my way to Gareth and

couldn't help the soft exclamation of surprise. The picture was....incredible and us. Gareth reached for my hand and we stood there in silent admiration.

A hazy sun filtered light across a stretch of brilliant blue ocean bordered by a rocky beach which was steep and surrounded by lush forest. In the sky over the ocean our Dragons flew in an inverted V formation so that Jace and Gareth flew slightly ahead and above Goldy. It wasn't so much the subject matter that was as startling as it was the vividness of the colors and how realistic they appeared. I leaned forward and touched the painting, oils I thought but when I looked closer I could see that our eyes were actually cut gems.

"Wow." I whispered, and couldn't help running my fingers over the back of Gareth and then Jace's Dragons. Someone or something had captured the very essence of them to perfection and I admired first Gareth's strong blue with his wide sweeping wings and delicately bearded snout, even to the claws at the tips of his wings. And I could nearly trace the delicate veins on Jace's somewhat less bulky green's wings. All of us looked as if we could fly off the canvas at any second and glide down the hall. I don't believe I'd ever seen anything like it and I was both amazed and awed by its beauty.

"This morning's just full of surprises." Gareth replied and gently tugging my hand he pulled me down the hall. When he stopped suddenly, I bumped into his back and nearly fell off my heels. It took me a second clutching at his shirt to steady myself and when I was sure I wasn't going to land on the floor I looked around his broad back and couldn't help the laugh that escaped me.

This morning when we'd trundled back to bed the room had been done in flat blues and greens and fairly shouted *bachelor*. Looking out at the living room I couldn't stifle my chuckles even when Gareth turned and gave me a dirty look, it was just too funny. Touches of gold Jace had said, and apparently someone had taken his comment to heart because it was like the room had sprouted gold and everywhere you looked there were gold pillows and gold candlesticks, and gold vases filled with flowers. There was even a gold bowl on one of the coffee tables filled with fresh golden apples.

The frames on the walls were now gold and the paintings themselves were no longer simply blues or greens but had swirls of gold running through them.

“I love what you’ve done with the place.” I told him playfully. He just grunted and shook his head before wandering toward the kitchen. I took a last look around and then followed carefully after him. Someone had definitely rolled out the welcome mat and it occurred to me that I might want to be careful about what I wished for.

Jace was standing at the sink rinsing out a pot when I stumbled through the doorway, grunted and had to grab the doorframe to stay on my feet. He turned to look at me then Gareth and a slow smile covered his face. “Ah, finally wore her out?” He asked Gareth with a sparkle in his eye.

Gareth actually made a scoffing noise and turned to look at me too.

I felt a little self conscious as I wobbled across the floor, there is nothing like an audience to give you performance anxiety. “No,” I responded in some exasperation. “It’s these heels.”

Jace’s smile dimmed somewhat as a look of concern-confusion slid onto his face. “You aren’t having any difficulties?” He finally asked.

“Nothing that removing these sandals wouldn’t fix.”

“Not the slightest twinge?”

I made it to the island and grasped the counter and looked at him inquiringly. “Twinge of what?” Jace and Gareth exchanged a look that made my eyebrow rise.

Gareth took a deep breath and explained, “Jace is wondering why you aren’t staggering around.”

“What do you mean staggering? Aside from these heels, why would I be staggering? I didn’t have that much to drink last night.”

Jace looked somewhat alarmed and then covered his lower face with his hand leaned an elbow on the counter and actually moaned softly.

“Would one of you please just tell me what’s going on?”

“Jace wants to know how you could have made love so many times over the past eight hours and still be standing. And honestly I’m a little surprised by it myself.”

I think my face went blank as I realized just what he was saying. I'd had sex with these two, vigorous sex at least six or was it seven times and I was standing there worried about my shoes. Oh yeah that explained Jace's not walking comment this morning. Ha, the two of them were obviously wondering why I wasn't all bowlegged like I'd just taken my first horseback riding lesson. Come to think of it, it did seem odd. "Must be that rabbit DNA."

"Well she's got the, screw like a bunny part down." Jace responded. "I've made breakfast," he informed us. "Obviously we men are going to need our strength if we hope to keep up."

We wandered over to the table set with fresh fruit and bacon and eggs and hash browns, Jace reached into the oven and pulled out a plate of toast which he set on the table. Gareth pulled out my chair for me and waited for Jace to take his seat before he casually asked, "So did you notice the new theme in the living room?"

Jace nodded and flashed a smile at me. "Solid gold." He replied and lifted his eyebrows several times. "I'm thinking if she'd been white we'd be looking at opals or maybe diamonds? Can't complain though, I'm Dragon enough to appreciate sparkly things. The dowry was an extra bonus though, wasn't expecting that."

What? He thought someone had paid them to take me off their hands? Like some old maid or something? Ha! "It's not a dowry." I told him crisply. "I'm not some chattel Mi offloaded on you. Besides I don't believe this came from Mi or my Mother."

"No?" He inquired and glanced sharply at Gareth. "I assumed...."

Gareth shook his head and said, "I believe your gnome has been busy."

"Snick did that?"

"Who's Snick?"

"Our resident gnome." Jace replied clearly confused. "That doesn't look like Snick's handiwork. I mean really, it's not like he has a lot of imagination when it comes to decorating."

"He?" Gareth demanded.

“He was definitely a she and her name is Areth not Snick.” I told him, taking a bite of my eggs and watching as the two of them exchanged puzzled looks. “Quite lovely too, about two feet tall, big black eyes, long black hair. Rode my Dragon.”

“Rode your Dragon?” Jace repeated, as if he couldn’t quite believe what I’d said.

“She was in your room when we came out of the bathroom. She’d laid out clothes for Lexi....I assumed she was your-our gnome so I had Lexi speak the binding words and she appeared. She touched Lexi’s hand and...disappeared. I’m not certain where she went, but when Lexi shifted she was perched on Goldy’s neck.”

“I assumed the dress was...ah...nevermind. Did this Areth say anything?”

I frowned as I got a flash of a pale haired woman dressed in tight leather, she looked...cold or maybe cruel. Hmmm and Jace thought my dress had belonged to her...interesting, we’d have to come back to that later I thought then shook my head. “She said she was pleased to serve me. And when she touched my hand she...came inside me. She stood in Goldy’s cave and spoke to her before she climbed on and the two of them...ah took flight.”

Jace actually dropped his fork and sat back in his chair a shocked look on his face.

“You are looking at me like I’ve grown a third set of horns.” I told him abruptly.

“You’re just all kinds of interesting aren’t you?” He asked in an amazed voice. “I take it you’ve never seen an Elemental before? Never called one before? Never performed a conjuring ritual?”

When I shook my head he just continued to stare at me.

“Please tell me you didn’t just wish for it and it happened.”

“I don’t recall wishing for anything...exactly. Only that I wanted clothes and couldn’t imagine what two men your sizes would have that could fit me.” I had already come to the conclusion that wishing might be dangerous, and having him confirm it was slightly disturbing.

“Have you ever....had any dealings with demons before? You do realize Elementals are demons right?”

“You mean, straight from the Everlasting, more powerful than Superman type of demons?” I asked while nibbling on a slice of fruit.

“Not even the, I’m a sidekick of Batman but still can kick your ass though I don’t live in the Everlasting anymore type of demons. More like the, I’m Alfred, will you be needing the Batmobile tonight Master Wayne type of demon.”

“I hadn’t realized they came in different versions of Superheroes and their butlers. But to answer your question...I may have brushed up against one or two in my childhood, though none looked anything like Areth. Mom made sure we got around.”

“Do you know who she is?” Gareth joined the discussion to ask. He seemed a little worried and I had to agree that strange demons cropping up in your home might cause concern.

Pushing his plate to one side Jace nodded, “I can find out.” He said, then relaxed back in his chair, closed his eyes and made a strange high pitched noise that grated against the inside of my eardrums.

We waited a few seconds then Jace made that awful noise again, this time before the sound stopped vibrating my eardrums a stocky figure appeared on the table in front of him, hands on hips miniature chest puffed out. He was dressed in a dark green one piece sans shoes just as Areth had been. But while she had had a delicate bone structure the small man before us was bulky with short brown hair. He was stood on the table facing Jace. He didn’t bother turning around but launched into a dialog in a very high pitched voice in a language I’d never heard before. He didn’t sound happy to be there, I suppose being summoned was irksome.

Jace suffered in silence for a moment and then they chatted. At one point Jace motioned toward me with his hand and the little man turned around and gave me a startled look. His little mouth opened in a surprised “O” and then he bowed very low. When he came back up again he shot Jace a disgusted look and walked across the table

towards me. When he reached out his hand to me, I quickly shoved my chair back from the table out of his reach.

“Nothing personal,” I told him as I got my chair between the two of us. I held on to the back of the chair and stared back at him. “I don’t think the overhead racks could handle a change.”

He tipped his head to the side and considered me for a moment then turned back to Jace and spoke very fast. I’m not sure I could have kept up, though Jace seemed to have no problem. When the little man finally wound down, both of them looked at me. Jace had a bemused look on his face while Snick’s face was spilt in a huge grin that made his button eyes dance. Snick tossed a comment over his shoulder, bowed very low and blew a kiss to me just before he winked out.

“Well?” Gareth finally prompted. Apparently he hadn’t followed the conversation either.

Jace took a breath and asked, “Apparently Areth is his Mother.” He told us flatly then looked at me and asked, “At any point, did it occur to you to mention that *your* Mother is *The* estranged Princess of Faerie?”

Oh yeah that.

Chapter 10

“Does this mean I don’t get the grand tour after breakfast?” I finally asked.

“Are you sure that stuff in the living room isn’t your dowry?” Gareth wanted to know. “I’m not sure I want to be indebted to the Elves, they have a nasty way of collecting payment.”

Just because the Elves and the Dragons didn’t always get along; one being primarily concerned with the upkeep of the earth and its inhabitants and the other being primarily concerned with stealing gold, razing herds, and eating virgin maidens. That’s no reason to belittle the Elves, even if I’d never visited Faerie or met most of my relatives.

“I’ll have you know,” Jace replied sarcastically, “that I have never razed a herd in my life! And you are the only maiden virgin I’ve ever come close to eating!”

“Ah, but you have stolen gold?”

“That my Princess is none of your concern. A man’s got to make a living doesn’t he?”

“Don’t call me that.” I told him flatly. “My Mother is the Princess not me. I just work here.”

“You know,” Gareth remarked calmly, apparently ignoring our sparring. “If your Mother was banished and neither of you have ever been back....do you think they know about you?”

I grimaced and pressed my lips together. Yeah they knew about me. Knew and didn’t approve. I mean hey, if Elves and Dragons can’t get along theoretically... imagine how much they must love their actual offspring. Oh no, they had not been happy to find little me; I’d received that message loud and clear. Sometimes I got even by playing my flute, just to piss them off.

Jace looked at Gareth who looked back at him puzzled. “Why does your playing a flute piss of the Elves? Are you serious, you play the flute? I told you she was a Siren!”

I walked around from behind my chair and slumped into it. I pushed away my plate thinking, so much for breakfast. “I’m not a prodigy,” I started, glaring at both of them just wanting to make that clear. “But the first time Mi handed me the flute...I just sort of...got it. Actually it was more like, the music got me. Anyway, it caused a sort of ummm ripple.”

Gareth leaned his elbows on the table and asked, “What kind of ripple?”

I frowned back at him and continued, “The kind that royal pain in the butt, real-live Monarch type Elves step out of. And lucky for me Mom was there or I might not be sitting here now.”

“That bad eh?” Jace asked quietly.

“Yeah it wasn’t good.”

“Tell us.” Gareth urged.

I sighed and considered them for a moment. Dredging up history was never pleasant, but it might be important for them to understand where I stood with the Elves. Just in case. So I closed my eyes and unraveled my memory.

“I don’t remember where we were, someplace with tall trees, someplace... remote. My Mother was working I think, so Mi and I wandered outside into the shade. I suppose no one though it odd, a small child walking about with a huge cat, if they did

I don't recall them saying anything. I remember sitting at the base of a tree watching a spider spin a web in the lower branches. I think I reached it and the flute was suddenly in my hands. It was...a delicate thing, very old and it just seemed to fit there perfectly."

I reached back to remember the feel of the warm summer air, I could recall the pale yellow dress I'd been wearing even down to the little yellow blue and pink rosebuds that covered it. "I remembered Mi sitting before me watching as I raised the flute to my lips and began playing. I think, Mi....spent a lot of time in my head. I don't think the idea to play was mine." I told them, opening my eyes and glancing between them. "I just knew I had to play, and the sound was so pure and sweet. I couldn't have played for more than a few moments. Apparently it was enough, because Mom came running from the building in a panic. I remember her hair streaming behind her and the look on her face. It was one of the few times I ever heard her raise her voice; she was very angry with Mi. They were arguing when the air just sort of bent and rippled then split open and several people were simply standing there."

"That must have been frightening." Gareth remarked, reaching out to give my hand a squeeze where it lay on the table.

I smiled and shook my head. "Trust me my Mom is way scarier. Both she and Mi turned to face them. Mi made it seem natural; it takes a lot to rile her. I think she just sat next to me not saying anything. No one spoke at first; they just stared at Mom. I remember thinking they were so beautiful; there were four of them and only one was a woman, and she looked a lot like my Mom. Then one of the men said something and they all looked at me. Everyone started talking at once and I couldn't understand what was happening. At some point I heard the word abomination; it was the only word I actually remember. It really angered my Mother. I think she was busy telling them off when the woman reached for me and Mi hissed at her.

That was when my Mother lifted me into her arms and walked us away from them. I watched over her shoulder and I can tell you they weren't happy. I don't know what she'd said, but one of the men looked like he would have slit my throat if he

could. The second looked very offended, and the third....” I thought about it for a moment and realized I had recently seen that look on a man’s face. “The third had his arm around the woman who was crying, but his face as he watched us walk away....I think...he must have cared for or at least wanted my Mother.”

Odd, I had never put that together before. But then, how could I since I’d never really seen desire on a man’s face before.

“Do you know who they were?” Gareth asked.

I shook my head. “I think the woman was my Aunt, but I don’t know who any of the men were. Sorry.”

He shrugged, “I suppose it’s not important.”

“Yeah well, it wasn’t too much later that Mom taught me to shimmer. I think I was about two at the time. Since then, it’s been Plain Jane for me.”

Both men looked like they’d lost their eyebrows in their hairlines so surprised did they appear.

“Plain Jane?” Gareth asked when he could finally speak. “That’s not the first reference to this person you’ve made. Who is that?”

I would have loved to have shown him, but really wanted that tour and I didn’t think on top of my lack of sleep I’d be in great shape just for the wow factor. I was going to explain but Jace beat me to it.

“You came into the club last night....we....”

“You were disappointed.” I interrupted him to add.

“And then the wolf dragged you onto the floor and you shifted.” Gareth finished.

“I shimmered.”

“An odd but somewhat appropriate term. Not unlike a chameleon.” Gareth agreed, then thought for a moment and added. “And you started this at two?”

“Somewhere around then.”

“So what happens now when you play the flute?” Jace wanted to know.

I smiled and if I'd had fangs they would have been showing. "My Mother says it echoes in their halls and can affect their moods. Sometimes I like to play in minor."

Gareth nodded like I'd said some great wisdom and maybe I had, after all Fairies by their very nature loved to dance and sing and their halls were supposed to be filled with lovely music. Hearing discordant notes echoing dirges through their halls might set their teeth on edge. One could certainly hope.

"Nothing like a rousing chorus of Caoineadh Airt Ui Laoghair to help them feel poorly about banishing my Mother. Or sometimes I like to play Dies Irae."

"Good God an Irish poem where two women duke it out, and the day of judgment as told in one of the main stanzas from the original Requiem Mass! Damn that's just...evil." Jace complimented me.

"Yes, remind me not to slight your Mother." Gareth told me with a grin.

"And no shimmering. I like you much better like this."

"Yes much better."

"And no flute playing just yet." Jace added. "We've got enough on our plate without pissing off the Fairies."

"Fine but just so you know dirges aren't the only music I can play."

"I'll keep that in mind." He muttered.

We cleared the table and helped each other to put the dishes in the sink. Jace made it clear that if we tried to put them in the dishwasher we'd be in for a nasty surprise. Apparently Snick took his cleaning duties very seriously and didn't appreciate help.

In the end I removed the heels and let them dangle in my hand. The floors were smooth and I was more worried about twisting my ankle than I was about dirty feet. Perhaps if I'd started wearing high heels at two this wouldn't be such an issue for me.

We started by heading back toward the bedrooms, only this time we checked out the first doors on both right and left. On Jace's side of the hall was a huge library, filled floor to ceiling on three of the four walls with books of every shape and size. The room came complete with a huge fireplace that took up nearly the entire fourth

wall, one that I could have stood up in. Sheepskin rugs covered the floors and deep comfortable looking arm chairs and ottomans were spread out about the room. I apologized for my comment about them not reading and wandered around until Jace couldn't stand it anymore and dragged me over to his special section filled with conjuring books, some of which looked to be very very very old. Obviously he liked to dabble, and maybe he'd teach me a thing or two. Hey if I was going to attract demons maybe I should know more about them.

Back into the hall and over to Gareth's side I discovered a very modern, very high tech office or should I say, set of offices since there appeared to be at least two of everything. I wasn't an expert, I think my computer was so last year, but it looked like they could have launched space shuttles to the mars from that room! Gareth breezed me in and then whisked me back out again. Either he didn't want me touching anything or he didn't want me looking too closely. Either way I was glad to be holding my shoes instead of wearing them as I'd surely have ended up in a graceless heap on the floor trying to keep up with him.

Back into the hall we went, Jace and Gareth both explaining that each room had an escape location and promising to show them all to me later. At the moment they pulled me down the hall to the last door at the end and pushed it open. Behind it was another set of doors, but this time there was only one on either side and one at the other end. Again all the doors were closed and Gareth pulled me toward the one on his side while Jace tried to pull me toward the one on his side. I ended up pulling free from both of them and standing in the middle of the hall with one hand on my hip giving them the one eyebrow raised look.

When they finally mumbled an apology I shook my head and wandered down to the end door reached for the round handle and swung the door open. A rush of steam whooshed out at me and I blinked rapidly in the warm damp moisture rolling back into the hall behind me. Curious I stepped through the door and felt the temperature go up about 30 degrees. Apparently I'd found the spa and underground swimming pool, a very large one. Feeling my hair curling into ringlets, I quickly glanced around the room

taking in the coarse sand surrounding what looked like a deep pool maybe forty or fifty yards across. Dropped lighting hung from the rocky ceiling and there appeared to be several deep areas where the sand was piled high. For all intents and purposes, it looked like a Dragon's lair. Goldy actually sat up and stared at the water, apparently the sand and warm water looked appealing to her.

I wandered farther into the cavern almost to the water's edge and when I turned back to the door, both Gareth and Jace were watching me and I found myself considering pulling off my clothes and inviting them into the water for a swim. I could almost feel the waves lapping over our naked bodies as we entwined at the edge of the water. I shook my head and realized we'd be back before the night was over. Right now I wanted to finish the tour.

Jace sighed and Gareth just smiled. The way these two went on you'd think I was the only date available to the prom!

"I think she means a dance."

"A dance of significant importance."

"It's a rite of passage for young men."

"I like to dance." Jace replied.

"We've already had our rite."

"Naked, I like to dance naked."

"Speaking of which, you should see what she's got on under that dress."

"Nothing?"

"No, worse."

"Truly?"

"It's all gold and red and lacy."

"It's been at least an hour."

"That long?"

"I've never felt this attracted to anyone before."

"She wants to see the rest of the place."

"It's not going anywhere."

“Take off your shirt.”

That made Jace look at him, but he didn't hesitate just reached for the hem of his grey t-shirt and pulled it over his head. He dropped it on the floor and took several steps into the room. Meanwhile Gareth was busy with his own buttons and his shirt ended up hanging from the door knob. They both reached for their pants at the same time and Goldy flexed her claws and glanced over her shoulder at the water behind us as if she could sense something at our back.

Her agitation had me turning back to the water and I noticed there were bubbles disturbing the surface. Something rippled under the water almost like a large fish and it was headed in my direction fast. I tensed but held my ground as a large scaly head about four feet long lifted out of the water directly in front of me. Behind me I could hear Jace and Gareth coming but not fast enough to have stopped that thing if it had wanted to eat me. In a show of aggression it opened its mouth, exposing razor sharp teeth and a forked tongue. Inside me Goldy let out a challenging roar and leapt from her cave and for the third time in less than twenty four hours I shifted.

Gareth was right some days it was good to be Dragon, especially when the sight of you causes big scary monsters to cower in fright and grovel for mercy. I spread my wings away from my body making me look larger and stood there teeth bared. Apparently that was enough because the creature flopped onto the sand and rolled over exposing its softer underbelly. I'm not positive but I think it actually grinned and might have wagged its tail if it hadn't been in the water still. Almost like a wolf cub or maybe a dog. I think if I'd have been closer it might have tried licking me or rub itself against my body.

Baffled I turned to Gareth and Jace who had crossed to me and were now standing naked at either side. Seeing that the creature presented no threat I shifted back to human form complete with my gold sandals still held in my hand and stood there waiting, again, the only one in the room dressed. Don't ask me to explain how it works I just know that my clothes, much like Areth earlier, just come along for the ride and

reappear when I'm done. I don't know where they go while I'm in Dragon form I'm just glad it's not embarrassing to shift as long as I'm dressed prior to the process.

"You've frightened Spot." Jace chided.

Spot? Surely not I thought to myself, yet he flashed me his amused smile and nodded.

"Now don't look at me like that, you couldn't pronounce his name anyway. We just call him Spot."

Meanwhile Gareth had crossed to the edge of the water and sat in the sand so he could give Spot a vigorous scratch on the scales just above his eye ridges. Spot appeared to enjoy the attention as he began humming softly and raised his head into Gareth's lap so both eye ridges could easily be reached. I took a moment to marvel at those rough scales so close to Gareth's manly parts but he didn't seem too worried about it so why should I be?

A good portion of Spot's body was still in the water, but I could tell that he resembled a Dragon only he appeared to be missing wings as well as horns. His body was almost black and he was covered in Dragon scales with spiky ridges running from the top of his head straight down his neck and I assumed down his back though his body disappeared under the water so I couldn't really tell. His eyes were a brilliant pale white color as if he was sightless or perhaps they allowed in light under the water. He seemed able to see just fine as he watched me shyly from one eye while Gareth continued to scratch him thoroughly.

"What is he?" I finally asked. "And what is he doing down here?"

At the sound of my voice Spot actually whined. I couldn't tell if it was a worried or excited whine. But it caused Gareth to scratch him harder probably as a means to distract him.

"He's a sort of watch dog." Gareth replied. "He protects the entrances to the tunnels in here."

I glanced around the cavern wondering where the entrances could be. I couldn't see any doorways so they must be hidden behind rocks or maybe just crevices in the cave walls.

"We'll show them to you later." Gareth told me. "Come and meet Spot. He thinks he's angered you and you're making him nervous."

He charges at me out of the water like some prehistoric Loch Ness monster and I'm making him nervous? Should I feel bad about that?

"He was just doing his job. Good thing for you Goldy shifted or you may have ended up toast."

Toast? I don't think so. I shrugged as I walked toward them, "he might have tried, doesn't mean he'd have succeeded."

Jace flashed me a grin, crossed to Spot, knelt and grabbed a handful of sand which he used to rub the somewhat softer looking scales just under Spot's leg.

I'd never owned a pet aside from Mi, and I couldn't really call her my pet, more the other way around actually. But if I had had a pet, I imagine it might look something like these two looked in caring for their...Spot? Just what was this creature anyway? Jace and Gareth weren't exactly making cooing noises but it was dang close. Who would have thought these two Dragons could be such...softies? What was that saying...small children and animals? And it was clear that the feelings were mutual, and it nearly made me go gooey inside. I mean really, here we had two drop dead gorgeous totally naked men petting and fussing over a fifteen or twenty foot long scaly watch dog. It just made my heart swell with emotion.

Gareth actually chuckled and urged me over. Apparently I didn't have a choice, I was meeting Spot. My dress made it difficult to kneel so I bent at the waist instead, leaned over and gave Spot a nice gentle pat on his head. I think it made him feel better because he blew out a very warm breath of air, a breath that actually smelled like charcoal, or maybe brimstone? Oh my God! Could it be? Was Spot an actual wyrm? I didn't know they existed!

“Does he breathe fire?” I demanded, pulling up my dress so I could kneel. Spot blinked his eyes at me and shifted his head slightly in Gareth’s lap.

“Yes, that’s why the pool is heated. And of course it comes in handy for eliminating undesirable tunnel trespassers.”

“Where did he come from? Are there more? Mi has spoken of them, aren’t they related to Dragons? I thought she was just telling stories.”

“I supposed there was a time when we were more closely related.” Gareth replied. “There are many worlds on the other side of the Everlasting and many creatures traveled the paths between worlds. It’s not unlikely that Dragons and wyrms started with similar ancestry. I know that there were no wyrms on our world but that Spot isn’t the only wyrm that lived in the Everlasting before he appeared here.”

“Appeared here?”

Jace stopped scrubbing and looked at me. “I think Snick had something to do with it. We needed a way to defend this cavern and poof there was Spot.”

“Handy.”

“I’ll say the heated pool was an extra benefit.”

“So what does he eat?” I asked, glancing around wondering if there would be piles of bones or some other tell tail sign of past meals.

“Fish, mostly.”

“Ex girlfriends.” Jace responded at the same time. His voice had a tinge of sarcasm to it so that I couldn’t tell if he was serious.

Gareth frowned and then added. “They just appear in the water, compliments of Snick I suspect.”

“Compliments of Snick, ha that’s rich.”

I glanced between the two of them and noticed that neither was willing to make eye contact. This was the first time I’d detected any discord between the two and it surprised me. Apparently the sudden tension affected Spot too because he lifted his head and glanced at each of them then settled his gaze on me. I think his tongue actually slipped out of his mouth and he got that dopy look again not unlike an

overgrown puppy. I was kneeling in front of him dress hiked to mid thigh, loosely holding my shoes when he tilted his head slightly and started undulating just his head back and fourth on his neck, not unlike a cobra before it strikes. I wasn't certain what he was up to then quick as lightening he grabbed my shoes and slipped into the water making a honking sound as he slid under the surface.

"Hey!" I yelped as the shoes left my hand and disappeared out of sight. "That was my only pair of shoes, darn it!"

Gareth and Jace both laughed as Spot surfaced several yards from the edge holding the straps in his teeth and proceeded to shake them vigorously before tossing them in the air over his head. At which point he leapt out of the water and came down with a mighty splash that soaked me to the bone and wet the sand nearly to the door.

I pushed damp ropes of hair out of my face and frowned between Gareth and Jace both of appeared to be trying very hard to hold a straight face. "You might have warned me." I told them grumpily. I assumed they must have known this was going to happen which might account for their lack of clothes. And here I thought it was me they were after, not just the saving of their threads.

In the end I stripped to my panties and bra at which point, Gareth leaned over while he was pulling on his shirt and whispered, "You see why I didn't warn you?"

We left the dress in the cave. Jace assured me it would find its way home and Spot didn't seem interested in it. I was getting used to going naked or near naked so it didn't really matter much. But my hair and shoes were a total loss.

## Chapter 11

It turned out that both rooms yet unexplored down the hall were bedrooms, big surprise there. The one on Jace's side was larger with a similar walk in closet and oversized bath, but the rest of the room was bare except for a large bed of a more feminine design complete with four posts carved out of some type of beautiful light wood. Aside from that there was no bureau or seating area. The room looked like it was just waiting to be custom designed to whoever would occupy it, a blank canvas. One thing it did have that the men's rooms lacked was hardwood floors.

The room on Gareth's side was a different story. I suppose what I was expecting was something similar to the one across the hall but when we opened the door all three of us stood in wide eyed amazement. The room was big, bigger than either Jace or Gareth's and I'm not sure how to describe it except to say it looked like it had recently been decorated in early chaos with a heaping side of pigsty thrown in. At closer inspection I could see a bed and chairs although I couldn't determine the color of either under the heaps of clothing strewn about the room. Clothing which was clearly female, and mostly in the leather variety. The art on the walls was dark, abstract, and not very pleasant to look at. I'm not art critic and what I was looking at might well

have cost a fortune, but sleeping in a room with that hanging on my walls would surely give me nightmares.

And the smell...I think I actually backed farther into the hall, feeling slightly unclean. I'd never experienced a smell like that. It was...unpleasant and my nose wrinkled as I remarked. "Ah I take it Snick doesn't clean in here?"

Gareth frowned and shot Jace an angry look. Jace just shrugged and reached out to put his arm about my waist giving me an affectionate squeeze.

"She's right, it stinks."

I wasn't going to ask who lived here, but I was wondering if I could get Snick to put a lock on my door. Whoever she was, I suspected she wasn't going to be happy with me and I had no desire to be axed to death by some irate female while I slept.

"You can bunk with me." Jace whispered in my ear.

I smiled up at him, thinking I might just take him up on that offer. I was getting the impression whoever lived in that room wasn't one of Jace's favorite people. Not wanting to dwell on it at the moment, I disengaged from Jace and headed back toward the front. Gareth stepped into his room to grab one of his shirts for me. What he came out with was a black sleeveless dress with a scoop neck that reached to mid thigh and hugged my curves like a glove. Jace moaned as I pulled the stretchy cloth over my head and then growled in appreciation as I tugged it into place. Little black flats accompanied this outfit and Gareth helped me into them before we wandered out through the front room on the way to the elevators.

"She doesn't care who lives there." Jace commented as we stood waiting for the door to close.

"Let it go." Gareth advised.

In the reflective paneling I saw the anger that crossed Jace's face before he schooled his features back to benign. Oh oh oh this wasn't good. I linked my fingers together and tried to think happy thoughts. I so didn't want to get in the middle of their squabble about whoever it was that was creating this friction between them. Besides it wasn't like I had any right to ask questions. I'd known them less than twenty four

hours and while we'd had sex...multiple times, none of us were mated for life and it wasn't like I was intended to be monogamous. Shoot my first time and I'd been with the both of them! If ever there was a precedent, surely that was it!

A little voice inside me asked, since I was going to live there...or at least I thought I was, shouldn't I know a little more about who I was going to be sleeping across the hall from? I was pretty sure Mi hadn't left me with them just so I could have my throat slit by some jealous female. Or maybe my being here wouldn't cause a problem. Yeah right, who was I kidding, no female would willingly share these two, I was so going to be the object of her hatred...whoever she was. And while I might not have ever had a boyfriend before, in school I'd seen the way girls reacted around other girls when they thought they were poaching. So not pretty.

"Nope, you got that all wrong." Jace told me abruptly. "I'm not sharing with anyone but you."

Beside me Gareth tensed. He may not want to admit it, but apparently some part of him must have agreed.

Jace punched the button for sublevel 1 forcefully and we rose quickly. Like the bottom floor the doors slid open onto a lobby area that was nicely decorated much like you'd find in any office building. The walls were painted a pleasant light yellow color and there was a short bureau against the wall complete with a humongous bouquet of silk flowers set just below a huge gilt framed mirror that hung on the wall. A couple of deep leather armchairs and a leather bench decorated the room, seating while you wait. If I didn't know better I'd say I was in some posh high rise lobby.

Gareth guided me to the nearest door and we stepped into a very large conference room. The table was about twenty feet long and some sort of jet black lacquer material. The chairs that surrounded the table looked like black leather mini thrones on wheels. I couldn't imagine what sorts of deals were made at that table, but it was all very impressive.

Neutral art hung on the walls, I suspected as more of a method of not calling attention to the lack of windows than because they were trying to impress the room's

occupants. There was a built in wet bar and fridge on the opposite wall, cleverly disguised amidst the wooden cabinetry that nearly lined the end of the room. I assumed the door led to restrooms and wandered over to check it out.

“So is this where you decide what type of whiskey to purchase?” I asked in a teasing voice. I guessed correctly and there was in fact a men and ladies room past the door.

“Occasionally.” Gareth replied, though he didn’t add anything and actually moved to the door and back into the lobby.

I hustled after him and made it to the lobby as he opened the other doorway across the hall. Through door number two was a very long hallway lined with doors on either side. The end of the hall was open and it didn’t look all that different than the hall leading into their living quarters a few floors down. I made no move to go down the hall, simply stood in the doorway gazing about and counting doors. I stopped counting when I hit forty five. The first few on either side were padlocked.

Jace came to lean his chin in my shoulder, snuggling himself against my back as he informed me. “The doors with the locks are storage. We keep supplies on hand down here where it’s cool and we don’t have to refrigerate. The rest of the rooms are sleeping quarters for our guards. The pays not great, but we provide housing and food for meals for those that choose to work and live here.”

“That’s a novel approach.” I replied.

“You’d be amazed at how little sick time you have to deal with.”

I imagine that was true. When your boss could come and check up on you at any time it would be hard to fake being ill so you could surf or play hooky or just sleep in. In all the excitement I’d nearly forgotten the two of them ran a business. It was hard to argue with their logic, but might explain why they were so willing to put me up here, just one more person in need of food and shelter, I wondered if I’d be required to bus tables or deliver drinks upstairs.

Gareth scoffed and gave me a look that said, I don’t think so. Jace just turned his head and bit my neck, reminding me I was still unshielded.

“I’m not sure our business would survive it.” Jace said when he was done munching on me. I pushed him off my shoulder and rubbed my neck.

“Well I’m sure I could control myself if you don’t get me all hot and bothered. I mean, I think I could handle a cute guy without, you know...causing a stampede.”

Both Gareth and Jace frowned and I wondered what I’d said wrong.

“No shopping.”

“I agree.”

“We have to protect our customers.”

“Yes, it’s a matter of crowd safety.”

“She stays below during business hours.”

“And how do you plan to enforce that?”

Jace actually smiled. “I say we sacrifice ourselves to ensure she’s too tired to leave the bed.”

“I say we skip the second floor.”

“We need to know.”

Gareth just sighed and nodded. “You’re right let’s go see.”

Go see what I wondered, giving the long hall another glance before turning back to the elevator.

“You went to school?” Jace asked, clearly picking up on my earlier thought.

“Sometimes, my Mother didn’t want me to, but Mi felt it was important that I be exposed, I think that’s the actual word she used, to other individuals my age.

Personally I think Mi needed a break from me and shipping me off to school for six or seven hours a day gave her more napping time. I didn’t mind, I got to meet all sorts of races, and non-human schools have some of the finest curriculums, especially since they re-instituted corporal punishment and can actually concentrate on learning.”

“What does that mean?” Jace asked his face and voice sounding puzzled.

“Corporal punishment...you know spanking and rapping knuckles with rulers. Well that’s what they used to do to humans; it means a whole different thing to non-humans....sensory depravation rooms for the Weres, films of pre-plague

industrialization for the Elves and chambers where the sunlight surrounds a small circle of darkness in the middle where Vamps are made to stand.

“Sounds barbaric.” Gareth remarked.

“Yeah well you try to control a couple hundred non-humans and see if that works for you without some type of promised punishment for bad behavior. I tell you, you couldn’t pay me to be a teacher, that’s one tough job!”

“So,” Jace continued, “Mi was responsible for your instruction.”

“Yes, but it wasn’t like we sat around in fields of flowers all day and she just yapped at me. Though heaven knows she did enough of that. Just so you don’t think I’m illiterate or anything, I have a business degree from Harvard.”

“You went to school at Harvard?” Gareth demanded skeptically, I wasn’t certain I liked the sound of surprise in his voice.

“Actually I never stepped foot on their campus.”

“Then how did you manage to get a degree?” Jace questioned.

“I challenged the courses and past the tests.” I shrugged.

“That must have been difficult?”

I just smiled at them, “I was seventeen at the time.” I couldn’t help bragging slightly; after all there aren’t a lot of seventeen year olds that achieve their Masters Degrees from any college, let alone one of the Ivy League schools.

We’d been standing in the elevator chatting for several minutes with the doors open to the second level. Both Jace and Gareth gave me startled looks and finally stepped out into the now familiar looking lobby area, though this lobby was unadorned with bare floors and rock walls. There wasn’t even a door, just an archway that led to a narrow hall that appeared to bend back on itself so that you couldn’t see where it led.

The air had a unique tang of musk that sort of hung there invading everything. I licked my lips and concentrated on the smells surrounding me as I stepped from the elevator. The smells reminded me of....a school playground, must be all this reminiscing. No, it definitely smelled like a mixture of sweaty wolf, and cat among other non-human smells. The air tasted like the club upstairs last night without the

cloying scent of perfumes to distract from the heady smell of male sweat. I licked my lips again and turned an inquiring look at Jace and Gareth who both seemed a little tense as they watched me closely.

Whatever was down that hall had them worried. And judging by the smells coming from that direction, whatever it was might well have given them cause for concern...before last night that is. I wasn't kidding earlier when I said I could control myself. At least I hoped I could. I tilted my head to the side and did a little self check. Nope I wasn't having that overwhelming urge to have sex sex sex that I'd been living with for the past six months. Interesting, you would have thought I might have noticed its very lack what with it occupying my nearly every waking thought for so long. Hmmm, nope no urge at all.

"Do you think that's a bad thing?" Jace asked in a somewhat worried voice.

"I don't know." Gareth answered, a frown creasing his brow.

"We didn't....break her or anything. Did we?"

"Maybe it's that she's satisfied."

Jace gave him a pained look. "Say it isn't so."

"I don't know."

"We could...ah check?"

"This isn't the place." Gareth warned sternly.

"It's been hours since she looked at us like she did last night."

"It hasn't been that long."

"It seems like it."

"We've been distracted."

"That didn't bother her last night. Hell, a dozen Vampires didn't distract her!"

Gareth shot me a worried look to which I gave him a bright sunny smile. Hey if they wanted to know they could just ask, I was having too much fun watching them worry over their problem to feel the need to help resolve it.

"I think it's our houseguest."

Gareth growled low. "I'm not discussing this now."

“You’re going to have to. She has a right to know.”

“No!”

“Then she stays with me.” Jace told him bluntly.

Gareth sucked in a breath and turned his back on the two of us. I shot Jace a worried look only to find he was grinning. I bit my lip as he winked at me, wondering what game it was he was playing at. Before the two of them came to blows, I simply stepped around Gareth and headed down the hall at a fast walk. Not subtle on my part, but then no one had ever accused me of being subtle so what did I care.

I nearly made it to the bend in the hall before Jace captured my elbow in his hand. Gareth was right behind him and actually stepped around me as Jace edged me to the side so he could pass. Either they didn’t trust me or they wanted Gareth to go first to protect me...from what I wasn’t sure.

The hall stretched on for another thirty feet or so, the smells getting stronger the closer we got to the end, inside me Goldy rolled over in her cave and wrinkled her snout as she sat up and glanced around. One word slipped from her, *Food?* And I nearly stumbled as we reached the opening. Goldy had never expressed interest in feeding before, not even during my teenage rebellion phase when we snuck out for midnight flights. That she would do so here, underground was more than a little disturbing.

Jace’s grip on my elbow tightened slightly as we reached the opening and Gareth moved to the side. I sucked in my breath, nearly gagging on the smell as my gaze traveled over the huge cavern below us set up like one gigantic gym or training area. My eyes swept from left to right, taking in the climbing wall and what looked like an obstacle course, boxing ring, floor mats, and weight training area complete with pommel horses and ceiling rings. Big ceiling fans rotated slowly circulating the air, and I could see vents in the walls, apparently overworked but still pumping in fresh air. I had wondered.

In the very back was what looked like an Olympic sized three lane pool? And there were people everywhere, mostly men but there were some women too. Everyone

was busy sparring, wrestling and lifting weights; some were running on the smooth track that circled the entire space.

“Wow!” This made the workout area I’d set up in my basement look very small indeed. I was suddenly excited at the prospect. I’d grown up working out daily with whatever sparring partners Mom could dredge up for me from local dojos.

When I’d been about eight I’d gone through an awkward stage and both Mom and Mi had decided that marshal arts would be a good way to learn balance as well as self defense, something they both agreed I would need. My training wasn’t classical, since I’d been forced to learn from whomever was available, consequently my sparring style was a mixture of everything from old school boxing, learned from an Irish Werebitch in Chicago to the more classic forms of marshal arts taught in dojos across the US.

“I think she approves.”

“She doesn’t seem bothered by them.” Gareth responded and I could see some of the tension ease out of his shoulders and back as he walked toward the four or five stairs that led down to the main floor below us.

I smiled at Jace and pulled my elbow out of his grip so I could follow after Gareth. He let me go reluctantly almost as if he was hoping I might have had a different reaction. Poor man!

People were starting to notice us. Those closest to the stairs had stopped what they were doing to turn in our direction. I watched the women closely wondering if my hall mate might be among those here in the room. Our arrival created a wave of disruption that quickly spread until everyone stopped what they were doing to look at us.

Most of the faces looked expectant as if Gareth and Jace joined them regularly and that there might be an opportunity to test their skills. Others noted my arrival and exchanged speculative looks with their neighbors. I noted their faces pegging them as the type that might need a little one on one with me on the sparring mats to engineer some respect. We’d come back to that later I promised myself, as I continued to glance

about the room. It was no different than stepping into any dojo anywhere, and I was used to being sized up and found wanting. Usually because I was playing Plain Jane and didn't look all that. Today I suspected it was because I came wearing a dress, my hair in disarray from our earlier encounter with Spot, being propped up by Jace. A misleading first impression if ever there was one.

Of course, not everyone reacted like I was some bit of fluff. Across the room I picked out at least two of the men that had been on the landing last night though I didn't see the man that had actually shot me. Lucky him. Those two weren't making eye contact; in fact their body language nearly screamed submission when my glance swept over them. I wasn't sure if it was their submissive look or the sudden feeling of imminent threat that caused me to hesitate on the stairs. I just know that it pulled my gaze sharply to the right in time to see a very large, very angry woman heading our way, and I had no doubt I was about to meet the occupant of the room across the hall. She of the tight leather, spiky short blond hair, and amazing lack of spatial hygiene.

Jace passed me on the steps, coming to stand directly below me. I lifted a hand to rest on his shoulder not to reassure myself as it might have looked, but so that I could push him out of my way if I needed to. Judging by the look on her face I'd probably need to.

Gareth took a step toward her and I growled at him, deep and low and threatening. The sound caused my hair to stand on end and I'm not sure which of us it shocked more. But after looking at my face he gave a nod and took back the step so that he was no longer standing between me and the oncoming freight train. If I was going to live here I was going to have to prove myself, and I flashed him a grateful smile letting him know I appreciated his understanding and consideration.

Jace on the other hand, wasn't nearly as accommodating and refused to give in to the subtle pressure I exerted on his shoulder. I wanted him to shift to the side out of my way, but he planted his feet and refused to be moved.

I sighed in irritation but gave up and simply stood there as calmly as I could given the look of absolute hatred being aimed my way. Inside me Goldy tensed and

lifted her muzzle again, running her tongue over her teeth as if trying to erase a nasty taste from her mouth....*Troll!* She whispered and flexed her claws at our mortal enemy. Trolls and Dragons do not get along. That would explain....a lot. I turned to look at Gareth in shock. He'd been sleeping with a Troll? No wonder Jace was having issues....good grief! I suddenly had the urge for a bath....the very thought made my skin crawl! No way were we sharing Gareth with a Troll! One of us was going to have to go, now!

I felt a piercing sense of joy from Jace as he moved to the side. Apparently my reaction satisfied him and he shifted out of our way moving off the stairs to stand with arms crossed, face covered in a smug smile. Gareth lifted his hand in my direction and might have taken a step toward me, but it was too late as this time both Goldy and I were in complete accord as I dove off the step and shifted mid-air. One stroke of my wings and I was on her, carrying her to the ground in my claws, my weight forcing her onto her back.

She let out a roar and swung at my leg with a large fist. I flexed claws squeezing her chest and reached for her neck with my teeth, wanting nothing more than to tear out her throat. She managed to get a forearm between us and I felt extreme satisfaction as the bone gave with a loud snapping noise. She started screaming obscenities at me and I flapped my wings once lifting myself slightly before I slammed my weight back onto her, stopping her foul mouthed utterances in a grunt as I momentarily cut off her air.

She wrapped her legs around my front foot and started squeezing. Trolls are very strong and hard to kill so it wasn't a surprise when the pressure caused me to hiss in pain. I just wanted this over as quickly as possible. One less Troll in the world would suit me just fine. I let go of her arm and glanced up my gaze focusing in on the water at the other end of the cave. She was too heavy to fly with, but I managed to flap my wings as I wrapped my claws as far around her torso as I could get, then started running across the floor, dragging her over mats and knocking over whatever apparatus happened to be in my way. People dodged for safety as we limped-ran the length of the

room, my wings pumping at my back her screaming at me and trying to bite, kick and claw me while being dragged along.

I didn't hesitate as I reached the edge of the pool, simply dragged her in over the edge into the deep end, holding her under while I was able to keep my head above the surface. Her weight like a rock, sunk immediately and I merely had to hold her under until she stopped moving. Trolls may be tough on land, but none of them can swim and you can only hold your breath for so long. Even Trolls needed air to breath to stay alive.

When I felt her heart stop beating beneath my foot, I raised my head and let out a piercing scream that reverberated off the surrounding walls like some huge echo chamber. I left her there as a final insult, made my way to the edge of the pool, and heaved myself out of the water.

The entire episode hadn't taken more than a few moments and everyone was either picking themselves up off the floor from where they had dived for safety or were simply staring at me in shock. I gave myself a shake and lifted into the air, figuring I'd just cement my status with a victory lap. I came in for a landing and shifted as my feet touched down, stepping dry and completely dressed before Jace and Gareth and realized not everyone was as pleased with me as I was myself.

Both men looked shocked and disheveled, as if they had been wrestling while I'd been busy eliminating the competition. I could only assume that Gareth had tried to intercede and Jace had prevented him from doing so. I took a moment to look them over and decided that neither had understood the seriousness of the situation. Had they honestly thought I would allow a Troll to share housing? Granted I'd never gone Troll hunting before, but that didn't mean I had to tolerate living with one. And it wasn't like she had been on her way toward me to shake my hand and play nicey nice.

"You just..." Gareth sputtered...waving an arm toward the pool.

"I didn't think you'd actually kill her." Jace commented.

"What you thought I'd just stand there and let her kill me first?" I demanded, placing my hands on my hips and quickly becoming annoyed with them. "You

thought....what that you could put the two of us under the same roof and expect we'd all live in happy harmony? And you're how old?" I demanded, my voice actually rising so that it carried out over the floor. "How incredibly stupid can you be! My God I just killed that that thing! You couldn't even freaking warn me it was in here! And this is how you plan to protect me?" I huffed, stomping up to them and poking first one then the other in the chest with a stiff finger. Obviously I was having post traumatic syndrome since I was actually shouting. I never shouted. I would not feel guilty about protecting myself!

Taking a step back I closed my eyes and took a deep breath...count to ten, count to ten. My voice dropped to a whisper as I finished, "Are there any other nasty surprises you're hiding or have you made a big enough fool of me for the day?"

Jace sucked in air and reached for me. I neatly sidestepped him and held up one hand. "Don't touch me." I warned slamming shut my shields and actually enjoying the fact that he jerked in pain. By that point, I was too angry and hurt to tolerate his hands on me. "Obviously I can't leave so could you just, take me downstairs? I'd like to be alone."

Gareth and Jace got into an argument, nearly coming to blows as I watched in stony silence. When it was over, it was Nick that led me to back to the elevator using his card key to access doors. Neither of us spoke as we rode the elevator, but when he opened the door from the foyer he held it slightly closed until I glanced up at him. He searched my face for a moment then cupped his hand below my cheek, catching the golden teardrop that had slipped from my eye to trail silently down my face. He held it in his open palm before curling his fingers over it oh so gently as if it was a precious treasure. And perhaps it was, Dragon tears being so rare.

He let the door close as he reached for me and I went into his arms, needing the comfort. We just stood there in silence, he resting his chin on my head while my body shook and cried out my heartache. When I finally got control of myself he let me go, giving me a lopsided grin before turning efficiently to the door and once again scanning it open. He stopped me again when I would have stepped through.

“Thank you.” He told me, giving my shoulder a gentle squeeze.

I looked at him and wondered why he would be thanking me. He must have seen my confusion because he continued, “For eliminating the most dangerous threat to their security.”

Ah so it wasn’t just me that thought having a Troll hanging around wasn’t a great idea. They tended to be self serving and not at all trustworthy. Not to mention, again, the entire mortal enemy thing. What had Gareth been thinking!

Nick smiled at me and gave me a wink. “It was nicely done and nothing to be ashamed of. You were right; she would have slit your throat in a heartbeat. I suspect the only reason she hadn’t slit their throats was because she wanted something badly.”

Obviously I hadn’t been thinking clearly and suddenly it just clicked, the security measures, the guards, the onsite housing, the huge work out area and the bloodless nighttime visitors...not exactly a coincidence. Wow, how naive could I be? “Hey Nick,” I asked, wondering just what was going on around here, “those pesky bloodsuckers that made a house call last night...that had nothing to do with me, did it?”

Amazing! Nick went from friendly to stoic in less than a second. I’d spent way too much time hanging around base medical hospitals growing up to not recognize that look. It fairly screamed x-Military. It was the look that said...you can pull my nails out and I won’t talk.

“Now, no need to go all Jar Head on me.” I told him with a tired smile. “It’s not like I don’t have my own baggage. And by the way, if the boys haven’t told you yet, it’s considerable. If they don’t get around to sharing the finer points with you, come see me and I’ll give you the details. Obviously you take your job seriously and apparently I’ve become part of it.”

“Thank you,” He told me, thawing slightly. “Though you don’t do so badly yourself.”

Strong praise, especially I suspected coming from him. “Yeah that’s me, able to leap tall buildings, stampede entire crowds, and kill female Trolls all in a day’s work.”

He actually grinned and held the door open for me. “It’s Green Beret, not Jar Head.” He told me as I walked through the door and down the hall.

## Chapter 12

I'm soaring, golden wings stretched out to capture the currents as I ride the black velvety night air. Stars twinkle across the sky as the full moon edges over the tops of the tall pines laid out below me and reflected off the ocean water lapping the shore below me. The moon is dark red, caused by the pollution still being pumped into the atmosphere despite the Elves' best efforts. Humans will never learn.

The feeling of freedom is incredible, and I twist my body into a spiral looping several times, the tips of my wings just missing the tree tops. Below me I feel life everywhere. A family of squirrels stirs in their nest, as I pass. To my left a herd of deer freeze, nostrils flared to catch my scent, their hearts accelerating as I, the hunter pass over their heads. But tonight I need to fly, to throw myself across the sky and taste the scents on the damp night air.

And then, I am not alone. Looking up I see a dark shadow plummeting down from above. Fear clenches at my heart and I veer sharply left. The shadow is closer now, dropping from the sky like a stone heading straight to me. Black wings, black body cloaked in night, its size eclipsing me. An anguished cry escapes my throat as I plummet to the ground.

Silver arms reach out to catch me, cradling me against a muscular chest. Multifaceted eyes gaze down at me from a sculpted face. I'm no longer in Dragon form, my

golden body and wings having shifted. Above us the black beast bugles an angry scream which splits the night and chases gooseflesh across my naked skin. I feel its anger pressing down on me, pressing in on me, invading my mind. I close my eyes and burry my face against my protector's chest, breathing deeply of his sharp musky scent, letting him fill my nostrils and sooth my burning throat and lungs.

I open my eyes and I'm in a cavern. I can feel the weight of the Earth pressing down on me from above, comforting. The clean smell of rich dirt fills my nostrils. I am surrounded by Dragon, cradled gently against the soft belly of a huge silver beast. I can feel its warmth pressing into my back. Turning my head I gaze into his huge silver eye and thoughts of love and caring overwhelm me. A golden tear slides down my cheek and is flicked away by the Beast's tongue. In my mind I hear him speak my name, telling me I must go. Turning I wrap my arms about his body, clinging to his strength. No please don't send me away my mind screams yet I'm torn away like a leaf in the wind.

I woke in the dark, thrashing about with someone leaning over me. My initial reaction was swift as I sent my fist into their kidney and followed up with a raised knee. A startled curse filled the air and an additional set of hands reached for me. My breath was coming in gasps when Jace leaned his face in to mine and yelled my name effectively stopping my struggles while Gareth flopped over onto the bed beside me moaning in pain. I suppose the knee to his groin wasn't pleasant.

"Was that necessary?" Jace asked calmly, nodding his head at Gareth who was still breathing heavy and trying not to hold his manly parts.

I covered my face with my arm and tried to regulate my breathing. The dream usually left me disoriented and it was going to take a few seconds to settle my reactions. I'm sorry I just couldn't worry about Gareth's discomfort just yet; I was too busy with my own.

"Next time don't grab me." I mumbled from under my arm.

"Gareth couldn't wake you." Jace responded as he sat himself next to me on the bed.

“Yeah well, you’ve been warned.”

“Does this happen often?” Gareth wheezed from beside me.

I turned my head and glanced at him, noticing that he was fully dressed, in different clothing than I had left him upstairs. I looked at Jace who was also in different clothes and wondered what time it was. I’d come back to my room and passed out on my freshly made bed, after a lengthy swim with Spot who hadn’t minded my tears and who had cheered me by frisking around in the water with me playing tag and racing me from shore to shore. He’d received a good scratching with the sand for his efforts. “Yes,” I admitted then pushed myself into a sitting position and wrapped my arms around my knees. I had carried my clothing back from the pool and laid them across the foot of the bed. In the light from my bathroom I could see that they were gone.

“I’m sorry I bothered you, were you just going to work?” I asked, pushing back my now dry hair and realizing that it must be later than I realized if my hair wasn’t still damp. I was so going to need to get a clock.

They glanced at each other. And Gareth’s voice was nearer normal as he informed me. “We ah....felt your distress.” He told me cautiously as if he thought I’d be worried about the fact that I’d been broadcasting again. Or maybe he thought I wouldn’t like that the two of them could hear me through a couple hundred feet of rock.

Did I? Hmmm no real downside there, after all if I had been in trouble it was nice to know someone could hear me and would come running. “It was just a dream.” I told them, smiling a little to let them know I appreciated that they cared enough to worry.

Jace frowned at me as if he didn’t like what that implied and reached over to slip a lock of hair behind my ear. “Or course we care.” He chided.

“Would you like to talk about it?” Gareth asked.

I shrugged and rested my cheek on my kneecap. “It’s just a dream I’ve been having for a while. It’s always the same.”

“The ah...the black, have you ever actually seen him? Outside of your dream I mean?” Gareth asked quietly.

“No, I’ve never seen either of them; you two are the only Dragons I’ve ever met in person.” I told him my eyes watching his face as he frowned. Hmmm, compressing his cupid bows again I thought. Then sat up straight when he grinned at me. I was so not letting him off the hook that easily.

He gave me a lopsided smile and said, “I’m sorry, doesn’t unmanning me count as punishment enough?”

Jace ignored the two of us and responded, “He goes by the name Dane. He’s a bit of a bastard young and very cocky.”

“Something was different about him. Now I suspect he didn’t cross over.” Gareth added meaningfully.

“He showed up in our club over a year ago looking for someone.”

“He wouldn’t say who.”

My eyes swung between the two of them as understanding dawned. This Dane person was one of my potential mates? And he wasn’t only stalking my dreams, but maybe me too. Oh that couldn’t be good.

“He had an Irish accent. I’d have pegged him as Black Irish, thug like if you get my meaning. Made our customers nervous and not in the same way you did.” He added when he saw the startled look I shot him.

“You didn’t like him because he had that little Jaguar you were dating all hot and bothered.”

Jace shot him a disgusted look and replied, “He seemed a little too intense to me, driven or something.”

Gareth nodded ignoring the look Jace gave him to agree. “Very intense.”

Oh goodie, arrogant and a thug. Not exactly my perfect date material. Not that I’d ever been on a date but, I wondered how dear old Dad would feel about that.

“Hmmm.” Gareth replied to my unspoken comment.

I glanced at him sharply and asked the question I so needed an answer to. “You know him don’t you?” I demanded eagerly.

Gareth just shook his head and I turned hopeful eyes to Jace who had a look of apology on his face. “We don’t know him.” Jace responded. “Though I didn’t sense any....ah.” He waved his hand and I just looked at him in confusion.

“He means he didn’t sense any urge on the Silver’s behalf to mate with you.” Gareth finished for him.

That was a big leap, assuming every male would want to mate with me and therefore those that didn’t couldn’t be..what...normal or had to be my father by virtue of the fact that they didn’t have sex with me? I may have been born at night, but I was pretty sure I wasn’t born *last* night! I think I actually made a scoffing noise.

Jace frowned at me and might have said something but Gareth interrupted him. “I think the main point is that we’ve never met the Silver. And for all we know he could be your father or one of the ten or one of any number of Dragons that crossed over. There aren’t that many that settled here, but that isn’t to say that they aren’t out there. I didn’t get any sense of where the dream takes place, it could be anywhere in this world.”

Jace frowned and offered. “Actually there aren’t that many places where pine trees and oceans combine. In fact, if I had to guess I’d say it was somewhere along the West Coast, maybe up into Canada or even Alaska. You said your father went into hiding....maybe he crossed over into Canada. That would have prevented the majority of his enemies from tracking him. He could have flown over the border with none the wiser and found some nice forested place to make a den...go into deep sleep or just merge in with the population, carry on his testing in private.”

I sighed. “I suppose.”

“And,” Jace added, “We also know we don’t like the Black, he’s simply not good enough for you. And since your father isn’t here, you’ll just have to take our word on that. If he shows up again, we’ll give him the bum’s rush.”

I frowned and informed him, “If he shows up again I have to meet with him. No matter how much you dislike him. I don’t have the luxury of being picky. That’s the deal.”

Jace and Gareth both frowned at me. “Yes that was the deal.” Gareth responded. Jace just grunted.

“Get up and get dressed.” Jace told me briskly as both he and Gareth slipped from my bed.

“Why?”

“Because we’re taking you out to dinner, you did say you’d never been on a date before?” And at my nod he continued. “So hop in the shower and doll yourself up while we go change. We’ll wait for you out in the living room.”

“But what about the club, don’t you need to work?” I asked their backs.

“It’s under control.” Gareth responded over his shoulder as he pulled the door shut behind him on his way into the hall.

I sat on my bed for a moment wondering what had just happened. Had I been asked out on a date, or had I just been informed I was going? Hmmm mostly the latter I suspected, maybe because they weren’t sure I’d say yes to the former. Smart men! I was still miffed with them but apparently they’d been willing to forgive me for slaying the Troll if I would forgive them for not warning me. Maybe it was best to let it go. Water under the Troll Bridge and all that, I thought then chuckled at my own joke as I hopped off the bed and headed to the shower. I was so going to need help. I wondered if Areth or Snick did hair.

It took me a while but between the three of us we managed to get me presentable. It turned out that both Snick and Areth did hair. Between the two of them they spent more time arguing over what to do with me than it actually took them to do it. I glanced at myself in the mirror before leaving the bathroom and gave them both a smile.

My hair was swept up off my neck and piled on my head with some sort of chopsticks which Areth assured me could also be used as weapons since they were very

pointy and made of wood. I suspected they were the upgrade to Jace's hair brush. My lashes looked incredibly long and the shadow she had used on my eyes made them look huge. A shiny lip gloss drew attention to my lips and balanced out my cheekbones which with my hair up looked pronounced. My skin was the warm color of golden honey, and blended well with the dress that Snick had reverently carried into the restroom and helped me into. Like the pictures in the front room, it was a mixture of gold, green and blue. Starting at the neck line in gold and darkening through various shades of green to darkest blue at the flirty hem. The dress ended just above the knee and tended to swing freely when I walked. The neckline was low and prohibited me wearing a bra. The back was...non existent except for golden cording which held the dress in place and prevented me from flashing too much breast when I moved. Tiny little panties that matched the overall color scheme accompanied the outfit as well as dark blue high heels.

Areth spent a few minutes explaining the finer points of walking in heels and had me practicing around the bathroom as she sat on the vanity and offered advice. By the time I was ready to leave I was feeling quite confident as Snick stood on the bed and helped me into my coat. A long draped affair that latched at the throat and basically hid me from neck to calf while still managing to cling in the most inappropriate places. The two of them sent me off whispering naughty advice and giving me proud waves.

Jace was sitting on one of the couches in the front room, his eyes closed, head leaning back listening to soft music and I took a moment to appreciate him. He was wearing tailored black slacks and a silk button down shirt in his signature green which was open at the neck. Across the couch next to him was draped a long black coat that looked like it might be cashmere. His dark lashes looked long and sexy against his cheeks and his day old growth made my palms itch.

A smile creased his lips and he breathed deeply. "I'd ask you to join me on the couch," he commented, eyes still closed. "But I'm afraid we wouldn't be leaving if you did, and Gareth is waiting upstairs with the car."

It was tempting, he was tempting, but I hadn't eaten since morning and Areth and Snick had worked so hard....

Jace signed, opened his eyes and rose in one smooth motion grabbing up his coat and pulling it on. "Food it is then." He told me briskly, giving me a look full of promise. He crossed to me giving me an appreciative look and offered his arm and we left for the elevator.

We came out on the Club level but took the stairs leading out instead of trying to wade through the dancers. I could hear the music and the beat thrummed in my veins. Jace placed his hand over mine and led me out the door and over to a long black car waiting in the alley. The night air was crisp with just a hint of fog rolling in off the bay, making me glad for the coat I was wearing.

The back door slid open and Gareth leaned a hand out, reaching to help me into the soft leather upholstery. When we were all seated comfortably, me in the middle between them, I glanced at Gareth and gave him the once over as I had done with Jace. They both smelled heavenly and Gareth was also wearing his signature color, his shirt was a midnight color that matched the hem of my dress, his coat was made from the same material as Jace's in navy blue. I suspected Snick had been busy in the laying out of clothes duties that evening.

"You look lovely." Gareth remarked as he reached for the bottle in the ice bucket and champagne flutes in the little cupboard under the seat across from us. He waited for us to make the turn out of the alley then poured glasses for us all.

"A toast in honor of Lexi's first date."

"To Lexi!" Gareth seconded.

I rode along in comfortable silence, sipping my drink and listening as they chatted about the club. At some point my mind wandered and I found myself wondering what Mi was doing and what would become of my stuff still back at my apartment. There wasn't much there that I needed, except a few mementos and my flute. Maybe tomorrow I could get one of them to help me pack and bring them over to

the club. I was thinking about what I would say to Mrs. Long, my landlord when the car stopped and Gareth took my drink out of my hand.

The back door opened and one of their men stood watching the street as we left the car. The other guard held the door to the restaurant. The dividing window had been up so I hadn't even realized there were two of them with us. Gareth rose from the vehicle and assisted me out. I had an uneasy moment when my heel caught on the pavement but between them they steadied me as we entered the doorway and down a flight of narrow stairs.

The smell of spices assailed me and my mouth nearly watered. At the bottom of the stairs there was an open doorway covered in hanging red beads. We stepped through the beads and were greeted by a portly man who bowed low to Gareth and Jace. I won't say he fawned over them, but I will say it was a near thing as he urged us to a place on the floor covered in pillows just off the main floor area. Jace reached for my coat and nearly swallowed his tongue when I let it slide off my shoulders. Behind me I heard Gareth hum softly and felt a guilty pleasure in their attention. Jace practically tossed our coats at the Matre'de but he was too slow and Gareth stepped forward and assisted lowering me to the carpet.

Our host gave me a frown and turned to look at a young boy standing near the wall who rushed forward to take our coats. When his hands were free he clapped them loudly and from the other side of the room several young men came forward carrying trays of fruits and drinks. Apparently we didn't need to order since no menus were forthcoming. The little man stood over us while we were served then wandered away with a flourish.

"He's charming. Do you come here often?" I asked, raising an eyebrow as I reached for a grape. Jace grabbed my fingers and lifted them to his lips so he could nibble on them. I looked at him and then at the bunch of red juicy looking grapes.

Gareth leaned forward and brushed his fingers down my arm. His voice was low as he informed me. "Don't be too hard on him, he's got daughters."

Jace nipped my fingers and wiggled his eyebrows, "Ugly daughters."

“I’m not really dressed for a chick fight.” I warned them both, “so if there’s going to be hair pulling and nail scratching we can just leave now.”

The both laughed and Jace let go my fingers so he could feed me a grape. He seemed to like feeding me so I let him. Meanwhile Gareth made lazy circles on my arm, causing my hair to stand up as gooseflesh erupted where he touched me.

Between bites I glanced around the room, noting the other customers busy enjoying their dinner and admiring the art and décor. There was a huge ivory colored bird carved into the wall which drew my attention.

“That is a Simurgh.” Gareth told me. “It’s a mythological huge winged creature capable of carrying off elephants in their claws. It appears in the form of a peacock with the head of a dog and the claws of a lion, always female, and always benevolent. It’s said to have lived through three times the destruction of the Earth and when it was 1700 years old it threw itself into a volcano but rose from it’s own ashes.”

“A phoenix?” I asked, looking at him and wondering if this was just another fairy tail or if they existed like Wyrms.

He shrugged and glanced at the carving before replying. “I’ve never seen one.”

When I looked at Jace he too shrugged. “There are many things that live in the Everlasting, but I’ve never seen one either.”

Jace was just finishing off the last orange slice as one of the young men appeared and whisked away our tray. He was followed soon after by another young man carrying bowls of soup that smelled delicious. He set the tray on the floor and we each picked up a bowl and spoon. The flavor was excellent, made with lamb in a tomato base with some type of vegetable that I didn’t recognize.

“Okra, it’s referred to as the lady finger.” Gareth supplied, “it’s also a wonderful anti-histamine in case you know anyone with allergies.”

“Can’t say that I do.”

When we finished our soup we had a brief reprieve as our servers brought us drinks made from chilled yogurt and fresh fruit. The three of us chatted. And Gareth explained the décor and other decorations which were not as inspired as the Simurgh

but equally interesting. We were nearly through our main course, a mixture of succulent lamb pieces and roasted tomatoes and mushrooms which Gareth named a kabob, when the music swelled and around the room people shifted so they were facing the main floor. Jace reached for me and pulled me in against his chest. "Protect me." He whispered as a group of five scarf clad women raced through the crowd and onto the floor before us.

The lights went down and I found myself looking at five incredibly beautiful women, each more lovely than the next with large doe eyes, porcelain skin, and silky black hair that cascaded down their backs nearly to their knees. They looked like a rainbow in their brightly colored costumes which left their midriffs bare. Their arms and legs were covered in see through scarves which tied at ankle and wrist with long ribbons that floated around them as they dipped and swayed. Ropes of pearls draped their foreheads, holding back their hair and scarves.

Gareth leaned back on an elbow next to me so that my body was cupped against his. I reached for him and he shifted so that his head slid into my lap and I could run my fingers through his hair. Behind me, Jace wrapped his arm around my waist holding me tightly against him as his breath warmed my neck.

Out on the floor the women swirled and gyrated rolling their hips in time to the mini symbols they held in their hands. Their movements were beautifully choreographed as if they had performed this dance a million times. And I suddenly understood the near hostel greeting from our host. Though mortal, these women deserved mates worthy of them. To the casual observer, Gareth and Jace could have fit that bill.

Jace hugged me tighter and Gareth slid his hand onto my leg just above my knee, making those little circles again that felt like mini-shocks.

At one point during the show, the women spread out amongst the guests. I suppose it wasn't surprising that several of them stopped in front of us. Their faces were eager their eyes inviting as they moved seductively to the music. I started out amused, but by the third pass their obviousness was starting to wear on me and I'm

ashamed to say I let a little of my Dragon out. As they approached us through the crowd I caught the smug look one of them flashed me and just couldn't help myself. I dipped my head, blinked once and slowly opened my eyes, eyes gone golden and multifaceted.

I got a tight squeeze from Jace and Gareth slid his hand farther under my dress and gave me a not so gentle squeeze on the thigh.

"What?" I hissed as the flock of would be rivals scampered, figurative tail between their legs back through the crowd. "Didn't you say to protect you?"

"No scaring the natives, it's not fair."

I clenched my hand to keep from smacking him. "Having to sit here while they try and seduce you isn't fair!" I hissed back.

Jace nuzzled my neck and whispered. "The only person doing any seducing here is you."

Gareth rolled over and glanced up at me. "I think you can retract your claws," He commented with a mischievous grin. "I'm pretty sure they got the message."

I glanced around the room, noticing the females had moved on to other customers and was about to blink myself back to normal when my gaze cut across our host and I took an extra moment to ensure he understood the situation fully. I didn't want to leave him with any misconceptions. I think he blanched when I flashed him a smile. Gareth growled at me and I gave in with a sigh and shifted. I'm not certain what scared our Host more, my eyes in Dragon form, or the fact that they shifted while he watched me from the shadows. Either way, I was satisfied he'd got the message. Maybe he wouldn't be so fast to dismiss the next woman that came through his doors.

"Isn't it refreshing how she always thinks of others?" Jace commented.

Gareth chuckled and I let my fingers wander down to his chest and into the hair just beneath the vee of his shirt.

When the lights came up we were served a frozen desert that tasted of limes and oranges. Gareth refused to leave my lap so I ended up feeding him while Jace fed me. We were a happy little group as we finished our meal and Jace paid the check. Gareth

used his wrist communicator to call for the car and we left the building. Amazingly our Host had absented himself. I couldn't feel badly about that. Though Jace informed me he'd miss eating at that restaurant, he was pretty sure they wouldn't be welcome back. Nope, couldn't feel bad about that either.

## Chapter 13

Back in the car, Gareth put the window down and asked our driver to drive us around town. Jace played tour guide as we were ferried around the Warf and Chinatown, over to Nob Hill and around the Market District. We sipped more champagne and they both told me stories of the great earthquake and fire of 1906 of how it had left nearly half their population homeless. They chatted about how the plague had affected the city and the mass influx of non-humans that had taken up residence since. The two of them had come over from Europe in the late 1700's as Captain and First Mate and had decided to stay, hiding in plain sight ever since.

They shared how they had been merchants then landholders and then sold their land to become real estate tycoons. As we drove around they described their forays into gold mining and railroad development. At one point they had grown tired of it all and sailed off around the world only to come back to San Francisco where they felt most at home. Jace admitted they had even spent some time in the military and had fought in several wars, but that this strip of land always called to them and nowhere seemed as inviting as the city by the bay.

I was thinking how much I'd enjoyed the evening and what wonderful dates they had been as we pulled into the alley behind the club. We made it down the stairs and the music flowed into my veins again and I stopped in the middle of the hallway.

Jace looked at Gareth and Gareth looked at Jace. "Why not?" Jace asked and opened the door for me. Gareth at my back I stepped into the club and inhaled deeply the aroma of what I now identified as sex. That heady musky smell that had overwhelmed me last night, eased into me like a warm promise and I slipped onto the dance floor pulling both men with me. I saw Gareth lift a hand at the bartender just before we were swept into the crowd.

I'm not sure if what we did out on the floor could be considered dancing, but it was wild and exhilarating and Jace and Gareth were there with me, pulling me back to them whenever the crowd separated us. The music was loud and the floor so crowded at times all we could do was press up against each other while our hands stroked and petted and our mouths melded. It was one of the most intoxicating experiences of my life. At some point Gareth edged toward the door and I found myself tumbling into the elevator holding my shoes while Jace pressed me into the corner and ran his hand under my top his mouth devouring mine.

The floors slid past and I was in the living area my hands on Gareth's chest, his buttons strewn about the floor as I bent him backwards over a couch and climbed his body while Jace ran his hands under my dress and yanked my panties off. We made it to the bedroom. I'm not sure who's, then there was no more clothes, only hot naked flesh amidst hands and lips, bodies sliding against each other as the music pounded through my veins reveling in the sweet intoxicating scent of Jace and Gareth as I screamed and came for them, over and over again.

I woke facing the wrong end of the bed sandwiched between my men. I wished briefly for a blanket then improvised and pulled Gareth's arm over me while I snuggled closer to Jace's back, yawned and slid back into unconsciousness.

The next time I woke I was alone and covered by Jace's comforter. On the bed in front of me was a note and what looked like the female version of Jace and Gareth's

watch, complete with neon dial for easy viewing in dark places. I reached for it and turned it so I could see that it was after ten, not surprising since we'd stayed in the club dancing for hours. I stretched and reached for the note which simply said, "Gone for your stuff, be back soon." It was signed with a big J and he'd drawn a set of lips. It made me smile.

What I needed was a good workout, now seemed the perfect time. Pushing back the covers I sat on the edge of the bed and braided my hair. I spoke out loud and requested a rubber band and maybe a one piece like Areth had been wearing only shorts instead of pants and maybe a jog bra to ensure I stayed in place since I planned on using the track upstairs. Oh and a pair of running shoes with ankle socks would be good too. Nothing with the inside stabilization bars since I had great feet and didn't pronate.

Having made my requests I wandered off to the bathroom and the use of the facilities and a quick shower. No need to advertise the fact I'd had massive amounts of sex last night. Though I was pretty sure anyone I was going to meet in the workout area were not under any delusions about that.

I left the watch on the bed deciding I wasn't going to be timing my workout so I wouldn't need it. Twenty minutes later I was in the lobby with two guards waiting for the elevator. Since Jace hadn't had a chance to chip me yet I was pretty sure someone would be waiting. Or possibly I'd developed a shadow or shadows that weren't named Mi. Either way I was glad to see them since I couldn't yet move around without their assistance. They introduced themselves as Owen and Ricky. Owen was about six foot five or six with huge shoulders and hands. His hair was long and almost a creamy yellow color or maybe a dirty white and it was pulled back in a long ponytail. His eyes were a dark brown and oddly shaped. Surprisingly, his skin was almost an umber color, quite dark given the color of his hair. He smelled strange like bear...polar maybe? I was pretty sure he hadn't been on the floor yesterday in the workout area. Someone that looked like him would have just stood out in the crowd.

Ricky on the other hand was just a wee bit bigger than me. About five foot seven or eight with brown hair and brown eyes; he looked fairly harmless if you didn't consider the arsenal he was carrying or the mean look in his eyes. I think I counted at least three blades and two guns. Goodness knows what else he might have been packing under his light weight jacket. He smelled of Hyena. We all kind of sized each other up for a moment before I smiled and stepped into the elevator clearly exposing my spandex covered back to them.

I guess they took that as a good sign, since they both stepped into the elevator with me. It wasn't like I could hide any weapons in my outfit which consisted of a sleeveless black stretchy one piece complete with inset bra, comfortable running shoes and black ankle socks. I was also carrying a hand towel and large bottle of water. A hint, left next to my clothes on the bed, that perhaps I hadn't been taking as much fluids as I should.

The plan was to run, use the mats for my kata's and then come back here and take a swim with Spot, after which I was certain I'd be in need of some serious food to sustain me.

As we were riding the elevator I asked, "So did Nick assign you to me or are you just the doormen?" I watched them in the reflective surface of the elevator and noticed the tightening of skin around Ricky's eyes.

Owen was standing to the side with his arms crossed over his chest, his eyes focused somewhere just over my head. I had walked to the back of the elevator before turning around so that there was no room between me and the wall. Ricky had stepped in and was standing just in front of me and to my right, facing the door, his body held loose as if he was ready for anything when the doors opened. I couldn't help smiling.

"To the victor go the spoils." Ricky replied, he didn't turn or move, he just spoke in a voice void of any emotion.

I turned a questioning look at Owen who flicked his eyes at me and added. "Our last assignment had an unfortunate swimming accident yesterday."

“How...tragic for you. Let’s hope your new assignment isn’t as careless.” I replied with a smile.

Owen nodded as the doors slid open and we stepped into the lobby. Ricky led the way down the hall with Owen bringing up the rear. I was really looking forward to this workout. “I’m planning to jog the trail; will that be a problem for you?” I wondered out loud. Neither of them was dressed for running and I wasn’t sure how serious they were about their body guard duties, especially since they’d lost Troll girl here yesterday.

Ricky turned to look at me and replied. “I think we can keep up.”

Oh goodie going to be macho about it. I sighed and tried again. “You aren’t exactly dressed for a workout. I wasn’t implying you couldn’t keep up, only asking if it was necessary.”

Behind us Owen spoke up. “If you allow us a few minutes in the locker room, we can change into more appropriate attire. We would prefer to remain with you, the boss was very specific.”

“Okay, no problem. I can just jog in place while I wait.”

Owen frowned and glanced at Ricky, clearly not liking the idea of leaving me alone even for a short time.

“Or I could...come into the locker room with you. I promise to protect your modesty and keep my eyes closed while you change.”

Owen couldn’t help himself though I know he tried not to smile. His eyes crinkled slightly and I know I saw his lips twitch. Unfortunately Ricky wasn’t so easily amused and he gave me a pointed look and told me. “You’ve got a smart mouth.”

I grinned back at him and replied in a flippant tone. “You’re not the first to mention it, though my Mother likes to refer to it as precocious or witty.”

He just grunted.

We ended up compromising and I stood in the locker room doorway with my back to the room, they took turns on point while the other changed or should I say stripped down since they both came out wearing only brief shorts and running shoes.

I was tempted to say something, but decided that might not be a great idea so I bit my tongue and headed off at a slow jog toward the indoor running track. We did a lap, me leading with my two shadows loping along behind me or in Owen's case walking fast, seeing as how his legs were nearly twice as long as mine. As we passed the pool I noticed someone had fished out the Troll. Hmmm what do you do with a dead Troll?

Ricky must have noticed my glance because he remarked in a snotty tone, "I believe Spot dined well last night."

I flashed him a smile and jogged just a little faster. If he thought that was going to bother me he was in for a nasty surprise.

We were on our sixth or seventh lap when I pulled up and led everyone over to the floor mats where I stretched and had some water. "I'm going to work on my form, you're welcome to join in or just ah...stand about." I offered then pulled off my shoes and socks and placed them at the edge of the mat next to my water and towel.

No one else was using the mats so I had the entire expanse to myself. I moved about fifteen feet from the edge rolled my head on my neck and closed my eyes, taking deep even breaths as I mentally walked through my first set of moves.

I started out with the simplest Goju Ryu a style of Karate a combination of soft and hard techniques in the form of kicks and punches as well as soft circular moves for blocking and controlling opponents. I quickly ran through the Sanchin, Saifa and Seisan katas then moved on to Seipai and Kururunfa. I transitioned to Shorin-ryu and realized I had gained a partner. A dark haired female about three inches taller than I had joined me on the mat and was following my steps. I settled more firmly into my routine and by the time we'd finished the next form our group of two had grown to seven and I began calling out forms as we ran through them. Kihon Ichidan, Kihon Nidan, Kihon Sandan, Taikyoku Nidan, Naihancin Nidan, Pinan Nidan.

By the time we finished the last one, sweat was pouring off me and the group on the mat was too numerous to count. I stepped back, turned to the group and bowed. Thanking them for the honor they had given me.

From the fourth row a man, about six foot with strong stomach muscles a broken nose and dark brown hair that just brushed his ears stepped forward and bowed. “Judo?” He asked, a small smile playing about his lips and a devilish twinkle in his eye.

“Randori?” I politely inquired, assuming he wanted to free-style spar versus one of the more confining choreographed katas. Obviously he was here to try and kick my butt but I thought it impolite to assume.

When he nodded I waved my hand in an invitation to take the floor. People cleared a path as we moved to the center of the mat. Owen and Ricky removed their shoes and moved to stand on either side of the circle surrounding us. Owen looked a little worried, but if Ricky was concerned at all, his face and body didn’t show it. In Karate kata, there is no sparring. Forms are done alone and the degree of difficulty increases becoming ever more complex. In Judo, there is only one kata that isn’t performed by two participants. In Judo katas are not even taught until you’re a brown belt and usually included the use of knives and swords. My sparring partner wasn’t packing so I assumed we’d be staring off with the standard, punching, kicking, choke and joint lock holds.

My body felt loose and strong as I bowed to my opponent. We circled for a moment or two trying to get the sense of each other. I was at a disadvantage as he’d been behind me earlier and I hadn’t seen his form. I could only assume that he was one of their best here, otherwise he wouldn’t have stepped forward to challenge me. On top of that, I was used to sparring with humans and needed to mentally adjust to full strength as the man across from me was as supernatural as myself and would undoubtedly be expecting it. My only hope was speed since he outweighed me by at least eighty pounds of solid muscle and his reach was much greater than mine.

These thoughts were swept from my brain as he came at me, aiming for my throat. I blocked and spun, clipping him with a raised knee to the thigh as I flowed past. He grunted and rocked onto the balls of his feet as he watched me watching him. I’d taken the position of defense to his aggressor. It could be a dangerous stance, but it

freed me up to observe his moves while I waited for him to come to me. His next attack arrived feet first. He was fast, but I was faster. I ducked the foot aimed at my chin, crossed my forearms and shoved upwards, flipping him all the way over and to the mats. He lashed out at me with his base foot and I used my shin to deflect the blow, stepping back and allowing him time to regain his feet. He wasn't smiling anymore and I suspected he was about to get serious. I flexed my knees and stood calmly waiting for his next move. I didn't have long to wait as he rose and rushed me at the same time, using a series of chopping motions to force me back. I blocked and gave ground, knowing that retreat can be a very powerful strategy. He followed, punching and kicking and trying for a hold but I was too fast for him. I continued to spar with him for a several minutes, getting in whatever defensive blows I could manage while shifting the force of his attacks aside from me.

Back back back I went on the mats. Circling and blocking and trying to stay out of his reach. At one point he faked a punch and grabbed my wrist when I went for the block. The natural reaction is to twist your wrist but I knew his grip was too strong for that so instead of pulling away I forced my hand up and into his chin, snapping back his head and gaining the release of my hand. I followed up with an elbow to his neck that sent him to the floor. He growled and his eyes turned just a little mean. Some time in the past few minutes I'd realized that he was good, but I was better. And the look he was giving me indicted I needed to end this soon or one of us was going to be hurt.

The next time he rushed me I didn't hesitate, instead of moving away from him I stepped under his reach and pummeled him in the solar plexus, grabbed his wrist and stepped under his arm, bringing his wrist with me behind his back. When he tried to turn toward me I kicked out his leg and shoved him to the floor while lifting his wrist to the center of his back so that his head hit the mat. "Do you yield?" I asked calmly. Amazingly I wasn't even breathing hard though I was sweating profusely. He grunted and I released his wrist and stepped back.

Perhaps it was overconfidence on my part that had me turning my back to him. Or maybe just that I really really needed a drink of water. Owen made a noise of

warning, but it was too late as there was a hard yank on my ponytail just before an arm slipped around my throat. All lessons are valuable when looked at in the right light. Having my windpipe crushed made me remember two critical rules; one, never turn your back on an opponent unless they're dead and two, you don't beat the house bully and walk away clean. Damn and I was so looking forward to that drink of water.

I hesitated for a second, wondering if he was just going to make me cry uncle, and realized that no, unfortunately it wasn't going to be that easy as the pressure tightened and he leaned in to hiss in my ear. Great, my options were, strangle for a while or resort to chick fighting. Well he'd pulled my hair first so guess which one I selected.

Turning my chin into his shoulder relieved some of the pressure. Reaching for his nostrils with one hand and his balls with the other took care of the pressure all together. The nostril hold got me out from under his arm while the savage squeeze and twist I gave his manly parts dropped him to his knees, taking me with him as I was unwilling to let go just yet.

I used my forearm to shove him onto his back, followed him down to the mat and applied just enough pressure to prevent him from lifting his head. He seemed to be in some distress and I realized I was still exerting an unkind amount of pressure with my other hand. "Do you yield?" I asked calmly, giving him another slight twist with my wrist to ensure he knew I was talking to him and expected an answer this time.

He moaned and I replied, "What's that? I don't believe I heard you clearly."

"Yes!" He spat back at me.

"Now, that's uncalled for considering you jumped me from behind." I told him calmly. "I don't really like cheaters."

A pair of scuffed up tennis shoes under faded blue jeans planted themselves on either side of my opponent's head. "I wouldn't piss her off." Jace warned. "You wouldn't want to end up at the bottom of the pool."

I let go and stood in a smooth motion, stepping out of reach of the man on the mat. My move clearly stating I didn't trust or like him.

“Playing with the help?” Jace asked casually.

I shrugged and reached for the water that Owen held out to me. His eyes were busy scanning the crowd but they hesitated on me long enough to give me a wink and an apologetic look before he went back to stoic complete with planted feet, neutral face with one wrist held in his other hand. I knew Ricky was behind me. I couldn’t help wondering why he hadn’t warned me as Owen had. But then he hadn’t like me from the moment he’d seen me, so no doubt he’d been rooting for my opponent.

Jace’s glance swung to my dark haired guard and his eyes narrowed menacingly. “Maybe you’d like to go a round with me on the mats?” He growled at Ricky and I turned in time to see the blood leave his face.

Chapter 14

My beaten opponent scuttled out of the way when I reached for Jace. I was too slow to catch him as he took two steps in Ricky's direction while reaching up to pull his shirt off over his head. Apparently Ricky knew better than to give him time to clear his arm holes because he jumped Jace's while his face was buried in cloth. I dropped my water and would have jumped into the fray except Owen's very large hand landed on my shoulder. Instinct had me reaching for him and the nerves between thumb and first finger. I dug my own fingers in and gave his hand a punishing twist. My movement brought the large man to his knees immediately. I really didn't have time to deal with him as Jace was still struggling to get out of his shirt while Ricky knocked him to the floor and began pummeling him.

"Wait, please." Owen grimaced, but looked me directly in the eye and rasped out, "He'll be fine I made sure Ricky left his weapons in the locker room. Please just wait, Nick sent me with a message."

I frowned then glanced back at Jace who was nearly clear of his shirt. Ricky had gone for a strangle hold but Jace brought his knee into Ricky's kidney and I let out the breath I'd been holding. Owen was right; Jace could take care of himself. I moved so I could keep my gaze on the fighters as they rolled about on the mat. Realizing I

was still holding Owen, I released the pressure. He signed gratefully and cradled his hand against his chest. "Ouch." He told me with a sardonic smile.

"No grabbing." I told him with a frown. "You mentioned a message?" I prompted as Jace punched Ricky in the nose causing blood to gush down the smaller man's face.

"He said," and he hesitated until I turned my eyes back to him. "It was an inside job and that she had help." And he glanced meaningfully at Ricky so that my gaze followed his.

I thought it over for a moment. "Thanks Owen." I told him then reached for my water and took a drink as I watched Jace beat their snake in the grass to a bloody pulp. I was a little surprised he didn't just snap the smaller man's neck and be done with it. Men!

Jace glanced up at me and bared his teeth.

I rolled my eyes and looked unimpressed. Get on with it already, I thought loudly at him. Either kill him or let him go, just pick one.

"You're taking all the fun out of it." He growled at me and planted his fist half heartedly in Ricky's face.

It was obvious the other man had already passed out. What he was doing now was just showing off.

"This is the thanks I get for defending your honor?" He demanded as he pushed himself off the floor and stood looking down at Ricky's bloody body.

"This so has nothing to do with me." I told him out loud. I could see the welts and bruises already starting on Ricky. Good thing he was passed out. If he had conscious and could have shifted it could have been ugly.

Jace nudged him with the toe of his shoe, "Sure it does, if you hadn't had my hair brush you might have been hurt."

"Yeah right." I replied then thought, I've been staking vamps for years, it would take more than a few immature bloodsuckers to bring me down.

He looked surprised and lifted an eyebrow at me as if to say, we'd be discussing that later. Right that moment he had something else he needed to take care of, because he glanced around at the ring of faces searching for one in particular. His gaze lit on the guy I'd been sparring with and I took an involuntary step forward. Don't do it, I mentally yelled at him.

He bared his teeth again and out of the corner of my eye I watched Owen jerk. It was as if he could sense we were having a conversation but couldn't follow the dialog.

Jace took another step in the hapless man's direction and I placed my hand on my hip and thought....you touch him and I'll be sleeping in my room tonight....all by myself!

He turned and gave me a look full of frustration. I lifted an eyebrow and stared right back at him. He growled and ran his hand through his hair leaving a bloody streak that made him look like some kind of accident victim. I smiled sweetly and finished off my water.

Owen rose to his feet, leaned in and whispered. "I'm afraid to ask what just happened but I think Mark, that ass over there," he indicated with a wave of his hand, "owes you."

I smiled up at him and spoke loudly enough for those in the circle to hear. "I don't like cheaters, I feel it indicates a weakness of character and weak characters can't be trusted." I replied while my eyes were trained on Jace. "If it had been life or death it would have been understandable. But this was just inexcusable" Yeah I thought hard at Jace, Mark might have gotten a reprieve, but if I was him I wouldn't be hanging out in any dark alleys anytime soon. And I'd managed to convey my feelings and perhaps a warning in Mark's direction as well as letting everyone else there know just how I felt.

Jace flashed me a surprised look then his eyes narrowed and his lips stretched in what I could only describe as an evil grin. I laughed back at him, lifting my eyebrows

several times in agreement. Hey the man needed to be taught a lesson, I just didn't want Jace to do it right that moment as it would have undermined my win.

Jace placed his hand over his waist and actually bowed briefly at me, as if to say, your wish is my command. Then he turned back to Ricky and poked him with his shoe again. He glanced at me and made that teeth grating sound he used to call Snick, who appeared in less time that it takes to breathe deeply. Jace and Snick conversed in that strange language then Snick went to Ricky and placed his small hand on his head. When he was done he disappeared as quickly as he'd arrived. Jace glanced at two of the men standing near us and said. "Dump him by the park."

I heard one of the guys ask if he wanted him killed and Jace replied no, just leave him on a bench somewhere. He wouldn't remember anything when he woke up. Apparently Snick wasn't just a butler extraordinaire!

Owen shifted at my back drawing my attention. His eyes looked a little worried and he seemed very tense. I took a breath and commented idly. "It's hard to think of him as a demon while he's helping his mom fix my hair and lay out my clothes."

My bodyguard shook himself and gave me a puzzled look. "He lays out your clothes?" Was his only response.

I shrugged and was turning back toward Jace when he wrapped me in his arms and bent me over backwards as his lips captured mine. The water bottle dropped from my fingers as I clutched at his shoulder. I wasn't sure what this was about but was more than willing to enjoy the moment. We made quite a spectacle of ourselves and when he let me up I was nearly panting and eager to get him downstairs where I could get his clothes off. He seemed satisfied as he propped me back onto my feet and gave me a peck on the cheek. "No time for that now." He remarked then wandered off to talk to a couple of the guards that were standing in a group having a conversation and trying not to stare.

I stood there sucking air in through my teeth wondering what had just happened. I didn't appreciate being used like that and the fact that he could just wander away unaffected, really irritated me. I'm not sure what I was thinking, or maybe I wasn't

capable of coherent thought because I focused my gaze on his back and shoved desire at him, full blown urgent needy gut reaction got to touch taste and feel right this instant desire. He stiffened and immediately turned toward me. Unfortunately he wasn't the only one.

There were perhaps thirty some odd men in the room and only a handful of females. Every one of them turned hungry eyes my way. Jace was fast, but not fast enough and Owen, who had been closest to me and must have received the strongest jolt, took me to the floor with the weight of his body. I found myself under the length of him pinned to the mat as he held my wrists and tried to kiss me. I was so shocked I couldn't react even when other hands grasped my ankles and feet and slid between us to cup my breasts.

Oh this was so not going to happen. Lucky me I was wearing a one piece or he'd have been in me in a flash. As it was I could feel his erection pressing against me and struggled to get out from under him. I turned my head in Jace's direction expecting him to save me from my own stupidity and found he had his own hands full trying to hold off a clinging female that had wrapped herself around him like a boa constrictor. I stretched my neck and from what I could see the other remaining females were locked amidst groups of men all writhing on the floor in plies of squirming hands and legs. I had to do something quick and I did what seemed only natural. I screamed for Mi.

Tan and grey fur appeared next to my face and large amber eyes blinked down at me in question then took a slow glance around the room before settling back on me again. I swear she raised an eyebrow. I moaned as someone bit my nipple and gave her a rather sickly look. Someone's hand slipped under my shorts and my breath was a little ragged as I pleaded, "Can you please do something?"

She sighed and flicked her tail and everyone in the room except the two of us froze. Now that was a talent that could come in handy!

"So," she inquired, glancing around the room again. "Was this your doing? Or is this a normal occurrence here in Dragon land?"

“You know it was me or I wouldn’t have called you for help.” I told her as I worked at squirming out from under Owen. “By the way, thank you so much for coming. I hope I didn’t take you away from anything important.”

She flicked her tail and simply replied, “What exactly did you do?”

“I’m not sure. Jace kissed me than walked away...and I didn’t like it much so I think I...I just thought desire at him.”

“You thought desire at him and nearly forty non-humans suddenly had the urge to procreate?”

I nodded miserably.

She stood up and wandered over to Jace and wound herself between his legs. She looked like she was contemplating the situation so I let her be and worked on getting out from under Owen and whomever else was assisting him. When I managed to get free I climbed to my feet and took a good look around. Yikes! This was such a disaster. Mi wandered back over to me and looked up with an expression I wasn’t sure I liked.

“I am most impressed with you.” She informed me. “I don’t believe I’ve ever seen anything like this. I can’t wait to tell your Mother.”

“Must you?” I whined. It wasn’t pretty, but surely no one wants their Mother getting that kind of news. Oh yeah, by the way, your Daughter...bless her heart, can inspire orgies of mass proportion with a thought and a wish. Gee that is such an endearing ability. She’ll be so proud.

Mi actually grinned her toothy smile at me. “Well perhaps I’ll soften it up a bit.” She told me, which made me love her even more than I already did. “So what do you plan to do with them?” She asked bluntly.

“Can’t you just...I don’t know put them back to normal?” I inquired in a small voice.

She just blinked at me and I got a sick feeling in my stomach. Crap she wasn’t going to fix this and I was going to have to. I glanced around again and asked, “Do you think it will wear off soon?”

“Not while they’re immobile it won’t. Maybe if you’d gone for happiness or lust it wouldn’t be a problem. But full blown sexual desire is another thing and one I’m afraid won’t be so easily banished.”

I ran my fingers over my head and rubbed my eyes. Maybe what I needed here was a little more help. “Plug your ears.” I told Mi then mentally yelled for Gareth. After a second’s hesitation I also placed a call to Nick. I wasn’t certain he’d hear me but I figured I had nothing to lose by trying. I made the call sound very urgent and could only hope that they would bring reinforcements.

While we waited I wandered over to Jace and pried off him the black haired woman that had first joined me when I’d been practicing katas. She outweighed me by about thirty pounds, but I managed to untangle her and drag her some ten feet away. Mi just watched me in amusement. When I was done I wandered back to her.

“Anyone else you can think of that might help?” Mi queried with a tilted head.

“I don’t think Spot would be of any assistance.” I told her with a frown and then bit my lip and wondered if maybe.... “Areth?” I called softly. There was a swirl of light and she appeared in the air before me, looking beautiful and dainty in a dress made all of black to match her hair and eyes.

“Greetings Lexi daughter of Princess Shaylee.” She spoke in her clear bell like voice. She glanced around and her eyes grew very large when they landed on Mi. She floated to the floor so they were at eye level. Areth curtsied low and added, “And greetings to you too Merecat Mi, Holder of Knowledge. It is an honor.”

Mi dipped her head and replied. “My gratitude for your timely care of my charge.”

“She is now my charge too.” Areth responded with a bright smile. “One I think that has been slightly naughty.” She observed, glancing about the room again before turning to look up at me. “We felt the strength of her compulsion but did not realize it had affected so many...this time.” She crossed her hands behind her back and looked at me inquiringly.

“This time?” I asked, my voice sounding slightly strained.

She smiled and nodded. “Each time before was less powerful. And aside from your first night here, had only affected the male Dragons.

I chewed my lip and thought about what she said. “Does this mean I’m getting stronger?”

She shrugged and glanced at Mi. Mi nodded slowly and replied. “It was inevitable that you would become more powerful once you mated.”

“Every time I mate, or just the first time?” I demanded, wanting to clarify that point right then and there.

They both shrugged at me and Mi added. “You’re Mother suspected only the first time, but I’m not sure that’s the case.”

Oh great the more sex I had the more bizarre I might become. That wasn’t comforting at all.

Mi heaved a sigh and shook her head. “You are such a trial.” She told me. “Most beings in your position would feel grateful.”

“How am I supposed to feel grateful when all I have to do is think desire and this happens!” I replied, waving my hand around the room to indicate the piles of bodies.

“Well obviously you will need to learn to control this ability, but think what it could be like if you could actually reach out and touch a single individual and only that individual with the force of your will across a crowded room.”

I mulled that over for a few seconds and decided that yes that could be an interesting ability, if I could learn to control it. “I’m not sure Jace or Gareth will be happy with me practicing on their men.”

Areth laughed and Mi rolled her kitty cat eyes. “Child,” she told me. “You can be so naive at times.”

I frowned at her and would have asked what she had meant by that but there was a commotion at the stairs. Apparently reinforcements had arrived. Mi blinked out leaving me standing there with Areth who levitated onto my shoulder and seated herself there.

Gareth walked onto the floor with Nick at his back leading about twenty men who were all flashing weapons and looking about with wide confused eyes. I hadn't been specific when I asked for help so it wasn't surprising they would be looking for an enemy.

He came to a halt in front of me, glanced at Areth and crossed his arms over his chest. He didn't even bother to say anything, just lifted an eyebrow. Behind him Nick and his men spread out, glancing around as if the attack might come from any direction.

"You can put your weapons away." Gareth told Nick in a calm voice. "I think we have Lexi to thank for this."

Nick looked at me and at my nod he frowned and lowered his weapon. "You called?" Nick inquired as he holstered his gun and straightened his lightweight coat back into place.

"Thanks for coming; I wasn't sure you'd get my message."

He snorted and told me bluntly. "Hard to miss, considering it shoved me off my chair and onto my ass." He jerked his head at the men around us. "There's a few upstairs that are still unconscious. You pack a helluva mental punch lady."

I winced and raised my voice so I could reach those farthest away. "I'm very sorry." I told them. "I'm still new at this."

Nick shook his head and said in a slightly horrified voice. "You nearly incapacitate over sixty men and women and you're new at this? Jesus!"

Gareth glanced between the two of us and finally inquired. "I assume you requested our presence for a reason?"

Oh yeah, I looked around the room and winced again.

His eyes narrowed slightly as he glanced about and asked as calmly as he could. "Are they hurt?"

"No." I muttered then added. "Well maybe their pride."

He nodded. "Obviously your workout got out of hand?"

"Not exactly."

He sighed and asked patiently. "What exactly did happen?"

I didn't wish to appear the tattler so I just pursed my lips and glared back at him. "Why don't you ask that idiot!"

That idiot was obviously Jace and Gareth sighed again and told me. "I'd love to, but you seem to have turned him as well as the rest of them into some type of statue. You didn't actually turn them into statues, did you?" He demanded his voice sounding not unlike Nick's in that it was slightly horrified.

"No I did not turn them into statues!" I hissed at him. "That was Mi. I called you because I thought it would be a good idea if we had some assistance when she releases them."

"Who's Mi?" Nick demanded, looking at the demon sitting on my shoulder.

I ignored him and continued. "I don't know how to undo this...."

"Who's Mi?" Nick tried again.

Gareth waved his hand at him which caused Nick to turn his steely glare on me. I mouthed, *later* at him while Gareth continued. "So when they are released..." Gareth hesitated and glanced around the room.

"Yeah." I whispered.

He rubbed his face then glanced at Nick who was looking grim. "This isn't going to spread to the rest of us, is it?" Nick demanded, clearly worried about the twenty or so people he'd brought with him.

"It shouldn't. I think they would have had to have been here when I...ah thought it." I told him then glanced around the room, forcing myself to make eye contact with those guards that had come at my call and whom were clearly considering the outcome of our conversation.

"Thought what?" Nick demanded.

Gareth glared and responded. "What does it look like she was thinking?"

Nick looked like he was trying to swallow his tongue. "This is what caused the crowd issues two nights ago isn't it?"

It was close enough so nodded and glanced around at the guards. I supposed I shouldn't have been surprised that most of them were having a hard time hiding their sudden interest, in fact a couple of them were actually grinning at me.

"What are we going to do with them?" Nick demanded. "We can't leave them like this! We don't have many females as it is, I can't think they'll be too happy when they realize what she did to them."

"Actually," I interrupted...then thought better about adding anything else to that sentence.

"Maybe we should try releasing Jace first." Gareth told me.

"Okay but you might want to ah...stand back. Just in case."

Gareth cursed under his breath and most of the guards closest to me shifted. Nick gave me a dirty look but stood his ground right behind Gareth who also refused to move. I didn't bother speaking, knowing that Mi was still there with us just out of sight. I just turned with Areth toward Jace and waited.

Jace unfroze and flapped his arms, clearly still trying to push away the female that had been attached to him. When he realized he was free, he looked right at me and made a bee line for me. His eyes shifted and they were nearly whirling as he covered the last few steps toward me. To my side Gareth shifted and bent over double at the waist with a strangled cry. It distracted Jace and he hesitated and blinked his eyes back to normal.

"Dammit Lexi!" He nearly yelled at me. He stopped about two feet away, with his fists clenched. He closed his eyes and dragged in a deep breath. Obviously he was struggling against the compulsion and I was so hoping he was going to win. He took another deep breath and cracked open an eye. "Are you okay?" His eyes slid to Owen and so did Gareth's.

"I'm going to kill him!" Gareth growled and Nick suddenly looked worried again. The three of them all stared at Owen and it didn't take a genius to figure out why he might be in the position he was in nor what he had been doing there. Of course there wasn't anyone under him...anymore.

Jace held up his hand at Gareth. “No, this is my fault.”

Gareth didn’t even look at him. “I don’t know what the hell you were doing, while he was doing...that! But it’s fairly clear what he was doing!”

“And I say no! This is no more his fault than it is Lexi’s.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m trying to tell you that I caused this.”

Gareth flexed his hands and rolled his head on his neck. Beside him Nick looked like he was certain if he should be protecting his man or blaming Jace. “He wants her.”

“He’ll get over it.”

“It’s too dangerous.”

Jace sighed and turned to me. “I’m sorry I shouldn’t have teased you like I did. But please don’t ever do this again, at least not in a roomful of people!”

“I’m sorry.” I told him reaching for his hand but letting it drop when he quickly backed up a step. It made my chest tight and I turned away and blinked at the sudden moisture in my eyes. Gareth sucked in air and held up his own hands. His eyes looked a little wild as he stared at me almost as if he was picking up the compulsion from Jace. Which I supposed wasn’t really surprising.

“Oh God Lexi.” Jace moaned. “I’m not afraid of you. It’s just that if I touch you right now....” His eyes were beseeching and then he growled in frustration while he ran his hand through his hair. “I want you!”

On my shoulder Areth’s laughter split the tension and all eyes focused in on her as she leaned against my ear and cupped her hand over her mouth so she could whisper to me. “You can do that?” I demanded when she had finished speaking. She nodded and jumped, landing on her feet in front of me.

She glanced up at me and said. “Everyone but him or him.” And she indicated Jace and then Gareth with a graceful wave of her hand.

I thanked her with a smile. She winked and began singing a high pitched song that echoed off the walls as she skipped among the frozen bodies, touching each on the

forehead briefly before moving on to the next. She left those nearest me for last and came skipping back singing and dancing to touch Owen and the other men at my feet. When she had touched everyone in the room she returned to me, curtsied deeply then disappeared.

I didn't look at anyone merely said. "We should probably separate them before we unfreeze them. They won't remember what happened up to the point of my...ah. Well she's wiped the last few moments from their memories."

I could feel their eyes on me but refused to look at their faces. Nick made a motion with his hand sending the guards into the piles so they could gently untangle their comrades.

When they had all been separated and a few of them redressed I thought my request at Mi. Within seconds everyone was pushing to their feet, straightening clothes and looking around in confusion. Jace raised his arm for everyone's attention and would have spoken except I cut him off. I was going to owe my safety to these people and no matter what Jace thought; I'd been the one to lose the compulsion on them not him. The least I could do was apologize.

It actually didn't go too badly. I think the fact that most of them had seen Jace kiss me made them look at him as partially to blame. I also mentioned that the power was new to me and that I'd obviously need to learn to control it better at which point I had several men offer to assist. I don't think Gareth or Jace were particularly happy about that but they let the comments go. Perhaps they realized that it might come to that if we couldn't figure out some other way to improve my skill. Mostly I was just glad that Gareth and Jace didn't kill Owen, though the looks they shot him had the poor man as skittish as a cat on a hot tin roof. And when they would have asked Nick to assign someone else, I put my foot down and turned mutinous.

When we left the cavern, no one was particularly happy. I got to keep Owen, but in deference to my lack of control Nick assigned me one of the women. He tried for the black haired one but for obvious reasons I politely refused. I ended up with Merry a six foot brunette with a flat chest and large thighs which caused Jace to shake

his head and whisper sarcastically. “Holding off the smaller woman was bad enough. You do this again and she may break me.”

Dammit, he was probably right!

Chapter 15

We left the guards in the lobby. I followed Jace through the door and only made it a few steps before Gareth picked me up in his arms and carried me down the hall, past the front room and into his bedroom. He tossed me onto the bed and was kicking off his shoes as Jace climbed naked onto the bed. Apparently Jace had dropped his clothing somewhere out in the hall. You can do that when your hands aren't full of squirming female.

I edged backwards watching him stalk me across the bed. His eyes were deep and dark and full of need. I could see that he was long and hard and oh so ready to be in me. He climbed my body until he was over me and I was pressed back into the bed, looking up at him as he leaned into me and buried his face in the hair at my temple. "I want to kill him for touching you." He rasped against my ear. "I need to burn away the image of you beneath him. Help me."

Gareth's hands slid between us capturing the straps of my one piece and easing them down my body so that my breasts sprang free. I pulled my arms out and lifted my hips so the cloth slid down my legs and was tossed over the edge of the bed. I reached for Jace, my hands sliding up his chest and around his back as I pulled him onto me, raising my hips so the hard length of him pressed against the sensitive skin at the juncture of my legs.

He crushed me beneath him his lips finding mine. I shuddered in his arms as he opened his mind to me. The desire I had aimed at him rebounded back at me flavored with the darker taste of helplessness and rage at the thought of someone else's hands on my body. I whimpered and held him tighter, clinging to him in my need. His mind overwhelmed me, surrounded me until all I could feel was his emotions and the pleasure between us, until there was nothing and no one but Jace alone. I held him tighter, kissed him deeper and writhed beneath him on the bed, powerless in his arms, drowning in his desire.

I cried out and lifted against him, offering myself. He pulled back and gazed into my face, his eyes whirling like jewels in a kaleidoscope. I caught my lip between my teeth and stared back at him while my hips undulated against him my eyes silently begging him to come inside of me, to fill the void he'd created. He held my gaze as he lifted himself and slid the soft silky skin of his head into me. I fought to hold his eyes, to not throw myself about in an attempt to impale myself on him. My breath came in ragged gasps and in my mind I felt emotions swelling, growing like a tidal wave roaring toward the shore. I cried out again as he slammed into me both mentally and physically swamping me in pleasure so intense it arched my back and spasmed my body under him, my mind completely rolled by the full weight of his need.

He rode me then with hard deep thrusts until warmth pooled in my center filling me with thousands of drops of pleasure until I couldn't hold them anymore and they spilled up and out of my body and I screamed and dug my nails into the bed trying to hold myself together as my body arched beneath him clenching tightly as the near pain exploded inside of me. And when I thought I couldn't give anymore, he began again building the pressure with long deep thrusts until I shattered again and again for him. And only then did he find release in me, pumping hard once twice and a third time as his release bowed his back and he yelled and slammed into me one last time and I felt him come so deep inside of me.

His head dropped to the bed beside me and he would have slipped to the side but my arms wrapped around him, and held him tight. His weight was a warm comfort as my eyes closed and I let consciousness slip from me.

Next I knew I was being carried, pressed against the warmth of a naked chest. I cracked open an eye when moist heat surrounded me and then I was being lowered into the pool and lips gently nibbled at my eyes and cheek. I stretched and reached my arms around Gareth's neck and he released my legs so I could wrap them about his waist as he carried me deeper into the water. He rolled onto his back and I kissed his chin and the underside of his jaw as we floated silently. My palm rested over his heart and I reveled in the deep strong beat, feeling it slide into me setting the tempo so that my blood flowed in time with his. His hand stroked my lower back softly, his fingers trailing over me dipping into the base of my spine and on over my bottom, cupping me gently then skimming back up and over my lower back again. It was as if he had all the time in the world and was willing to share it with me.

We floated like that for a while just relaxing, feeling the ebb and flow of the blood through our bodies. Who knows how long we might have stayed that way me thinking calm easy thoughts just enjoying the moment. Yeah I could have gone on like that, except Gareth was apparently holding himself back...admirably. Something I didn't realize until he dropped his shields and I was engulfed in his churning emotions.

Rearing back at the unexpected deluge nearly sent us both under. Gareth wrapped his hands around my back and pressed himself against me. My breath caught in my throat and I shuddered against him. "Gareth," I whispered, "what..."

"My needs are no less." He replied his deep blue eyes capturing mine and holding them as he questioned. "Can you deny me?"

How could I when he held nothing back as he did in that moment, his soul laid bare to me? "I cannot."

"Lexi," he whispered, "I think you will break my heart."

No! My mind cried! I did not want to hurt this man. I wrapped my arms around him and took us under the water, my lips finding his as I tried to deny the words he'd said.

When we broke the surface he stroked to the nearest edge and when his feet hit bottom he stood and we clung to each other. "Give me a year." He whispered.

One year, it was nothing a blink of an eye in a Dragon's life. Yet I had been created for a purpose and that knowledge was ever with me, shaping my life and driving me. Still it was no sacrifice and I would gladly have promised more. I couldn't rush the future and there was so much that he and Jace could teach me, so many reasons to stay. I leaned my forehead against his. "Yes, I will stay." I told him solemnly. "One year and we shall see."

He hugged me tightly then lifted me onto the steep bank and laid my back on the deep sand. "One year." He replied. "But be warned, I will do everything I can to convince you to stay longer." And so saying he eased between my legs and slid his body inside me. I arched into him taking him deeper so that he filled me. My fingers slipped into the damp hair on his chest and he buried his face against my neck, inhaling my scent into his lungs. Deep in his chest he hummed his contentment and I smiled as I rained kisses over his shoulder. His thoughts had settled somewhat from the chaotic mass they had been when first he'd dropped his shields. It was as if they now held focus, a single burning determination. The force of it was nearly daunting.

Gareth kissed me then, his cupid bow lips soft and gentle as he nibbled and teased. A last kiss on the chin and he slid back into the water. I raised my head to look at him. He was so beautiful. He leaned over me and ran his fingers down my body. "You are the beautiful one. Your skin is so soft, like silk. Your breasts are perfect." And he leaned forward and ran his tongue around my areole. The touch puckered my nipple and made me squirm on the sand. He took his time running his tongue from breast to breast, teasing until they were tiny buds that he captured in his mouth.

My pulse raced as he worked his way down my body, nibbling along my ribs and over the muscles of my stomach to dip his tongue into my navel. His eyes held

mine as he eased lower across my red gold curls and lower. “Help me.” He urged then reached for my hands and guided me, showing me how to hold myself for him so that his lips and teeth and tongue could plunder. He worked me for several minutes, licking and sucking until I was quivering on the edge and then he backed off, allowed my breathing to even out before he built the pressure over again.

I was a mass of shuddering nerves when he slipped a finger inside of me and began slowly sliding it in and out. His hummed and the vibration of his mouth against me tightened my muscles nearly sending me over the edge. He became serious then, the flicks of his tongue becoming stronger as I made soft noises and held myself open to him. His moved his finger faster and the pressure built and built until it spilled over me, pulling me off the sand as my body contracted and the waves of pleasure coursed through me.

He pulled me back into the water then whispering for me to hold onto him as he reached between us with one hand and guided himself into me. His other hand he used to hold my hip so he could direct me onto his hard length. He teased me with his hand on his cock as he ran his head over and around me. I moaned and writhed trying to capture him as he brushed himself against me until I threw back my head and screamed in frustration. Only then did he enter me using my hips to direct us as he rocked in time, pulling me onto him hard and deep.

My head slipped back and his mouth found my nipple this time his teeth sank deep and I cried out with the near pain of it then nearly whimpered when he growled and rode me harder. I held his arms and gave myself over to the pleasure and came shuddering and moaning for him. His breathing changed and he drove himself into me harder grinding our hips together and I felt the urgency in his mind the rush to release as he spilled his seed into my body.

We clung to each other in the water gulping air and I wondered how he had managed to stay on his feet. He smiled and kissed my temple. “Sheer stubbornness.” He admitted and I chuckled softly. He helped me rinse the sand out of my hair. I had a bad moment when we couldn’t work the rubber band out and he ended up calling Spot

over to us so he could use one of his teeth to slice through the thick band. Apparently Spot had been banished to the other end of the pool by Gareth and was more than happy to join us. It took a few minutes to explain to him what we wanted, he was so excited and just wanted to play. When Gareth finally got him settled down so that he wasn't practically drowning us in his wake he used his eighteen inch fang to slice through my hair band then grabbed it up in his mouth and carried it away with him to the other end of the pool. Obviously it was just one more trophy to go with my shoes. Spot sure like collecting things!

"What we need is a blanket and some towels." Gareth remarked.

"What we need." I replied, "Is food! I haven't eaten since dinner last night."

"Fine then what we need is a blanket and towels and a picnic basket!"

"Please."

"Please." He replied with a smile. His fingers brushed my cheek and he leaned in for a kiss. I smiled back at him and lifted a hand to trace one brownish blond eyebrow and his eyes narrowed. He reached for my wrist and held my arm up so he could inspect it. "Did I do this?" He demanded.

I turned my arm so I could see the nice purple bruise forming. "No, I don't think so. I probably got that from Mark."

"Mark?"

"The guard I sparred with upstairs. The one Jace is going to beat to a bloody pulp next time he finds him alone in a stairwell." I replied with a nasty smile. "I can't say he doesn't deserve it, the cheat pulled my hair."

"I'm sorry." Gareth said suddenly, pulling me against his chest.

I shrugged and gave him a squeeze. "It's no big deal; the next time I shift it will disappear. I could do it now, but it's a sort of reminder that not everyone plays fair."

"Not about this." He replied then gently kissed my bruise. I pushed back in his arms so I could see his face. "I'm sorry I didn't come sooner, when I first felt your call."

"But you did. You came with Nick. That was the only call I made."

He shook his head at me. “No I mean the desire.”

“You felt that?” I asked and I’m sure my face paled. “Where were you?”

“I was going over inventory with Nick in the club.”

I swallowed slowly. This was so not good. If my range had spread to two floors up it was amazing that no one else but those in the cavern were affected. “Did Nick feel it?”

“No, he didn’t react until you...called for him personally. He wasn’t kidding about it knocking him out of his chair. That was well done.”

“But you felt me...weren’t you concerned?”

He grimaced and admitted. “I fought it.”

“Why?”

He leaned his forehead against mine and took a deep breath. “Lexi,” he told me softly. “You are very young and I...am old and not without my pride. I did not like the idea that you could have that power over me.”

I took a deep breath. “I’m so sorry. I know it was wrong of me to use force. Gareth, I need help, if I can’t learn to control this power it might be disastrous.”

“Obviously, this is why we will help you.”

I worried at my lower lip for a moment. “It’s worse.” I told him, realizing he needed to know the whole ugly truth.

“Tell me.”

“Mi thinks it could get stronger.”

Gareth nodded and gave my shoulder a squeeze. “You are not old enough to have reached your full potential, though I admit you are already stronger than a good number of those that crossed over, a gift from your father, no doubt. I suppose it makes sense that your powers would continue to increase.”

“Every time I have sex?”

“That would be...are you certain?”

“I just don’t know.” It was frustrating but true.

He shrugged and added in a teasing voice. “There’s only one way to know for certain. Of course I will be happy to assist you in determining the truth. In fact I will make it my number one priority.” We were laughing when the door opened and Jace wandered in with his arms full, perfect timing.

“Snick shoved this at me and said someone ordered a picnic?” He told us wandering over to a sandy spot so he could lay out the blanket he had over one arm. He actually had a picnic basket, towels, and robes in the other and we left the water to help him set things out.

Lunch was wonderful, fresh barbequed salmon on crackers, a variety of cheeses and boiled and seasoned new potatoes. For desert there was fresh fruit. A bottle of crisp white from the Napa Valley had been included along with a bottle of water and I realized I’d gone without coffee that morning.

“Next time you see your Merecat, be sure to thank her for packing your apartment.” Jace commented as he leaned back on one elbow and sipped his wine. He was wearing jeans again and a dark t-shirt without shoes.

“Where did you put my stuff?” I asked, looking at him from where I lay with my head in Gareth’s lap.

“We just put everything in your room, there wasn’t all that much. I’ve never known a female to have so few belongings.”

I leaned up on an elbow thinking that can’t be right. “What do you mean there wasn’t all that much? My stuff took up the entire first floor and a good portion of the basement! Furniture and clothing....I had two bedrooms full!”

“Nope I didn’t see any of either of those, just a few boxes in the middle of an empty room. I had the guys bring them down.”

Gritting my teeth I thought evil thoughts at Mi. She probably wasn’t paying attention but it irked me enough to be angry with her. Sounded like she’d taken the opportunity to get rid of my clothing, she never had liked my taste! Well, the joke was

on her because Areth had great taste and I made a mental note to keep those two apart if possible. No need in warping Areth with Mi's sense of style. "Thanks."

Neither one would meet my eyes. I grumbled under my breath then put my head back in Gareth's lap. He lifted a finger and gently stroked the tension lines from between my eyes. "And thanks for the watch." I told them, thinking that I needed to get it out of Jace's room and start wearing it. "And were you going to get around to putting that chip in me anytime soon? I might need to go out at some point and it would be nice if I could get back in. Oh and by the way," I said, my eyes closed while I fielded the random thoughts coming from my subconscious. "I left my car in the parking structure over at the publishing house." Note to self, I thought, I needed to contact Margie, maybe send her some flowers or a yacht or something. I owed that woman big time.

Jace leaned forward and ran his finger down my arch. "We already took care of it."

"Hmm? What do you mean you took care of it?"

"We had it moved to our garage last night."

I frowned again and cracked open one eye to look at him. "Okay, can I have my purse back soon or were you planning on keeping that too?"

"It's in your room. Although you're lucky Nick found it upstairs...very careless."

"I seem to recall being a little busy at the time." I told him.

Gareth's voice was calm as he asked. "Where might you need to go?"

I shrugged. "I still have a job you know. Although I suppose I should contact my publicist to let her know I won't be working anymore. I'll need to do some banking. And it would be nice to see the sun again. Maybe take a walk on the beach or something." I kept my thoughts light. "That's not going to be a problem is it?"

"Not as long as one of us goes with you."

"What's the real reason?" Jace demanded and Gareth glanced at him sharply. Damn he shouldn't have been able to tell I was hiding something.

“Stop poking at me or I’m going to shield.” I told him with a grimace. “Did I pry when those Vampires attacked us, or make one mention of the fact that you obviously hold super secret conferences here and have your own fighting force living and training on the premises? I didn’t even ask who where those six weres upstairs the other night? Remember them...the ones Mi warned us about? No I did not nor did I say anything about that ultra modern computer gear you’ve got going on in the other room, or that you’ve got a cave like Batman with your own personal Wyrms guarding the bat gate? I don’t think so! And let’s not forget that you were sleeping with Troll girl! A Troll for God’s sake, I’ve even given you the benefit of the doubt and assumed you were sleeping with the enemy for information or something. I mean why in the hell else would you be doing it? Its obvious whateverhername was didn’t give a rats fig for you, oh yeah cause she was so sleeping with Ricky, and can I just say for the record...yuck. So before you start grilling me on where I usually spend my nights, you might want to rethink the whole give what you get theory and either mind your own business or start talking.”

Dead silence. Well that can’t be good; I thought to myself and opened my eyes. I would have sat up but Gareth placed his hand in the middle of my chest even though he was looking at Jace. “It would be so much easier if she was as dense as she is beautiful.”

I frowned up at him. “Gentlemen you have two options; either tell me what’s going on around here or don’t. You’ve opened your home to me and I’ve agreed to stay for a year. I can spend that time ignoring the clues you keep dropping in my lap or I can assist you however I can. Either way just know that I’m not blind and I fight better when I know what’s coming at me.”

Jace’s face lost color and he stared at me with stricken eyes. “What the hell does that mean.....you’ve agreed to stay a year? With whom did you agree?”

“Lexi agreed to stay at least a year. After that we will...discuss it.” Gareth told him calmly.

Both men looked at me and I had the overwhelming urge to apologize though I wasn't sure what for. "So should I take the change of subject as an indicator that I'm supposed to walk around for the next year with my hand over my eyes and my fingers in my ears? Because if that's the case let me warn you, I'll be going out at night with or without you probably while you're working."

"For what reason would she be going out at night?"

"Without one of us?"

"She will not be seeing others." Gareth told Jace though his eyes had narrowed and he was staring directly at me. It wasn't really a comment, more a directive.

"I don't think she's taking up a new hobby. I sense its something she's been doing for a while."

"Well she wasn't seeing others." And this time when he said it the tension eased from him.

"What could she possibly do at night, all on her own?"

"Fly?" Gareth asked hopefully, and then added. "We can take you flying...in fact we should go tonight." They both looked at me hopefully and I pressed my lips together and refused to look at them. I'd lifted my deeper shields and was this close to completely shielding and was busy concentrating on what they might be hiding to keep them from prying into my thoughts.

"That sounds lovely Gareth; I've never flown with other Dragons before... except in my dream and you both know how that ends. I would be honored to fly with you."

"Not flying."

"Not clubbing."

"Not having sex."

"She works from home."

"She works alone."

"The library is closed."

"The zoo is closed."

“Maybe running?”

“From someone or after them?”

“She scoffed at me.”

“What?”

“She scoffed at me and told me she’d been killing Vampires for years and that it would take more than an immature Vampire to hurt her.”

They both looked at me with serious expressions and I fought not to squirm under Gareth’s palm. Think happy thoughts, think happy thoughts.

“That’s not going to work.” Jace growled at me.

“She was very quick with her little wooden pointy stick.”

“She could have killed Bobbie...but she didn’t.”

“Hmmm, she interrogated him first.”

“Not to mention how quickly she dispatched your buoyancy challenged friend.” Jace replied with a happy smile.

“Thank you for reminding me yet again.” Gareth nearly growled at him. He didn’t seem all that distressed over it, more like he was irritated over the loss of his house keys than he was over the loss of his girlfriend. And I had to wonder about that yet again. “She wasn’t my girlfriend. And I never slept with her! Even though she told everyone we had. And you should know that not everything is what it appears.” He nearly growled at me and I couldn’t help sensing the disappointment he was putting off.

Jace glanced between the two of us and sighed. “She fought Mark and beat him. And you should have seen her lead nearly the entire team in seventh and eighth level kata’s. I know for certain a number of them have never done higher than sixth level.”

Now that confused me. How could that be? There hadn’t been a single person out there that had taken a misstep! Come to think of it, that had been rather odd. Have to check that out tomorrow maybe step up to the next level to see what happened.

Gareth flashed me a curious look at the thought and leaned over me. “So my beautiful little gold, just what have you been up to?”

I slammed my shields shut and stared back at him, ignoring Jace’s hiss.

“Dammit I hate it when she does that.” He complained.

“I warned you.” And I wasn’t going to feel guilty about it, no I was not.

Gareth actually smiled and told us. “She follows through, I like that about her.”

“Yeah great, that’s just great.” Jace muttered. “Would you please just tell her so she’ll stop splitting my head open?”

“In deference to Jace, I’ll give you the short version.....we train hunters.”

Chapter 16

I pushed Gareth's hand off me and sat up. This was too funny. "You train hunters?" I demanded bluntly and dropped my shield. Jace took a deep breath and muttered his thanks. "That doesn't explain the conference room."

"What is so funny?" Jace grumbled. He was likely misinterpreting my humor, thinking it was at his expense.

"You have no idea how refreshing you are!" Gareth ignored Jace to tell me. "Beauty and brains, I'd nearly forgotten what it is like to be with a female of our race."

"The Everlasting changed not just their bodies. Mean and stupid is not an attractive combination." Jace agreed with a nod. "Sometimes I wonder if it is a blessing they can't reproduce. Surely the offspring would be monsters."

"I think your Father was a genius."

"Yes yes and I'm young too, don't forget that. And I have all my own teeth and no disfiguring scars and I can eat in public....well perhaps not without scaring the dancers. But I'm sure it's no hardship that I can manage to defend myself against your adoring fans. Bla bla bla."

"You know, she doesn't really believe you." Jace commented, his voice sounding puzzled.

"Must be all those years in someone else's skin." Gareth responded.

I waved my fingers to get their attention but apparently they hadn't beaten the subject to death yet.

"I suppose I always took this form for granted. Once I selected it it just stayed with me until this and my Dragon form are all I have. Yet, I suddenly find myself grateful. I can't imagine what it would be like to go about in an ugly disguise my entire life."

"Guys!" I practically yelled. "It wasn't that bad."

"I think she protests too much."

"Entirely."

"Fine whatever, don't believe me. But could we get back to the subject of you training hunters? I assume you're sanctioned with the Government?"

"Why does she act like she knows about hunters?"

"I'm more concerned about her last comment."

"Hello....can you say Mi? Or how about my Mother...and the fact that I spent a lot of time on military installations when I was a kid...a pale brown haired, brown eyed kid that nobody noticed?"

"I see her point. Perhaps having a non-descript alter-ego could have been an advantage, it might even come in handy. Can you change into other people or just this ugly brown person?" Jace wanted to know.

I frowned at him. My disguise was plain not ugly! "Yes but what has that got to do with anything?"

Jace snorted inelegantly, but then does anyone snort in an elegant fashion? I thought becoming momentarily sidetracked.

"Is it easy? Can you do it here...now?"

"What? Oh no it's not easy and yes I could do it now but after my workout upstairs and then with you two I'd probably need a nap and honestly I'm not really in the mood to humor you right this second."

"She'll need to practice that. Hiding in plain sight isn't going to be an asset if it leaves her weak."

“Hey, I am getting better. A year ago shimmering would have knocked me out for hours. Lately it’s less than thirty minutes. I’m pretty sure with practice it will get easier. It’s just the change that exhausts me. Holding the shape is no problem.”

They seemed to mull that over for a few minutes and I took the time to pack the uneaten food back into the basket, munching on strawberries and cherry’s the while.

“So the vamps the other night, can I assume that was someone’s way of saying thanks for meddling, please drop dead?”

“Something like that.”

“Have you plugged your internal leaks now, or are there more that I should know about?”

Gareth just shook his head. “She goes right to the heart of the matter, doesn’t she? Amazing.”

Jace was staring at me as if he’d had an epiphany and I nearly swallowed my tongue. “Yes she is.” He commented, lifting a knee and placing his elbow on it he studied me silently while he mulled something over. I couldn’t tell what he was thinking but it was obvious he was onto something and I wasn’t certain I was going to enjoy whatever it was.

That thought made him smile...not a Hi there, I’m so happy to see you kind of smile either. More like...I’m the cat and I’ve just eaten your canary type of smile. Gareth was silent on the other side of me as I packed the last of our things away and sat back on my knees, tugging at my robe to cover my thighs before folding my hands calmly in my lap. I took a deep breath and looked back at Jace. I was going for serene physically because intellectually he’d set off alarms and I was practically jumping up and down. I really didn’t like the way he was looking at me.

“You do realize you’ve killed an unarmed citizen in an unprovoked attack? And you have used your will to cause several dozen individuals to perform acts against their nature? And that the penalty for said violations under the United States Civil Code allows for termination with extreme prejudice?”

Gareth sucked in a breath and frowned at Jace.

In my lap I felt my fingers clench and I nodded, looking down at the blanket in front of me.

“Except those laws don’t really apply to you, do they? Not any more than they do to Gareth or me or Nick or eventually to those men and women we’re housing upstairs.”

I shook my head and kept my eyes lowered.

“Because you operate outside the laws, above the rules, don’t you?”

This time I nodded.

“Seventeen, and graduating from Harvard, that’s fairly impressive. And since then you had another what...seven years trailing along with your Mother? A woman who is the estranged Princess of Faerie, and a very important person despite her family issues. Hell, she’s a decorated near national treasure, given her service during and after the plagues. She managed nicely to keep your parentage under wraps. I don’t recall ever hearing anything about you. Everyone probably assumed you were just someone else’s daughter or sister or later on, just another secretary in her entourage didn’t they? If they noticed you at all, and here I was feeling sorry for you.” Jace continued with a shake of his head.

“And check out your body language.” He continued. “I bet you spent a lot of time looking young and innocent and submissive just like you are right now. Can this be the same person that leapt from the stairs and dragged a full grown Troll to her death?” He demanded leaning forward and shaking his head at me. “You know what I think? I think....your Mother is brilliant. Tell me, was it her idea to hide you in plain sight then protect you from the very people searching for you by having them train you so you’d be legally untouchable?”

I pursed my lips and nodded. “I’m not sure whose idea it was originally.” I told him calmly.

“I bet they recruited you straight out of school, probably sight unseen, didn’t they?”

“Yes.”

“How did you account for your personal history?”

“Records get lost and everyone knows it is against the nature of Elves to lie. My Mother might have inferred I was a foster child and since she is who she is....they took me on her recommendation. Passing the written and orals were easy, and I’d been training since I was eight so the physical requirements weren’t difficult.”

“So what does the Government think you are?”

I took a deep breath and raised my eyes to him. I reached for my robe, and let it drop off my shoulders while pushing it off my thighs. I glanced down and started with my right kneed I shifted just a few inches at a time, running the shift up my leg, and the right side of my body, over my shoulder, across my back and then down the left side of me to the other knee. It was like I’d run a piece of scaly material up and over my skin, so that wherever the material was covering me, that was the only place with iron hard scales. And I did it fast. The entire demonstration took just seconds. Then I was pulling my robe back up and I blinked and told him. “They think I’m some kind of chameleon. They were intrigued, but not unduly so. It was enough to get me through the academy and into a program.”

“Yes, an interesting trick. There aren’t many that can pull that off without losing a limb. And I’ve never seen it done that fast, or with such precision. So, I’m guessing you graduated with honors?”

Actually I had worked hard to stay in the middle of the pack. Having to fight my natural inclination to excel had been difficult for me. I was looking for autonomy not infamy. The last thing I needed was to be assigned to the border or be picked for one of the elite squads. Typically once you became a hunter you went into an apprenticeship or supervised combat situations for several years before being allowed free reign. It was just the Government’s way to ensure they hadn’t created the ultimate killing machine then set them free on the general population, though it had happened in the past, just after the plagues when we’d nearly been overrun. Then the elites that went into the field had been decorated veterans for the most part, or pulled from the newly created non-human military teams yet they still had been selected carefully. .

Beside me Gareth nodded thoughtfully and spoke for the first time since Jace had started this conversation. “Did they assign you to your Mother?”

“No she requested me and they were happy enough to accommodate her.”

“And when you left a year ago, did anyone contact you?”

“No, I believe Mi might have had something to do with that. I think she arranged for me to fall off their radar.”

“So what we have here is a fully trained and duly sanctioned hunter who’s in the system, but for whom all follow up actions have been electronically eradicated. She is probably assigned to someone that doesn’t exist.” Jace commented. “I congratulate you. I believe you met your goal. I don’t think you get any more autonomous than that.”

“Yes and I imagine it explains the drop in crime over the past year which is about the same time you moved here.”

I couldn’t help the wicked smile that slipped over my face as I nodded.

Jace grimaced and added, “And the reason we’ve been infiltrated.”

“Obviously they thought you were a rogue one of ours.” Gareth remarked when I questioned him with a raised eyebrow.

“Irony at it’s finest.”

I glanced between them and realized I might owe them an apology although why my helping to keep the slimy underbelly of the city from overrunning the general population should be a problem, I couldn’t really say. It wasn’t like I’d been taking out the big bosses; I’d just been chipping away at the petty criminals.

“And doing a damn fine job of it from what we hear. While managing to stay out of our sight, and yet right under our noses.” Jace commented.

“Perhaps if you got out more we might have met sooner.” I teased.

“Mmmm.” Gareth replied.

“No need to shove that in our faces.” Jace grumbled. “But seriously these night raids have got to stop.”

“Why?” I wanted to know. I wasn’t going to get upset, but there had better be a good reason or there would be no deal. I liked hunting and I was good at it. The fact that they’d been infiltrated indicated they needed to be a little less lax in their security and I wasn’t sure how that translated to me having to curtail my activities.

“You explain it.” Jace told Gareth as he rose from the blanket and stripped off his t-shirt and pants.

Jace wasn’t wearing any underwear and I’m not ashamed to say I ogled him. Even though it was clear he was more frustrated with me than interested. He rolled his eyes and wandered down to the water and dove in. I craned around to see him break surface and then he was freestyling to the other end with clean powerful strokes.

“So what’s so bad that you have to deliver the news?” I asked, swinging back to Gareth and settling myself. I was still kneeling and took a moment to straighten my legs so I wasn’t cutting off my circulation.

He smiled half heartedly and turned around so he could lay his head in my lap. I fought my initial reaction but he remained silent until I gave in and ran my fingers through his hair. After the third or fourth pass he finally spoke.

“You know we’ve been here in San Francisco off and on for several hundred years. And of course you know that we Dragons, especially the drakes can be...territorial?” He glanced up at me when I nodded and went back to playing with the hair at his temples. “In addition to training fighters, we’ve held this land, through whatever means necessary for a very long time. At first it was Indians, then the Spanish, then claim jumpers and on and on. Fast forward to the time just after the plagues and we found ourselves overrun with non-humans. That’s when we went to the Government for sanction. Because of who and what we are, our obligation included not just eliminating potential threats, but from time to time we are called on to act as ambassadors.”

“To whom?”

He reached for my hand and turned my wrist to his mouth, kissing the sensitive skin for a moment. “You would be surprised who has occupied the chairs in that room upstairs.”

“Okay well that’s all interesting, but what has it got to do with me staying home nights?”

He sighed and pressed my wrist against his cheek. “We may be the only drakes in this area, but we’re not the only....leaders of our respective communities shall we say. And you have caused a bit of a stir in the supernatural underworld.”

“So the non-human head crooks don’t like me, so what?”

“So my beautiful little naive gold,” Gareth told me as he released my wrist and pushed himself up. “They’ve called a conclave and we’ll be hosting it.”

“So you have a few folks over for a bitch session. What is that supposed to prove?”

“Well,” He told me calmly. “It was supposed to be act of good faith.”

Whatever he was hedging about I wished he’d just come out and tell me. I was having a couple of issues with the fact that he would willingly sit down with the head bad guys, or maybe it was just their lackeys they’d be sending? Personally, it sounded like a great time to clean house. Get them all in a room and eliminate them.

“Much as I’d like to do that...I’m honor bound to offer them safe passage. The rules are very clear. And don’t discount the fact that while some may be criminals, getting rid of them is not necessarily a good idea.”

“What? Is this a case of the devil you know versus the one you don’t?”

He nodded. “Disruption of power tends to create problems on a larger scale. Besides while they are here they will be under our protection.”

“And what happens if they break your rules?” I wanted to know.

He smiled and I couldn’t help the small shiver up my spine. “Then their lives are forfeit. It is the one thing everyone agrees on. And it tends to keep them on their best behavior.”

“So why is your hosting the meeting an act of good faith?”

He leaned forward and placed his hands on my shoulders, looking me directly in the eyes. “Because Lexi...Jace and I have allowed a hunter to enter our territory and she’s been systematically eliminating our fellow non-humans. We are being called to task for not having dealt with the problem. You might say it’s a question of honor.”

“You haven’t dealt with me and so they are going to slap your wrist? When is this meeting and exactly how long ago was it scheduled?”

Gareth took another deep breath and released my shoulders. “It’s this week and we’ve been planning it for more than a month.”

I had to stop and think for a moment what day it was, not only did I need to start wearing my new watch; I was also going to need a calendar. The world was moving on outside, but time seemed to stretch down here underground. “So what happened two nights ago upstairs?”

“Has caused chatter but no one has tied the two together...yet.”

“And if they do?”

“We will deal with that when it happens.” And his voice had gone silky smooth and dangerous. “Don’t mistake me Lexi, I will protect you. I’d prefer for it not to come to full out war, but there are several elements living in this city that I wouldn’t mind eliminating.”

“We....will protect you.” Jace added from behind me. I’d been so focused on Gareth that I hadn’t noticed his approach. “No matter what! Let’s just hope it doesn’t come to the what.”

I smiled at the two of them. “So do you think if you tell them you’ve found and domesticated me they’ll back off?”

“I think they’d demand we give them your head on a platter.” Jace told me bluntly.

“Or worse.” Gareth responded.

What could be worse than killing me I wondered?

“I don’t think you’d like being a demon’s concubine or enslaved to a master Vampire.”

“I thought demons only had power over non-humans that started out human, like Vampires and weres?”

“Normally they do.”

“Then how could I end up as a concubine to one?”

Gareth frowned slightly. “It could be done as easily as slipping you a potion so you are less inhibited and give up your will. Demons are bound by a unique set of rules, they can’t force themselves on others, but they can trick you into giving over your control in exchange for some power or wealth usually. While they may not be able to control us, there are other less metaphysical ways to lose yourself to them.”

“Speaking of which....” Jace started but Gareth cut him short with a frown.

“It is immaterial since we won’t be introducing you as the bane of San Francisco’s underbelly.”

“Oh okay, so we’re going with the don’t ask, don’t tell approach. Am I supposed to be your visiting niece from Alta or something?” Alta was an abandoned ghost town in the middle of the Rockies that was supposedly one of several gateways to the Everlasting.

Both of them frowned at me. “It’s too late to hide her.” Gareth remarked.

“Fine but that doesn’t mean we have to introduce her.”

“They know she’s here and what she is.”

“They think they know what she is.” Jace corrected.

Gareth nodded and glanced at me with a thoughtful look.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “They think I’ve got dangly parts don’t they?”

Jace grinned and chuckled although I was having problems seeing the humor in the situation.

“She could shimmer.” Gareth offered.

“She’d have to be someone else, not the ugly little brown thing she’s been.”

“I’m not ugly!” I snapped at him and had to restrain myself from smacking him when he looked at me like I was an idiot.

“Whatever,” Jace told me with a dismissive wave. “You can’t be her.”

“Why not? No one will even notice me.”

“Because if they track you back to your Mother, your poaching will be the least of our worries. I don’t think you want to end up as sushi in some lab do you?”

“Oh yeah, that.” Funny how my other problems just sort of overshadowed that one. “If I can’t be Plain Jane anymore, why can’t I just stay like this? It’s not like I’m going to be able to hide what I am. I can’t exactly mask my smell.”

Gareth and Jace glanced at each other. “How did you manage to survive without being outted sooner?” Gareth questioned. “I would have thought someone somewhere would have commented on it...that it might have raised questions?”

I thought about it for a minute and then replied. “I think it helped being with Mi and my Mother. And Dragons aren’t that common, besides most people just see what they want.”

“All true,” Jace added. “But if I had to guess, it had more to do with the way you looked than anything else. Let’s face it; no one would have suspected you were Dragon looking the way you did. I don’t believe any of us have ever been accused of being homely.”

## Chapter 17

“We need to take care of some business upstairs.” Gareth told me. “Nothing life altering, I just need to do some scheduling and Jace needs to handle payroll issues. Will you be okay for a few hours?”

“Sure,” I told him, snuggling down on the blanket. “I think I might just take a nap here and then go unpack my stuff...or what’s left of it.” I muttered.

He leaned over and pushed back a lock of my hair before giving me a kiss on the cheek. “Rest now and we’ll be back in a little while. Spot will make sure no one bothers you while you sleep.” And then he rose and was walking toward the door leaving me with Jace.

“We will need to speak to Nick, as head of Security he deserves to know some of what he is dealing with. I trust him and believe you can too. In spite of what you might believe, he was very impressed with your abilities upstairs and I think he will ask you to assist with training, I hope you accept. Those folks upstairs may be called on to fight beside you, it will help if they respect and trust you. Let Snick know when you are ready so I can send Nick down, I’ll leave it up to you to decide how much you want to tell him.”

He had pulled his clothing back on and instead of leaning down to kiss me; he knelt and pulled me into his arms. Laying his cheek on my head he whispered. “More

precious than gold, and I suspect you'll be just as hard to hold on to." Then he kissed my lips and while my head was still spinning, he gently released me and was striding through the door.

I watched him go then closed my eyes. It had been a full morning, and I still hadn't had any coffee. I was so going to have to talk to Areth about that, I thought as I settled more comfortably on the sand and allowed myself to drift off to sleep.

I smelled smoke...no brimstone. Opening one eyelid I found myself staring directly into one huge white eyeball. Apparently Spot had crept onto the blanket with me while I'd slept. Well at least part of him had anyway. Most of him was still on the sand, just his head and a good portion of his neck actually fit. He was lying on his belly with his face even with mine. Ever had the feeling someone was starring at you while you slept? Must have been what woke me.

Realizing I was awake, he made soft cuffing noises and blew his warm breath over my face, causing the tendrils of hair at my temples to blow backwards in the mini breeze. "Whoa boy, no singing the eyebrows." I told him playfully then reached out to give him a scratch above his eye ridge where I knew he liked it best. He made more happy noises as I sat up and straightened my robe probably thinking I was going to join him for a swim or a rousing game of keep away. Come to think of it, I was probably lucky he hadn't stolen my robe while I was sleeping he was such a thief!

Spot grumbled when I got up, then he scampered back to the water flinging sand and blanket all over me. I stood there and brushed at my face and decided what the heck I could use a swim to loosen my muscles anyway. After my workouts earlier and then sleeping on the sand I was just a little tight. Dropping my robe I ran into the water after him. Spot let out a honk and dove under the water. I chased him down and grabbed his tail, letting him drag me under the water and halfway across the pool before I let go and surfaced. He disappeared for a few minutes and when he came back, sure enough he had my shoe in his teeth.

A good hour later I drug myself out of the water giving Spot a last scratch as I grabbed up my robe and headed for my room. I was in serious need of some conditioner for my curly mop and a comb before I met Nick and filled him in on my life's story. Well at least part of my life, the less people that knew about my test tube beginnings the better.

My room was dark and cool and devoid of any boxes. Areth had been here and unpacked for me. Obviously that wasn't all she'd done since my room was now decorated and while I couldn't be certain...it just looked bigger. The color scheme had changed too. No longer was it bare floor and rock walls with a bed to one side. Now the beech colored hardwood floors gleamed warm and rich in the low lighting covered here and there with throw rugs. Two of the walls were paneled in a similar wood and one was draped in folds of gold and the palest of blue and green. The bedding had been replaced in a similar color scheme done up in broad stripes. A new dresser sat against the wall complete with vanity and I could see that several of my pictures had been set up on it. Against the last wall was a floor to ceiling book case made out of a wood painted dark red. There were books on the shelves and all sorts of knick knack and cubby holes. And I could see that many of my treasures had been placed in special holders. On one end of the book case a built in desk was set up complete with drop lighting and what looked like a brand new PC and large flat screen monitor mounted directly onto the wall.

Several large paintings hung about the room, one depicting Dragons in flight and I could tell from the second moon in the painting, that this was not a memory of this world. In the picture the skies were filled with flights of Dragons of all colors and shapes. It was an awe inspiring picture and I knew I could spend hours just tracing the flight patterns and picking out each individual Dragon's characteristics. It was amazing.

Hanging next to it on the wall was another large picture and this one, stole my breath with its sheer color and beauty. I walked to the painting and just stared at it amazed at the detail and fineness of the individuals portrayed. It was a picture of Faerie

like I'd never dreamt. Depicted on the canvas were all manner of creatures but the painting was dominated by a group of Elves dressed in the finest of garments, laughing and singing as they danced to music played for them by a red gold haired woman whose back faced me as she played her flute, a golden flute, a golden flute that looked just like mine. I turned slowly toward the bookcase and the center where my flute rested on its velvet covered holder. The section had a light that shone directly on the instrument sending reflections bouncing off the shiny surface and onto the sides of the knick knack area so that it looked like it was radiating light.

I glanced back at the picture and felt a premonition run up my spine. I shook it off and wandered over to the last picture, possibly the most disturbing of all since it was a portrait of me....surrounded by quite a few men. Yet there were only five that I recognized, Jace and Gareth stood to either side glancing down at me, their faces in profile. Jace had his hand on my lower back and Gareth held my hand in his. All of us were dressed in evening attire. The men wore tuxes and I was in a ball gown of palest gold, off the shoulder and cut low. I looked like a princess with a circlet of filigree gold holding back my red-gold tresses. Jace's vest and cravat were emerald green, Gareth's was royal blue.

Directly behind me stood the man from my dreams, the one that never failed to catch me when I fell from the sky, to comfort me. His hair was swept back from his temples and his eyes shined proudly. Both hands rested on my shoulders and I couldn't help noticing the platinum colored wedding band on third finger of his right hand. I couldn't help noticing it because it was the male version of the one that my Mother wore on a chain around her neck. Apparently this was my Father, and I stared at him for several minutes. I supposed you could say I was looking for answers. I signed and ran my finger over his face, wishing I knew where he was.

My gaze shifted to the other men spread out behind me and across the room some standing, others leaning against walls or chairs with their arms crossed, all of them wearing tuxes, their vests and cravats in various shades. All of them had their faces in darkness. It wasn't that they appeared headless for you could clearly see that

they were glancing toward me it was more that they were in shadow...unknown their features hazy. Yet it was clear that they were each individuals, in different shapes and sizes, just faceless. I counted ten. Apparently these were my custom designed mates. There appeared to be two that were spatially closer than the others. One was clearly red and the other, just slightly behind the red, was black...I guessed this must be Dane. I leaned toward the painting trying to make out features, unfortunately it didn't help. The best I could say was that the red was slightly smaller than Dane appeared. Not in height but in bulk. Jace had described him as Black Irish; I would have said he looked like a bruiser. One I wasn't particularly looking forward to meeting.

At my feet were four other men, all kneeling with their heads bowed. One was clearly an Elf, and though his face was averted I could tell by the shape of his ear and the color of his skin. He had pale blond hair held back in a leather strap. There was one other man with pointed ears but he was clearly not Elf though what he was, I couldn't say. The shape of his body and the black color and rough texture of his hair indicated to me, that he was something else, he was actually the closest to me. Next to him knelt Owen, the only one of the four whose face I could see and whom I recognized. The last knelt between Owen and the one closest to me. This man had swarthy skin with long black hair that was tipped in silver and swept the floor. His face was in profile and I could swear there was just a hint of red in his eye. He reminded me of a full size male version of Areth and I had to wonder if he wasn't part demon. All of the men kneeling were dressed as assassins, complete with weapons that I could see, and probably several that were hidden.

It appeared that Areth had decorated with my future in mind.

I showered and got my hair under control. I pulled on the sleeveless rust colored dress with matching sweater left on my bed, and headed to the living room. I was fairly certain that Nick would be waiting for me since I'd mentioned needing to chat with him while I'd been dressing. Actually I'd been opening and closing my dresser drawers wondering if I'd find anything in them or if I'd continue to have

everything laid out for me. Sure enough what I found was spare sheets and bath towels. Not exactly what you'd expect to find in your underwear drawer but I suppose Areth was serious about serving me and hey, who was I to complain?

Nick was standing in the hall looking at our Dragon picture when I came through the door. He shifted slightly and watched me walk to him. "Hi there, looking for me?" I asked as I walked up beside him.

"This is amazing." He replied and turned back toward the picture.

"It just showed up yesterday."

He grinned, "Yeah that happens around here." The way he said it made me wonder if Snick's duties stretched to the barracks floor and how that might look to some of the newest recruits. Especially those he might not like.

"Would you like something to drink?" I asked leading him down the hall and into the kitchen. He nodded and I got a couple of glasses of water. "So I need to tell you there are some things I can't tell you but most of my life is an open book. I can tell you that the things I won't tell you could get you killed and I know that's not fair but knowing these things might get you killed faster than you not knowing them. And hopefully you'll respect me enough to trust that."

"And if I can't."

"Then I'll ask Areth to pay you a visit. Given what she did upstairs, I'm certain she could remove the knowledge that there's something I haven't told you so you won't be burdened by the thoughts anymore."

He mulled that over for a moment as we wandered out to the living room and seated ourselves on the couch. "Sounds like there's not much I can do about this. Take you at your word or have my mind wiped."

"Hardly wiped." I said as I sipped my water, but I got his meaning, just as he'd got mine. "Let me tell you the rest, I think you'll agree there is more than enough to worry about." And I did. I told him everything including who my Mother was and how I'd grown up, I told him about my abilities, I might have misdirected him slightly when I told him I was half Elf and half Dragon and that it had caused me to exhibit

some strange powers. And I might have fibbed when I inferred that no one knew about my Mother because we didn't want to embarrass her family. After all, a Dragon and an Elf...very tabo.

I explained about my training and my education. I even told him I'd never had sex before Jace and Gareth, something I thought he should know since I didn't want him thinking there were any ex-lovers who might rear their ugly heads. The one thing I didn't tell him was that I'd been lab enhanced. That little tidbit I kept to myself. I hesitated over telling him my hunter status, but in the end I explained that I put in my time and had simply moved to San Francisco and had not been contacted since. He didn't seem unduly surprised, so perhaps it wasn't that uncommon, or perhaps he just thought they were monitoring me and now that I'd ended up here it wouldn't be a problem. Either way I was happy he didn't press the issue.

We chatted for about half an hour, he asking questions and me answering. At the end he seemed satisfied and then the conversation turned to training and as Jace suspected he asked if I would assist him. A little give back to the community so to speak. I gladly accepted and he went away promising to put together a schedule for me if I'd come to the cavern tomorrow so we could go over it together. When he was gone I put away our glasses and headed back to my room.

I wandered around wondering what to do with myself. Noticed that my watch had been relocated to my nightstand and put it on. Hard to believe it was already after eight and Jace and Gareth had probably already opened the club. Hunting seemed to be off my list of things to do so that was no help. I considered making dinner but nixed the idea immediately; I couldn't see Jace or Gareth thanking me for burning down their kitchen. I considered mediating, but the thought nearly put me asleep. I'd spent too much time in water lately to want to soak in the tub and I wasn't really one for reading or movies. Although I suppose if I was forced to I could sit through some mindless comedy. I moved from picture to picture while I was trying to figure out how to occupy my time and ended up standing in front of the picture with the Elves.

Jace had said no flute playing, but I'd been playing the flute since I was a child and nothing had ever happened. I glanced over my shoulder at the bookcase and the flute shining back at me like some forbidden fruit all pretty and begging to be plucked up. I proceeded to argue with myself for several minutes but in the end boredom won out and I lifted it from its display and carried it to my bed, pulled up my full skirted dress and settled it around me as I sat cross legged in the middle and lifted the flute to my lips.

I took several minutes and warmed up, playing scales to loosen my fingers. And then I played, and the music that came from the flute was pure and sweet and filled the room and hall with golden sound. At first the music was slow and almost tired, reflecting perhaps, my boredom. But as I continued to play I let myself think back over the past two days and the music changed, became more powerful, alluring and seductive. I filled the rooms with the sound of my feelings of discovery and intimacy pouring into each note the sweet rapture of Jace and Gareth's arms as we lay entwined. I closed my eyes and played as I relived the first touch, the caress of skin on skin of breaths mingling in the dark building to crescendo only to fall back to start again. And the music became joyfully, wistful as I imagined the nights to come and the promise of shared pleasures yet unknown.

I played until my brow became damp and I could no longer feel my feet or legs. And still the music poured from me and there was a strange sense of urgency, as if I was racing toward something and I played faster though my arms shook and I had trouble filling my lungs, yet the music spilled from me until there was nothing but the wanting and the needing for more. And finally I was done. The flute fell to the bed and rolled out of my numb fingers. Eyes still closed, I hung my head and tried to remember how to breathe.

As I sat there gulping air, a sound intruded. Something that shouldn't be there pulled my eyes open and lifted my head. It was a small sound which caused Goldy to open an eye and raise her head. It was such a small sound to have come from someone so...imposing. A certain someone I appeared to have conjured straight out of the

portrait that hung to the side and just behind him. A someone, that looked not quite Elf with long dark hair and very dark almond shaped eyes who was currently leaning one booted foot on my desk chair, arms crossed over his well developed and mostly bare chest staring at me with a look of complete annoyance. He looked...like he'd stepped off the cover of a non-human romance novel. All high cheekbones, pointy ears, and sculpted muscles wearing tight leather pants tucked into high boots with a matching vest that was only partially tied closed. Did people actually dress like this in real life?

I stared back at him and straightened my legs while hot needles exploded in my calves and I wondered if I would be able to defend myself if he decided to attack me. Note to self, don't cross legs while playing the flute. He neither moved nor spoke, just continued to glare at me and I couldn't determine if he was being polite, or perhaps he just couldn't speak?

"Hello." I finally told him. He continued to stare at me and made no comment so I tried again. "I'm Lexi and you are?"

He heaved an annoyed sigh. "Cursed." He finally mumbled then dragged his foot off my chair and took a step to the side so he could bow deeply to me.

Figuring that was his state of mind and not his name, I wasn't sure how to respond, so I picked up my flute and edged toward the side of the bed. I didn't wish to seem forward and sitting on my bed with a strange man in my room seemed almost an invitation. Not that he wasn't yummy looking, or that I hadn't had sex with total strangers before, I just didn't think any of us were going there at the moment and decided it might be prudent to prevent him from getting the wrong idea.

"And how can I assist you?" I asked as I stepped down to the floor and realized he was nearly as tall as Owen though not quite as broad through the shoulders. He must have topped Gareth by at least three inches.

His lips pressed flat and the skin below his eyes grew tight as he watched me walk to the bookcase and lay my flute in its holder. I didn't quite turn my back to him but it was a near thing. He moved fast, faster than I'd ever seen anyone move. I know this because I was suddenly pressed up against the bookcase with a knife at my throat.

Lucky for me I don't typically panic or I might have impaled myself. Actually I was busy wondering where he'd hidden the knife, his boot or down his back maybe?

His eyes were huge black pits filled with a near hatred yet I stared calmly up at him. My hands hung at my sides and while I should have been frightened, I just couldn't find it in me. "You will not hurt me." I told him and smiled serenely into the maelstrom of his emotions.

He grimaced and stepped back from me, his look of rage slowly being replaced by one of confusion and...almost despair. "I could kill you." He hissed and I noticed he had a slight lilt to his voice, a strange sort of accent.

"Too late." I told him abruptly and I just knew that what I said was the truth. That we were now bound together, somehow our fates entwined. A premonition... perhaps? I stepped away from the book case and my eyes drew his to the picture he had been standing in front of. I tilted my head to the side and told him. "When you first appeared, while I played...that was the only time you could have freed yourself. But only had you struck at that moment."

His face went blank as his gaze followed mine and he looked at the picture of him kneeling at my feet. "Though I hate this, I could not." He growled and turned back to me and immediately dropped to one knee and bowed his head. "My Lady." He choked out, his voice sounding rather harsh his fist clench tightly around the hilt of his very sharp blade. "I have been sent by your GrandMother the Queen, and I am yours."

I stumbled back and had to grasp the bookcase because my legs refused to hold me. What could this mean? I slid to the floor and stared back at him in horror. And that was how Gareth and Jace found us when they ran into the room with Owen and Nick at their backs.

## Chapter 18

How do you stop a grizzly bear a polar bear and two Dragons from charging? Answer...you don't. You simply get out of their way. At least that's what I would have tried to do. Apparently my newest acquaintance had other plans. One minute he was kneeling before me, the next he was standing in front of me holding his knife at the ready while I watched disaster approach at lightening speed. How do I get myself into these situations I wondered then simply solved the problem by shifting. I don't believe my new friend was expecting my reaction and the process shoved him forward then nearly off his feet as I placed my head and neck between him and his charging doom. "Halt!" I bellowed and twisted my head nearly into Jace's chest. The move got the required reaction as all four men skid to a halt. None of them was looking very happy with me. I hesitated a second just to make sure they were paying attention, and then shifted back.

"Out now." Gareth growled and Owen and Nick glanced between myself and the stranger but turned immediately for the door. Owen let out a startled sound as his eyes landed on the picture with him kneeling at my feet. He hesitated a second but continued to the door tossing me a confused almost wistful look over his shoulder.

"Come here Lexi." Jace demanded then narrowed his eyes at me when I shook my head. He might as well have said, step aside while I kill the man standing behind

you for that was what he really meant. His face had gone flat and hard and he looked....jealous. If possible, Gareth's looked even worse. I knew the only thing keeping them on that side of the room was me standing between them. And they did not like it.

"Lexi," Gareth growled and again I shook my head. There was movement behind me and I threw a quick glance over my shoulder. No wonder Jace and Gareth were growling. The man or whatever he was had dropped to his knee again and there was a look of wonder, no....rapture on his face as he stared at me. Now what? I wondered. A moment ago he was practically snarling at me and holding a knife to my throat now he looked like I was his last hope on this or any other world.

Jace and Gareth both jerked and I realized they were listening in. I glanced back at them and shrugged. "Before you do anything," I told them calmly, you may want to look at the picture over there." And I pointed to the wall behind them.

Gareth refused to take his eyes off the man on the floor behind me, but Jace frowned as he turned slightly, putting his back to Gareth so he could look behind him. "Damn it." He muttered and I could tell his teeth were clenched. He turned back to us and this time he looked more frustrated than jealous and was clearly unhappy with the situation. Gareth bared his teeth and walked toward me. A slight breeze fluttered my hair and leather covered back suddenly stood between Gareth and I. Ah so that's where he kept the knife I thought as I noticed the sheath under his hair between his shoulder blades. I didn't have time to admire it as I realized this time I'd be too slow to prevent the inevitable as the two of them struck each other with what felt like the force of two speeding trains.

Hands reached for me and were swept away before they could connect and Jace was pulled into the fight his forearms bleeding from knife wounds. I watched in shocked horror as Gareth was sliced open across his chest the blood streaming down him. I cried out in anguish just as scales rippled across his skin and he partially shifted, healing the wound completely.

“Stop stop stop stop stop!” I shouted and threw myself into the middle of them. The knife clattered to the floor and three sets of hands grabbed for me trying to push or pull me out of the way, but I refused to go by wrapping myself around as much of the three of them as I could. It was extremely undignified what with my skirt bunched nearly to my waist and the four of us rolling about the floor but it effectively stopped the fight as none of them wanted to hurt me and I refused to be gently pried off of them.

“I’d love to continue this later,” Jace commented in his sarcastic voice. “But for now could you please let go?” I had somehow managed to wrap my thighs around his neck and held him in a head lock. My right arm was wrapped around Gareth’s neck and in my left hand was a fistful of black hair, held close to the scalp at the back of the neck. I literally had all three of them by the scruff of the neck.

“If I let you all go will you behave like adults instead of juvenile delinquents?” I asked making my voice sound syrupy sweet.

“I make no guarantees.” Jace replied bluntly.

“And you?” I asked giving the handful of hair a tug. “I’m sorry your name is what?”

“Cursed, My Lady.”

“Really? I thought you were....I don’t know describing your situation, not that that was your actual name.”

“No My Lady, it is the name I was given at birth.” He replied in his lilting voice.

I wasn’t sure what to say to that so I turned to Gareth and kissed him. Hard and full on the lips while my mind whispered, he did not touch me. Well he had but not in that manner and only because he had been sent here by my GrandMother and was furious over the fact that he’d been...given to me. In my arm, Gareth relaxed then tensed as I fed him that last little bit. Between my legs Jace turned his head and nipped my thigh letting me know he was becoming annoyed with my strangle hold on him and that he’d like to be let go.

I released Jace first, standing from the heap we'd become and pulling Gareth and Cursed up to a kneeling position with me. Next I kissed Gareth on the cheek and slid my arm from around his neck. Cursed was now on his knees beside me his head level with my ribs and I quickly used my spare hand to smooth down my dress. My hand in his hair was firm but wasn't causing him any pain. I gently tipped back his head so I could look into his face. He looked, a lot happier about the situation than I would have if someone was holding me on my knees by my small hairs. I needed to do something quick before it escalated again. "Why did you attack them?"

"Forgive me Mi Lady, they were angry and I feared for your safety." He replied his eyes holding mine as he stared up at me and I wanted to believe him, there was just something that told me it wasn't just duty and I'd need to keep my eye on him.

"This is Gareth and this is Jace." I told him pointing to each of my men in turn. "They also have concerns for my safety."

"And strange creatures in her bedroom." Jace muttered. "Just what are you?"

I grimaced, even for Jace it was a terribly insensitive question. One did not go around demanding answers of creatures from Faerie...it was just rude. "Jace.."

Gareth's voice was low and nearly vibrated with anger. "Let him go." He told me.

I glanced between Jace and Gareth and frowned. This was so ridiculous didn't they know I'd much rather be making love to them than standing here arguing over some other man? I mean give me a break, I'd just been playing my flute and the guy shows up out of nowhere saying my GrandMother sent him. Wait, if my GrandMother sent him then he must be part of the court. If he was part of the court then he was at least partially Elf. Cursed he'd said his name was and understanding dawned as I looked down at him. "Cursed....like me." I whispered and watched as pain filled his black eyes and was quickly replaced by anger and then a strange kind of wonder. "Aren't you? No wonder you hate me."

His torso swayed toward me and his hand slipped around my knee. Gareth hissed and Jace made a sound deep in his throat but I ignored both of them. "I

thought...” He began and tried to shake his head but my grip prevented him from doing so. I noted his reaction but refused to release my hold, a move that earned me a small smile.

“I’ll release you when they feel less threatened.” I informed him curtly. “I’m not in the habit of restraining men by their hair.”

He gave me a look that raised my eyebrows and had both Gareth and Jace bristling. “Too bad.” He murmured and I think I actually blushed.

Oh this was so heading into dangerous territory. “You,” I told him bluntly, “Are making it difficult to feel sorry for you. In fact I haven’t known you ten minutes and already I begin to see why you were exiled. You’re just a wee bit of a trouble maker aren’t you? Is it the half breed status or are you just generally a pain in the ass?” He just grinned at me, a nice white perfectly even smile, if you didn’t mind that all of his teeth from the eyeteeth back were actually pointed. Inside me Goldy thumped her tail and whispered, *Goblin*. Well that would explain the name Cursed. A mixture of Elf and Goblin! It was surprising his head wasn’t bashed in at birth. His Mother must have hidden him away until he could fend for himself. That he had survived childhood said much for him and I couldn’t help wondering how old he was. I’d never seen a Goblin before but according to Mi they didn’t tend to be this attractive. His looks obviously took after his Elf half. Fortunate for me, since I seemed to be stuck with him.

All three of the men flinched at that thought and I stared down in horror at Cursed realizing Jace and Gareth weren’t the only men in the room that could hear my thoughts. Damn must be the Elf in me! I released him letting my hand drop as I stepped back and away. Gareth reached for me and pulled my back in against his chest. And Jace stepped toward us. Cursed watched me go, his face calm, patient.

“I don’t like him.” Jace remarked to no one in particular.

Cursed turned his black eyes on Jace and seemed to consider him. “I have no quarrel with you Dragon.” He replied as he stood and crossed his arms over his chest. Gareth tensed behind me and I lay my hand over his where it encircled my waist.

“I think the question that needs to be answered is, what has changed and why do I suddenly rate a guard sent by the Queen?”

Cursed turned his face to me and he looked...nearly offended. “Forgive me,” He replied stiffly, “But I have never had a taste for children and I have been waiting these twenty three years for your invitation. Had you called to me sooner I would have come.”

What? Called him sooner....I didn’t call him at all! Gareth’s breath was a little harsh as he leaned his face next to mine and his arm squeezed almost painfully around me. I turned my head to look up at him and winced at the angry look he gave me. I didn’t get it, why was he mad at me?

“I told you no flute!” Jace muttered then covered his face with his hand. He turned away and walked over to the nearest chair and plopped down in it, leaning his elbows on his knees and staring at the floor.

“I’ve been playing the flute since I was two!” I practically yelled back at him. I didn’t understand what was happening but obviously Gareth and Jace did. “If it was my flute playing he would have shown up way before now!”

Cursed looked like he’d swallowed something bitter, but pursed his lips and didn’t say anything. I had to wonder if my dirges hadn’t struck home.

Jace continued to look at the floor and replied. “I suspect it was more what you played than the fact that you played.”

What I’d played? I thought blankly.

Behind me Gareth took a deep breath and the pressure eased a little around my waist. “Your music filled the caverns.” He remarked.

Jace scoffed and added with a weary sigh. “Your music caused every man in this structure to stand at attention!”

Somehow I didn’t think he was referring to them being on their feet and I blushed and shifted uncomfortably in Gareth’s arms. His lips whispered over my temple. “You’ve turned our dance floor into a sex pit.” He added softly. “I’m not sure if I should thank you or wring your neck.”

I sputtered and twisted to look at him. “You are kidding right?”

“Don’t we wish?” Jace added. “You’ve given an entirely new meaning to the club’s name! Why do you think it took us so long to get here? You know Lexi; you could have just called either or both of us on the communicator.” He told me with an exasperated look as he pointed a finger at his own wrist. “We would have got the message. You didn’t need to call for backup.”

“Wait!” I demanded, holding up both hands palm out. This was terrible. If what they were saying was true, then there was an orgy going on upstairs and I’d called Cursed, not as a guard, but as...I couldn’t even think it. My mind just shied away from the thought.

“I am here to guard your...person My Lady.” Cursed added with a grin. “As I told you, I am yours. I assumed you understood my meaning.”

“If I had understood your meaning I would have sent you back to Faerie with a message to my GrandMother!” I told him angrily. “As you can see I am perfectly capable of picking my own lovers! And stop calling me that, my name is Lexi!”

He actually dipped his head though he was still smiling. “As you wish, but consider; twenty three years ago that was not the case. Without you, there is no return to Faerie.” He warned me bluntly.

“Twenty three years ago I was two!” I nearly shouted.

“And had the Princess not refused to answer our Queen’s summons, you would have been under my guard since then. And it would not have taken you twenty three years to call to me.” He told me and his tone of voice held almost a seductive edge to it.

In shock, I stared back at him and considered what he’d said. My Mother had been called back to Faerie and because of me she had refused to go. “They cannot want me....they called me an abomination.” I whispered and couldn’t miss the look of anger that flashed deep in his eyes.

“The court assumed you were....human.” He told me gruffly.

“They wanted to kill me.”

A fine tremor ran over his skin and I could sense the force of will he exerted to control his emotions yet his face remained neutral. He made no excuses, nor tried to defend them in any way. And I knew without a doubt that he'd felt the same bigotry aimed at him his entire life. It elicited a small sense of kinship with him and I looked closer at him, trying to see beneath the blank face and tightly controlled emotions.

"Yes and you've been very angry with us ever since." He remarked politely as he stood there looking back at me. He was standing with his hands clasped behind him, his legs spread slightly as if at parade rest. His hair had slipped over one shoulder and spilled down his chest and I had the strange urge to entwine my fingers in the length of it and wrap it around my wrist.

I swallowed and realized the room had gone unnaturally quite.

"Was that him or her?" Jace demanded harshly as he rose from the chair and glared at us.

In answer, Gareth growled and the hair stood up on my arms. Cursed seemed to perk up and his eyes just sort of burned black fire as he stared back at me. My skin started tingling and my breath caught as the tension ratcheted up about twenty degrees inside the room.

I swallowed again and asked, "Cursed would you step out into the hall?"

His body tensed but he responded neutrally, "If My Lady requests it of me."

"Ah...consider yourself requested," I told him softly, forcing myself to breathe shallow. "And could you um...close the door behind you?"

He stood there for a second as if hoping I'd reconsider but I pressed my lips together and turned my cheek to Gareth's shoulder. "As My Lady desires." He replied with a bow. He glanced at Gareth over my shoulder and reached for the knife slipping it into the holder between his shoulder blades and then he was gone the door clicking shut behind him.

I pulled the scent of Gareth deep into my lungs and turned into his arms. A moan escaped me as his hand slid into my hair and pulled my head back as his mouth crashed down on mine and his tongue thrust itself into me. My dress gave as he

grasped it in one fist and gave it a sharp yank. It slid to the floor. Behind me Jace pulled the shoulders of my sweater from me and then my bra and panties were gone. We ended up on a small rug on the hard floor, the urgency of our need too intense to allow for the time it would have taken to reach the bed. I ended up on all fours with Jace beneath me, his shirt buttons torn from their holders, his pants half off. Gareth spooned me from behind, his erection pressed between us. I made mewling noises and leaned back against him while my lips and teeth worked their way down Jace's stomach and into the nest of curls between his legs.

He raised his hips to me as my mouth slid over his head. He was so hot and silky and he tasted salty and sweet. I growled deep in my throat and took the entire length of him in, sliding my tongue over and around him feeling him jerk as I worked him with lips and teeth and tongue. His fingers dug into the carpet and his eyes flashed to crystals as they started a slow whirl that excited things way down deep in me. I ran a hand up his chest and into his crisp hair and stared back at him opening myself to him and sharing my excitement.

Gareth slid a hand over a breast and gently squeezed my nipple. I moaned around Jace's cock and pressed back against Gareth, begging him to take me. He hummed and pulled back and my body followed his so that he raised his hands to my hips so he could force me away from him while he positioned himself between my legs. Jace reached for my shoulders. "Hurry." He told Gareth, his voice sounding strained. I held my breath as he worked his way into me pulling my hips back and onto him. I struggled for a minute trying to find a rhythm as I tried to concentrate on both working Jace with my mouth and feeling every inch of Gareth as he worked his way into my tight body. And then we had it as the two of them pressed into me together. Jace's hard cock sliding down my throat, while Gareth ground his long thick length into me from behind.

One hand on my hips and one on my shoulder, Gareth rode me, his movements quickening becoming more forceful. Beneath me I reached for Jace's hands and twined my fingers into his holding on to him while he bucked against my mouth. As the

excitement built, I felt their shields drop away and was swamped in pleasure so intense it rocked an orgasm through me. Jace threw back his head and called out my name as he plunged into my mouth and I felt him spill his seed down my throat. Waves of pleasure rolled over and through me, amplified by the three of us and Gareth drove deep inside one last time and came with a strangled yell. I exploded again shuddering and pushing back to them every ounce of ecstasy they had given me. When I could move, I swallowed and breathing heavy as I slid from Jace, dropping my forehead onto this thigh.

Jace brushed back the hair from my face and pulled me up his body, hugging me tenderly. Gareth moved with me and the three of us ended up lying on the carpet, me with my cheek on Jace's chest my fingers buried in his dark curls. He ran his fingers over my arm while Gareth snuggled in at my back kissing my shoulder and neck with his arm draped over my waist splaying his fingers to cup my breasts. I made happy Mmm mmm noises in my throat and winding my leg over Jace's closed my eyes and reveled in our considerable afterglow.

There was a sharp rap on the door and it swung open. I yelped and pressed myself against Jace as Nick stuck his head into the room and averted his eyes from the three of us on the floor. "Excuse me." He told us. "There are some....ah folks in your living room and the cat has informed me they aren't leaving until they speak to Lexi."

I blinked several times and tried to process what he'd just said, but Jace beat me to it. "Is the cat tan and grey with big amber colored eyes and a smart mouth?" He demanded, his voice sounding annoyed.

Nick nodded and continued to stare at the walls, obviously there was more. Gareth took a stab at it this time and asked. "You mentioned folks as in plural, who else is with the cat?"

Nick actually flicked his gaze to us his eyes looking almost nervous. I'd never seen him look that way and it made my muscles twitch, who could make this man nervous? "Your Mother...." He replied in a very small voice. "And.....him." He

continued, jerking his thumb at the painting on the wall, the one with me and all the men.

“Which him? I asked my voice bordering near hysteria. My God my Mother was in the living room!

He stepped into the room and marched up to the picture and pointed to the pale haired Elf kneeling at my feet. “That one.” He told me bluntly then marched back to the door. “I’ll let them know you’ll be out shortly.” And he closed the door behind him quietly while I lay between Jace and Gareth and started to shake.

I rose from the floor and stood there thinking she was out there! I’ll admit, I panicked and slammed shut my shields, all of them! Jace winced and nearly went over as he stood up from the floor. Gareth actually sucked in a breath and held out a hand to me. I was standing there staring down at him in horror when the door slammed open and Cursed ran into the room knives in both hands and his own look of panic covering his face. He skidded to a halt and stared at me, his eyes doing a slow once over that was abruptly cut short as Jace stepped in front of me and I realized I was stark naked and squeaked and clung to his sides, pressing myself up against him from behind.

“What the hell do you want?” Gareth demanded, rising from the floor behind me like some sort of vengeful god. My shields were still firmly in place but I didn’t need them to know rage was rolling off both of them like some kind of tidal wave.

Cursed bowed abruptly and answered. “My apologies, I sensed My Ladies’ abrupt....withdrawal.”

I peaked around Jace’s arm and looked at Cursed in surprise. “What does that mean?”

“It means,” Jace told me, reaching for my fingers which were digging into his side and wrapping them around his body so that my fingers were buried in his chest hair. “That when you shielded he could no longer feel you.” He told me and I could swear his voice sounded rather smug. Obviously Cursed couldn’t sense my outer shields like Jace and Gareth could.

“Can you sense me now?” I asked dropping my outer shields and watching the frown ease from his face. He nodded and I raised my shields again, Jace flinched but didn’t make a sound and neither did Gareth who had come to stand on the other side of Jace. When Cursed frowned again and shook his head I smiled and dropped my outer shield. He nodded and looked just a little...irritated or maybe that was just because Jace and Gareth were grinning back at him. Or more precisely maybe it was because the three of us were standing there naked and they were grinning at him. I wasn’t sure.

Jace pulled my fingers to his lips then smoothed them back onto his chest and worried at them until my fingers curled into his hair of their own accord. Then he leaned down and whispered loud enough for all of us to hear, “Mmm that’s nice.” I yanked my hand away from him turning red as he chuckled softly. “She just loves a hairy chest.” He told Cursed in a nasty voice.

Beside us Gareth snorted and remarked, “Guess that’s something Elves or Goblins wouldn’t know about.”

Behind Jace I bit my lip and wondered what the two of them were blathering about. It took a few seconds but it finally dawned on me and I glanced around Jace’s arm to see Cursed glaring back at us with his arms crossed over his chest....his hairless chest. That was just....mean! I frowned and bit Jace on the back of the arm. He cursed and frowned back at me. I gave him a dirty look and stepped away from him and flounced off toward the bathroom, giving them all a view of my pert backside. I heard Cursed laugh and Gareth growled and scooped me into his arms.

By the time we reached the bathroom I was shaking again. My Mother was still out there and Cursed had just confirmed he could “hear” me from the hallway. Jace told Gareth, “I think she’s gone into shock.” Then I was in the shower and it took the two of them to wash my hair and bundle me into a couple of towels. The whole while I just kept shivering and wondering how long she’d been there and how much she’d heard. Can you actually die from mortification? If so I didn’t have long to live!

Jace chuckled and Gareth made tisking noises at me as they rubbed me dry and combed out my hair like a five year old. I so needed to get control of myself, here I

was falling to pieces because my Mother had arrived unannounced. It wasn't that bad, except....except I'd been in the midst of making love with two men! And I started to hyperventilate. Jace was actually laughing at me as he shoved my head between my knees and Gareth wasn't much better, when I managed to catch my breath I noticed he was standing in front of me bare naked with his arms crossed over his chest grinning. I groaned and put my hand over my eyes. "Areth?" I called. "I need help!"

Tinkling laughter preceded the beautiful little Elemental into the room and she dropped a curtsy to me. "How may I assist you?" She asked, glancing up at Gareth with an appreciative smile. I couldn't help following her gaze and had to shake myself to stop my mind from wandering. "Ah...my Mother's here." I told her and frowned at the breathless quality of my voice. Behind me Jace gave me a squeeze and I realized I was sitting on his naked lap. I knew they were only teasing me, but honestly it wasn't going to be helpful if we ended up in a pile on the bathroom floor!

Areth cocked her head to the side, her little body going still as she seemed to listen to something I couldn't hear. She looked back at me and said, "Come with me." As she flitted off toward the bedroom. Jace gave me another squeeze and put me on my feet. I left my towel in the bathroom and the three of us trailed along.

Clothing for all of us was laid out on the bed. For Jace and Gareth, tailored trousers and silk shirts, as usual, but the shirts were high collared and purest white and came with caveats and the jackets laid out next to their shirts looked like velvet with brocade down the front and around their collars. Each had one in his signature color and I couldn't wait to see them in them.

Areth motioned me forward and held up for me a velvet dress of my own in palest gold with swirls of emerald and sapphire. The dress had long fitted sleeves a low scooped neck and was backless. In fact it looked like it would barely cover the tip of my spine. Apparently all my back material had gone into the mini train that swept the floor behind me when she helped me into it. Dainty high heels accompanied the dress and when Gareth had strapped me into them I looked at Areth who was holding something behind her back and wearing a secretive smile on her cherry red lips.

“Come into the bathroom she told me.” And the three of us filed back in. Gareth seated me on the vanity chair and Areth propped herself on the counter directly in front of me so that I couldn’t see what she had in her hands. “Close your eyes.” She told me and I smiled and did as she’d asked.

I wasn’t sure what she was going to do, but I relaxed when I felt her apply makeup to my eyelids and cheeks. I think she may have used a little mascara too because when I opened my eyes my lashes looked long and very dark and accentuated my eyes, making them appear even more uptilted then they usually did. She bounced around behind me and pulled several strands of my hair away from my ears, piling it like a mini crown on the top of my head while the rest of it cascaded down my back in red-gold curls. When she was done with me I looked...like my Mother! My breath caught in my throat and I leaned in to the mirror for a closer look. I’d never noticed the resemblance before but the person staring back at me would never be mistaken for anything but the daughter of the woman in the other room. The other room!

“Don’t panic again.” Jace scolded and took my hand giving me a warm smile which lit his eyes. Gareth had wandered into the other room and came back carrying both of their coats. He took one look at me and stopped dead in his tracks.

“You look...”

“Like a Princess.” Areth responded with a giggle. And then she held out her hands to me and I bit my lower lip. Draped across both palms were a set of clip on dangling earrings made from gold and....Dragon’s tears, our Dragon’s tears, Jace’s, Gareth’s and mine. They were stunning and I reached for them reverently.

“Thank you.” I told her in a voice gone husky with emotion.

She smiled and tilted her head. “Do not thank me.”

Where had they come from? I glanced at Jace and Gareth. Apparently neither of them knew as they both shrugged and went back to pulling on their coats. I clipped them on and leaned in to the mirror taking a second to admire the way they captured the light. They hung half way to my shoulders and moved with me, like something alive. With my hair pulled back they were absolutely perfect! I was so busy admiring them

that I missed seeing the men finish pulling on their coats and when I glanced up and into the mirror I caught my breath again at how handsome they both appeared.

Chapter 19

“Shall we go?” Jace asked, offering his arm. I screwed up my courage and placed my hand on him. Gareth got the door for us and we stepped into the hall. I had a bad moment when I glanced up and directly into the dark brown eyes of Owen who looked at me like I’d grown a second head. Cursed was standing down the hall in front of the Dragon painting and he bowed low to us, his eyes hooded as he watched me walk toward him and I wondered what he was thinking.

“That he liked your other outfit better.” Jace muttered under his breath.

“And who could blame him?” Gareth replied.

A smile slipped over Cursed features and he bowed again. “Actually gentlemen, you are both mistaken.” And he turned and led us down the hall. At the doorway he paused until we were standing just behind him and then he announced in his deep lilting voice. “May I present My Lady the Princess Lexi and her consorts Gareth and Jace.” And he bowed and stepped to the right and I was looking directly into the palest blue eyes I’d ever seen anywhere.

“Hello Mother.” I said and Jace swept me across the room and into my Mother’s arms as she stood from the couch.

“Lexi you look wonderful.” She whispered in my ear and I couldn’t help blushing. She pushed me back so she could get a look at my face. “I’m so proud of you.” She told me with a warm smile.

“Nice earrings.” Mi muttered from where she lay with her feet curled under her on the couch. She glanced at me and then sniffed delicately.

I continued to hold my Mother’s hand as I sat on the edge of the couch and waited until she turned her beautiful amber eyes to me. “Thank you.” I told her and leaned forward to kiss her on the top of her head. She blinked and purred for a couple of seconds and then caught herself as if what’d she had done was unseemly. My Mother smiled down at me and I rose and turned her toward my Dragons. Mother may I present Jace Green and Gareth Blue. Gentlemen may I present my Mother Princess Shaylee Helyanwe. They both bowed low over her hand.

Gareth spoke first saying. “It is an honor to meet you Princess.”

“Welcome to our home.” Jace added.

My Mother had never been an overly emotional person but she surprised me when she stepped forward and held out a hand to each of them. Neither hesitated as they took a hand in theirs. “The honor is mine.” She told them softly. “Thank you.” And all three of them looked at me. I think I was actually saved from saying something lame by someone clearing their throat across the room. My Mother immediately tensed and her fingers tightened slightly in Jace and Gareth’s. She stepped back and seated herself on the couch, taking a moment to straighten the lovely dove grey fitted dress over her knees before she turned to the man who was standing by the entertainment center. I think we all knew he was there; we were just doing our best to ignore him.

Mi rose and stretched her back then sat back down again and wrapped her tail around her feet. “May I present Lord Amras Lissesul?”

Gareth, Jace and I turned to the Elf standing across the room with his feet spread apart and a condescending look on his face.

“Must you?” I replied and raised one eyebrow when he narrowed his eyes at me.

My Mother choked, I think it was supposed to have been a laugh that went horribly wrong and ended with me patting her on the back. She glanced up at me at one point her eyes wide and mischievous and I smiled down at her and squeezed her hand.

“Yes because today I was elected to be in charge of all the fun jobs.” Mi replied sarcastically and then rolled her eyes when I bit my lip so I wouldn’t laugh. Beside me Jace and Gareth shifted but remained silent. This was their home but obviously neither of them wanted to offend my Mother. Fortunately as the youngest person in the room I was guessing by at least several hundred years, I wasn’t burdened by the same overly developed sense of etiquette.

I glanced toward Cursed, the only other person there I felt might give me a sense of what this was about since the two of them probably knew each other. But Cursed was staring up at the ceiling completely ignoring me as if he knew what I wanted but was purposefully pretending otherwise. I continued to stare at him but he refused to glance my way.

“I wouldn’t look to him for assistance.” Amras informed me. “He knows his place.”

“I’m sorry exactly who are you?” I demanded, turning furious eyes on the newest pain in my ass. Coughing erupted around the room and I pointedly ignored the rest of my men. If they weren’t going to assist me, then I’d apparently have to deal with this one myself.

“I believe we’ve already been introduced.” He replied in a haughty tone as if the mere mention of his name should have sent me into a rapturous feint.

I gritted my teeth and took several steps in his direction. Apparently that was enough to get Cursed to look at me because he stopped staring at the ceiling and lowered his eyes. I sent a *don’t bother* thought in his direction which he obviously received because he lifted one shoulder as if to say. We’ll see.

“Look Amras who-ever-you-are I don’t believe you were invited into our home so you could insult my people.” I told him from the middle of the floor where I’d

stopped so I could place my hands on my hips. I'd had just about enough frustration for the day and this jerk, apparently my third, wasn't making anyone's life easier.

He tilted his head to the side and lifted one eyebrow. "Didn't you?" He queried. And he looked at me and I realized his eyes were nearly the color of violets after a storm. His hair was long and pale and very fine. He was wearing a black turtle neck under a black fitted jacket and tailored black pants. His hands were long and fine and his body tall and muscularly slender. He had the classical Elf beauty not exactly feminine but a far cry from Gareth's ruggedly handsome good looks.

I shook my head and frowned, looking back at Mi who was watching me intently. "Played the flute lately?" She asked. "We ah...got your call." And she lifted her nose in Amras's direction indicating the 'we' was the 'him' across the room.

I heaved a sigh and dropped as gracefully as I could into the nearest chair. My legs just wouldn't support me anymore. I clasped my hands in my lap and glanced over at Amras who was watching me intently. I sighed, what else could I do? "Please don't tell me we were betrothed at birth or some such nonsense. Because I've had a really really long day and I don't think I could handle it."

He actually bowed and I closed my eyes and pressed my fist against my forehead. When next I looked Mi was staring back at me from the table in front of me. "Now Lexi, don't look so surprised it wasn't actually you he was betrothed to, just some potentially future someone that no one ever actually thought would occur. It's just a technicality really. Not set in stone or anything. And of course when you called, he just showed up. You left us little option but to bring him along you know Elves with the whole formal introduction and all."

Amras coughed again but I pulled a Cursed and refused to look at him, choosing instead to glare at Mi who I somehow sensed was the cause of this latest mishap. "This is not my surprised look." I told her curtly as I slumped back against the cushion. "This is my...how could you have done this to me and why couldn't I have been a normal child and had a puppy look." Yeah that would have been great...a nice big dog to romp around with in a yard. I knew other people with dogs who were loyal and

brave and loved you no matter what, only asking to be scratched and petted and allowed to fall asleep in your lap, not hissed at and manipulated. Dammit I wish I had a dog!

Mi stood up on the table and her tail went strait up along with every hair on her thirty five pound body. I thought this is it, I'm dead for sure, but she wasn't looking at me and I turned my head to the left to follow her gaze and was nose to nose with the largest blackest wolf I'd ever seen. Pandemonium broke out around the room as four bodies hit my chair simultaneously and I was flipped over backwards and vaulted onto my hands and knees on the carpet. My breasts nearly slipped from my dress and I struggled to not move as I stared into large red eyes from between Gareth's legs. To his right was Amras balanced on his toes, a long wicked looking knife in his hand his face a scary mixture of anticipation and ah...determination. Nope nothing feminine about him. To the left was Jace and then Cursed. Behind our newest addition was Owen who was also holding a knife as well as a gun.

"Don't move." Jace hissed at me and I glanced up at him and nearly stuck my tongue out.

"Owen," I called. "Could you please put the gun away I would really be upset if you happened to shoot my Mother. And maybe while you're doing that our newest arrival can shift and introduce himself? In fact, all of you put your weapons away and would it be too much to ask for one of you to help me up?"

"Lexi!" Gareth growled as I turned over and tried to untangle myself from the train of my dress nearly exposing myself in the process. My heel caught in the bottom and I struggled and finally yanked the entire mess up and over my knees. The wolf was sitting calmly on his haunches the tip of his tongue caught in his teeth with his head tilted to the side watching me intently his eyes gleaming. I was sitting there in the middle of the living room, my beautiful dress bunched up around my thighs and it just struck me as funny and I couldn't help myself, I started to giggle and I couldn't seem to stop and I finally collapsed back onto the floor and threw my arm over my face as gales of laughter burst from me.

“Is she, always this....exuberant?” Amras asked his voice sound slightly shocked and dismayed. It just made me laugh all the harder.

“She wished for a dog.” Jace grumbled.

“Yeah I know.” Gareth muttered back.

“That is no dog.” Cursed declared.

“The last time she wished for something she got Areth.”

“What’s an Areth?” Cursed inquired his eyes busy watching the wolf who was just sitting there not doing anything remotely scary except watching me.

“An Elemental.”

“Her own personal Gnome.”

“But she’s only two feet tall.”

Gareth nodded and finally replied. “She’s been having sex.”

“And that is a bad thing?” Cursed asked tentatively.

Jace cursed and turned his back on the wolf who shifted to black and flowed between Gareth’s legs like smoke in a strong breeze. I felt heat everywhere and I was lifted off the ground and carried to the nearest chair. I hiccupped and felt the smoke solidify beneath me and found myself looking up into one of the most beautiful faces I’d ever seen. Inky black hair fine as silk and tipped in silver covered my shoulders and pooled in my lap. I reached for a handful and the silver shimmered briefly becoming golden strands. His breath smelled of cloves as it brushed my cheek and I raised my head and studied his face. He had high cheekbones and wide set eyes the color of a fine merlot under dark expressive brows. His lips were finely shaped and currently smiling down at me. “Hello.” I told him calmly. “You must be my fourth.”

“I believe you asked for loyal and brave and please feel free to scratch and pet anywhere you’d like.” He murmured and his voice was husky and made me shiver.

“Her fourth what?” Amras demanded. I would have thought of all of them he’d be the most offended but he just looked....determined, yes that is the word I would use to describe him. It actually surprised me and I pulled myself up straight my eyes searching out Jace and Gareth.

For once Gareth looked more ill than pissed, but Jace was nearly beside himself he seemed so angry.

I watched Gareth and muttered quietly, "I'd like to get up now." And was released immediately and assisted to my feet. "Thank you.....?"

"You may call me Kit." He replied smoothly as he stood then bowed to everyone in the room. His eyes met and held Mi's then moved on to my Mother and he dipped just a fraction lower as he informed us. "The pleasure is entirely mine."

I walked to Gareth and held out my hand. He gently folded me against him and signed into my hair. Jace went over and flopped down in a chair and stared at me in moody silence. I looked at him from where my cheek rested against Gareth and replied in a small voice. "I think I'm done now." He held his breath and closed his eyes and I could tell he was thinking about those faceless forms in the background. "Well except for them." I corrected. He let out the breath and let his head drop back against the couch. I didn't think he was taking this very well and who could blame him. "Areth?" I whispered. "I think we're going to need a few more bedrooms." Gareth gave me a possessive squeeze and kissed my brow. Apparently our little family had grown.

My Mother caught my eye and I gave her a sickly smile to which she pursed her lips and nodded her head. She rose from the couch and called Mi. "I think Lexi has enough to deal with tonight, but I can see that she is in capable hands so perhaps we can come back to visit soon?"

Gareth released me and I crossed to my Mom and we embraced. "I love you." She whispered in my ear.

"I love you too Mom." I told her.

"You will be fine now. I feel so much better knowing you're safe." She squeezed my hand and I had a sudden insight of how difficult it must have been for her to have raised me away from her family and friends. The constant worry and secrecy. I had been such a burden. "No never." She whispered clasping my fingers tightly. "But I do miss your Father."

I had a thought and glanced around the room. “Come with me.” I begged her and gave her hand a gentle tug. “I want you to see something.” And I turned pleading eyes to Gareth.

“Take her.” He replied with a lopsided smile. “I’ll ah...entertain.”

Thank you, I thought at him and gently tugged my Mother across the living room toward the hall. Mi trailed along behind us her little black tail flicking back and forth as she strolled along. We all hesitated for a moment at the picture in the hall and then Mi turned slowly and looked up at Owen who was trying to watch both the room and me at the same time.

“Pick me up.” She demanded and he started and glanced down at her. When he just stared at her she repeated her request, this time making it sound more imperial than polite and he immediately reached down and lifted her into his massive arms. No easy feat but then Owen was six and a half feet tall and could easily tote me around under his arm so I wasn’t too concerned about his ability to lift Mi. “I like you.” She told him bluntly. “But you’ve been unmade, and someone has done something very bad to you.” And so saying she lifted a paw and placed it gently in the middle of his forehead. “Heal...and remember.” She breathed softly and Owen jerked back and swayed slightly looking around in confusion his eyes widening as he glanced from face to face.

I reached out to steady him, my mind concerned with his well being. “What have you done to him?” I asked Mi crossly.

“I’ve unblocked him. And now he’s no longer at a disadvantage. You’ll thank me later.” She told me in her typically cryptic way.

I looked at Owen and smiled at him. He smiled back at me and lifted a hand to brush back a stray curl. Across the room Jace hissed and Gareth rumbled deep in his chest. Obviously the image of me pressed under Owen’s body on the mats upstairs was still fresh enough in their minds that neither of them trusted him within arms distance of me.

Owen’s eyes widened and then narrowed slightly as a look of desire crept into them, almost as if he’d followed my thoughts and was having some new ones of his

own. He leaned down and placed Mi on the floor like he was responding to an unspoken command. With his hands suddenly free he reached for me and I found myself pressed up against his broad chest and I had just enough time to voice a muffled protest before his mouth crashed down on mine and he was kissing me as if he wanted to devour me whole.

Elves and Demons were one thing, Were beasts are apparently a completely different matter and my Dragons had simply had enough. Hands yanked me out of Owen's arms and sent me whirling across the landing my arms pin wheeling to keep me upright on my high heels. I surely would have landed back on the carpet but three sets of hands righted me and I found myself being held in the most indiscreet of places. I don't suppose it was any surprise that the three of them seemed to be very amused by the situation. I sighed and then winced as bodies hit the wall behind me and I glanced over to where I'd left my Mother to find that she had moved farther down the hall in the direction of my bedroom. At the moment she and Mi were watching the three of them go at it like I imagined she might watch a culture grow in one of her labs.

They still had their hands on me and I lifted one eyebrow as I looked at each in turn. "Gentlemen, if you please?"

Cursed sighed and stepped back first his hand slipping from my ribcage where his fingers had somehow managed to slip beneath my dress and were resting against my breast. Amras went next, taking with him the hand lying below the base of my spine. He'd managed to slip his entire hand beneath the material and neither of us had any doubts about the fact that I was wearing nothing at all under my dress. I let out a breath as the heat from his hand slid over my skin and looked up at Kit who was wearing a wicked smile and holding my shoulders, his palms pressing into the bare skin at the top of my breasts. With a flick of his fingertips he could have slipped my sleeves and had my dress off me in a heartbeat. Instead he'd opted for a more discreet peep show since he'd actually pressed the material apart and from where he was standing had a nearly unimpeded view of my breasts and probably my feet too. He pressed his lips together

in a small pout to let me know he was leaving under protest, but he did take his hands off me and step back.

We all turned to watch Jace go sailing as Owen rose from the floor. It looked like he'd have a black eye later unless he shifted. Gareth meanwhile was busy pounding on Owen's face, which looked like it would have more than one black eye. Owen seemed to be holding his own but I worried my lip and told the three standing with me. "That man is my fourth. Please don't let them damage him permanently."

Kit looked down at me and tilted his head to the side. "I thought I was your fourth?"

I smiled suddenly and reached out to give his arm a quick pat. "Only in the order of which you arrived."

He jerked his chin toward Owen and lifted an eyebrow in query. "And he arrived when?"

"First, he was here before me."

"He did not come in answer to your song?" Cursed asked taking the opportunity to move in closer to me so he could lean over my right shoulder.

I shook my head and then thought for a moment, he had been with Gareth and Jace earlier and there had been that look on his face when I'd stepped into the hall. Perhaps he had come but not known the reason.

"Did we all feel the strength of her call?" Amras asked and he stepped to my left so I could see him more clearly. He looked between Cursed and Kit both nodded.

Kit smiled again. "Some of us just had farther to travel." He remarked and I couldn't help wondering where it was he'd been and did I really want to know? He chuckled softly.

I monitored the fight going on across the landing and glanced between the three of them. "Why are you really here" I asked, suddenly curious. The picture had portrayed their arrival but there was no explanation.

“To serve you, in whatever manner you desire.” Kit responded. The other two nodded their heads in agreement but the answer didn’t tell me anything. I bit my lip and frowned up at them. There had to be more than that.

Amras took a breath and his violet eyes were wistful as he said. “For the chance.”

The chance? The chance to what I wondered bitterly, to follow me about and perhaps throw their lives away while I passed myself from Dragon to Dragon trying to find one that might impregnate me? It wasn’t a pretty thought and I realized I wasn’t nearly as eager as I had been to embrace my destiny.

“Bitter indeed if that was your only option.” Kit responded softly.

Cursed had held back until then but he stepped closer and his voice was low and gentle as he explained. “You are so young, but in you are the seeds of great power. You could be Queen to any number of races. All we ask is the chance.”

In that moment I realized the seeds he spoke of were not any powers or abilities I might develop, but something more elemental. Something no other Dragon or Elf or Demon possessed. Humans would remove them with needles and scalpels harvesting them like pearls from the sea. The non-humans were willing to try a different approach.

My fingers plucked at the skirt of my dress as I thought about their words. Cursed was right, I was young, twenty five is a blink of an eye to a non-human. It could take decades for me to mature enough to be fertile. In the meantime...well in the meantime I just might need to get a bigger bed. “Please don’t let them kill him.” I asked again and they stepped back allowing me a path to my Mother across the hall. I didn’t look back, but imagined if I did they’d be watching me with either relief or satisfaction. Neither of which I felt particularly up to seeing just then. I didn’t know how I was going to explain this to Gareth and Jace, but I did know they weren’t going to be happy.

My Mother wrapped her arm around my waist and I leaned my head on her shoulder for a moment. She gave me a gentle squeeze and I knew she’d been following

both the physical and the mental battles going on around the room. I smiled up at her and turned my back on the three rolling around on the floor urging her out the door.

In my room I hesitated for a moment, closing my eyes and taking in a deep breath. My head dropped forward for a second and then I rotated it on my neck, working out some of the tension and just...letting it all go. There is much to be said for cleansing breaths and meditation. Dropping my problems at the door was just one of the many things I'd learned in dojos across the county.

Mi looked around and wandered over to the picture of the Dragons in flight. I glanced at her briefly but guided my Mom to the picture of me with my men. "Is this my father?" I asked softly, noting her surprised expression which she quickly concealed.

"Yes," She breathed.

"Can you tell me his name?"

She thought about it for a moment and looked at me strangely. "Surely you know your father's name?" She wondered.

When I shook my head she glanced back at the portrait. "His name is Roark."

Roark, that seemed to fit. "Do you know where he is?" I asked.

She just shook her head. "He wouldn't tell me where he was going. Just in case."

"I see him, in my dreams sometimes. He seems so kind." I told her as we stood there looking at the portrait. She nodded and something about the look on her face told me that my dreams weren't the only ones he walked. It made me feel somehow happier that they were able to communicate. I suppose it makes children feel safer somehow to know that their parents still love each other, even if they are apart.

Mi wandered over and sat at our feet glancing up. "That is quite the harem you're collecting." She told me happily. "About time."

"I'm not quite sure what to do with them all." I admitted with a rueful smile. And she coughed her little kitty cat laugh.

"I'm sure you'll figure something out."

“One of these men might be the father of my future grandchild.” My Mother commented and I tried not to stiffen beside her. Though I’d just been exploring options out in the hall, having it said out loud was rather shocking. “Oh Lexi, I can’t wait for you to know the joy of carrying a life inside of you, to see it grow and become a wonderful little person.” I must have turned slightly green because she laughed at me and gave me a hug. “Plenty of time.”

I glanced back at her and replied. “Plenty of time for you too, and I wouldn’t mind a little sister or brother to take some of this pressure off me.” I think she actually blushed and then she wasn’t the only one laughing as we stepped into the hall and walked back to the living room which was completely silent and totally empty.

“I’ll walk you out.” I told them.

“No need but call if you require anything.” Mi advised as she brushed up against me on her way to my Mother and then she leaned against her and the two of them simply vanished. I glanced around the room wondering where everyone else had disappeared to.

Chapter 20

I wandered into the kitchen and pulled a bottle of white wine from the fridge. In the cupboard I found a goblet and a search of the drawers netted me a cork screw. I poured myself a glass and placed one foot on a barstool while I sipped. I stood there for probably twenty minutes and was working on my second glass when an arrow of black smoke slipped into the kitchen and made a beeline for me. I jerked nearly spilling my drink as the smoke disappeared under the hem of my dress and wound up between legs brushing my skin and sending hot tingles through me as it made its way into my patch of hair and I could swear I felt a tongue brush my lips and reached for the counter to steady myself as the smoke rose hot and tingly up my belly and then my breasts were being teased and the nipples pinched before the smoke spilling out my top and back onto the floor where it coalesced into Kit.

I stared at him breathlessly as he grinned and told me. “I do love that dress, who’s your tailor I must have a conversation with them.”

I put my glass down and pressed my legs together trying not to shudder. “Areth.” I muttered then added. “Where is everyone?”

“They will be along in a moment, I took the direct route.” He told me then leaned in and ran a finger across the edge of my dress, mostly just brushing my breasts. “Areth huh? I’ll have to make sure she stocks something a little more to my taste.”

I swallowed breathlessly and asked, “And what would that be?” He stood up straight and waved his hand at me and I was suddenly standing there wearing nothing at all. Well that’s not true, I wasn’t wearing any clothing, just golden chains draped about me. I glanced down in alarm and he flicked his wrist again and a full length beveled mirror in a huge standing frame appeared next to me. It drew my eyes and I stared at myself in shocked fascination. My hair was a wild riot of red-gold curls that reached past my butt and the ends were tipped in black similar to Kit’s.

My neck was covered by a solid collar nearly six inches tall made from hammered gold and covered in rubies and amber jewels. My nipples were pierced through with golden hoops and golden chains draped from a loop on my collar down my chest and attached one to each of the hoops. A third chain stretched from my neck down my center and disappeared between my legs only to reappear over my hips and around my waist where it clasped at my belly button with a huge ruby the size of an almond hanging at the end.

My wrists and ankles each were enclosed with cuffs very similar to my collar but instead of having just one loop, each cuff had several and I could only imagine what they might be used for. Large gold hoops hung at my ears and my fingers and toenails were painted ruby red. My gaze swept my body then rose to meet Kit’s eyes in the mirror. He looked very pleased with himself as he stood beside me and I could smell the spicy scent of cloves on his skin and licked my lips. He ran a finger down my collar and slipped his hand under the chains and my breath caught in my throat. I’m not sure what his plans for me were, but he suddenly dropped the chains and flicked his wrist and the costume and mirror disappeared replaced by my dress and high heels.

I swayed slightly as Gareth burst into the room, Jace on his heels with the rest of them right behind. “What the hell are you two doing in here?” Gareth growled and I turned to look at him my eyes wide and slightly unfocused. He glared at me and I had a

sudden surge of guilt and the image of me naked and draped in chains flashed across my mind.

They all stopped dead in their tracks. Gareth's eyes nearly popped from his head and Jace's mouth dropped open. Behind them Cursed grinned and raised both eyebrows, Amras let out a low whistle and looked at me with a new appreciation. Last through the door was Owen and of the five he was neither impressed nor amused. In fact he crossed his arms over his chest and gave me a look that said he'd thought better of me than that.

I watched him through the crowd for a few seconds then I dropped my foot to the floor and turned to face him, ignoring the others as I tilted my head and considered him. Kit glanced between us. "I'm sorry perhaps you think you can do better?" He challenged Owen and the taller man brushed past Amras as he stepped farther into the room.

"She's no slave plaything." Owen told him, a thread of steel flowing through his voice. "She should be treated as a Queen, not as some Demon's Concubine."

I bit my lip and said nothing. It hadn't been my fantasy and I wasn't about to stick myself in the middle of them. I'd done nothing wrong and defending myself was only going to make it look like I had.

"And what does a polar bear know of Queens?" Kit demanded, drawing himself up to his full height.

"Likely nothing." Owen told him pointedly.

The men turned to look at Owen as if what he'd said made no sense and actually it didn't, or it wouldn't have if a polar bear was all Owen was. But Mi had done something to him, she had somehow unblocked him, though from what I had no idea. Someone had done something bad to him....what could that something be? Did Owen himself know? Something about him was...different, he was simply more.

People shifted about the room, likely following my thoughts. Owen dismissed the Demon with a wave of his hand and everyone in the room held their breath as Kit was literally swept several feet to the side. Owen locked eyes with me and I had to

grab the counter as waves of pleasure speared my body and I fell into his vision. There was a huge fireplace at our backs and we were naked. Owen was seated cross-legged on a cushion and I straddled his lap one leg wrapped around his hip the other draped over his thigh my toes sunk in a thick sheepskin or was it a bear skin rug? He was buried deep inside me one hand wrapped around my hip, the other supporting my back which was arched so that my breasts pointed to the ceiling, my head thrown back. His tongue lathed my breast and I cried out as he rolled our hips and pulled me onto him.

I gulped air, shook my head, and blinked several times. Raising a hand to my brow I glanced about the room and found I wasn't the only one shaken by what Owen had just done. Amras held his head in his hands and Cursed staggered to the table and into a chair. Gareth and Jace were simply standing in the middle of the room with their arms crossed over their chests, completely unimpressed by the show. Kit looked annoyed and me, well I was having my own issues, just standing and breathing normally.

"Hey guys?" I rasped. "Can we not play mine's bigger than yours anymore tonight?" From across the room Amras burst into laughter and Cursed chuckled.

"Damn." Cursed grumbled, "I think I was next."

"Nooooo." I told him bluntly. "No more next tonight!" And pushing myself upright I yelled. "Areth!" And she appeared in a swirl of red black ooze her eyes huge as she stared up at me. "I'm sorry." I told her in my inside voice. "Could I have a cape, preferable black?" Her eyes darted around the room but she held out her arms and I reached for the long velvet cape lined in some sort of fur. "Thank you." I told Areth and she blinked out.

"What are you doing?" Gareth asked calmly.

"I'm going out."

Jace stepped forward as if to argue and I turned my eyes on him and he hesitated. "I'm going out to kill something and you had better not try to stop me." I told him, ending on a growl.

“Snick?” Jace yelled and two capes dropped from the air in front of Gareth and Jace.

“The rest of you....just.” And I gritted my teeth and glared at the other four. “Stay here!” Then I was sweeping toward the living room and men were scrambling out of my way. I don’t think I’ve ever been as angry as I was at that moment. Behind me Jace and Gareth flung their capes over their shoulders and rushed to join me.

No one spoke on the elevator ride to the club level. When the doors opened I nearly ran up the stairs and pushed open the alley door. People were milling about and I brushed past them, lifting my hood to cover my hair as I stretched my legs and somehow managed not to twist an ankle in my heels. At the next block I turned left and headed for a dark alley. I held my dress in one hand as I quickly scaled the iron stairs, coming out on a second floor landing looking over the city. I waited half a heartbeat checking to make sure no one was watching then climbed onto the rail and threw myself off. I hung in space momentarily and then spread my arms and shifted, flapping once I cleared the building opposite and then I was up and into the fog and out the other side bugling as I went. Below me Jace and Gareth echoed my call and broke free of the clouds racing toward me.

The air was damp and sweet and felt so good caressing me. I turned north and flew toward the Richmond Bridge following the water and reveling in the freedom. The fog dissipated as we rounded the Richmond point and entered the San Pablo Bay. On the hills below us I could sense cattle and deer and Goldy licked her lips. When was the last time I’d eaten I wondered and couldn’t quite remember. Jace at my left turned to look at me and the stars sparkled off his beautiful green eyes. He flashed his teeth at me and in my mind I heard him ask. “Hungry?”

I nodded and he looked over at Gareth on my other side and the two of them rolled and dove together. Not wanting to be left out I banked and followed them down, pulling up just above tree level.

We circled a grove of trees several times whipping the inhabitants below us into frenzy until a couple deer broke from cover and Jace was on one of them in a flash. His

green wings pressed to his sides as he dove and snatched a deer up by the neck flipping it up and over his body. I watched him from above the trees and he turned to look up at me as if to say...see it's not difficult. I turned and flew back over the forest Gareth at my back. When the next deer broke cover I went after it managing to miss it with my teeth but grabbing it up with in my back claws. It must have only weighed a couple hundred pounds because I was able to lift it even though it struggled. Gareth pulled up in front of me, his huge blue wings nearly sending me over backwards in the downdraft. "Be humane, snap its neck." He advised in a deep rumbling voice. Realizing the poor beast was still struggling; I reached down and nearly ripped its head off. Gareth's deep laugh made me wince but I managed to kill the poor thing and carry it over to where Jace was busy munching on his deer. He watched me as I dropped the deer on the ground and looked at it.

"Here and here." He said pointing to two separate places. "Are the best meat." When I just continued to stare at it he reached over and used a single claw to slice it open from hind leg to chest. The sight and smell of fresh blood was too much for Goldy and she fell on the dead beast. I just sort of went away and hid, not really wanting to think about what was going on. This wasn't really what I'd been referring to when I said I was going out to kill something. At the time I'd been thinking more along the lines of rapist or thief, maybe a Vampire. I'd never killed and eaten my food before and I was sensing it might take some getting used to.

Gareth landed next to us with a medium sized boar in his claw and he settled down to his own meal. When we were done we carried the remains into the bay and dropped them for the fishes. No need to advertise our nocturnal dinning habits. We splashed about in the water, cleaning off the blood and ah...other things I still didn't really want to think about and then wandered up the beach and onto the warm sandy shore and flipped onto my back so I could stare up at the stars. I tucked my wings in next to my body and Gareth and Jace lay on either side of me. Jace rested his head on my chest and Gareth snuggled his next to mine. We stayed there watching the quarter moon rise over the bay. I'm not sure which of us shifted first, I just know that when I

turned to Gareth he held out his arms to me and pulled me in against his chest. I sighed and pulled Jace's arm around me, tucking him in at my back.

"We like your Mother." Gareth told me softly and I gave him a squeeze. His eyes were closed and his head pillowed on the hood of his cape. He looked almost serene in the pale moonlight.

"Even more amazing, she likes you too."

Jace buried his cold nose against my neck and muttered. "Hey what's not to like?"

"Oooh what indeed." I laughed and shivered slightly. Jace reached down and wrapped my cape about me, covering me from the chill creeping in off the water.

"Cold?" Gareth asked, pulling me in tighter against his chest and rolling toward me.

"Mmmm." I mumbled, snuggling my cheek in against his chest and burrowing my hands in under his velvet coat. Behind me Jace pressed closer and draped the end of his cape over the three of us. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the moment. I didn't want to think about what was waiting for us back at the club or what was coming in the next week or month or year. I just enjoyed the scent of water and trees and more importantly the smell of Gareth and Jace as I lay safe and relaxed between them.

I woke to Jace gently shaking me. "Come on sleepy head, time for Cinderella to return to the dress and shoes." He whispered against my temple. I opened my eyes and noticed the moon had crept two thirds the way across the sky.

"Tell my Fairy Godmother just another hour." I muttered.

He laughed and sat up, pulling me with him. "No time for that. Let's get you home and into a real bed." He urged. I rubbed my eyes and glanced at Gareth who was pushing himself off the sand. He reached for my hand and they lifted me onto my feet. Jace brushed the sand off my back and then stepped back and shifted. Gareth gave me a quick hug and did the same. I sighed and reached down inside of me and felt my body flow and enlarge.

Gareth rocketed off the beach silent and fast. Jace brushed his wing against mine, urging me to go next. When we were all airborne we took the direct route, heading southwest. The fog had thickened over the water and San Francisco was buried under it. Gareth guided us in and we dropped below cloud level just over the Embarcadero. He circled once around the top of a building I recognized as the club and Jace arrowed past and shifted as he landed, his feet touching down on an area that looked specially designed for the purpose. Gareth came in second, also stepping onto the roof in human form. I was lining up, getting ready to land when I looked down and saw Jace collapse. Gareth had turned back to watch me and didn't see the two men dressed in black who stepped out of the shadows. Frightened for Jace and realizing Gareth was in danger, I raised my shields, tucked in my wings and dove for the roof teeth bared and eyes whirling. Gareth felt my shields rise and looked around in alarm, immediately dropping into a defensive position.

I don't believe they were expecting me, because neither of the attackers looked up. I snapped up the first one, just as I'd seen Jace do to the deer, lifting him over my shoulder and nearly cutting him in half with my teeth. Three more appeared out of the shadows and Gareth went after them as I banked and went after Jace. I wasn't certain what they'd done to him but I needed to get him out of there. Two of the men ran to Jace, lifting him between them they started dragging him towards the edge of the roof. I roared and flung myself on them, plucking one up with my claws and flipping him out and into the street below. The other turned to me with a pipe to his mouth I'm not sure what he intended to do with it but I snapped his arm off, somewhere around his neck and he went down screaming and gurgling in his own blood.

I plucked Jace out from under the assassin and pulled him several feet away. Gareth was still struggling with several other attackers, but I didn't dare leave Jace alone. Wrapping my body around him I tucked him in against me just as black smoke swirled up in front of me and two red eyes appeared. "Help him!" I growled and the smoke hesitated and turned toward Gareth and Kit was loping into the fray in wolf form. I blinked and Amras and Cursed were there too, knives flashing, the strength of

their numbers quickly ending the fight. Owen did a sweep of the roof and I shifted ending with Jace's head and neck in my lap. He was so still and I couldn't tell if he was breathing.

"He just collapsed." I told them.

Gareth reached for him and pulled him off of me and into his arms. Owen returned to us and when Gareth would have moved to the door Owen reached for him and the three of them disappeared. I let out a strangled cry and Amras and Cursed turned outwards as if we'd been attacked again. Kit snorted and asked. "Anyone that doesn't want to take the stairs hold on tight. And then we were not on the roof anymore, I can't really describe what happened, I just know that it wasn't all that pleasant and I didn't think I wanted to be doing it all that often, but I couldn't argue with the speed as were suddenly standing in the middle of the living room and Gareth was laying Jace on one of the couches. I ran to them, pushing Owen out of my way so I could kneel next to Jace.

Beside me Gareth sat back on his heels and glanced at me his eyes full of pain. "I think he's been poisoned." He told me then opened his hand and held out a small dart tipped in red feathers.

"Will it kill him?" I demanded my voice sounding harsh.

Gareth just looked at me and I bit my lip forcing myself not to scream. No this was not happening, I would not lose him! Glancing at the dart I reached for it, holding it between the fingers in one hand as I placed my other palm on Jace's chest. I would not allow this to happen; he would wake and be fine! I would make it happen and closing my eyes I reached inside and thought *HEAL* and pushed it down my arm and into his chest feeling the force of my need invade his body. It was not the first time I had done this, but it was the first time I'd ever had a patient sit straight up gasping for air. I did mention my Mother is a healer right?

Jace came off the couch like a spring his face contorting into a grimace as he clutched as his chest and yelped. I had just enough time to sigh before I slipped to the floor in a faint. Nope that had never happened before either, but then I'd only ever

fixed a broken leg and a sprained wrist before, I'd never tried curing someone that had been poisoned. Must be that sex thing.

Someone was arguing and my head was killing me. I moaned and clutched at the wet cloth covering my eyes and spared a moment to wonder if I'd be looking like a raccoon when I pulled it off.

"Why would she look like a raccoon?" Amras asked the suddenly silent room.

"Because I'm not wearing waterproof mascara." I mumbled.

"What is mascara?"

"I have no idea." Cursed replied then asked. "Are you well My Lady?"

Sure if you consider feeling weak as a kitten with a splitting head ache well.

"I'm fine." I pulled the cloth off my face and looked around. Apparently I was now occupying the couch that Jace had been on earlier. Everyone else was gone except the three of us. "Where'd everyone go?"

"The roof."

"Is Jace okay?"

"Exceedingly so. In fact we're all feeling rather well thank you."

I moaned and closed my eyes again. Apparently I'd spilled over again.

"Ah yes, Owen mentioned something about your adventures upstairs earlier. I am sorry I missed that." Amras commented.

"The Princess has the ability to heal." Cursed added. "But last I knew it was nothing to rival your ability. It is a shame you were denied Faerie where we could have assisted you in mastering your gift."

"The power you display is quite impressive."

"Mmmm." I didn't know I rivaled me either and I didn't think me being in Faerie would have mattered since I'd only recently been experiencing quantum leaps in strength.. Again with the whole gaining power through more sex thing. The room went quite and I opened my eyes to find them both looking at me with what I could

only describe as hungry expressions. I probably shouldn't have thought the "s" word and glanced between the two of them. "Sooo....they left you here with me?"

Cursed crossed the room and came to stand next to me so I was looking up at him. I had the urge to sit up and tried pushing up onto my elbows but the pain in my head was too much and I simply dropped back onto the cushion. Amras moved to lean against the back of the couch and even with my eyelids closed I could feel them looking at me. "We two are apparently the lesser of four evils." Cursed informed me.

"I do not believe I have ever been lesser at anything." Amras commented.

"Because you've never been up against a Demon and a Minor God."

Amras made a rude noise and I wondered were they talking about Owen? "I liked him better before the cat fixed him."

The couch dipped and I struggled not to roll toward the thigh all but brushing my shoulder and arm. I'd lost my cape somewhere and was feeling slightly exposed in my dress. "I have a headache guys." I told them bluntly hoping to distract them. Instead, Cursed's cool fingers slid into my hair massaging at my temples.

"Do you think they'll be back soon?" Amras asked. And I felt fingers that could only belong to him glide over my hip and down my leg to my foot. Gentle hands undid the strap on my shoe and I heard it fall to the floor. It felt good to have it off me and then the other one followed it and my feet were bare, toes curling into the couch. The cushion near my ankle dipped and one of my feet was lifted into Amras' lap as his fingers massaged my arch.

"Not for a while." Cursed replied in his deep voice.

"We were told to take care of you." Amras remarked his fingers having moved from my foot to my ankle.

I ignored his comment, tensing slightly under their hands. I was pretty sure I could control the situation, I just didn't want Gareth and Jace wandering in to find me in what might appear to be a compromising position. As long as they kept their hands below the knee and above my neck there wouldn't be any problems.

Cursed sighed but leaned over me to say. “My Lady, if you would but drop your shields I believe we could assist you to eliminate the pain in your head.”

It sounded reasonable and the pain was intense enough that I was willing to try. “Why does it hurt so much?” I asked, letting my shields slide away. The pain level dropped several notches but still remained fairly high. I suppose I half expected to be overwhelmed by Amras and Cursed’s interest. But all I sensed was polite concern for my well being. It actually surprised me.

Cursed smiled slightly and continued massaging my forehead and temples.

Amras replied. “Forcing your will on someone as old and powerful as the Dragon is not without consequences. We are quite fortunate that all you managed to do was knock yourself unconscious when his energy rebounded at you.”

“While understandable your action was rash and could have killed you.”

I’d had no idea, not that it would have made any difference, but I was definitely going to have to get myself under control before someone got hurt. Rebounded on me? “So if I want to use this power I need to what...learn how to direct the energy instead of having it come back at me?” I asked tilting my head back slightly so I could look at Cursed.

He nodded and slipped my hair out from under my head, draping it across his legs and pooling it in his lap before sliding his fingers back to my temples. “In order to do this you must learn to sense the power so you may manipulate it safely.”

“Will you teach me?” I asked, looking between the two of them.

Cursed continued to stroke my brow and it was Amras that raised his violet eyes to mine and replied. “It would be our pleasure.”

“Close your eyes My Lady. Can you...show me your shields without raising them?”

I thought about it and in my mind I could feel both Amras and Cursed’s polite attention, they had slid inside of me and were calmly waiting. My main shield was like a clear bubble that stretched from horizon to horizon and when closed appeared to me like a ecosphere might look on an alien world. From a distance it looked solid and hard

like clear diamonds, but up close it was more like shifting threads that moved faster than the eye could see. I slightly raised my shield and felt both men mentally lean in closer as if they were bending over my metaphysical shoulder.

“Now slow it.” Amras urged and his mind showed me how to calm the shifting threads and slow their movement. I concentrated, following his suggestions and found myself able to look through the small openings between threads.

“This will allow you to sense other’s thoughts while your shield remains in place.”

“With practice you can manipulate the in between spaces which will allow you to communicate with others, though your shields are tightly closed. It will also allow you to...release pressure by allowing you to siphon it off.” And while I watched he swept the pain I was feeling which looked like thick brown ooze blanketing my mind toward my shield and filtered it out through the openings, the tension in my head immediately disappeared and I breathed deeply.

“May we see your upper shields?”

It took me a second to respond as I was busy mentally viewing the in between spaces as Amras had called them. Looking around I searched for my shield, I didn’t normally raise it without my lower shield being in place and I knew if I lifted it completely both men would be literally ejected as neither seemed able to sense me with it closed. I concentrated and a hard thick wall of Dragon scales lifted into view approximately waist high. The scales were silver and overlay one on the other forming an impregnable wall.

Both of them pressed closer as if trying to get a better view. “Does it close completely like your other shield?” Amras wanted to know.

In answer I raised my shield to shoulder height. “No it just sort of goes straight up all around.”

“Is it outside of your other shield?”

I thought about it for a moment. “It’s more like...” and I gave them a mental image of me encased in my Dragon wall inside of my crystal shield.

“Fascinating.” Amras breathed and I could sense them both press against the shield. “There does not appear to be any openings.”

“It is quite different than either of the Drakes. Yet they can sense you through it?”

“Jace says it’s like loud static.”

“Hmmm, I wonder....can you manipulate the size and shape of it?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never tried.”

“Can you sense anyone else across it or over it or around it?”

I shrugged. “I’ve only ever used it for defense, to keep other beings from poking around. I’ve never actually tried communicating through either shield.”

Amras took a deep breath and I felt him lift his own crystal shield to waist high. “Watch.” He whispered and in my mind I sensed Cursed lift his shield which was darker, tinged around the edges with black. Both of their shields lifted over their heads and snapped into place. I should have been cut off from them but I could clearly sense them and as I watched their shields slowed and I could literally see Amras’ thoughts slip through the in between spaces and cross to Cursed and in through his shield. It was like watching a bolt of electricity spearing from one’s shield to the other. I watched for several seconds as the light speared back and forth. Then Amras turned to me and said. “Now you try. Close just your lower shield and slow it. Then send your thought through the in between.”

I took another breath and raised my shield letting my outer one fall completely away. I turned to Cursed who stood with his shields dropped and concentrated on slowing the speed and watched as my thought tentatively reached for the edge of my shield and slid away.

“Imagine it sliding through.” Amras corrected.

And I tried again and this time the thought pierced my shield and slammed into Cursed nearly flattening him. My eyes snapped open and both Amras and Cursed were laughing, Cursed holding his hand to his chest as his eyes danced with amusement.

“Thank you My Lady.” Cursed chuckled. “I’m pleased you approve and he tipped his head to the side, sending his long black hair cascading over his shoulder and into his lap where it lay like an inky pool that invited my hands.”

I winced and blushed wondering what had possessed me. No one spoke for several minutes as I mulled over what they told me and I would be lying if I said I wasn’t enjoying their attention yet it was somewhat disconcerting that the only feelings I sensed were benign and blandly pleasant. Obviously they were experts at masking their thoughts and I didn’t think I was up to poking at their shields just yet.

“In all of Faerie, in more than two millennia I have never seen hair this color.” Cursed remarked, lifting a handful of my own hair and watching it slide through his fingers. “I can’t say that I like what the Demon did to it though.” He held up the ends above my eye level and I realized that when Kit had put me back, he’d neglected to fix my hair back to its normal length or remove the black tips. I was going to have to chat with him about that.

“The length is very pleasing. But the tips...”

I looked at Amras and lifted an eyebrow. Though his thoughts were still as calm as they had been, something in his voice and eyes became more intense and I wondered what might have caused the change.

“Chains.” Cursed replied. “It brings to mind little golden chains.”

Just the mention of it had me remembering my image in the mirror in full technicolor and I can safely say that the polite interest that they had been feeding me disappeared and I found myself gasping as waves of desire crashed through my mind. Cursed’s fingers moved to my ear and followed the gentle contours up to the tip. Amras froze his eyes widening. “Just that easily she shatters the control.” He whispered and he gazed down at me with a look I knew I’d seen before.

“I know you.” I told him and I tipped back my head and stared up at Cursed who refused to meet my eyes but continued stroking my ear, his long delicate fingers tracing the tip over and over. And it wasn’t me naked I was seeing, but me as a two

year old being carried away in my Mother's arms while they watched me. "You wanted to kill me." I told Cursed calmly. "I remember your face."

Cursed nodded once but refused to speak. I turned to look at Amras and gently pulled my foot out of his grasp as I pushed up on my elbows. I tilted my head to the side and stared at Amras who had gone still, his beautiful eyes staring back at me. "Did you sleep with my Mother?" I asked him tightly.

"I won't ask if it would matter." Amras replied, his eyes holding mine. "So I suppose for the first time I should feel fortunate that she refused me, even though we were betrothed for more years than I care to remember."

Betrothed to my Mother....who left him to save the humans. And had me. And now here he was. "Do you love her?" I couldn't help asking.

He frowned and stiffened but continued to hold my gaze as he admitted. "It was never about love." And he blinked and placed his palms on his thighs. "It was about an alignment of houses and the chance for my family to improve its rank."

"But you desired her, you can't deny it. I saw your face as she carried me away."

"The Princess is a beautiful woman. And the throne still needs an heir."

I chewed on my lower lip and considered him. The fact that he'd been my Mother's fiancé caused some dismay. Had they slept together....well that as they say would have been that! But I couldn't fault him for finding my Mother beautiful. "When I played the flute that time...did you think it was my Mother?"

Amras looked up. "Yes."

"That must have been a nasty surprise."

He nodded and glanced at Cursed. "You have no idea."

I followed his gaze and found Cursed sitting still his eyes focused across the room as if he was holding himself apart from the conversation so as not to be noticed. I pushed up into a sitting position and pulled my feet up to the side of me, tucking them under my dress. "Who was the third man, and the woman that was with you?"

"The woman is the Queen's sister, your Great Aunt." Amras offered.

“The last person was one of her guards.”

I nodded and thought it over. Amras had come thinking my Mother might have reconsidered. No wonder she’d been frantic when she heard me play. Her Aunt her guard and...Cursed had come. Why was Cursed there?

“As punishment.” He growled suddenly and pushed off the couch to pace to the other side of the room. His movements were stiff and his shoulders looked tense. I glanced at Amras in confusion and he pursed his lips and shook his head at me. Letting me know this was Cursed’s story to tell or not.

When he’d arrived earlier that night, Amras had said not to look to Cursed because he knew his place. What exactly had his place been?

Cursed held the back of a chair his fingers nearly white from the pressure. He had his back to us so I couldn’t see his face as he spoke in a low harsh voice. “Because I failed my duty.”

“Your duty?”

He took a deep breath and turned toward us as he pushed back his shoulders and his black eyes captured mine. “My duty to the Queen to protect the Princess, even from her own foolishness. That is what the Queen called it. The Princess’ desire to assist the humans. But the Princess, she was very convincing and I...”

My gaze swung to Amras in shock noting that he did not seem surprised. “You were in love with my Mother?” I demanded, my eyes swinging back to Cursed.

Cursed held my gaze but refused to acknowledge the question. “All believed I assisted her in leaving the Sidhee.”

And had he? He’d obviously been enamored of my Mother. It was hard to think of Cursed as having a softer side but he must have if he’d allowed my Mother to convince him to help her escape.

“Just tell her.” Amras demanded his voice sounding tired and slightly angry.

Cursed lifted his head and glared at Amras who stared back at him with an exasperated look. Something passed between them and Amras nodded once and began speaking.

“When the...problems with the humans started the Princess went to the Queen and begged her to intercede. The Queen refused, concerned lest the sickness spread to the Sidhee. The Princess had always been a favorite at court and there were those she convinced to help the humans. When the Queen learned of their plans she forbid her to assist in any way, yet the Princess would not listen. She slipped her guard one night and fled. Taking with her many others. Cursed was the Captain of her guard and all assumed that she had seduced him into looking the other way.”

I'd been watching Amras but my eyes swung to Cursed who stood staring down at the floor his eyes hooded. “Did she?”

Cursed jerked slightly but replied in a low voice that vibrated with emotion. “Never.”

Never, but it was clear he would have liked her too.

Amras raised his hand to gain my attention. “It would have meant his death. Even had the Queen allowed it, many in the court would have killed him for the insult.”

Insult? Oh yeah, half goblin. My relatives weren't real big on the mixing of blood. So he'd helped her escape? “If you loved her why didn't you just go with her?”

Air hissed through his teeth. “I did not assist her in escaping!” He replied low and vehemently. “She tricked me!”

“Why didn't you go after her?” I wondered.

“The Queen slammed shut the doors to the Sidhee and locked us all in. Him,” Amras pointed to Cursed. “She threw into a prison cell, where he stayed until twenty three years ago when the sound of your music opened his iron door. The Queen had decreed he was to remain locked away until the Princess repented and begged forgiveness.”

“So when I played....?”

“All assumed it was the Princess and since the Queen never specified which Princess, and you are after all your Mother's daughter, she was forced to let him remain free. However she was still angry and Cursed has been barred from court and given to you as further punishment. Yet he could not leave Faerie until called for.”

An interesting dilemma, I did not know he was mine to call so I might never have called him, leaving him to wander the halls of Faerie not only a half breed, but an outcast without title or office. To have once protected the future Queen and then be assigned to a half breed child, that must have been difficult to stomach. No wonder he'd held a knife to my neck when he'd arrived. Perhaps I should apologize on behalf of my Mother who surely caused this entire problem in the first place. I wasn't certain if we could put this behind us and start over but I was willing to try. I held out my hand to him inviting him to join me on the couch.

Cursed shoulders slumped and the tension seemed to drain from him like some huge weight sliding down his body. He crossed to the couch and sat a little ways from me I reached for his hand and his eyes lightened and one side of his mouth lifted in a sad smile. "I thought she was ready to return to the Sidhee. Yet there you were a beautiful little golden haired replica of her holding her flute and staring up at me with your huge golden eyes. I wanted very much to blame you, to hate you. I could not hide my anger and the Queen...bound me to you and I was glad that you did not call for me. As the years stretched on, I realized I was not the only angry one, for your music filled the Sidhee from time to time, reminding all that you survived and were as happy with us as we appeared to be with you. Each time was a knife through my heart, reminding me that I had failed my duty and in having done so, allowed the Princess to conceive what we believed to be a half mortal child, the only child born to any Elf in decades."

I sat there listening to his story and the more I heard the more I became irritated at my Mother. Not only had she jilted Amras but she'd tricked Cursed and caused him untold pain and suffering. Yet I was frustrated and couldn't deny that had she not done so I wouldn't be sitting here today, with these two whom she'd literally dropped in my lap like some cast off second hand ex-boyfriends! She'd actually brought Amras to me and introduced him! Then she'd told me how much better she'd felt and knew I was in safe hands! Ugh! I dropped Cursed's hand and stood abruptly from the couch yanking my dress out of my way and crossed the hall headed to my room. This was simply

intolerable. My Mother created the mess and had dumped it in my lap so I could sleep with it! How charming was that?

Chapter 21

There was a huge wolf lying in the middle of my bed, his head resting on his paws, huge ruby eyes watching me calmly.

“Get off the bed.” I snapped at him then stopped in my tracks, took a deep breath and tried to calm my nerves. “Please remove yourself from my bed.” I asked in a more neutral voice as I pulled off my earrings on my way to the bathroom.

“Would it help if I told you I’ve never met your Mother until this evening?” Kit asked his voice sounding odd coming out of his muzzle.

“How long have you been ease dropping?” I asked, stopping at the doorway to the bathroom.

“Long enough to know you’ve been set up as a sacrificial lamb in more ways than you know.” He told me, primly crossing one front leg over the other. Apparently he hadn’t taken me seriously when I’d asked him to get off my bed. “I’d move but your bed is very nice and it’s either here or in the bathroom with you. This place has more bolt holes than a sieve and the Drakes have decided they want at least one of us with you at all times.”

I heaved a sigh and continued on into the restroom, leaving my earrings in the new golden jewelry box on the counter. There was a robe laid over the back of the

towel rack and I grabbed it and headed for the toilet. At least in there I'd have a little privacy.

I used the facilities, changed into my robe and headed back to the bedroom after splashing water on my face. Kit was still taking up both sides of the middle and I frowned at him but lifted the covers and slipped in anyway.

"Wouldn't you be more comfortable without that?" He asked casually then flicked his nose into the air and my robe appeared at the end of the bed. I squeaked and pulled the covers higher sending him a dirty look.

"Fine, but you stay on top of the covers!" I growled then closed my eyes and tried to clear my mind.

"Would you like me to sing you a lullaby? Or perhaps you'd enjoy a bedtime story. I'm sure I could come up with several that might...excite you." He teased then shifted around so that his head rested on my upper stomach.

I gritted my teeth but refused to open my eyes. "You're being obnoxious."

His warm tongue licked my arm where it lay across my chest holding the covers to me. "I can be good." He whispered seductively.

"Then prove it by behaving yourself." I muttered ignoring the tingle that ran up my arm and spread across my chest like little bolts of lightning.

"I'd rather not." He told me baldly then eased a little higher on the bed so he was lying with his head on my chest, his nose only inches away from my chin. His body cupped down one side of mine, the weight of him forcing me to lean in against him.

I lifted a hand to push him away but never got the chance as the bed on the opposite side suddenly dipped and I opened my eyes to find a huge yellow wolf with dark brown eyes staring down at me. Kit growled softly and edged back several inches.

"I hope I'm not intruding?" Owen spoke in his deep voice. I blinked at him several times and glanced at Kit who was staring up at the larger wolf with his eyes narrowed. Owen circled twice causing me to shift my legs to give him room then he lie down and put his head across my hips. I sucked in air and tried to remember how to

breathe. There was a knock at the door and I glanced helplessly between Kit and Owen. The door opened slowly to reveal both Cursed and Amras who looked somewhat surprised then pleased. Both stepped into the room and Amras shut the door softly behind them. Cursed looked around the room and headed for the bed his eyes dancing as he glanced between the three of us. Amras was smiling as he followed in Cursed's wake and I wondered what it was that was making them look so damn happy.

Halfway across the floor Cursed reached for the ties on his vest and began undoing them while behind him Amras shirked his coat and then pulled his turtleneck over his head letting everything drop to the floor. My eyes moved between the two as their shoes and pants went next. By the time Cursed reached the bed he was completely naked and very happy to be there as was Amras behind him.

Cursed reached the bed first and as he crawled onto it I got a very enlightening view of him as he shimmered, becoming a huge black cat with black eyes and long black whiskers. He walked daintily across the bed then stepped between my legs forcing me to spread them so he could curl into a small ball or as small a ball as a two hundred and thirty pound cat can make. Both Owen and Kit looked at him in surprise though neither made a sound. My gaze swung to Amras who wiggled his eyebrows at me as he too crawled naked onto my bed and shimmered and I was suddenly looking into deep violet eyes staring back at me from the soulful face of a huge pale wolfhound. Owen and Kit both growled softly but Amras ignored them and stepped past Kit right up onto my pillows where he laid his head on my shoulder and closed his eyes. His hair was soft where it brushed my cheek. My hand twitched in the bed covers as I forced myself not to reach for him. I knew if I pet him, I'd be in more trouble than I felt myself capable of dealing with at that moment.

Sometime during the wee hours I felt myself lifted from my nest of bedding and fur. Then I was in Jace's arms and I wrapped myself around him pulling his scent deep into my lungs. I murmured against his skin and buried my fingers in the hair covering his naked chest. He carried me to his room and onto his bed where Gareth was waiting for us, reaching to snuggle me close against the hot length of him as Jace climbed in

beside me then turned me in his arms his hands and lips eager to touch and taste. I purred deep in my throat and reveled in the pleasure pouring into me from them. Echoing back the joy and sweet hunger they built within me.

I woke and stretched realizing I was alone in Jace's bed. With my eyes closed I smiled and hugged a pillow to my chest feeling quite pleased with myself and the world at large. Across the room someone cleared his throat and my happy little bubble burst with a pop that was nearly audible.

"Now you've ruined her happy moment." Amras chided.

Owen snorted and I knew if I looked at him he'd have his arms over his chest and be frowning. It seemed to be his natural stance all broody and serious. I was thinking that I liked him better before Mi had done whatever she'd done to him. At least then he'd had a sense of humor and a little more personality.

Amras' voice was wistful as he commented. "What I wouldn't give to have her wake beside me with that look on her face."

"Had it been my bed she graced she would not have awoken alone." Owen added his voice sounding slightly dismayed.

I squeezed the pillow tighter and tried not to moan into it. It was clear there would be little alone time if any in my near future. I was lying there hiding from the day when my pillow began making hmm mmm noises and I reared back to find Kit's eyes perusing my chest. "Good morning Princess." His disembodied lips remarked. "And might I add you look good enough to eat this fine day?"

I shoved the pillow onto the floor and glared at Owen and Amras both of whom were chuckling. "Do not do that!" I practically yelled at Kit. He materialized seated cross legged on the bed wearing very brief shorts and nothing else. He looked like he might slip out of them if he moved too fast. His naked chest looked like some overgrown weed patch as it was completely covered in black and silver tipped hair and I had to stifle a laugh as he scratched at it with a look of disgust on his face.

“Are you certain about the hair Princess?” He demanded raising one eyebrow and turning his head to the side. “Because I’m having a hard time seeing the attraction.”

“Oh God.” I muttered and covered my eyes with my arm trying hard not to laugh. “What do you want?”

“Oh yes, well ah....give me a second I didn’t think it would be this easy.”

I nearly screamed. “We’re not having sex!”

“Are you certain? Perhaps you should define sex?” He asked, leaning forward and walking his fingers up my arm. Across the room Owen snorted and Amras laughed.

“Are you here to torment me or did you have some reason for invading my bed?”

He hesitated a second then replied with a straight face. “Both actually. And of course for the free peep show because I’ve always enjoyed looking at you.”

I sighed, at least he was honest. “Fine and before I forget, could you do something about my hair?” I asked, grabbing up a handful of the curly mass and holding out the ends at him. “I’d like it back to its natural color please.”

He frowned at me but the tips bled back to their normal red-gold color.

“And the length?” I reminded him.

He shook his head at me his eyes twinkling. “The consensus is that we like it longer.” And he waved his hand at the other two men. “The length stays.” Then he reached behind him and ran his hand under his own hair, letting it cascade over his arm and shoulder and into his lap. It was a very erotic move and made my eyes widen slightly.

I frowned at him and was about to make a rude comment when he leaned forward and waggled his finger in my face. “Make one comment and you’ll find it dangling about your ankles.” He told me sternly.

“Fine!”

“See that wasn’t so difficult.” He told me happily, clapping his hands like a child that had gotten their own way. “Now that we’ve settled that you’re august presence has been requested on the training floor upstairs...post haste.” He jumped from the bed and yanked back the covers exposing me to everyone in the room.

I hissed at him, which only seemed to amuse him even more as I did some jumping of my own and headed for the bathroom. I didn’t exactly run but it was a near thing.

“There is no shame in nudity.” He called after me and I was pretty certain I heard Amras choking.

I stretched out my stay in the bathroom as long as possible until Owen stuck his head in and asked if I needed assistance. I was sitting on the edge of the tub dressed in my training outfit my hair pulled back in a braid. I got up and walked to the door, following Owen down the hall and into the elevator. Kit swirled in behind us and the four of us proceeded up. At one point I glanced down and noticed my outfit was shrinking. I gritted my teeth to keep from yelling at Kit who gave me a mischievous look. By the time we got to the second floor my one piece had shrunk to a jog bra that barely covered my nipples and a pair of nearly indecent spandex shorts in black and silver. When I growled at him and refused to leave the elevator he sighed and added back some material. We reached a compromise and I followed Owen’s large back down the hall.

Somewhere just after the turn Owen’s guard uniform of black on black disappeared and all he was wearing was some tennis shoes and a pair of shorts similar to Kit’s except they were hot pink. I placed my hand over my mouth but couldn’t completely stifle the laughter. Behind me Amras grumbled and I looked around to find him wearing lime green. Which given his coloring didn’t look all that bad. Owen simply waved his hand and his shorts grew longer and turned black. Unfortunately fashion design wasn’t Amras’ thing and he was still grumbling when we left the hall and took the stairs out onto the floor.

Cursed was waiting for us on the mats and he gave Amras a double take. Amras lifted his hands and shrugged. Nick stood next to Cursed with the black haired number who'd wrapped herself around Jace yesterday. My fault entirely, but it still made me nearly miss a step as I looked at her and felt an emotion I'd never experienced rear its little green head.

"Mmmm..." Kit responded edging closer to me and putting his hands behind his back. "Our little Princess doesn't like competition." He whispered at my ear.

I waved him off and continued walking toward Nick, pasting a smile on my face and trying to ignore Kit's observation. I slammed my shields shut and watched as Cursed's eyebrows nearly disappeared in his hairline. Owen and Amras both looked at me sharply and Kit just laughed an evil little laugh.

Oblivious to the mental energies swirling around him, Nick stepped forward drawing the woman with him. Owen, Amras and Kit stopped a few steps back and all crossed their arms over their chests, varying degrees of anticipation showing on their faces. Cursed just stared at me as if I'd grown a third set of horns his eyes slightly annoyed, likely because I'd closed all my shields and he had no idea why.

"Ah there you are Lexi, I'd like to introduce you to El she'll be assisting you in the training classes." Nick said and I couldn't help noticing that El was busy sizing up my men. I stepped in front of her effectively cutting off her view and stuck out my hand.

"They belong to me." I replied sweetly, looking up at her and wanting to make sure she didn't mistake my meaning. "And just so we're all clear," I continued while her eyes grew wider and she froze in place. "I don't share." I was leaning in slightly and nearly growling by the time I finished my little speech. Inside me I felt Goldy's nod of approval. Around me my four stood a little straighter and I was glad I'd raised my shields because I was afraid I'd just confirmed their status, not just to little miss grabby hands but most importantly to myself.

I think she murmured something and quickly stepped back, turning to Nick as if looking for a life preserver. Nick was looking at me like he wasn't sure how to

proceed so I smiled at him. “Give me twenty minutes on the track.” I told them calmly. “Then we can run through some forms. And maybe do some sparring.”

Nick nodded and I turned away, taking my entourage along with me. Cursed was the first to speak as we set out on the track at a slow pace in deference to my shorter legs. “What was that all about?” He whispered to Amras the two of them were in front of me with Owen and Kit who’d shifted to wolf and was loping along with his tongue hanging out of his mouth looking extremely happy bringing up the rear. Cursed turned to give me a strange look which I ignored.

Amras muttered something too low for me to hear and Cursed grunted. Behind me Owen started whistling a happy tune and I clenched my teeth and jogged just a little faster.

The four of us lapped the cavern seven or eight times before I pulled us up. I’d forgotten to bring water and I glanced around looking for a fountain. Owen watched me carefully and must have realized what I needed because he snapped his fingers and handed me a bottle just like the one I’d had yesterday. I thanked him and headed out to the mats. Nick was still there waiting for us and he pulled me to the side so we could chat briefly.

Folks wandered over until they were milling around waiting for me to begin. I glanced at El and gave her a nod and she started them off with a first level while I watched from the sidelines. Nick wandered off and I removed my shoes and watched the forty or so people out on the mats noting their strengths and weaknesses. Behind me Kit carried on a running commentary which was too low to follow but succeeded in distracting me until I turned around and gave him a look then sent him to the opposite side of the mats. Cursed and Amras each took a side and that left Owen at my back.

“If you want them to follow you as they did yesterday, you will need to drop your shield.” Owen told me softly. I chewed my lower lip and thought it over. Had I been projecting the moves to them, and was that why they’d been able to keep up? Nodding thoughtfully I dropped my upper shield and felt Owen’s mind surrounding mine with warm contented thoughts. He took a step closer and was softly pressing

against my back his body molded to mine. Leaning down he whispered. “If you will be patient with me, I will endeavor to be more light-hearted.” And his lips brushed the tip of my ear. I nodded once and leaned a shoulder against his chest to let him know I understood then stepped onto the floor and took up a position at the head of the class as they moved on to a second level kata.

Nearly an hour later we finished and I turned to bow to the class which was about half the original size. The rest of the folks had dragged themselves off the mats and were watching from the sidelines. I smiled at those still standing, noting Mark was in the group toward the back. I called him forward and asked if he’d be willing to assist in a demonstration. He looked a little worse for wear and I wondered if Jace had been at him, but he seemed game so I motioned Owen over and explained to him what I wanted. A few minutes later the rest of the class had cleared a space in the middle of the mat and Mark was looking at me over the blunt edge of a very large knife or perhaps it would be more accurate to call it a small sword. In my hand I had a matching blade and while he tossed his sheath to the floor, I reversed my along my forearm and held it close using it as a small shield.

Mark and I walked the class through the motions and at the end I bowed to him and invited him to spread out amongst the students. Owen provided weapons all around and I wandered amongst the class giving advice and demonstrating moves. El shadowed me and I finally became annoyed and sent her off to spar with Mark, hoping the two of them might hit it off and leave me and mine alone. As I wandered around the mats I passed my men and each time I came within range I felt their overall approval. Cursed seemed rather wistful and I couldn’t help wondering when the last time was he’d sparred given that he’d been left to his own devices so long in Faerie. As I passed him I stopped and looked up at him with a question in my eyes. “I’ve never seen an Elven warrior fight, would you be willing to provide the class with a demonstration?”

He bowed low and let out a high pitched whistle which caused everyone on the floor to turn and stare. He looked down at me for a second as if debating something

then reached for my shoulders and leaned down to kissed my cheek. “Thank you My Lady.” He whispered and there was a weight of relief in his voice I’d never heard from him. Then he was waving for Amras to join him in the middle. Amras glanced between us and his face lit up. He seemed nearly as eager as Cursed and jogged over to Kit who was closest to him. They chatted briefly and Amras came away carrying a long curved sword which he hefted several times. People flowed back from him as he gave it a couple of swings. He turned back to Kit and his lime green shorts were replaced by snug dark grey leather pants which molded to his thighs and hips nicely. His chest was left bare and I couldn’t help but admire the play of muscles under his skin which seemed to glow from within.

In the middle of the mats stood Cursed who’d picked up his own slightly curved sword from Owen. He was still wearing his leather clothing from last night; apparently Kit hadn’t gotten around to his wardrobe. Owen had apparently provided guards for his wrists which laced tightly halfway up his forearms. Both men were barefoot.

Amras carried two long strips of leather onto the floor and tossed one to Cursed who stared down at it as it lay in his palm with a strange expression. Amras knelt on one knee and placed his sword on the floor then using the strip of leather he knotted his hair into an intricate binding that smoothed it back from his face and neck and shorted it to mid shoulder. He picked up his sword and walked to Cursed who continued to stare at the strip of leather as if it might bite him. Amras placed his hand on Cursed’s shoulder and gently squeezed. Cursed lifted his eyes to him his face filled with such longing that it made my chest tighten. Amras nodded and held out his hand but Cursed stepped back and went to one knee just as Amras had done. In less than a minute he was back on his feet, his sword gripped tightly in his hand. And like Amras his hair was pulled back from his face tied in the same intricate tail.

A grin split Cursed’s face and he leapt, his sword striking Amras’ with a loud clash. Amras parried and grinned back at Cursed as he slipped the blade and pivoted on his foot. I bit my lip and stood tensely on the sideline, watching their movements with

awe. I had never seen anything as beautiful or fluid as their dance as they hacked at each other with the speed of immortals.

“Your Elves are fairly handy with a sword.” Gareth whispered in my ear and I sighed and leaned back into his chest. His arms wrapped round me as our eyes continued to follow them across the mats. Cursed was definitely the stronger of the two in brute force, but Amras appeared more nimble on his feet and was able to slide in under Cursed’s attacks. Neither drew blood as that would have been an instant loss. A clumsy sword wielder is very dangerous; to nick or injure your opponent in a test of skill is dishonorable.

And just as quickly as it began it was over and I was surprised when Amras proved the winner. Cursed bowed low to him and came up smiling. The two men grasped forearms and Amras leaned in to say something to Cursed that caused him to throw back his head and laugh. Across the room several women turned to stare, drawn by the purely masculine sound. Both men walked to us, chatting and smiling.

“That was quite impressive.” Gareth told them. His voice conveying an admiration for their exhibited skills.

“I’m afraid I’m a little out of practice.” Cursed admitted.

“Nothing that a few training sessions won’t correct.” Amras offered his eyes darkening slightly before he forced a smile and replied. “And then he’ll wipe the floor with me. If he wasn’t so big and clumsy he would have had me several times.”

Cursed just grinned and glanced around. Owen and Kit stood about five feet to either side of us watching the crowd as they broke into twos and began hacking away at each other with the blunted swords. Apparently the Elves’ skill had inspired them and I watched as Nick wandered onto the floor and turned to smile at us. He seemed pleased at the progress and renewed incentive we’d provided today. Nice to know we were earning our keep.

Cursed wandered over to Kit and when he came back he was sporting a thick leather strap and scabbard at his hip. He handed one to Amras who took a moment to

belt it on and sheathed his sword. “I think we’ll keep these.” Cursed remarked. “It feels good to have a blade at my side again.”

“So did you just stop by to make sure I wasn’t causing trouble?” I asked Gareth.

He gave me a hug and kissed the top of my head. “I came to see if you wanted to go out for lunch. Jace and I need to run some errands and I thought it might be nice if we brought you along with us.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? After last night?”

“We’ll be fine.” Gareth assured me.

I thought that might be a little optimistic but was willing to take the chance if it meant spending time with them. “That sounds great but I’m going to need to shower and change first and I’d prefer to do it downstairs.”

Owen wandered over to us and nodded. “I’d like to remain if that is acceptable.”

“Me too.” Kit informed us. “There is this red head over there...”

I stiffened in Gareth’s arms and glared at Kit who chuckled and pointed to a very large red haired man who looked like he was trying to tie another man into a pretzel. I winced and flared my nostrils at him and he walked away laughing. Damn Demon!

Gareth glanced at Cursed and Amras and the three of them had a little non verbal conversation which I was not able to follow. I suddenly felt like a third or was that fourth...wheel and shifted anxiously in Gareth’s arms. He absently kissed the top of my head again and I forced myself to stand still. “Well that’s all settled.” Gareth replied as Cursed and Amras dipped their heads and wandered off toward the locker room.

I had no idea what he was talking about but I kept my mouth closed and let him lead me off the floor toward the stairs and eventually the elevator. Besides I was busy thinking about my lesson plan for tomorrow and how I was going to convince Cursed or Amras to teach me to fight like they did. I wasn’t totally inept with a sword, I just

didn't have their finesse yet. The real question was, would they teach a female. I didn't know if ladies in Faerie wielded swords and wasn't certain they'd share their secrets with me.

Jace was in my room waiting for us. "No problems?" He asked, his lips twitching slightly. I suppose I deserved that, considering I hadn't gone twenty four hours since I'd been there without causing a stampede or an orgy. Good thing they had a sense of humor or I might have found myself thrown out on the street, trouble maker that I was. Of course I had saved Jace's life last night so maybe that counted for something.

He snorted and held his arms open to me. "You taste salty." He told me as he buried his lips against my neck while I wrapped my arms around his waist and hugged him tightly.

"Don't ever do that to me again!" I warned him.

"I'm sorry. I did make it up to you...or don't you remember?"

I leaned back in his arms and gave him a saucy smile. "I'm not sure I know what you mean." I teased, and then laughed as his mock hurt expression.

"You wound me to the quick!"

Gareth came up behind me and hugged us both. "Lucky for us Lexi has more power than she knows what to do with."

"Yeah." Jace grimaced then leaned back and pulled his shirt up. In the middle of his chest was a perfect hand print, my hand print. It looked like it had been burned into him. I stared at it in horror. "Now don't worry, it will go away as soon as I shift." He teased. "I just thought I'd keep it to show you how lucky I am and you...seemed a little distracted this morning."

I bit my lip and glanced into his eyes, worried he might be sugar coating it for me. "Are you sure it will go away?"

He grinned and shifted just his chest, when he was done the hand print was indeed missing and I sighed and threw my arms around his so I could hug him again.

“Who were they? And what took you so long?” I asked, wondering where they’d been till early morning. I hadn’t liked going to bed without them and hadn’t planned to fall asleep, healing Jace must have taken more out of me than I thought.

Gareth pulled me into the bathroom while Jace ran the bath and stripped off his clothes. I smiled and kicked off my shoes and ankle socks. Gareth helped get me out of the jog bra and I assisted him with the buttons on his shirt. The three of us piled into the warm water and I wrapped my arms around Jace’s neck giving him a kiss. Gareth reached for the shampoo and then I was being soaped up and down and hmmm all around. There was water all over the floor by the time we’d finished and my hair was squeaky clean and smelled of flowers. Gareth and Jace were wearing happy smiles and I know I was feeling sated...for the moment, as I leaned back in Gareth’s arms and ran my fingers over Jace’s upper thigh.

“They were human.” Jace began. “Your Demon tracked them across town to Hunters Park over by the abandoned shipping yards. There are several warehouses over there that are used...for unhealthy activities. By the time we got there everyone was long gone, it looks like it was a hot operation. Get in, do whatever damage possible and get out.”

“Would the poison have actually killed Jace?” I demanded, my thoughts whirling unpleasantly.

“I’m not certain but it’s highly unlikely. Dragons are difficult to kill, even in human form. Lucky for us though you were there and we didn’t have to find out. Obviously they weren’t expecting that.”

“Which means either Ricky didn’t have time to get a message out, or these people weren’t associated with whomever he was working for. Did anyone escape?” I wanted to know.

Gareth shook his head. “Apparently whatever Mi did to Owen has...awakened his powers which seem to be considerable. He was certain no one got off the roof alive. And he was fairly handy in cleaning up the bodies.”

I frowned and wondered if I wanted to know. “Which isn’t to say someone wasn’t watching from the next building over.” I muttered crossly. Jace nodded grimly then reached down and placed his hand over mine stilling my fingers as I realized my gentle caress had turned just a little savage. “So who do you know that employs human hit squads?”

Behind me I felt Gareth shrug.

“Too many to hazard a guess?”

Jace nodded and grinned at me. “We aren’t usually this popular. Two tries in three days is something of a record for us.”

“Think it has something to do with your upcoming meeting?”

Both of them nodded and I wondered if I should feel relieved or more worried about that. “So Owen and Kit were back early, where were you two? Was there a problem in the club?” Aside that is, from the earlier orgy I’d created.

Gareth went dead still and Jace dropped his eyes refusing to look at me. I thought about their reaction for a second then sat straight up and turned to look at Gareth wondering at how dense I could be. I wasn’t sure if I should smack them or hug them. In the end anger won out and I pushed off Gareth’s lap intending to get out of the tub. It’s difficult to make an indignant exit from water, especially when you’ve got two shamefaced men hanging on you. “Let me go you you, I’m so angry at you two I can’t believe you expected me to jump into bed with them the minute your backs were turned!”

“Now Lexi.” Jace started.

“Don’t you dare now Lexi me! How could you think that?” I demanded and couldn’t help the catch in my voice.

“I told you this was a mistake!” Gareth growled and pulled me into his arms nearly cracking my ribs with the pressure of his hug.

“I agree it was too soon. But we both know it will happen, it’s merely a matter of time.”

“You expected me to sleep with them on their first night here?” I demanded my voice muffled against Gareth’s chest. And then thought about it and realized that’s exactly what I’d done with them so why wouldn’t they? The thought didn’t make me any happier.

“We considered it might happen.” Gareth admitted gruffly.

“So you just...absented yourselves? Left me to fend for myself? You threw me to the wolves!” And I couldn’t stop the hysterical laugh that turned into a sob as I buried my face even deeper against Gareth’s chest.

“Two wolves, a dog and a very large cat.” Jace agreed. “I don’t think you’ll ever know just how happy I was to find that menagerie on top of your bed this morning. Especially since Gareth made me go get you alone.”

When I leaned back and looked at him he replied. “It was his idea not mine. I’d prefer to kick the lot of them to the curb and be rid of them. Yet for your sake I’m trying to see the bigger picture here and be gracious. It is damn difficult! Meanwhile feel free to keep them celibate. You’ll live a very long time, and there is no need to rush into anything.”

Jace snorted and lifted an eyebrow. “There are four immortals upstairs whose main goal is sitting naked in your lap. I think we’re fooling ourselves if we believe something isn’t going to happen probably sooner rather than later.”

“But I don’t want them.” I whispered.

“You will.” Jace informed me flatly. “Just remember we aren’t going anywhere. Nothing will change the way we feel, and we will always be here for you. No matter what.”

“No matter what.” Gareth promised.

## Chapter 22

We piled into the car after several minutes of heated discussion. Cursed refused to be left behind but wasn't at all comfortable with our mode of transportation. I settled the argument by simply going behind Gareth and Jace opening the door and climbing in. I think even that wouldn't have prevented them from continuing on, but when I realized they weren't getting the hint I reached out and closed the door behind me leaned over, lowered the window, and asked the driver to pull forward about ten feet. At first he hesitated then looked out the window and gave me a wink through the rearview mirror. In no time everyone was inside and we were pulling into traffic. Amras looking around in wonder and Cursed sitting ramrod straight and clenching his hands in his lap.

Our first stop was the bank and a huge gilded affair it was. While Gareth and Jace conducted business I tried to keep Amras and Cursed out of trouble. It was obvious to me that Elves had been too long stuck in Faerie seeing as how Cursed nearly taped his hands together and Amras put several staple holes in one of the desk blotters before I realized they were experimenting and could get the desk accessories out of their nimble fingers. The two of them looked like tourists on holiday and Jace finally wandered over after seeing my frustration and wrapped his arm around me then lifted

an eyebrow at them. I think they got the message because they stopped gawking and poking at everything and started paying attention to their guard duties.

Next stop was the court house and it appeared my flute playing had not only resulted in an orgy, but also a subsequent ticket and a five thousand dollar fine. Not because orgies were illegal in San Francisco, but because the club hadn't been licensed for sex. Since I was staying for a while my Dragons felt it a good idea to apply for a license while they were paying the fine. I had started to offer to pay it, and Jace had glared at me so I took Amras and Cursed over to the opposite side of the room and tried to be as unobtrusive as possible.

Because it was daylight outside, nearly all of the people working were human and the sight of three Elves in broad daylight nearly caused a mini riot as folks found one reason or another to be in our vicinity. Or maybe it was just that I was wandering around with four drop dead gorgeous men and most of the workers were female.

After Gareth and Jace were passed to the sixth window each previous one missing the appropriate forms or needing pictures or whatever the case might be, Jace sighed, stroked his day old growth and actually frowned at me. At that point I began to understand why they had dragged me along, nothing like a little in-your-face repercussion session to make me think twice about my actions.

I believe the situation amused Amras and Cursed and I swear they actually played to the crowd as they stood behind me with hands on hips, chests puffed out and haughty looks on their faces. Snick must have provided their clothing and I must say they both looked good in black, black leather that is. They both had on their tight leather pants tucked into tall leather boots, turtlenecks and calf length leather jackets. And both still had their hair tied up and were wearing their blades at their sides. It was enough to give half the old biddies in the place palpitations. Add in Jace's sophisticated bad boy good looks and Gareth's rugged handsomeness and I started wondering if I was going to need a license to take the four of them out in public! One thing was for certain, the club managed to get some free publicity and I was pretty sure we'd be seeing several of these faces again.

About forty five minutes into the process one of the male guards who'd been eying us since we got there, wandered over to me and demanded to know if my friends had a license to carry weapons in public. Amras gave him a dismissive look and informed him they had diplomatic immunity. The guard looked us over and remarked that diplomatic immunity only applied to dignitaries and royalty and he didn't recognize any of us so maybe he'd better see some identification. Cursed stepped forward and advised the guard that it was not our concern that he was unable to recognize royalty. The guard looked at me and asked point blank if I was some kind of Princess or something to which both Amras and Cursed gave a curt nod.

It happened so fast that I didn't have the chance to stop either of them and I broadcast my sudden distress at how quickly things had gotten out of control by lifting my upper shield which caused Gareth and Jace to glaze at us sharply. The guard nearly fell over himself bowing before he scampered back to his position by the red velvet rope at the door but not before he stopped and shared his news with at least two other people who took one look at me and literally ran to spread the news. Amras was wearing a very satisfied smile until he noticed the look on my face and realized they'd just made a major faux pas.

I stood there watching the news spread like wildfire throughout the room and had visions of us splashed across the headlines in the afternoon newspaper. I remember wondering if we could get out before a photographer showed up and started snapping pictures then glanced around the room noting the cameras and realized it wasn't really going to matter either way.

"Smile for the camera." I growled at Amras and Cursed. Amras had gone all stiff and his face looked like it was carved from marble.

"What is a camera?" He hissed back at me. Cursed had a confused look in his eyes but knew something was wrong and his body language said he was ready for anything.

I looked at Gareth and tried not to yell for him to hurry. He must have understood my urgency because he turned back to the woman and gave her his best

smile. I might have been angry with her fawning had I not been so worried about getting out of there. Of all the places to have let that little tidbit of knowledge slip, the courthouse was undoubtedly one of the worst.

I put my back to the nearest camera and stepped in front of Cursed so he was blocking the one on the other side of the room. “What possessed you to declare diplomatic immunity?” I asked Amras in a low voice.

“Your cat.”

“Mi?” I asked glancing around quickly. “Is she here?”

He blew out a breath and moved his hand to the hilt of his sword. “No.” He growled. “She told me it would allow me to move freely amongst the humans and that I was to use it if challenged. Apparently it was a mistake.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and mentally counted to ten. “We need to get out of here, now.” I told them opening my eyes and glancing at Jace who was already on his way to me. He didn’t even stop, just placed his hand at my back and swept me toward the doors. I barely managed to stop myself from glaring at the guard as we went through the doorway and into the hall. It looked as if the two floors above us had emptied into the main hall as there were people everywhere. Gareth caught up just the other side of the doors and moved in on my other side. Cursed cleared a path through the throng and I could tell he was struggling not to react as sly hands brushed to pet him as he passed.

There was a lot of oohing and ahing going on. And people whispering, “Who is she?” Gareth and Jace looked grim and I can’t say I felt much better. We nearly made it to the doors when a flash went off and I felt Goldy’s tail whip back and forth in irritation. Gareth’s fingers tightened on my arm and I looked up at him with a horrified expression. His eyes said, hold it together please. On the other side of me Jace leaned in and blew his hot breath across my ear, distracting me slightly. Sex or confusion filled terror hmmm, all we needed now was a little comic relief and we’d be all set.

Two things happened at once; Cursed reached the outside door and pushed it open only to find the crowd had spilled out onto the steps ahead of us and there were

several more cameras there all busy snapping pictures as we made the doorway, and Owen appeared from a pale yellow haze standing beside Cursed and holding the other door while on my shoulder Kit materialized as a little black and silver Dragon that draped his barbed tail around my throat and rubbed his body against my neck and cheek as he spoke in a voice that carried out through the crowd. “Little Johnny asked his teacher, ‘Do heart’s have legs?’ and the teacher replied ‘Why do you ask?’ and Johnny replied ‘Yesterday I heard my dad tell my mom, sweetheart open your legs!’”

I choked and just managed to smother a hysterical laugh, Gareth groaned while Kit’s evil laugh rolled out across the shocked crowd, and the seven of us stood there framed in the doorway at the top of the steps of the courthouse with cameras going off everywhere.

It was a disaster of media proportions or at least that’s what Kit whispered in between tracing his little raspy tongue over my ear and ogling my breasts. Obviously he’d heard my mental yell for help which was why he and Owen had showed up.

Below us people were shouting and calling for answers or a speech and I was struggling to hold it together and suddenly grateful that Areth had dressed me in a classy shirtdress with matching short jacket and heels in a lovely shade of red that matched the highlights in my hair and would look wonderful in print. Or at least I hoped so!

No comment became our favorite comment as we pushed our way down the stairs toward the curb. Jace spoke into his communicator and a few minutes later our long black car rolled up to the sidewalk and we had another body assisting us in getting a path cleared to the vehicle. There was no argument this time as we all piled in and our driver slammed the door shut then hopped in and we were pulling away from the curb. Seated against the driver’s side wall I dropped my face into my hands and started shaking, violently. Jace was cursing, a steady stream of foul words that would normally have impressed me if I hadn’t been perilously close to slipping into shock.

“What just happened? Why is Lexi so distraught?” Owen demanded.

On my shoulder Kit was making tisk tisking noises while he pressed his little body against my neck, his tail slipped down my chest and came to rest in my cleavage and I growled and swatted at him. He left me with a chuckle materializing on the seat between Owen and Amras who was looking rather distraught himself.

Gareth draped his arm around my shoulder and pulled me in tight. “My Mother’s going to kill me.” I muttered against his chest.

“I take it someone said something they shouldn’t have?” Gareth asked his voice sounding...resigned but calm.

I nodded but added. “It wasn’t their fault, I should have told them before any of us went out in public.”

“Told us what?” Cursed demanded, he looked angry and confused as he leaned around Jace on the other side of Gareth.

“That I’ve spent my entire life hiding who I am and that it wasn’t just the Elves my Mother was hiding me from!”

Amras sucked in a breath and sat forward then demanded. “You mean you’ve spent your entire life without being....acknowledged?”

“Hmmm mmm mmm.” Kit responded shaking his head. “Now why would that be? Estranged Princess has illegitimate child...or not?” He added turning his head to the side his black eyes boring into mine. “Just who is dear old Dad?”

I pressed my cheek harder against Gareth and bit my lip. Amras and Cursed both flinched and sat back slightly. A blank expression slid over Amras’ face and he glanced down at his lap and pursed his lips. “Cursed tells me you shift to Dragon.” He remarked casually. “That’s not an Elven talent I’m familiar with.”

Kit glanced between them his face screwed up as he concentrated. “So what you’re implying is Mom’s an Elf and Dad’s a Dragon. But that doesn’t really work for me because I know Demon when I smell it.” Kit offered as he slumped back on the seat and spread his black clad legs. His dark red shirt gaped at the chest and I could see that he’d toned down considerably on the chest hair. He flashed me a smile and in spite of the gravity of the situation I nearly rolled my eyes.

Owen leaned forward, rested his elbows on his knees, and clasped his hands while he considered me with his dark brown eyes. “You are much more than simply Dragon or Demon or Elven...you were uniquely crafted. A blending of the immortals.”

“And who would know that better than the mighty Ve?” Kit replied with a sardonic lift to his eyebrow. He crossed his arms over his chest and glanced back at me.

Owen’s hands clenched slightly and his shoulders tensed. “I haven’t been called that in a very long time.” He muttered.

Kit didn’t bother looking at him; he simply shrugged one shoulder and replied. “Maybe you shouldn’t have seduced your brother’s wife, assuming that’s who arranged to put the whammy on your memory.”

Red hot anger blazed in Owen’s eyes for half a heartbeat before it was replaced with what appeared to be regret. One side of his mouth lifted and he nodded once. “As I said, it was a long time ago.”

Interesting and I definitely wanted to hear that story, but later, hopefully when things weren’t falling down around my pointed ears.

“I don’t understand the problem.” Cursed said and he looked even more confused than he had before.

“The problem is we’ve just announced to the media that I’m a Princess of Faerie.”

“As it is the truth, how can it be a problem?” He responded his forehead creased in a frown.

Taking a deep breath I glanced around the interior of the car at the lot of them and replied. “First of all there are only so many Elves living among the humans and every one of them is tracked closely. In all these long years no other Elves have left the Sidhee. Second, there is only one Queen and she only has one daughter....only one Princess.”

Amras sat forward again. “So either the Queen had another daughter or Princess Shaylee wasn’t as closely watched as the humans believed.”

“But everyone knows there has been no other Elf child born in more than a century!” Cursed added.

“It has been a long time since anyone heard news of the Sidhee, and no one really knows what has been happening there. Besides it wasn’t just me. Suddenly there are three of us that are unaccounted for. Which will raise the question, has Faerie unlocked their doors?” I replied.

“The reporters will be camped on our doorstep.” Owen remarked to no one in particular. “And with the upcoming meeting....”

Jace, who’d been quiet after his cursing fest stretched out his legs and laced his fingers over his waist and remarked. “Yeah this is really going to piss off the underworld, can’t say that upsets me.”

Next to me Gareth nodded thoughtfully. “It might be enough to call off the meeting.”

“Or get them to agree to another location. I didn’t really want them running around in our den to begin with.” Jace added then frowned and leaned his head back against the seat. “Of course it would be just like those bastards to demand we deal with the press and still host the meeting.”

“What meeting is this? And who will be running around in your den? Who are these underworld beings?” Cursed wanted to know.

I could feel Gareth starting to respond, but Jace beat him to it. “Vampires mostly and their lackeys, a couple of Dwarves a Wizard and Sorceress the local Were leaders and some other odds and ends.” Mostly the scummy underbelly which keeps this city running.”

“No Demons?” Kit wondered out loud.

“Sorry.” Jace told him. “You’re on your own.”

Kit smiled and glanced at me. “Not entirely, which reminds me; what exactly is your Father, I don’t think you ever answered my question.”

“No I didn’t.” I told him bluntly.

“Hmm, an enigma. What has two sets of horns, pointed ears and smells of Demon? Answer...nothing natural.”

I sucked in a breath and Gareth growled low. Jace pulled in his legs and pushed himself up straight on the seat. Across from me Kit ignored them both and turned to Owen. “So when you and your brothers made mankind, what exactly did you use to stir the pot? Was it like, a pinch of this and a dash of that, or did you just sort of put together some mud and sticks and animate them?”

Owen lifted an eyebrow at him and glanced between the two of us.

I hissed at Kit and he turned to me with a curious look. “I wonder who he got to donate the samples...”

Amras was looking at me like I’d grown a second head and Cursed; well he was looking at Owen as were Gareth and Jace.

“Lexi was not animated.” Owen must have felt compelled to tell the group. “She was born from her Mother’s womb.”

“Ahh, so it was the pinch of this and dash of that.” Kit nodded sagely. “No wonder she went her entire life not telling anyone who she was. Mustn’t let the humans know we’re cooking up immortals, especially beautifully powerful beings like our Lexi.”

His comment caused Cursed and Amras to turn their stares to him. Both seemed offended on my behalf probably because neither understood how someone of royal blood could have been raised without the honor they believed was due her. It just wasn’t something either of them could comprehend. After all, Faerie was all about who you were and what rank your family held no matter who you had to do to get there.

“Well that explains the picture.” Kit continued, nodding to himself as I watched him string the clues together. “I don’t suppose those are your brothers skulking around in the dark behind the rest of us?”

“No not related.” I whispered and he lifted an eyebrow. They were all definitely created from my Father’s partners. The three of them had made certain that inbreeding would not be an issue.

“Hmmm, well that’s not good news.” He remarked with a grunt. “And I suppose you wouldn’t like it if I eliminated some of what I suspect might be potential competition?”

“No...no eliminating any of the competition. That would not be a good idea.”

“Lexi Lexi Lexi.” He chided. “I can see you won’t be a disappointment.”

I didn’t know what to say to that so I just gave him a sickly smile.

## Chapter 23

Gareth radioed ahead and there were a dozen or so trainees waiting for us at the side doors. No one else was there yet, but we knew it was just a matter of time till someone thought to ask one of the employees what we'd been doing at City Hall which would undoubtedly lead them straight to our doors what with the fine and all.

Gareth helped me down the stairs and we all piled into the elevator. "I guess this means we're eating in today?" I asked, my voice sounding rather shaky.

Jace was standing behind me and he leaned his chin on my head, tucking me in against him. "One thing is for certain, we haven't had a single dull moment since you wandered down the street in our direction."

Which reminded me I still needed to send that yatch, or maybe just flowers to Margie.

"What is a yatch?" Cursed asked.

"Who's Margie?" Amras added.

"Do we have a phone?" I asked. I couldn't remember seeing one anywhere downstairs. Maybe all that stone prevented reception or with their communicators they simply didn't need one.

"Do you need to do this now?" Jace wondered.

I grumbled and thought about it. “No but soon.” To which he gave me a squeeze.

“You aren’t really giving someone a yacht are you?” Owen asked.

“What is this yacht?” Cursed tried again.

Jace finally took pity on him and told him. “It’s a really big, really expensive boat.”

“No, I’m not giving her a yacht but I wouldn’t be here now if it hadn’t been for Margie who works in the office for the publishing company I used to work for. Coming to the club was her suggestion.”

“Wouldn’t gold or jewels be more appropriate?” Amras asked.

“Women don’t give other women jewelry except on their birthday or for Christmas or unless they are your relative.”

“But they give each other yachts?”

I just sighed and Jace gave me a kiss on the head. “Don’t worry we’ve already sent her two dozen roses.”

“You did?”

“I took care of it personally last night before your…solo.”

And Gareth leaned in and added. “Inside the card was a lovely pair of diamond earrings.”

Hmm, that was nice.

The doors slid open and we all piled off nodding to the guards in the lobby and went into the living room. I headed for the kitchen but Jace cut me off saying he’d ask Snick to take care of the food if I went and found something to do that wouldn’t cause anymore problems. I gave him a saucy pat on the bottom but made no promises.

Gareth, Amras, Cursed and Owen were seated and deep in discussion in the living room. Kit was nowhere to be seen. I headed down the hall and noticed the library door was open. Maybe Kit was checking out Jace’s Demonology collection? I didn’t stop, just headed on down toward my bedroom. Inside I sat on the bed and pulled off my shoes, going over to the bare closet and placed them inside on the floor.

I used the restroom and when I came out Amras was standing in front of the picture of me playing the flute.

“Jace sent me to tell you lunch will be ready soon.”

Interesting, Amras had never been alone with me in my bedroom. What was Jace up to now?

“Actually I came to apologize for what happened earlier.”

I walked over and stood beside him. His hands were clasped behind his back and it drew my attention to his hair. I raised my hand and ran a finger over the intricate binding that held his pale silky length out of his way and asked. “What is the significance of the leather binding?”

He turned his head toward me and shifted so we were facing each other. My fingers slipped from his hair and I stood there looking up into his handsome face. His eyes were slightly dilated and very beautiful. From this close his skin looked like it glowed with a light from within. “Only those in the service of the Queen may wear their hair thus.”

“And how will you serve your Queen?”

He lifted one eyebrow and informed me. “In whatever way she desires.”

“Amras.....” I began and one corner of his mouth rose slightly and he turned back toward the painting.

“Where did this picture come from?” He cut me off to ask.

I let out the breath I was holding and turned my head to gaze at the picture. “I believe Areth provided all of them. Do you know any of these people?”

He shook his head. “No but I recognize the place, it is within our Sidhee in one of the Queen’s gardens.”

“Would I like the Sidhee do you think?”

“Perhaps....for a while.”

“That was not the answer I was expecting.” I told him, turning my head and looking up at him.

He sighed and shifted his feet. “I think you would appreciate the fineness and beauty but the politics at court would weigh heavily upon you, just as it did your Mother.”

“My Mother didn’t like life at court?”

“Perhaps if she had not been born the Princess it would have been different. Your Mother was always perfect, never a harsh word or misplaced foot. But she did not crave the position and eventually sought escape, much to everyone’s dismay.”

“Losing the Princess must have been a terrible blow to Faerie.”

He smiled then and turned fully to me his hands unclasping from his back so they could rest on my shoulders. “Nothing is lost.” He assured me. “And much has been gained.”

“There is a human phrase that goes, if you love something set it free, if it comes back to you it is yours.” I told him then laughed. “Actually I think the more popular version is, if you love something set it free if it doesn’t come back, hunt it down and beat it into submission.”

Amras thought about that for a second and then smiled. “I don’t know about beating your Mother into submission; I can’t really see the Queen doing that. But I know there were several in the court that might have liked to see it happen.”

“Think dear old Mom’s a spoiled brat do they?” I joked.

“Spoiled brat?” He replied with a curious note in his voice. “Perhaps.”

“Uh huh and perhaps you might have been one of those that would have liked to have her a wee bit more submissive?”

He sighed heavily. “One learns quickly to grit one’s teeth and smile, else one finds themselves on the opposite side of a challenge or tossed into a dark cell. Elven justice does not tolerate disparaging remarks made against the throne.”

“And what is the Queen like? And why does no one ever speak of the King? I assume my Mother wasn’t an immaculate conception?”

“The Queen is a very fair ruler. She is loved by the majority of her court and deals well with her subjects. She has been Queen for a very long time and there is no hue or cry to replace her. Though there are always plots of some sort or another.”

“You aren’t just saying that because you’re concerned you’ll end up in a deep dark cell?”

Amras chuckled softly and winked at me. “No, it is in fact the truth.”

“And what of my Grandfather?”

“That is another story.” He replied and his voice had lost all humor. “Best not told on an empty stomach.” And he motioned toward the door and held out his arm for me. “Shall we?” He asked and I slipped my hand through his and we headed for the living room.

“After lunch can we practice working on my shields?”

He flashed me a smile and said, “Or we can begin now?”

I looked up at him as we passed the portrait of the Dragons in the hall and felt his gentle touch on my lower shield. It was like a light knock, asking for entrance.

“Slow your shield.” He leaned in close and whispered as he led me to the table and pulled out my seat for me. The others were milling about and each found seats as Amras helped push in my chair. Kit slid into the chair on my right and Owen was holding the chair at my left. Gareth and Jace just rolled their eyes and took the seats at either end of the table. That left Amras and Cursed across from me as everyone took their seats and began passing dishes around.

Lunch was a lavish affair; apparently Snick had taken the opportunity to pull out the good crystal. Laid out on the fine linen was a feast of whole roasted chickens, penne pasta in a tomato sauce, artichokes and feta Risotto with crumbled bacon, a huge Caesar salad, large platters of grilled vegetables with a big bread basket full of focaccia and baguettes. If the table could speak I think it would have been groaning.

Kit made it his business to ensure a little of something got onto my plate. I think he would have fed me if I let him. On my other side Owen tried to make polite conversation. Across the table Amras smiled and leaned over to whisper in Cursed’s

ear. The two of them looked toward me and I realized I could sense them in my mind. I glanced around the table and noticed that Gareth was busy eating and Jace was chatting with Owen. Beside me Kit lifted an eyebrow but managed not to say anything as he pushed his food around on his plate in sulky silence.

I struggled not to close my eyes as Amras' voice slipped through my shield and I heard him whisper, "Slower."

I concentrated on slowing the lines even more while I ate my salad. Beside me Kit made a rude noise and I was tempted to elbow him. He stuck out just the tip of his tongue at me and dropped the hand closest to me onto his thigh which he'd managed to wedge against mine.

"Your Grandfather still resides in the Sidhee." I heard Amras clearly in my mind and glanced up at him across the table my eyes wide. When I would have asked a question out loud he touched his lips with his finger motioning me to think it instead of speak it.

I thought about it for a moment and mentally watched the lines from the inside of my shield trying to time my question as I reached through and toward Amras. "Where?" Around the table several of the men paused but no one said anything. Apparently my aim needed to improve. Next to me Kit rolled his eyes and lightly stroked my thigh with his fingers.

Cursed smiled and glanced down at his plate.

Amras took a breath and mentally replied, "Several hundred years ago, when the Princess was still very young, the Queen walked into the throne hall and found your Grandfather together with one of her handmaidens."

I winced and put down my fork. Kit perked up beside me and I pushed his hand off my lap where it had strayed. It was a little easier this time and I tried focusing right at Amras as I said, "Ouch!"

Down the table Gareth frowned and flicked his eyes at me. "Indeed," Amras agreed, and then added, "unfortunately for your Grandfather she was not alone but had some two hands or more of others with her, including the Princess."

Oh my God! My GrandMother had walked in on her Husband having sex with another woman, in her own throne room! And my Mother had been with her! Had he been my husband I probably would have killed him with my bare hands!

Around the table conversation ceased abruptly while I mulled over what Amras had said. And then I had to wonder, did Elves even care, aside from the embarrassment that is? Truthfully I knew very little about Faerie so perhaps marriage vows meant little to the Elves. No wonder my Mother had issues with men. I knew she loved my Father, but it didn't take a genius to figure out she'd gone the artificial insemination route. Seeing your dad like that probably messed her up for life and for all I knew she may never have had real sex!

Amras sucked in air through his teeth and I glanced up to find him grasping the table, his fingers white with the pressure. Next to him Cursed looked like he couldn't decide if he should be insulted or horrified.

Down the table Gareth rubbed his hand over his eyes and took a deep breath. From the other end of the table Jace suggested. "Perhaps you could just finish the story out loud for the rest of us. I'm sure the ending will help Lexi to better understand." Of all of the men at the table he looked the calmest as if he already knew what happened and believed I'd approve.

Next to me Owen didn't make a peep and I suddenly remembered Kit's earlier comment and tilted my head to look up at him. His brown eyes were slightly distraught but he held my gaze and said nothing.

"She turned him to living stone." Amras said tightly.

"Well good for her!" I replied forcefully.

Jace chuckled softly and added. "Lexi, marriage is the most sacred of vows to the Elves, seconded even by their allegiance sworn to the throne. If one of the partners breaks their vow the offended partner gets to choose their sentence. I believe the primary choice is death, no doubt why Elves so rarely marry."

Amras shook his head and let go of the table. "He remains to this day in the throne room in...the same position he was when discovered. The handmaiden was not

harm. Later it was determined that he had been given a lust potion, a very foul spell.”

I chewed my lip and thought that over. Maybe it wasn’t his fault entirely. “I’m sure the culprit was found and dealt with. But why didn’t someone change him back?”

Cursed glanced at Amras and replied. “There is no one in Faerie with the skill required to undo what the Queen has done.”

“Then why didn’t they move him out of the throne room? That’s got to be awful!”

Amras and Cursed both shook their heads but it was Amras who replied. “As decreed by the Queen, he serves as a reminder to all.”

Wow the old gal must not be quite as nice as they made her out to be. And I had to wonder just how dedicated Amras was if he could betroth himself to my Mother after having to view the potential consequences to a marital indiscretion each time he entered the throne room. In fact, the more I thought about it the more I could appreciate GrandMother’s wisdom. Having a daughter might have been a deciding factor. Protecting one’s female offspring could be a deadly affair. And might explain why my Mother had been the way she was with me.

“Lexi, you are frightening us.” Jace chided.

I had a horrible thought and glanced at Jace. “It’s just marriage right? Elves, I mean we don’t have a problem with ah....premarital sex do we?” The room was deadly silent for several seconds and then all six of them erupted in laughter. I’m pretty sure I turned red!

Chapter 24

I was sitting on the sand scratching Spot and trying not to feel miserable. I'd excused myself shortly after my incredibly stupid question and had been hiding out in the spa as I was coming to think of it, ever since. At least Spot didn't laugh at me. Actually that wasn't my biggest concern. No right now I was wondering what I was supposed to do with myself. Couldn't shimmer to Plain Jane, couldn't go out in public as me. I was pretty sure the media was going to keep me penned in here and I had no idea what to do with the other four men currently occupying the den as Jace had referred to our little happy home.

"Mind if I join you?" Gareth asked. He sat on the sand next to me and clasped his hand around his knees. "I came to say we're sorry we laughed at you. It was a reasonable question given your lack of knowledge and we all behaved poorly."

I gave him a lopsided smile and leaned over to kiss his cheek but he turned his head at the last moment and our lips brushed then melded and he was on the sand beneath me in a heartbeat. Apparently sex was becoming my solution for many problems and I hadn't yet had my afternoon fix. Gareth's fingers slid the zipper down my back and we slipped it over my head. My bra and panties followed quickly after and then he was shimmying out of his pants and shirt and I was seated on his lap with his long hard length buried inside of me my head thrown back and my fingers clasped in

his as I rode him. Spot fled back into the water leaving us laughing and gasping for breath on the shore. Quick and fast was wonderful especially since we were both covered in sand. Gareth picked me up and carried me into the water where we floated side by side.

“You know the meeting is tomorrow night?” Gareth asked.

“I knew it was this week. You didn’t say when exactly.”

“I want you there Lexi beside Jace and I.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“No, but it’s what I want.” He told me softly.

I reached for him and we stood and he held me so close I could feel his heart beat beneath my cheek. “Is there anything I should know? Should I not speak, is eye contact going to be a problem? Any particular buttons I shouldn’t push? I’d hate for the night to end badly because I mistakenly offended someone.”

Gareth chuckled and remarked. “Yes it’s much better if you offend them on purpose.”

We moved back to the edge of the water and found towels near our clothes. We wrapped ourselves up and Gareth sat then invited me to put my head in his lap and for the next few hours he went over some of the major dos and don’ts. Along with a crash course in underworld etiquette, he introduced me to the attendees by having me relax so he could enter my mind and provide me with visuals of the main people that would be attending so that I would recognize them when we met. He even drilled me on their names while flashing their faces like rolodex cards. It was quite possibly the most unique learning experience of my life.

When he was done he pulled his clothes back on and mentioned that with Spot here on guard he’d asked the others not to bother me and that I was free to stay as long as I liked but that he needed to get upstairs before the club opened. He kissed me and I held him tightly then let him go, sinking back onto the sand with a sigh.

Jace found me there mulling over what I’d learned and running through the rules. “So you agreed?” He asked stripping off his shirt and shoes before undoing his

jeans and letting them drop to the sand. I nodded and watched him walk to the water and dive in. On his fifth lap I dropped my towel and joined him, the sight of his trim naked body cutting the water too much for me to resist any longer.

I pulled him under and wrapped myself around him, rubbing my body across his chest and sliding around his back. He turned to me and his hands cupped my breasts as we broke the surface. Jace made a low sound in the back of his throat then lifted one leg so he could wrap it around his hip, pulling my pelvis in against him. “What took you so long?” He whispered against my lips before his mouth found mine in a kiss that nearly sent us under again.

We backstroked to more shallow water so Jace could bend me over his arm as he kissed and nipped his way across my ribs and breasts. My hair wrapped around us as he lifted me onto him and I moaned as he worked himself inside of me. I braced my feet against the back of his thighs as he spread his legs and used my hip to guide me. He walked us backwards toward the shore slipping onto his knees when the water became shallow and then down onto all fours until I was laying on the sand at the water’s edge.

Bracing himself on his elbows he laid between my legs his body filling mine. “I missed you.” He told me as he nibbled my neck and earlobe.

I smiled up at him and traced his widow’s peak with my fingers. “It’s only been a few hours.” I teased. “How much could you have missed me in that amount of time?”

He moved his hips against mine, sending little lightening bolts of pleasure through me and reminding me just how big he was. “It’s hard...to measure.” He replied with a twinkle in his green eyes.

“Mmm hmm, it certainly is.”

His fingers slipped into my hair, holding me still while he kissed his way across my jaw to my chin. “Are you comfortable?”

I wrapped my ankles around his knees and tilted my hips slightly taking him in deeper. “Very.”

“Hmmm.” He murmured. “Hold that thought.” And he slipped from me and walked his body down mine until he was kneeling between my legs. His tongue dipped into me and I jerked on the sand, my hips lifting to his mouth. He made a low noise in his throat and moved to my nub and placing his hands on my thighs he worked me until I was gasping for air and all but twitching beneath him. Only then did he slide back up my body and this time when he asked if I was comfortable I could not speak, only moan as he buried himself inside of me saying. “That is the answer I was looking for.”

He left me curled up on the blanket that had arrived while we were once again removing the sand from my hair and body. I fell asleep with Spot’s head on the blanket next to me and when I awoke I spent several minutes scratching and rubbing him with sand before I wrapped myself in my towel and headed for my room.

The door slipped shut behind me and I realized that Kit was lying on my bed propped up on several pillows, one knee bent with his hands in his lap. His feet were bare and he was wearing black pants and a maroon silk shirt which was completely unbuttoned and nicely framed the crisp black and silver hair covering his well defined chest.

“What are you doing in here?” I asked, pulling my towel around me tightly as I wandered across the room toward him.

His dark eyes filled with humor as he replied. “I am entertaining myself while I wait for you.” He moved his fingers slightly and my eyes were drawn down to his lap and his obvious erection. My eyes widened and my breath caught as he slowly ran the tip of his finger up the length of himself. His pants were stretched so tight I could see every long inch of him pressing against the thin material. He looked huge. “The others ran away.” He murmured in a soft seductive voice, “After you brought us all to our knees with the unexpectedness of your pleasure with the older Dragon.”

My eyes flicked to his but quickly strayed back to his lap as he dropped his knee and pressed the heels of his hands slowly down either side of his cock. By the time he reached the base I was standing next to the bed and there was an excitement churning deep inside me. I noticed his top button was undone and licked my lips as he covered

himself with one hand and stroked his way back up to his head. On his second pass the next two buttons came free and I placed a hand on the bed and leaned toward him nearly panting in anticipation. “See what you do to me?” He whispered, “Are you curious my little Demoness?”

I licked my lips again my eyes riveted as he stroked himself slowly to his tip and slipped a finger beneath the material about where his head should be. Another button sprang free but his hand was in the way and I...couldn't see, suddenly I very much wanted to see.

“Then see me.” He stated as his clothing melted away, and he lay back against the bedding all muscles and gorgeous dusky skin. His hand wrapped firmly around his penis and he squeezed his fist down his length holding himself out for me. My towel slipped from nerveless fingers as I climbed slowly onto the bed. The sight of him holding himself excited me and caused a hunger I'd never felt before. He made a low noise of pleasure and tightened his fingers as he stroked himself slowly for me while I watched.

My hand slipped to his thigh as I knelt on the bed next to him my mind urging him to pleasure himself, to show me how he liked it. His breathing grew harsher as his hand moved faster. My shields were down and I could feel the sense of urgency coming off him. I watched in dark pleasure as he threw back his head, his neck and chest muscles straining. He was so beautiful and I would have assisted him if I could and then it was too late as he called my name and came, milky fluid spreading across his chest and stomach as he strained one last time then slumped against the pillows his hand slipping to the bed.

“I think I'll change my name.” He muttered from amidst the pillows. “I think you should call me Next.”

I swallowed, realizing my breathing was nearly as ragged as his. My fingers tingled on his thigh and when I would have lifted my hand he reached for me, his fingers wrapping delicately around my wrist. He leaned up as he held me and I saw his body literally absorb the fluid until there was nothing left but clean skin.

“Touch me.” He whispered as he gently guided my hand to the nest of curls at the base of his still hard cock. I hesitated but my curiosity was too great and I ran my fingers over the silky smoothness of him lifting and gently massaging his sac as I rolled him across my fingers. He thrummed with pleasure and lay back against the pillows his dark eyes watching me explore as I learned the texture and feel of him.

My fingers slipped round him and I stroked up his length while he shifted slightly on the bed. I worked my way back to his base and leaned forward to pull his head to my mouth. He choked and his fingers flexed in the bed as I ran my tongue over the tip of him. He tasted of salt and cloves and I purred and slipped him between my lips working him with my tongue while my fingers rolled his sac. He raised his hips to me and I slipped between his thighs then slid my knees under his hips so that he was lifted off the bed and into my lap where I could reach him more easily.

I used lips and teeth and tongue until he threw back his head and moaned and came shuddering and calling my name. And then I slid from the bed while he watched me through red silted eyes. He was still hard and looked like he was ready to go again. But what I’d just done was as far as I was willing to go at the moment and was more than I’d intended to begin with. “I take it we’ve defined sex.” He told me from the bed his voice sounding angry.

I reached for my towel and wrapped it around myself then looked at him and tilted my head to the side remembering his earlier comment. “For now.” I replied then calmly walked away from him, into the restroom to shower.

The bed was empty when I’d finished dressing in the long lavender skirt and blouse that had been left for me. The top had a large collar and buttoned up the front with long sleeves. It ended just below my ribs leaving my waist bare. The skirt was fitted and when I zipped it closed it sat just below my belly button with a slit that reached mid thigh leaving quite a lot of skin showing. No bra or panties had been provided and I had to wonder if there was a hidden message there somewhere. My shoes were flat sandals and I slipped them on and went looking for something to do.

Jace and Gareth were nowhere to be seen but the rest of the men were in the living room and no one was talking. Kit sat off by himself looking angry and dissatisfied. The other three looked at me as if I was to blame. I took one glance at them all and kept right on walking out the living room and into the lobby. Behind me I heard scuffling sounds and didn't make it to the elevator in time to avoid them, then realized I was going to need Owen at least if I wanted to go anywhere anyway. Maybe I should go find Jace and have him get me chipped. This dragging around a crowd with me everywhere was starting to irritate.

I stood in the elevator and waited as Amras, Cursed, and Owen got in. Kit must have opted to stay behind. Owen used his card key to close the door and pressed the button for the club level. Somewhere between the second and first floor he stopped the elevator and turned to look at me crossing his arms over his chest as he did so. "What did you do to the Demon?" He demanded and beside him Amras and Cursed shifted so they too were facing me.

I simply raised my lower shield. I didn't even need to think about it, it just happened. "What business is it of yours?"

Owen narrowed his eyes and dropped his hands from across his chest then reached for me. There wasn't anywhere to go and he was too big to take down in the elevator, at least not without hurting one or both of us. I stiffened as he grasped my shoulders and gave me a sharp shake. I wasn't sure what I'd done to deserve this and didn't like it at all.

"Get your hands off of me before you lose them." I hissed up at him and he frowned but removed his fingers.

"I don't understand." Amras remarked. "Why is Kit so angry?"

"Maybe you should ask him." I suggested leaning a shoulder against the back wall and starting to feel a little angry myself.

"We tried."

"I don't know, maybe he's pouting because he didn't get his way."

Amras glanced at Cursed and then at Owen. All three of them looked shocked. “But...he did...I mean we felt...” Amras stammered to a stop and glanced at me his eyes filled with confusion.

Well they apparently couldn’t sense everything or they wouldn’t be grilling me now. “What exactly are you implying?”

No one really wanted to answer my question but Owen finally said. “When we returned from the training grounds we felt his pleasure. We assumed you were ...together.”

“What exactly does that mean, you assumed we were together?” I asked sweetly.

“My Lady,” Cursed tried. “We assumed you had accepted the Demon as your lover. It...gave us hope.”

Oh so they were rooting for Kit and wanted to know what mean Lexi had done to piss him off? This was too funny they actually seemed to be angry at me on his behalf and heaven alone knew what they were thinking. “I did not have sex with Kit.”

“But you...are you sure?” Amras demanded.

I glared back at him. “I may be new at this, but I think I can tell when I have sex.” I informed him sharply.

Cursed looked unsettled and wouldn’t meet my eyes. Owen was frowning and looked dismayed while Amras looked simply baffled. I gritted my teeth and mentally yelled for Kit. We waited several minutes until he finally swirled into the elevator in an angry red and black haze.

“Am I next?” He asked sarcastically as he formed leaning against the elevator door with a pout on his face and his arms crossed.

“Tell the nice men that we did not have sex. They seem to think I’ve done something horrible to you.”

He stood up straight and dropped his arms then bowed angrily. “We did not have sex and she did nothing horrible to me. She was wonderful and sweet and really knows how to make a Demon feel special.” He replied in a sarcastic tone.

I frowned up at him nearly as confused as Amras. “Why are you acting like this? I fail to see what reason you have for being so angry with me. It wasn’t like I took advantage of you or that you were complaining earlier.”

He sucked in air through his teeth and his hands clenched at his sides. “I beg your pardon.” He remarked bowing again. “I did not realize my distress would annoy you.”

“Your distress over what? Are you seriously telling me you didn’t enjoy yourself?” I demanded feeling frustrated and just as confused as the others.

“Yes I enjoyed myself!” He snapped back at me.

“Fine, then what is with the temper tantrum?” I asked glancing around in confusion while the others tried to make themselves smaller so they wouldn’t be noticed. Not easy to do considering the shortest one there was still six feet tall.

Kit was gritting his teeth and there was a red haze around his head. “I am not having a temper tantrum!” He growled back at me.

I waved my hand at his as if to say, explain this then. “Well one of us is and it isn’t me! You’re acting like I raped you or something. My God we spent a few pleasurable moments together, just because we didn’t have sex, I don’t see why it’s that big of a deal!”

My comment must have surprised him because he froze for a second and then a sly look covered his face and he put his hands behind his back and leaned slightly forward as he asked, “So you admit you found our time together pleasurable?”

The man was exasperating! “Of course I did! I never said differently.”

“So even though we didn’t actually have intercourse you willingly concede that you found pleasure during the time we did spend together?”

I threw up my hands and just stared back at him wondering if oral sex had simply drained his ability to think rationally.

“Yes or no, be specific.” He told me.

“Yes I found pleasure!” Good lord maybe it was a good thing I hadn’t had sex with him if this was the way he was going to act.

“So you found me pleasing?” He wheedled.

“Yes I found you pleasing!” I growled nearly ready to strangle him myself as I felt the subject matter might best be discussed in private. I might have too, except a loud bell like noise reverberated inside the caverns, rocking the elevator so that Owen grabbed my arm to keep me from hitting my head against the wall. I covered my ears and looked up at the others in alarm. “What was that?”

Kit looked positively ecstatic as if he might break out in a happy dance right there. “Too late too late too late.” He sang.

An orange haze appeared about shoulder height and Owen shoved me behind his back and into the corner as everyone moved out of the middle. Amras and Cursed slid in next to him on either side so that I was completely surrounded by walls of flesh and metal.

“Oh it’s you.” I heard a high pitched voice say. Unfortunately I couldn’t see the speaker.

I recognized Kit’s voice as he replied. “Just get on with it.”

“Well where is she?” The impatient voice demanded and I guessed they were discussing me.

“Gentlemen if you please?” Kit asked nicely. “This won’t hurt a bit.”

“Your word?” Owen demanded.

“My word.” Kit agreed and I wondered just how much a Demon’s word actually meant. Were they like Elves and Dragons? From what I had gathered it seemed that immortals held their word in high regard so maybe Demons were not an exception. At least I hoped so as Owen and the others stepped out of the way and I found myself facing a small man floating above the floor in the same orange haze holding a rolled up scroll which he opened and began reading from.

“Are you the Demoness Princess Lexi Helyanwe daughter of Princess Shaylee Helyanwe and Roark ah...Silver who was breathed to life by the Sixth Level Demon who shall be referred to as Knight?” He demanded.

I glanced around trying to take in what he was saying and finally nodded.

“Speak up please.” The little man or was he a demon demanded. “For the record.” And an ink bottle and long feathered pen appeared mid-air poised as if waiting for my response.

“Yes.” I offered.

“And on this date did you accept sexual favors from one Second Level Demon who shall be referred to as Kit and if so did you find pleasure in accepting said sexual favors?”

“Ah....kind of?”

“Is that a question or are you responding in the affirmative?” The little man demanded, his voice going up an octave in irritation.

“I suppose so, yes.” I told him more firmly then watched in fascination as the pen scribbled on the parchment.

The little man turned to Kit and dipped his head. “Congratulations on your new permanent position.” He told Kit. And when his pen finished writing he pulled from his sleeve a bottle of dusting powder which he sprinkled over the scroll in a shower of sparkles then rolled up the parchment and handed it to Kit who bowed as the little man simply disappeared, taking his orange haze with him.

Kit then turned to me his nostrils actually flared and his eyes flashed a violent red. “Little Demon.” He informed me. “You’ve been spending too much time among Dragons and Elves, now it’s my turn!”

I wasn’t sure what that meant but I didn’t have long to ponder as he reached for me and in a swirling haze we both disappeared from the elevator. The world tilted yet I could feel Kit surrounding me as colors swirled by in a dizzying kaleidoscope.

The world stopped changing colors and I found myself naked and draped across a huge bed covered in black silk with carved posts that had little gold chains stretching to my ankles and wrists binding me on the bed. The room was draped in red cloth and seemed to be at odd angles as if everything was slightly tilted, it hurt my eyes if I stared.

Glancing down at myself I noticed I was wearing the little outfit from the previous night and Kit was naked and kneeling between my spread legs. “What are you doing? Why have you brought me here?” I demanded, pulling on my wrists to no avail.

He stroked my pelvis running his long delicate finger over the chain and replied. “Fulfilling my contractual obligation, like a good little servant. Didn’t dare bring you here sooner, I simply couldn’t take the risk.”

He wasn’t making any sense but my mind focused on the servant part and clung to hope. “What contract?”

He snapped his fingers and a rolled parchment appeared. “This one.”

I held my head up at an odd angle and frowned down at him. “I didn’t sign any contract.” I told him sharply.

He smiled and leaned over me and I could see that he was swollen as he hung just above me. He brushed himself against my thigh then leaned back and unrolled the scroll using both hands. “Oh but I believe you did.” And he turned the scroll around and held it up for me to see. At the bottom was a tiny golden hand print, as if someone had inked an infant’s palm and pressed it to the parchment. The closer the document got to me the brighter the palm print glowed. He pulled the document away and the print dimmed. After several back and fourths I got the message and my eyes widened slightly as I looked up at him.

“I don’t know how you got that, but you can’t expect me to honor something I was forced to do as a baby!”

He lowered the scroll slightly and the look in his eyes was...very eager. “You would foreswear yourself?”

Based on his reaction, I was guessing that would not be a good thing. “No, but I have no idea what it says in that contract. So how can I know what would or would not foreswear me?”

He thought about it for a moment then nodded. “Agreed.”

“Ah Kit, can I see the contract?”

“No.”

I thought about the servant comment earlier and my eyes narrowed slightly. He’d said he was my servant and servants were supposed to do what you told them to do. “Kit give the contract to me.” I demanded.

He frowned at me and grasped the roll tighter as if he was afraid I might yank it out of his hand. In fact I would have if I could have reached him, but the damn chains prevented that from happening. “First things first.” He informed me not actually disobeying me as he laid the contract on the bed beside us just out of my reach. “You have the most amazing skin.” And he ran his palms over my thighs, stroking me from knee to hip.

“Kit what do you think you’re doing?” I demanded again, ignoring the heat from his palms and the way sensations skittered across my skin.

“I am considering how to begin while I acquaint myself with your lovely person. Apparently my powers don’t work on you very well and I did not get the opportunity to earlier, you were very...abrupt.”

“Kit, take these off me!”

“Do it yourself.”

I pulled on the chains trying to pull them free from the bed posts but they wouldn’t budge. “Dammit!”

He picked up the scroll and unrolled it again reading through it in silence while I fumed. “It says right here....yes...hmmm I’m wondering why you’re finding this so difficult.” He told me and his words were rather cryptic. “Obviously you’ve been suppressing your Demon side.”

How could I have suppressed something I didn’t even know I had? I glanced at the paper wondering what it said. He smiled at me then rolled and tossed it down again. “Where did you get that parchment from?”

He wound his fingers around my chain oh so gently and admitted. “I stole it.”

I pushed up on my elbows and stared at him in shock. He’d stolen it! “From who?”

He sighed and let go of the chain. “Another Demon, the one who breathed life into you or weren’t you paying attention. Trust me you would not have liked him at all, in fact I believe I did you a favor. The Sixth Level is not for the feint hearted.”

I thought about that for a moment. If he’d got the contract from...Knight was it? Then that meant that this Knight Demon must have been working with my Father or how else would he have ‘breathed life’ into me. Actually given what I’d seen of Areth and Kit I had to wonder if the breathing wasn’t more of a placing, as in an egg in my Mother’s womb. And maybe he’d added a little something extra. My Father wouldn’t have given me over to the Demon would he? Not after having worked so hard to ensure the Dragon’s survival. I needed to see that contract. “Why did you steal the contract?”

He looked sad for a moment and I watched him as he struggled with something. “Hell is lonely.” Then he grinned wickedly and informed me. “I’ve been watching you for a very long time.”

“You have?”

He nodded and placed his elbows on either side of my hips, stretching out his legs behind him. His chest lay across my pelvis and he rested his chin on my belly. “For many decades”

“What? How can that be?”

“Time moves differently here.” He replied then traced my rib with his middle finger. “I...acquired your papers when you were three.”

“Then why haven’t I seen you before this?”

“Against the rules.” He replied then pointed at the contract. “It clearly states you are not to be contacted prior to your twenty fifth birthday, and not until you became sexually active. Penalty for early intervention resulting in loss of all future privileges.”

“And what future privileges would that include?” I asked, closing my eyes so I didn’t have to look at the ceiling which was giving me a slight headache.

He edged onto his forearms and inched his way up my body until he was covering me completely his erection pressed between my legs. “The privilege to serve

you.” He whispered against my ear. “In whatever mutually pleasurable manner you desire. I am after all a Second Level Chaos Demon of the Order of Limerence, and I am yours to command.”

Limerence, what the heck was that?

“Intense passionate desire, obsession, or good old lust if you prefer.”

Wow he was a Lust Demon! I had no idea Hell had levels or orders, which wasn’t all that surprising since I had never thought about it at all. It made me wonder what the Sixth Level Demons were involved with.

“Domination and rage.” He answered. “The farther down you get the worse it is. The upper levels are...intense in a different manner. One I believe you’ll find more satisfactory.”

Hmmm, rage. It occurred to me that that was something the other female Dragons might know all about and it might be something my Father would think I’d need to remain alive and free. “And in return you get what?” I asked turning my head so I could look into his black eyes.

“Entrainment, pleasure, the right to belong to someone, and relief from boredom.” He whispered and rolled his hips to tease me.

“Why the contract?”

“Who knows why your Father sought to bind the Demon Knight to you? Or why he infused you with the properties of a Lust Demon.” He told me. “You admitted I pleased you thereby sealing your side of the bargain which officially transferred the deed over to me. I need only begin to fulfill my portion to make it binding.”

Maybe it was his way of protecting me, having a rage filled Demon at my disposal might not have been a bad thing. I was starting to have a problem concentrating what with his body pressing in on mine and the smooth hard length of him resting intimately against me. “And what...is your portion?” I asked my breath hitching slightly as I licked my lips.

His fingers laced through mine and his lips found my neck. “I am to train you to become the Demoness you are meant to be.” He whispered and he inhaled at my

neck pulling my scent into him. His tongue found my pulse and his lips covered my neck sucking hard and fast causing me to throw back my head and lift my hips to him. I pulled at my chains unable to stay still on the bed.

“I can be anything you want me to be.” He told me softly. He flicked his fingers and one of my hands fell free of its cuff, he laced his fingers through mine and guided my hand as he lifted himself slightly so he could wrap my fingers around his shaft. “Thicker?” He asked and his cock grew larger until my fingers could not reach around him anymore. “Longer?” He taunted and he was touching my forearm nearly to my elbow. “Or how about?” And he became ringed with ridges so that my fingers flexed and spread as he forced them up his length. “Its all yours, anytime, anywhere. All I require is your agreement and a willingness to embrace your darkest desires. To let me teach you to embrace yourself.”

I moaned softly, he felt so good, so right and he’d waited so long for me. I struggled to remember why I shouldn’t be doing this.

“Lexi,” he whispered against my ear. “Do you know why I waited...why I was compelled to take you and make you mine?”

I held him tightly in my hand and felt the strength of him, so tempting. I struggled to think past the need he’d raised, and managed to shake my head. It was like I was drowning in pheromones, so that the scent of cloves covered me, invaded my skin and I was drowning in Kit.

He ran his tongue up my neck, tasting me, breathing me in. “There are many types of Demons.” And he placed his hand over mine squeezing tighter and moving my hand down the length of him. “Too few of us are of the second level, and none of us are female....and then there is you.”

Chapter 25

“What about now?” Kit demanded sounding as frustrated as I was feeling.

“No nothing has changed in the last five seconds!”

“Why isn’t this working?” And throwing up his hands he flopped back on the bed. “Cleopatra, Catherine the Great, Marilyn Monroe, all of them part Demon and all of them well versed at a very young age in the art of seduction! Why are you having such difficulties with this? I can smell the Demon on you! And I heard what you did back at the club. You must try harder!”

I rolled my eyes and turned my head so I could watch him slumped back naked on the bed. We’d been at this for what felt like days but in reality was probably just hours. He’d given up trying to seduce me and seemed obsessed with teaching me to read auras. A hopeless endeavor since I’d never even seen an aura. Apparently it was the most basic feat for a neophyte and I wasn’t doing well. He had already proclaimed we weren’t going back until I mastered at least one new Demon skill. Since I didn’t really have anything planned for this evening I’d decided not to put up too much of a fuss, hoping I might actually learn something that could help me.

I lay propped up on some pillows watching him intently, rattling my ties I told him. “You know I could probably think better if you gave me some clothes and took these chains off.” As answer he reached over and slipped his fingers under the nearest

chain, which just happened to be connected to my left nipple and gave it a slight tug. I hissed at him but didn't say anything. He'd done that several times over the course of the past few hours, I wasn't certain if it was to remind him of why he was there to begin with.

"Let me think." He replied, actually chewing on his lower lip. "What about conjuring?" He asked, turning his head to look at me. "Have you ever wished for something and it appeared?"

"Once, just recently." I admitted.

He sat straight up and turned eagerly toward me. "Well tell me all about it." He demanded and I relayed to him how I'd asked for clothing and they had appeared, along with Areth. He mulled that over for a moment and then reached over and gave my chain another tug, his eyes narrowing when I became irritated.

"Why do you keep doing that?" I growled at him.

"Because I keep hoping you'll do something about it." He told me bluntly. "I know it irritates you and I'm hoping you'll stop resisting me and show me something."

"But I'm not resisting you! I am trying and I don't know what you want from me!"

He leaned over me and said, "I want you to stop denying yourself."

I heaved a sigh and stared back at him. "Can't you teach me a spell or something?"

He looked offended and leaned back. "I'm not a Warlock thank you very much! And there's no need to insult me."

"Okay maybe you could just tell me how Demons do whatever it is you do? If you don't memorize things or brew stuff, how exactly do you do stuff? And for that matter what should I be trying to do to begin with? I'm not even certain aside from making things appear and disappear what you do."

"Different Demons have different powers."

"Fine what are yours, maybe mine are different and you're trying to make me do something I don't have the skill to do." I offered.

“Different Demons have different skills, but Demons of the same Order have similar skills. That means you should be able to do what I can do.”

“Which is? I mean besides disappearing and reappearing stuff? What exactly can you do?”

He frowned at me but finally answered. “Telekinetic, Telepathy, and Immortality.”

I closed my eyes and rested my head back against the pillows. “So the disappearing and reappearing is just your telekinetic ability? You can move not just other items but yourself as well?”

“Yes.”

“Do you need to see what you are moving around or where you are going? I mean do you ever materialize inside a rock or anything?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes because it is the one thing that human Newton got right, no two objects can occupy the same space at the same time. Therefore you cannot reappear inside a rock, it is impossible.”

Well that was good to know. Assuming I ever mastered the art of moving myself and other things around at least I didn’t need to worry about putting stuff inside of other stuff. Just the thought of that made me rather queasy. “So how long did it take you to grow into your powers?”

“Demons aren’t born.” He told me sarcastically. “We were created.”

“What?” I thought he wanted me to produce a child. Hmmm actually he’d never said that, he said he wanted me for entertainment and pleasure. Did that mean he was the only one of my four not looking to father a child with me?

“What would I do with a child?” He scoffed. “It’s you I want, because of you I’ll be able to get out of this hole. Besides, no one becomes a full Demon our numbers are static.

“What about the Elementals?”

“Elementals don’t fall under the same rules as those within Orders.” He replied. “They have the rare ability to reproduce amongst themselves.”

“So are all Demons in Orders stuck here?”

Kit flopped back on the bed and covered his face with his arm. “Hell isn’t what you think it is.” He muttered. “Picture a never ending line at the DMV, full civil servants that have nothing better to do than ruin your day by making you as bored and apathetic as they are.”

I couldn’t help wincing. That did not sound like any kind of fun to me. “So hell is full of civil servants that do what exactly?”

He pulled his arm off his eyes and turned his head toward me. “Process the dead, what else?”

Wow that sounded...not very charming. “What exactly were you doing when you stole my paperwork?”

He covered his eyes again and rolled his head back the opposite direction. At first I thought he wasn’t going to answer and then he finally replied. “I was processing paperwork.”

And that would make him...a clerk? I couldn’t help the smile that spread across my face. He must have picked up my thoughts because he sighed heavily.

“Oh sure laugh it up.” He told me somewhat bitterly. “You have no idea what a temptation you were. Unfulfilled contracts aren’t easy to come by.”

“I’m sorry Kit; it’s just hard to picture you standing behind the DMV counter processing paperwork. Here I was thinking Hell was an exciting place full of torture and dammed souls and orgies and I can’t even think what all.” I teased him.

“It is, if you were once human and sold your soul! Or one of the more powerful Demons, but for the rest of us it’s just a nine to five job with the annual weekly vacation. Unless you land a contract which can get you out of this place permanently.”

“Ah Kit.” I asked glancing around the room. “If you don’t like it why did you bring me back here?”

“Because I used up my vacation getting your name on the contract and until I fulfill my portion I’m not free to stay topside.”

He’d used his vacation? But he’d only been there a day, oh yeah must be that time differential thing. “And what happens if you don’t teach me something soon?” I asked, starting to worry slightly.

“Let’s just say I won’t be going back to my clerk job.” He muttered from beneath his arm.

I thought about that for a moment. I actually liked Kit. Aside from the fact that he could be a pest at times he was still likeable. And I couldn’t help feeling a bit empathetic with him; after all I’d been a hunter for years but had to keep a boring day job to hide myself amongst the population. Not that it was anywhere nearly as terrible as working as a clerk must be. Still it was a menial job and I could relate to the boredom that created. Could I really let him get into trouble because he’d stolen my contract and tried to better himself? Yet if we managed to fulfill his portion then I’d be stuck with him for life. Would that be such a bad thing? At least he had a wicked sense of humor and interesting skills. Plus he’d belong to me, which meant hopefully I could make him behave, or at least I hoped so. Having made up my mind I nudged him with my knee. “Okay take off the chains and I’ll cooperate.”

He moved his arm off his face and turned his head back to me. “You mean you want to keep me?”

“Yes I do my word on that. But I need to read the contract first and the two of us need to agree on what it will mean to us. But first give me back my clothes and take these chains off me.”

Eager now that he’d got my promise he sat up and snapped his fingers and my dress and top were back where they belonged. I sat up and reached for the contract. He didn’t try to stop me. Surprisingly it was written in English and I scanned through the entire document biting my lip and frowning in several places. Apparently he’d given me the gist of it. The only thing that really stood out was that I’d need to use him. And not just to create havoc amongst the humans. No I was actually gaining a...dare I say

it...playmate. With all rights and privileges granted to me for as long as I lived. Apparently this wasn't an open ended contract but quite finite. He became my problem, end of story. And I could do with him whatever I wanted as long as I actually used him. Had this gone to a pain or vengeful demon I could only imagine the type of destruction I could have caused. Not that a Lust Demon was going to be any better, but at least we should be able to minimize the effects. Fortunately for me there didn't seem to be a time limit as to when I began using him.

I also thought I understood why he'd been angry earlier when we hadn't had intercourse. Apparently one of the stipulations was that if he wasn't strong enough to seduce me into pleasure then the contract was null. Of course the contract didn't indicate exactly what type of pleasure he was supposed to seduce me into. Obviously my admitting he had pleased me was enough to kick start the process. Had that not been the case the consequences could have been very bleak for Kit.

He was sitting up watching me intently as I finished and rolled up the scroll and handed it back to him. First things first and I mentally yelled for Mi. Kit jumped on the bed and I glanced at him and raised one eyebrow. "You do want my help don't you?" I asked him calmly. When he nodded I folded my legs and silently sat waiting.

Luckily Mi didn't keep us waiting long and she appeared on the bed in front of me looking extremely displeased and started right in. "You do realize they are nearly berserk upstairs right?"

I nodded and waved my hand at her. "I can't help that right now. I need to know if you ever did to me what someone did to Owen." I asked rather abruptly. It had come to me that having Lust Demon in my blood would have been a difficult thing to deal with as a child let alone as a teenager and it might account for why I'd felt like I was five up until about six months ago. Maybe I was breaking through some of my blockage.

Mi sat down and glanced between Kit and myself. Her amber eyes taking their time perusing Kit's naked body before she turned back to me and nodded. "When you

were a baby you started attracting...all sorts of interesting creatures. It got so bad you're Mother and I agreed to...ah....restrain you mentally."

"And you didn't think to say something to me about it?" I asked not really upset. On top of everything else I actually could understand how that might have been more than either of them could deal with. But it did annoy slightly that they hadn't mentioned it to me when I'd moved in with Mi. After all at the time I was really feeling like a freak, can you imagine, twenty four years old and no sex drive?

"Your Mother and I agreed that the best course of action was to let you find yourself on your own."

"What?" That just sounded lame.

"You would have preferred wondering if Jace and Gareth wanted you for you or because you had Lust Demon in your blood?"

Oh well, when she put it that way perhaps it wasn't such a bad thing. "Okay I agree." I told her, nearly taking the wind out of her sails by being so agreeable. She actually opened her mouth then closed it abruptly. I'm sure she wasn't expecting that response from me. Beside us on the bed, Kit looked very excited and I could tell he was having a problem restraining himself from interrupting. "But now? Can you fix me now?"

She glanced between Kit and myself and nodded. "But I'm not sure this is the best place to do that." She said glancing around the room with a grimace on her face. "It's Hell Lexi, are you certain you want to risk attracting something you can't handle?"

I chewed my lip and stared back at her then looked at Kit who'd gone from excitement to horror at the thought. "Kit can't leave again and I can't leave him here until I learn something from my powers which will seal the bargain my Father made and release him topside with me."

Mi tilted her head to the side and didn't say anything.

I chewed a little more and then asked. "Do you know how my powers work? What they are?"

“Of course.” She replied. “As an infant you could move objects and creatures were just naturally drawn to you. It wasn’t a bad thing; at first we didn’t think anything of it since you were a beautiful baby. But eventually we realized it was something more than cute rosy cheeks and your golden reddish hair that was drawing attention. That and the fact that your Father contacted your Mother via a dream. She wasn’t too happy with him as I recall.”

I nodded and asked. “So can either of you teach me the basics to moving something with my mind, something small that I can do quickly. Can you help me remember back to the time when I could move things? I think if we do this quickly we can get out of here and back where we belong before anything bad happens.”

“I think if you raise your shields first then when I unblock you we can prevent any broadcasting.”

“Both shields or just my lower one?”

“I think just the crystal one, but to be safe let’s use both.” I raised my shields and waited. Mi glanced at Kit and said. “I believe you need to do this or the credit will go to me instead. That won’t help either of you.”

Kit nodded and moved onto his knees he snapped his fingers and in his hand was small perfect gold statue of a Dragon. In fact it looked a lot like me and I smiled. He placed the Dragon on the bed and gave me a serious look. “When the Merecat does whatever she is going to do to you, I want you to look at this Dragon and picture it in your hand.”

“Do I need to snap my fingers?” I asked, having noticed that Kit did that whenever he wanted something.

He nodded thoughtfully. “If it makes you focus more easily.”

“Then you don’t need to snap your fingers?”

He smiled sheepishly and replied. “No I only do it for effect.” Which made me smile. “Just picture the Dragon, the weight of it in your hand, imagine it moving from the bed to your hand. Just as quickly as you move the object we’ll be gone from here.” He assured me.

Mi stood and moved toward me around the Dragon. She glanced between Kit and I and I nodded my head at her. “Concentrate.” She told me, and then she reached up with a paw and brushed my temple. “Remember.” Her touch blew away my upper shield leaving my crystal one intact.

The room shifted and I was looking at Kit and the red haze that surrounded him. “Wait.” I breathed as I glanced at Mi and realized she was wrapped in an opalescent glow of her own. “I can see your auras!”

Kit glanced at Mi and grabbed the contract as the bell sound rocked the room again just as it had in the elevator. Mi disappeared then Kit’s face split into a huge grin and I reached for the Dragon as he snapped his fingers and my world lurched and I was briefly surrounded by lights of all colors just before everything tilted and I plopped down in the middle of Jace and Gareth’s living room on one of their sofas.

Then there was yelling and I was yanked off the couch into Gareth’s arms, and I’m fairly certain I flashed everyone in the room as my top climbed above common decency. Kit had reverted to wolf shape and was sitting on the floor with his tongue lolling out, his red eyes dancing joyfully. Clenched in my fist was the golden Dragon and I squeezed it tightly, realizing I’d just bound a Demon to myself for life.

The Dragon flowed around my right hand and shifted into a little golden bracelet which wrapped around my wrist and fastened itself there with an ominous snap. I stared at it for a second then got distracted again by Gareth who didn’t want to part with me, even to Jace who elbowed his way to me and gently detached me from Gareth so he could feel for himself that I was really there. Apparently we’d been gone for over an hour and the two of them were beside themselves with worry.

Cursed and Amras weren’t much better but it was Owen that surprised me the most. Apparently he’d tried going after us and been rejected from Hell and he was not at all happy with Kit. Not too surprising, except he’d mentioned going to his brother for help. That in itself didn’t surprise me as much as the fact that his brother Odin wasn’t all that happy to see him strolling the chambers of Vahalla. That little tidbit

nearly sent me into a flurry of questions which I just managed to restrain myself from asking. There would be time later to pull him aside and get his story.

They all seemed relieved to see me but all of them wanted to kill Kit. I'm sure if I hadn't been there to stop them they might have tried too. Most of them settled down though when I informed them that I had not been hurt, we had not had sex, and Kit now belonged to me lock stock and barrel and neither one of us would be returning to Hell, ever. My news seemed to create mixed feelings since Owen, Amras, and Cursed hadn't forgotten our conversation in the elevator earlier and must have still been hoping Kit had paved the way, so to speak for them.

Jace was the first to tell me that they had heard the bell and the next thing they knew the others were telling them that I had disappeared with Kit in a most disturbing way. Then he admitted he'd called for Mi when Owen had been unable to track us.

I told them that Kit had needed to return to Hell and had taken me with him and it wasn't until I could see auras that we'd returned. That little gem got Kit some dirty looks all of which he ignored. He'd moved to one of the couches and was lounging across it, his black and silver hair getting everywhere as he watched the group with what appeared to be extreme satisfaction.

The most interesting part of the situation was that every man in the room's aura was dark green except for Kit who'd remained the same color of red-orange it had been earlier. I wondered if red-orange wasn't the color of Lust? And if I looked in the mirror if my own aura might be that color too? Just thinking about it made me suck in a breath and freeze causing everyone else in the room to also.

"What is it?" Gareth demanded, his aura shifting from green to yellow. Wow this aura thing was kind of cool. I glanced around the room and everyone else's auras were changing to different hues. I'd have to check with Kit to find out what they all meant.

I wasn't certain I wanted to blurt it out but as I glanced around the room I decided if anyone needed to know it was them. "Mi showed up and she did to me what she did....to Owen." I finished rather lamely.

I was sitting on the couch with Jace on one side and Gareth on the other. Amras and Cursed were facing us on the other side of the coffee table and Owen was seated in one of the chairs to my left. Kit had taken the couch across the room and had his head on his paws, his wine colored eyes glued to me.

“What exactly does that mean?” Jace asked as Gareth tensed on the couch next to me.

I took a deep breath and leaned back against the cushion. “I’m not certain but I think it means....I am going to be more trouble than we imagined.”

Kit made cuff cuffing noises which I took to be his wolf laugh. Cursed glanced at him thoughtfully but the rest of them simply ignored him until he replied. “It means the Cat released her and now she’s going to have to learn how to control the Lust Demon parts of her.”

Just mentioning lust made me think it and that caused a ripple effect which I could see coming off me like red-orange waves that flowed out from me through the air and brushed everyone in the room. Beside me Gareth and Jace growled. Amras, Cursed and Owen all stiffened as if this wasn’t the first time they’d been hit by lust. All three of them looked just short of frantic though they managed to hold it together, although all of them clenched their fists. Kit simply lifted his head and licked his lips. “Ahh...I think I’m going to need to um...so sorry about that guys.” I squeezed my eyes shut as all of their auras turned a bright red-orange, just like Kit.

Cursed sucked air in through his teeth. “Interesting.” He replied softly.

“Please don’t do that again.” Jace whispered next to me.

I turned to him and gave him a sickly smile. “I didn’t do it on purpose.” I replied.

“Even so is there no way to control it, whatever it is?” Gareth breathed. He was slightly bent at the waist and leaning his elbows on his thighs. He looked like he was in pain and I wondered if lust worked hardest on those that enjoyed sex often or those that hadn’t had it in...a very long time.

“Can we not test that theory?” Owen asked calmly. He of all of them seemed the least affected his aura merely a light red, maybe that was because he’d been exposed to Frigga, his brother’s wife, and if memory served correctly she was the Goddess of Fertility and Love. So perhaps a little lust couldn’t compare.

“Don’t sell yourself short.” Owen told me quietly. “Without lust there is no love and fertility becomes a painful duty.”

“Well said.” Kit responded, drawing all eyes to himself. “The trick is how to control Lexi’s new power, which I must say is more intense than I’d dreamed. Not quite full Demon strength, but remarkably powerful all things considered.”

All things considered? Like the fact that I was part Elf, part Dragon with just a breath of Lust Demon? I could feel the new power in me; it was like a pale red haze over my senses saturating everything except my shields. Circling my mind, looking for something, a hiding place maybe? Perhaps I just needed a place to put it, like Goldy in her cave? Having thought this I glanced up at Kit who winked back at me and lowered his head back onto his paws.

“Amras, can you help me?” I asked, turning to the Elf with a plea in my eyes. “I need to...construct a shelter or a shield.”

The Elf stepped forward and went down on one knee. I could see the beaded sweat on his brow and realized he was struggling to control his desire. If he dropped his shield...Cursed stepped forward and placed his hand on Amras’ shoulder. On the couch I leaned forward and slowly lowered my crystal shield. Beside me Gareth and Jace reached for me almost involuntarily. Amras rocked back and Cursed leaned forward. Owen grasped the armrests as if to hold himself in his chair.

Then Amras and Cursed were both in my mind. Their touch was cool and impersonal. “You must form a binding circle.” Amras whispered and I wasn’t certain if he spoke aloud or only in my mind. “To do so you must...” And then he showed me and it was like building another shield only it looked and felt like the funnel of a tornado reaching down into the area of my mind that was creating the lust. At the end he was straining toward me while Cursed held him back. But I had a new shield, one

that was shiny and light red and rolled like a storm on the sea. Before he drew back he showed me how to open a portal or a doorway that I could walk through or open to let out the lust that swirled like a roiling boiling storm inside of my funnel. And when he was done he slumped to the floor his head resting against his thighs. Everyone in the room breathed a sigh of relief except Kit who shifted to his human form and crossed his arms and legs and shot a disgusted look at Amras' bent head.

I would have gone to Amras to thank him, but Jace held me back. A hand on my arm and a look in his eye that indicated unless I wanted to relieve his suffering, it was best not to touch him just yet.

The thought that I had caused him, or any of them physical pain was like a knife in me and I bit my lip but pressed back into the couch, rethinking my situation. I wasn't certain how long we could go on like this. It just didn't seem fair to any of them.

Chapter 26

In the end it was Gareth that made the decision for me, for all of us. I hadn't realized how deeply I'd grown to care for him until he raised my hand to his lips and I saw the compassion in his eyes. With a look he told me it was the right thing to do. That it was necessary. At first I didn't want to go, afraid to lose what the three of us were just beginning to build together. Afraid it would be damaged beyond repair. But his eyes told me differently.

My arms slipped round his neck and I held him tightly, kissed his cheek as he breathed me in. And beside us I felt Jace wrap his arms around me too, giving me his support and trust, letting me know that he too believed in me and was in agreement with Gareth.

And then they released me and urged me to my feet, turned me toward Amras and Cursed who met my eyes with a look that seared me to my soul. His hand on Amras' shoulder tightened and then slipped away as he backed a step. Amras heaved a sigh and lifted his head slowly, perhaps sensing my gaze.

No one spoke as I eased around the table. Amras' eyes were huge violet wells of desire and fear. Perhaps he feared what was about to happen, or that it might not. Either way he held himself perfectly still, as if even the slightest movement might frighten me away. And perhaps he was right. I only know that my heart was racing

and my mouth was dry as I moved to within a foot or two of him and slowly held out my hand.

His eyes met mine then dropped to the couch behind me where Jace and Gareth sat. What he saw there must have encouraged him because he glanced back at me and reached for my hand, his cool fingers slipping into mine. His aura shifted to almost yellow and he pulled in air as our fingers brushed. Then he was on his feet standing over me and I bit my lip.

My eyes strayed to Cursed standing just behind Amras and I struggled to breathe as his black eyes pulled me in. Amras followed my gaze and stared at Cursed who lifted his eyes to Amras with a look of wonder. He too glanced at the couch behind me and his eyes widened slightly and his nostrils flared as he breathed deeply. He took a step toward us and Amras held out his arm to Cursed.

I can't say that I remember the walk to my bedroom. I just know that the three of us made it there and that it was Cursed who closed the door and it was Amras that led me to my four poster bed but stopped just short of it as I kicked off my shoes and pulled my blouse over my head, unzipped my skirt and let it fall to the floor before crawling onto my bedding and in amongst the pillows.

When I turned to look at them, Cursed was holding onto the post at the end of my bed, his eyes deep black pits. Amras stood where he had stopped and simply stared at me as if he couldn't quite believe his eyes. Both of them were bathed in that same red-orange glow.

"Gentlemen?" I breathed. "Do I need to lower the shield you helped me build?"

Cursed made a sound low in his throat and glanced at Amras as his hands strayed to the ties on his shirt and I watched from my pile of pillows as he slowly raised it over his head leaving his chest bare to my gaze. His muscles were well developed his skin looked like caramel all smooth and yummy.

I turned to look at Amras and noticed he too had removed his shirt and was in the process of removing his boots. Like Cursed he was well muscled only more slender

and his skin nearly glowed from within like moonlight. I licked my lips and lifted my hair out from under me, snuggling down as I watched the two of them remove the rest of their weapons and clothing. Amras was closer and just a little quicker and he slid onto my bed with a grace that sped my heart. His movements were fluid as he moved to my side and propped his head on his hand. Cursed stalked onto the bed, his muscles bunching and flowing, much like the cat that he was, as he slipped up on my other side.

“What would you have of us My Lady?” Cursed asked as he leaned on one elbow, much as Amras was doing at my other side.

I glanced down his body. It wasn't the first time I'd seen him nude but it was the first time I knew I could touch him, all of him and that made a world of difference. “Release your hair please?” I asked turning to look at Amras so he knew my request was for them both. They each sat up and undid their leather ties dropping them to the floor at the side of the bed. Pale blond and black streamed across my quilt and I reached for a handful of either. “I want....your pleasure.” I responded as I tugged them closer with a gentle pull. “I want to feel you inside of me. I want to hear your breath catch as you reach orgasm, feel your heart race. I want your satisfaction.” I whispered and glanced between the two.

“You don't ask much.” Amras replied with a small smile.

“No just...everything.....touch me.” I offered and it was like they had been waiting for my permission. Long delicate fingers brushed me, teasing and whispering promises across my skin. I reached for them and pulled them in closer, tighter as hands and lips melded.

Cursed slid down my body, his mouth hot as he blazed a path across my ribs and stomach, his leg slipping between mine and I shifted my thighs spreading them slightly. The hard hot length of him brushed against me as he maneuvered himself over my leg sending a shiver of anticipation through my body.

Amras pressed in against my other side while he kissed his way across my collar and up my neck, his teeth finding my ear then my jaw. I turned my face to him and our lips met. So soft and full he tasted of sun drenched meadows and honey. I

opened for him as I ran my hands over his arms and shoulders and up into his hair. It felt like silk and I purred as I grasped a handful and let it slide across my palm and through my fingers wrapping it about my wrist.

Cursed's tongue, full and wet moving over me raised my hips and caused me to moan and pull back from Amras so I could look down my body. Amras turned too and watched as Cursed grinned and set his tongue to me again. I grabbed a handful of bedding and fought to keep my eyes open to watch him as he swirled his tongue over and over causing tremors in my lower regions. His eyes were black as night and narrowed slightly, his hands resting lightly on my thighs.

Amras slid up onto his arms and urged me forward so he could curl partially in behind me, cradling my body against the smooth length of him, my head resting against his upper stomach. He lifted his hair and draped it across my shoulder, partially covering my breast and his hands slipped into my hair then began tracing my temple, ear, neck, and shoulders. The length of Amras pressed in against my side and my fingers strayed to his thigh, running up his perfectly pale body, over his hip and across the tight skin of his lower abdomen. Amras wasn't nearly as thick or long as any of my other men, but he still fit nicely in my palm as my fingers slowly tightened around him. He breathed in sharply and slid his top leg back, allowing me better access which I took full advantage of as I ran my fingers first up his length then slipped down his shaft so I could cup his balls in my palm. They were so tight like hard knots and I rolled them gently feeling Amras tense behind me.

"Hmmm, have a care." Amras breathed. His voice sounding slightly distressed. I wasn't being rough so it must be that he was unused to being touched.

Cursed made a low harsh sound in his throat and his fingers dug into my thighs. Yet his eyes never wavered and it felt as if he could go on like this all night. While his tongue on me felt heavenly, I wondered at his restraint. "Cursed, this isn't necessary." I told him softly.

He lifted his head and flashed his teeth at me. "Yes My Lady it is, I would not harm you."

I thought his comment odd and my hand stilled on Amras as I considered his response. “Why would you harm me?” I asked.

My question caused him to stop once again and this time he dropped his head to my nest of curls resting his forehead against me. His hair slipped forward, hiding his face as he breathed deeply yet remained silent. Behind me Amras stroked my shoulder with his cool fingers. “We had agreed to let Cursed go first, his need is...much greater than mine.”

He spoke softly yet there was an edge of steel in his voice as if he was trying to convince not just me but perhaps himself as well. And I wondered how that could be to measure one’s length of celibacy against another’s.

Cursed jerked slightly between my legs, as though my thought had struck him. Amras sighed and continued. “All of us believed he had been seduced by the Princess, especially the Queen, who was most wroth. Yet Cursed had been one of her most faithful warriors and she couldn’t bare the thought of killing him, so instead she had him put into the dungeon.”

This wasn’t anything they hadn’t already told me, and I wondered what his point might be.

“The point is that she forbade satisfaction of any kind, yet regularly he was forced to....watch others.”

Satisfaction of any kind, what exactly did that mean?

Amras sighed again and ran his fingers over my arm. “Not even self inflicted.”

My mind strayed to Kit and I wondered...I didn’t want to finish that thought. “But what has that to do with us?” I asked, surely he didn’t think I would deny him the satisfaction he so obviously needed. And then I thought, to see me with Amras first...

Amras cleared his throat gently and was silent for a moment. I could almost sense the conversation taking place but could not follow it. No one spoke for several minutes then Amras continued. “Princess,” He breathed against my ear. “We are concerned that Cursed’s size may harm you.”

His size? It was true he was nearly the tallest of my men but I wasn't in any danger of being crushed under his weight. Confused, I turned my head to glance up at Amras and asked. "What is wrong with his size and why are you concerned he would harm me?"

Amras smiled gently and gave me a slight squeeze. "Had you not noticed he is rather...well endowed?" Amras asked, and I swear he looked as if he might be blushing.

Come to think of it I had noticed he was easily as large as Gareth or Jace and perhaps a bit larger but not so much that I was alarmed by it. And not nearly as large as Kit when he'd...I needed to stop having these thoughts. "Yes." I replied and smiled back at him. "But I don't believe either of you need worry. I'm certain it will not be a problem for either of us." Amras glanced at me and there was something in his eyes, regret perhaps? Yet it was quickly covered as he leaned forward kissed my forehead and nodded. "Cursed, look at me?" I called to him as I turned back and settled against Amras.

His body still looked tense but not as if it would shatter like glass as it had earlier. I knew he was listening; perhaps he didn't yet believe me. But he slowly raised his eyes and I'd never seen such raw desire before on anyone's face. It caused me to sit straight up and reach for him. He flinched when my hands brushed his shoulders as if my touch burned. After what Amras had told me I was tempted to feel sorry for him, but knew he would not thank me. Instead I lifted my hands to his face, cupping his cheeks as I looked down into his black eyes and simply knew what I needed to do.

I let one hand drop back to the bed and gently slipped the other into his hair reveling in the feel of the thick strands. When I reached the back of his head I grabbed a handful and gave him a sharp pull. Kindness was not what he needed at that moment. He growled and bared his teeth at me. I narrowed my eyes and held him tighter slowly pulling him toward me as I lay back so that he was forced onto his knees and over me. "I want you now Cursed!" I told him forcefully.

I thought he might come to me, but instead he grabbed my hips and yanked me down and under him. I managed to hold on to his hair as my body slid across the bedding and then he was on me with another growl he rammed himself inside and I was suddenly glad he'd taken the time first as he stretched me to my limits and nearly beyond. My head went back and my hips rose of their own accord as he nearly pulled himself out then slammed back in again. No gentle loving this, as he pummeled me repeatedly, yet my body responded eagerly raising to meet each thrust. His breathing became ragged and I wrapped my legs around his, pulling him in tightly. His lips found mine and his tongue slipped into my mouth. I opened for him and when he drew back I followed jerking slightly when my tongue caught on one of his teeth and was punctured.

I tasted the dull metallic flavor of my own blood which seemed to excite Cursed as he forced his way back into my mouth and sucked my tongue all the while making eager noises in the back of his throat. He was after all part Goblin, so perhaps it wasn't all that strange.

Distracted by his feeding at my mouth and the feel of him inside of me, I lost my concentration as my shield slid away so that I found myself swamped in Cursed's raging need. Like a four alarm fire it roared through me causing the heavy pooling in my lower regions to overflow and bow my back as an orgasm racked my body lifting me off the bed. Cursed yelled and dropped his face to my shoulder sinking his teeth in as he plunged into me one last time and held there his body throbbing out his orgasm so deep and hard. I screamed and pulled at his hair, the nails of my other hand digging into his bicep deeply.

My bedroom door slammed open and Gareth stood there with Jace at his shoulder both of them lined in an angry dark red haze. Behind him in the hall I could see Owen surrounded in dark green and Kit who had reverted to wolf and whose red eyes were peering around Gareth's waist, he seemed to be enjoying the view. "What the hell!" Gareth rasped and Jace sucked in air as Cursed lifted his blood stained lips from my shoulder growling as he ran his tongue over his mouth.

“Goblin!” Jace hissed.

“Are you well?” Owen demanded after several tense but silent seconds. He seemed the only one of them capable of coherent speech.

“Mortified but fine thank you for asking!” I snapped back then glared at Gareth and Jace as I shifted my shoulder and healed instantly. Nothing like being caught in the act by your boyfriends, while making love to another man. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to crawl under the covers or beg for forgiveness. “I’m sorry I screamed. It was just...unexpected. See,” I said pulling back my hair to show my unbroken skin. There was still blood but no wound.

Cursed pulled his eyes from the others long enough to look down at me. And I couldn’t tell if the look in his eyes boded well for me or not. He seemed shocked but I couldn’t say if it was because of what he’d done or the fact that I’d healed the wound so quickly. “Pardon My Lady.” He told me and I realized it was only the third sentence he’d spoken to me since we’d entered the room. Not a big talker in the bedroom apparently.

Above us on the bed Amras assured the others. “The Princess was not in any danger.”

Gareth’s gaze flicked to him but his question was for me. “Goldy?” Gareth demanded, and his voice vibrated with unspoken questions.

I turned to him my eyes huge as deep inside me Gold raised her head and glanced over her shoulder. Her brilliant golden eyes swirled calmly as she gazed in Gareth’s direction. *The Blue and Green have nothing to fear.* She stated.

Gareth nodded abruptly and his eyes turned gentle as he gazed at me. Unexpected tears filled my eyes and slipped down my cheeks as I stared back at him. “We’ll give you some privacy.” Gareth muttered and backed out the door, forcing the rest of them backward too. Kit looked like he would have stayed but Gareth glared at him and my Demon winked at me and trotted down the hall.

Where do you go from here I wondered, feeling the tears run down my cheeks. Amras swam into view over me and his fingers brushed at the moisture which collected

then hardened in his palm. “Dragon tears.” He whispered gazing down at the golden dew drop shapes on his hand and on the bed next to me.

“Why did the Dragon address Goldy and how did she speak from within you?” Cursed asked still leaning on his forearms above me.

“I have no idea.” Obviously he trusted her answer more than mine at the time. “Maybe it had something to do with the fact that we’re....ah...” And I waved my hand at us. He was still buried inside of me and I could feel that he hadn’t diminished much in size. I wondered if we’d be going round two soon or if this might be a tag team event.

“Hmmm.” Amras murmured. “I’m not certain I know what a tag team is but if it means I’m next then that would be my preference. Perhaps we should clean you up first? Not that it matters to me.” He assured me with a smile. “I believe you’d look lovely covered in mud. But perhaps you’d like a chance to...collect yourself, assuming Cursed can drag himself away from your considerable charms.”

Cursed shot him a look which I couldn’t interpret and wasn’t certain I wanted to. Either way he lifted himself off me but not before leaning down to kiss me first. “I am sorry if I hurt you My Lady.” He whispered gently and I glanced up into his eyes and saw the truth of his statement. “Thank you.”

I sniffled then smiled as I brushed back the hair from his face, looping a strand behind one of his ears. “My pleasure.” I replied realizing it was the absolute truth. With the exception of the initial shock, the bite hadn’t been all that terrible. I was very happy to be the one to end Cursed’s long celibacy, and not just because my Mother had caused it.

I pulled myself off the bed and wandered to the restroom nearly gasping when I got a good look at myself in the mirror. My hair was a disaster and the blood from my shoulder had run all down my arm and breast. My eyes were huge and my skin very pale. Who knew sex could take so much out of a girl?

I headed to the shower and turned the hot water on nearly full blast letting the heat pull the tension from me. I was struggling to wash my hair when I realized there

was really no need to do this alone. Since Amras was one of the four that had decided they liked my hair this length, there wasn't any reason he couldn't help me get the mass of curls clean. My shields were still down so it wasn't difficult to call to him, I didn't even need to time it, just simply whispered his name in my mind, focusing on his image. Either I was much stronger than I thought or he had been anxiously waiting. It was less than a minute before the shower door opened and he stepped in his arms circling me from behind.

"You called?" He breathed against my ear. His hands roaming my front before he turned me to face him as his lips gently met mine.

"I need help with my hair." I told him when he let me up for air some few minutes later. His mouth was incredible and was already causing a tightening down low.

"Is that all you need help with?" He breathed against my lips his body pressing into mine. "I am now ready to fulfill your earlier wish for my satisfaction. In fact I'm more than ready to...how did you put it? Ah yes, to be inside of you. To let you feel my heart race and my breath catch as I reach orgasm. I was not locked in a cell or forced to watch others enjoy themselves, but I have held myself back much longer than our friend in the other room. I am not certain I can wait one more moment to taste you."

I moaned softly and slipped my arms around him pressing my breasts against his chest. His words excited me, left me breathless with need. "Amras." I whispered. "Yes."

His hands were like quicksilver as they glided over my body cupping me against him. His breathing deepened and he dropped his forehead to mine his body stilling. "Princess," he whispered, and his voice was filled with pain. "As much as I want this, I do not want to disappoint you."

I wasn't certain what he was talking about but I moved against him, urging him on with my body. I slid my hand down between us and cupped him in my palm. He

stiffened slightly and would have drawn away but I refused to release him. “What is it Amras?” I asked, nearly panting with the need he’d raised in me.

He stroked the back of my hand and said. “I have seen the others, and I know I cannot compare....I do not want to disappoint you.”

His meaning took a moment to sink in. Was this what had disturbed him earlier with Cursed? That he thought he was too small to please me? “Would it make you happy to be larger?” I asked, truly curious. I had never thought about size before. Honestly it had never come up for me seeing as how I’d only ever been with Gareth and Jace and now Cursed, it just hadn’t been a concern.

“Very much.” He admitted. “It is...vanity I suppose.”

I thought about it for moment and considered the problem. He wanted to be larger, I was part Demon, could I help him? Before I tried I took a second and concentrated on my newly created red wall, opened the door and gently breathed out desire at Amras. I wanted him and it didn’t seem right that he was conflicted with concerns for pleasuring me. At that moment, it was the quickest way I had of letting him know how I felt.

His aura shifted from dark purple to red-orange as my haze enveloped him and he stiffened in my arms then it was as if he’d been touched by a live wire and his hands and lips were everywhere as he pushed me up against the shower wall and lifted my leg wrapping it round his waist. Just before he slid inside of me I formed an image in my head as Kit had taught me and reaching between us I quickly slid my hand around him pushing the image down my arm and wrist and out my fingers into him. Then I couldn’t think anymore as he slid inside and began rolling his hips.

Chapter 27

We were both panting when he pulled out. My body felt boneless and I would have slid to the floor except Amras somehow managed to keep the two of us upright. “Goddess protect me! What have you done?” He breathed, looking down at himself in awe.

I couldn’t help smiling as I stared back at his face. I didn’t need to look down to know that my wish for him had worked. Of course it had, hadn’t I been feeling the newly enlarged length and width of him buried inside me for the past several minutes. “Consider it my gift for my family’s aggravating treatment of you through the years.”

“Is it permanent?” He asked his voice sounding shaky as if he wanted to know but was almost afraid of the answer.

“Unless you try using it on someone else.” I said then covered my mouth with my hand as my eyes widened in horror. I couldn’t believe I’d said that out loud, in fact I couldn’t believe I’d thought it at all, let alone said it!

He glanced at me and it was clear he wanted to laugh but was afraid to do so.

“I’m sorry I don’t know why I said that.” I told him contritely.

He laughed then and swept me into his arms pressing into the flesh of my stomach as he said. “Faithfulness is the least of your worries with me. I promise not to

‘use’ it on anyone else but you, as long as you promise to ‘use’ it more than once every several hundred years.”

Several hundred years...ouch! My Mother had much to answer for.

“Thankfully that’s all in the past now.” He assured me as he nuzzled at my neck sending gooseflesh skittering across my skin.

I chuckled and hugged him tightly. “Deal!” I agreed. “Right now would be a good time to ah...finish what we’ve started don’t you think?”

He laughed again and reached over to turn off the water. “I think we should finish this in the bed where we won’t crack our heads open.” He added because one of his more vigorous thrusts had caused my head to bang into the tiles. I was forced to agree.

Cursed was stretched out on his stomach across my bed, I would have said he was sleeping but as we got closer he rolled onto his side and made room for us, patting the bed as he scooted back across the covers. He looked relaxed enveloped in a light red haze his eyes heavy...sexy as he watched me climb onto the bed. Amras slipped up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist cradling me back against him. “You don’t need to do this.”

Cursed just smiled slightly as he replied, “You would prefer I leave?”

Amras tensed against my back but his voice was calm as he spoke. “Yes, to say otherwise would be a lie.” And Elves did not lie.

Cursed’s smile widened. “Then I will stay.”

Sighing heavily, I felt Amras nod his head. “So be it.”

I was having a hard time understanding why Cursed was being obstinate and turned my head to glance back at Amras who appeared deep in thought. His eyes flicked to me and he forced a smile. “Cursed has more wisdom than I would have credited him with.” He told me and reached to brush back a wet curl from my cheek.

His comment made even less sense to me and I frowned glancing between the two of them. Amras looked nearly chagrined while Cursed seemed to have adopted a calm relaxed visage. I threw up my hands and pushed out of Amras’ arms, moving to

the head of the bed and crossed my arms. My posture clearly said I wasn't budging till someone explained this latest riddle to me.

Normally I would have expected Amras to take the lead but he pressed his lips together and refused to meet my eyes so I pointedly turned to Cursed. "Neither of us is going anywhere My Lady, so sharing is a habit best started now." He replied.

His words sunk in and I had to remind myself that while they had known each other in passing prior to two days ago, unlike Gareth and Jace who obviously had no issue sharing me; these two came from completely different backgrounds. That they managed to be this civil to each other, obviously on my behalf, was actually quite amazing especially given their history with my Mother. To ask them to share a bed, let alone my person seemed more than unreasonable. I thought maybe I should say something, and then realized there wasn't much I could say. This was the way it had to be and if they couldn't handle it then it was best to know now.

"It's me or one of the other's." Cursed told Amras bluntly. "The Demon has been in here twice already, and I'm beginning to understand his fascination with your activities in the shower." He stated, his eyes dropping briefly to Amras' lap and his obviously much larger member which was nearly as long as Cursed's now, and perhaps slightly wider. He glanced between us and asked, "Your doing My Lady?"

I nodded, chewing on my lip as I watched Amras out of the corner of my eye. He seemed to be resigning himself to the situation. A minute or so later he lifted his eyes to Cursed and there was a mischievous sparkle deep in their violet depths. "Best not to mention this or our numbers might grow significantly." He jested, obviously on his way to being over his funk and seemingly well pleased with himself.

Cursed chuckled and shook his head his eyes turning back to me speculatively. I just lifted an eyebrow and stared back at him, tipping my head to the side. He shook his head again. "Perhaps if you lowered your shields and allowed her to feel you?" He suggested quietly.

Amras breathed in and after a quick nod his shielding fell away and like with Cursed earlier, I was overwhelmed with his desire. My body jerked and I pulled air in

through my teeth, my fingers digging into the bed as I struggled to deal with the influx of emotions aimed at me. “Come to me Princess.” He urged.

It took me a second to figure out how my limbs were supposed to work then I was moving across the bed toward him and into his arms. I pushed him over and crawled onto his body, kissing him while my hands roamed, touching everywhere. When he would have rolled us over I straddled him brushing myself over his length effectively removing that option as his smooth round head found my opening and I forced him into my body ever so slowly. His eyes widened and he grasped my wrists braced against his chest, when I wiggled at the end settling myself firmly I could feel him lightly pressing against my cervix.

Quite simply he felt incredible, and I savored the moment before I leaned forward and began working his length in and out of me. It didn’t take long before he was lifting to meet my slow thrusts, and then his hands shifted to my hips where he could better guide our motions.

Maybe it was that he’d stopped earlier in the shower or that Cursed had mentioned Kit being in here twice already or perhaps several hundred years of celibacy? Whatever the cause, it didn’t take long before Amras’ breath quickened and he wrapped his arms around my back. In a movement that impressed me greatly he flipped us over and I was suddenly looking up into his lovely eyes.

They say the eyes are the window to a person’s soul and right at that moment Amras’ looked nearly frantic with need. His pleasure filled me, seeping into my body filling me up so that warmth began building, bubbling up inside me until I writhed on the bed beneath him, my limbs tingling as the blood raced through me. My eyes widened then slipped closed and I reached for him holding onto his arms as pleasure speared me, bowing my back and clenching me around him. Amras threw back his head and moaned low and deep in his chest while he spilled his seed inside me.

His arms gave and he slumped down on me, his chest pressing my back into the bed as we lay there in near stupor. I wrapped my arms around him and ran my hands over his back, soothing as I glided over his skin. His lips found my cheek and he

snuggled his face in against me. “Thank you.” He whispered and I hugged him tightly, hooking a foot over the back of his calf.

His weight felt good on me, the heaviness of him matching the weight of my limbs. When he would have moved I held him tighter. He chuckled and slid out of my body moving just enough so that his full weight wasn’t pressing down on me. His lips brushed mine and I smiled softly. My eyes were heavy, it had been a long day and tomorrow was likely to be even longer.

“Rest Princess.” Amras whispered and I turned my head and cracked open my eyes to see Cursed still lying on the bed with a pensive look on his face. I reached my hand toward him, and he glanced at it with a small smile.

“The others are at the door My Lady. Shall I call them in?” He asked softly. A look of regret crossing his face.

From the lee of my neck Amras groaned and muttered something I didn’t quite catch then rolled off me and onto his back where he threw his arm over his face.

I chewed my lip and thought about it for a moment. “Give me a second.” I muttered and pushing up so I could crawl to the head of the bed where I pulled back the covers and climbed under them. Amras pulled his arm off his face and glanced at me with a question in his eyes. I sighed and flipped back the covers motioning for him to join me then I glanced at Cursed and silently made him the same offer for my other side. They both smiled and quickly slipped under the covers and pressing in against me. I tucked the covers around us and sent a mental call for Kit.

The door slipped open and Kit trotted in with a big toothy grin. He leapt onto the bed and settled himself at the foot, his large ruby eyes blinking at me. Owen stepped into the room, took one look at the situation and he too shifted to wolf without being asked, trotted over and made himself comfortable at the other end. I smiled at the two of them and closed my eyes drifting off to sleep with my arm draped over Amras and Cursed pressed in against my back.

Sometime in the wee hours Gareth lifted me out of my bed and four pairs of eyes watched as he carried me from the room.

## Chapter 28

I woke to the heavenly smell of French Roasted coffee and Jace's face smiling beside me on the pillow. Gareth was standing next to the bed holding a huge mug with, of all things, a big yellow smiley face on it.

"Morning." Jace chuckled as I inhaled deeply and pulled my hand out of the covers so I could hold it out over Jace's body toward Gareth. I so needed that caffeine to start my day with.

"Maybe you should sit up first?" Gareth suggested.

Grumbling I pushed into a sitting position and winced slightly at an unfamiliar tenderness in my nether regions. Gareth must have noticed because he raised one eyebrow at me and gave me one of those darkly masculine looks, the kind I'd only been seeing recently. Apparently the two of them weren't nearly as blasé about me being with the others as they tried to appear. I knew this because they'd spent several hours this morning proving that point to me which of course accounted for the happy smiles and dare I say...solicitous attitudes?

I reached for the coffee and sucked the rich aroma into my lungs. The first sip was ambrosia and I closed my eyes and rolled it over my tongue savoring the rich flavor and creamy sweetness. It was the perfect temperature for drinking and I lifted the mug again for a second then a third sip.

Jace sat up and braced his head and back against the headboard. “Wow...keep that up and none of us will be able to walk.” He muttered.

I opened my eyes and noticed that Gareth’s were slowly whirling, and his face had a dark sexy look to it. “Hmmm, I think she should only drink coffee with us.”

“Yes and she sleeps only with us.” Jace added turning to glance at me so I could see that his eyes were also whirling.

I took another swallow and glanced between them. Gareth was standing behind Jace and he eased onto the mattress with one hip. His eyes stopped whirling suddenly and his face grew serious. “Take whomever you need to your bed, whenever you must. But you sleep here with us at night, agreed?”

I smiled and nodded.

“And don’t worry if you fall asleep....one of us will come and get you.”

“In fact we’re happy to do so.” Jace told me with an evil smile his eyebrows going up and down several times.

I was thinking of four pair of eyes and nodded again. I couldn’t argue their logic.

“Well that went surprising well.” Jace commented. “Hurry up and drink that before you unman me or I lose my self control.” He teased.

“Coffee this good should not be rushed.” I informed him pertly.

“You’ve got a short memory.” Jace commented his eyelids going to half mast as he stared at me.

The last time I’d teased him I’d ended up with cold coffee so I smiled and tipped up my mug, swallowing the rest in a long gulp then handed it empty to Gareth who held out his hand for it and disappeared out the door. All that liquid had me heading for the restroom.

When I came back from the bathroom, Gareth had returned and he was sitting on the bed propped up on pillows much as Jace was. Both of them were dressed except for shoes and there was a large tray of food across Jace’s lap. Both of them were wrapped in a dark blue haze. I crawled onto the bed and into the space between them

my eyes glued to the newspapers held in Gareth's hand. He handed them to me after I curled around a pillow and I bit my lip as the headlines leapt at me off the front page of the San Francisco Tribune, Chronicle, and Times. In order they said; *Mysterious Elven Princess Sighted at City Hall*, *Who Is This Princess*, and *Sidhee Opens Its Doors and Mysterious Princess Sighted at City Hall*. I started reading the first article and by the second paragraph I was wincing. The Tribune mentioned Gareth and Jace as well as the Salty Dog by name and included not just the fine for the orgy but also their application for a sex license. After that it was just a summary of how long it had been since any new Elves had been sighted and mentioned my Mother by name indicating she had been unavailable for comment. Ouch.

The Tribune and Chronicle had all opted to use a serious picture of the seven of us standing on the courthouse steps, Cursed and Owen holding open the doors while Jace and Gareth flanked me and Amras stood just to my left and slightly behind me. My face was framed against Kit wrapped about my neck and looked slightly shell shocked. The men looked grim and uneasy. Anyone looking at the picture could see that we did not want to be photographed. While the Times photographer must have caught the snapshot just after Kit had told his horrid joke because in that picture I was smiling while the men ranged from chagrin to shock. I wasn't certain which picture I disliked more.

I flipped the papers to the end of the bed and asked, "So how bad was it last night?"

Jace used a fork and speared a piece of sausage which he held out for me. "Not too bad considering the Salty Dog angle wasn't released in yesterday afternoon's paper. But it did make the evening news and they've been running it nonstop all morning."

I groaned and chewed a piece of scrambled egg. "Have we heard from my Mother yet? Or has Mi been by?"

Gareth pushed back the hair from my face. "No we haven't heard from either of them. But this evening's attendees made sure they let us know they will expect the meeting to go forward, they just aren't very happy with us."

“Actually I think they are more curious than mad.” Jace commented. “Never a good sign when dealing with this group.”

I chewed and thought about it. “What time is the meeting?”

“Midnight.” Gareth answered. “And we expect you to be fully rested.”

“Now about your attire.” Jace commented as I turned to look at him. “I’m going to have to have a conversation with Snick. It’s a toss up between badass sexy and classy sophisticate. That dress you were wearing in the pictures makes us lean towards sophisticated but it warms my.....heart to think about presenting you in tight black leather.”

Gareth chuckled at the grimace on my face. “Don’t worry; I’m sure Areth won’t let Jace’s bad taste impede her ability to dress you to flawless perfection.”

Jace grumbled and forked up another helping of eggs for me. Good thing Mi and Jace weren’t dressing me; I could only image what I’d look like. “Hey don’t mock the leather.” Jace told me with a twinkle in his green eyes. “It looks great, wears well.”

“If you love it that much.” I muttered, taking a moment to finish chewing and swallowing before I continued. “How come I never see you wearing any?”

We both glanced down at his green cotton button up and well worn blue jeans. I lifted an eyebrow at him in question and he smiled sheepishly back at me. “Not to worry.” He replied. “You’ll be getting an eyeful this evening. Even the Dwarfs usually show up in tight leather.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Unfortunately he’s not.” Gareth admitted. “Leather seems to be the fabric of choice for the Underworld. Not quite sure why that is. I’ve always found a nice pair of wool pants so much more comfortable and it doesn’t pull the leg hairs out.” He finished with a grimace.

“So will you be wearing leather tonight too?” I asked, leaning over and placing my hand on the center of his chest as I glanced up at him coyly. I even managed to bat my eyelashes at him which caused him to rumble deep in his chest.

“Not on your life.” He told me firmly as he covered my hand with his own. “Not even if you bat your eyelashes and beg. If he,” and he jerked his thumb in Jace’s direction. “Wants to have his short hairs yanked out every time he moves that’s his prerogative, I prefer not to.”

Hmmm I could see that might be an issue since I seemed to be the only one around here that wore undergarments of any sort. I hadn’t thought of that before but maybe that was why Elves preferred leather...not many short hairs to pull. I hadn’t seen Owen in leather and with Kit....well he probably enjoyed it though he hadn’t been all that hairy till he noticed my penchant for chest hair. That thought made me smile as I curled my fingers into Gareth’s soft patch.

“Talcon power.” Jace added and I turned to look at him slightly confused. “It keeps the hairs from sticking.”

Gareth laughed again. “Thanks but I’m okay not puffing white clouds from my crotch with every step.” This conversation was nearly surreal and I laughed with Gareth just imagining little puffs of white following along behind Jace as he moved. I had, upon occasion worn leather out hunting but like Amras and Cursed I was hairless in all but a couple places on my body and since I was one of the few to actually wear underwear it had never been an issue for me. I couldn’t help humming the first strains to Puff the Magic Dragon...which earned me a disgusted look from Jace and another chuckle from Gareth.

“So what were your plans for the day?” Gareth asked changing the subject.

“I thought I might workout the group then work on some of my other skills for a while.”

“Other skills?” Jace asked raising an eyebrow and tilting his head to the side.

“Not that! Good grief.” I grumbled. “My shields, moving things oh and I was thinking it might be a good idea to get Kit to explain the aura colors to me.”

“Aura colors?”

“Yeah that’s how we got out of Hell! When Mi showed up Kit was trying to teach me a new skill...don’t look at me like that it wasn’t sexual at all! He just needed

to teach me something so he could fulfill his end of the bargain. You know, so the contract would be valid.”

“What contract?” Jace demanded.

“Must be the scroll Owen was talking about from the elevator. What is it for?”

It dawned on me that we hadn’t really had any time to talk since Kit and I returned last night so I gave them the edited version and explained about the contract. At one point I shook my wrist and rolled the little gold chain that was still attached to me around. There didn’t appear to be any clasp. I’d need to chat with Kit about it, I had a bad feeling it might be permanent.

“Damn.” Jace replied. “That’s a lot to take in.”

“I can’t say I’m sorry it was a Lust Demon that stole your paperwork. I’m not sure what we’d do with a sixth level. I much prefer making love to making war.” Gareth added giving me a wink. “If I’d wanted angry I would have found and kept one of the female Dragons that came over.”

“I kind of like the fact that your Demon was a clerk. Think we can get him to help out with our paperwork? Jace chuckled.

“Yeah well....I think I should tell you something about last night.” I sat back against the headboard and bit my tongue, hugged my pillow a little tighter and glanced between them,

“Oh no brace yourself Gareth I don’t like her tone of voice.”

“Just tell us.” Gareth urged his voice steel covered velvet.

“I made Amras larger.” I whispered closing my eyes and hiding my face in the pillow. Jace moved and I glanced at him through my hair as he put the tray on the bed and turned back to me with a confused look on his face.

“Larger how?” Gareth asked.

I glanced up into his face then flicked my eyes to his lap and back up again. Apparently it was enough for him to get the point and he dropped his face into his hands.

“What? What did she just do?” Jace demanded leaning forward as Gareth’s shoulders started shaking with silent laughter.

Gareth dropped his hands and reached for me, pulling me in against him in a hug. “Is it permanent?” He asked though his chuckles.

I moaned and nodded. “I think so.”

“Oh that’s rich.”

“What did Lexi do to the Elf?” Jace asked again, though I think he was beginning to suspect.

Gareth ignored him and asked. “So exactly how big did you make him?”

I bit my lip and glanced up at him suddenly feeling shy. “Not quite as big as you or Jace.”

“Good answer.” Gareth growled and hugged me tighter.

“Oh damn!” Jace muttered obviously figuring it out on his own. “This we definitely need to keep to ourselves or we’ll be over run!”

“That’s what Amras said.” I muttered against Gareth’s chest. “I told him to consider it payback from my family.”

“That was....quite decent of you.” Gareth assured me. “Please don’t try that on any of our other men. I’d hate to have another riot.”

“No wait...maybe it could be...like a graduation gift.” Jace teased. “Thanks for coming to our school of fearless hunters as we send you out into the world to fight evil we’d like to give you a large token of our appreciation.” Gareth and I both looked at him in surprise then the three of us burst out laughing.

Yeah that so wasn’t happening.

When the laughter died down somewhat Jace turned to me and asked, “Ah do you think that would work in the reverse? I mean, could you actually shrink someone’s size permanently?”

“I don’t see why not.” I told him honestly, though I’d probably have to touch them there to make it happen.

“Good to know.” He told me with a wicked smile. I wasn’t certain I liked the way his aura shifted to a darker green but at least it matched his beautiful eyes.

Before they left, Jace handed me a small envelope which contained my access chip as well as two others. He told me he would have inserted it via needle but that he figured I could just get Kit to do it without the pain. I didn’t have an issue with that since I wasn’t too fond of needles anyway. The other two could be used for Amras and Cursed since Owen and Kit clearly didn’t need them.

Several hugs and kisses later I headed for the shower while they went off to chat with the caterers and florists and Nick to talk about security. Jace was talking on his communicator and flipped me mine just before he headed out the door. I wasn’t sure where I’d left it and needed to take better care of the thing. Maybe if it was more feminine it wouldn’t keep being left behind. By my watch it was already past nine if it wasn’t for the coffee in me I might have snuggled back into the bed for another hour or two of sleep. Oh well I’d just have to make time later for that.

I was soaping up in the shower when a shadow fell across me and I turned suddenly, my feet nearly slipping out from under me in on the slick tiles. It was Kit and he was leaning against the shower wall a smile on his beautifully sculpted face. I frowned at him and went back to removing the soap.

“I can help you with that.” He offered.

“Thanks but I’m nearly done.” I told him, not bothering to rise to his bait.

He sighed and gave me a wistful smile. “You did read the part in the contract about using me right?”

I turned to him and smiled. “Yes I did, but I seem to recall there was no time limit for that. Besides as soon as I’m dressed I was planning to use your skills.” At which he perked up and his smile turned slightly wicked.

“Truly, and what can I do for you Mistress.”

Mistress...Princess...My Lady...ugh I seemed to be picking up titles like ticks on a mangy dog. “Just give me a minute.” I informed him as I turned off the water. He suddenly held a large fluffy towel between his outstretched hands and refused to

give it to me. I sighed and let him wrap it around me but when he got a little too personal with the drying off I smacked his hand and growled at him. He chuckled and behaved.

Areth had left my work out clothes on the tub and I slipped into them and braided my hair while Kit told me Little Johnny jokes which had me swinging between groaning because they were so bad and chuckling over the really funny ones. I tied my shoe laces and grabbed my bottled water off the counter then headed for the bedroom where I suspected the others might be waiting.

Sure enough Amras and Cursed were standing on either side of the door. Both were dressed in leather and it made me smile thinking of my earlier conversation. Both had their hair tied back and serious expressions on their faces. I grinned at them and looked around for Owen who turned out to be in the closet apparently looking for something.

“What are you doing?” I asked poking my head in the doorway to see Owen stepping out from behind a bend in the wall. Obviously he’d found one of the bolt holes and was checking it out. I stepped into the room with Kit behind me and wandered over for a look.

“I think it goes to the sauna.” Owen told me. I stepped in front of him and stared into the black hole in the wall. I couldn’t see any cobwebs or doors but could detect warmth that I hadn’t felt anywhere underground but Spot’s area. Owen was probably right and that was good to know.

Kit stepped up beside us and snapped his fingers and torches set in the wall sprang to light. I wandered in farther and could tell that it was much like a narrow hallway tall enough for even Owen to walk upright in.

“I hadn’t realized this was here. We should probably explore all the bolt holes later. Not today though I’ve got other plans.” I told the two of them. Kit pursed his lips and snapped his fingers and the lights went out and I found his hands where they shouldn’t be as he guided me out of the pitch black. I grumbled at him and he chuckled as we returned to the bedroom and I went over to the bed. My glance went to Amras

and Cursed. The two of them were wrapped in a brown haze and I wondered just what that might mean.

“Brown suggests stability and denotes masculine qualities.” Kit offered. “Basically your boys there aren’t sure what to expect so they’re wearing their masculinity on their sleeves, so to say.”

“Thanks.” I told him. Watching as Amras and Cursed frowned in tandem and stood just a bit straighter. “Can you guys come here for a moment?”

They both moved forward tentatively and stopped about three feet away from where I was standing at the end of the bed. I smiled at them and they seemed to relax slightly.

I reached over and picked up the envelope I’d left on the bed which had been made in my absence and held it in my hand. “Kit could you help us please?”

“Certainly Mistress what can I do for you? He asked, slipping onto the bed behind me and sitting so that his legs fell on either side of my body. I rolled my eyes and pointed to the floor in front of me. He huffed slightly but moved where I indicated.

“In this envelop are three devices which will allow us to come and go on the elevators without having a card key. There are only three because two of you do not require the use of the elevator to move about the building. However the rest of us aren’t quite so mobile. The device needs to be inserted under the skin in your wrist and must remain a secret from everyone else except those of us in this room and Gareth and Jace who, of course, provided them. If one of you do not wish to do this simply say so, and we’ll get you a card key. I watched Amras’ and Cursed’s eyes noting that neither gave anything away although both seemed to be struggling to maintain their brown auras as they were listing slightly towards dull yellow.

“Caution or sickness.” Kit offered watching them out of the corner of his eyes.

I nodded and opened the envelope shaking one of the small devices into my palm which I held out for Kit. “Don’t worry there isn’t any iron in the chips. Could you put that right here?” I asked, indicating the skin on my right wrist just above the little gold bracelet. Kit snapped his fingers and the chip disappeared. There was a

sharp pain in my wrist which subsided immediately. “Thanks.” I told him then glanced at the bracelet and up at him.

“That is part of the contract. You accepted it when you reached for the Dragon and brought it out with us.” He told me his smile widening while his red eyes gleamed. “It means you’re mine.”

“Does it?” I asked pursing my lips and tugging gently on the links. “I would have thought it meant I’m your Master, not that I am yours.”

He waved his hand at me as if the difference was immaterial. “It’s usually a branding, but I couldn’t bear to damage your beautiful skin so I reworked the verbiage.”

“You mean it’s supposed to be a tattoo?”

“Actually more like a brand in your skin, a Demon mark of power and favor.”

“Will it shift with me?” I asked suddenly concerned.

“Of course, I didn’t spend decades working on the wording just so I could amputate one of your hands!” He assured me.

“Well that’s good to know. Thank you.”

He wiggled his eyebrows then snapped his fingers and the gold chain turned into a diamond tennis bracelet which sparkled in the lights. Then he snapped his fingers again and my wrist was surrounded in rubies that matched his eyes and the red strands in my hair.

“Hmmm....very nice.” I told him holding out my wrist so the lights could catch the stones.

“I’m glad you like it.” He murmured and his voice sent gooseflesh skittering over my arm. Then he snapped his fingers again and it was a little gold chain only this time there were perfect miniature Dragon charms hanging off of it. I turned my wrist and noted there was one of every color as well as a little black and silver one. “Later maybe we can discuss matching earrings.”

I wasn’t sure I wanted to know what that would cost me so I just shook my head and glanced over at Amras and Cursed, both of which were staring at my wrist. Neither

of them looked very happy. I waved my fingers to get their attention and nearly took a step back when I met Cursed's eyes they looked so hostile. Wow what had I done to deserve that I wondered.

He dipped his head and when he raised it again he appeared much calmer. I glanced at Amras but his face and eyes appeared unperturbed, if he'd been angry I had missed it while watching Cursed. Amras merely held out his left wrist. "Not my sword arm Princess." He told me softly. I shook another chip into my palm and looked at Kit who snapped his fingers. Amras jerked and pulled his wrist into his chest hissing through his teeth.

"Was that necessary?" I asked Kit, frowning when he looked at me innocently and shrugged.

Cursed took a breath and held out his left arm also. The last chip lay in my palm. Kit snapped his fingers and Cursed paled slightly but didn't flinch or make a sound. He did however glare at Kit who smiled serenely back at him.

"I'm sorry about that." I told Amras and Cursed. "Kit's feeling a little jealous over last night and obviously can't restrain himself."

Cursed looked at me and one corner of his mouth lifted before he nodded thoughtfully. "With good reason." He replied and turned his satisfied smile on Kit who did some stiffening of his own.

At the side of the bed Owen cleared his throat. "I guess this means I still get to use my card key?"

"I'm sorry did you want a chip too? I just thought...I can get one from Jace if you want it." I told him, feeling rather foolish for having excluded him.

Owen smiled and snapped his fingers then held out his palm which suddenly had one of the little chips in the middle of it. "Actually I think I will use this instead. Just in case I have to leave in a hurry and can't seem to find my clothing." He teased.

Beside me Kit snapped his fingers and the chip disappeared. Owen's eyes widened then narrowed angrily. His aura shifted to black.

“And black means power, elegance, formality, death, evil, and mystery. You take your pick.”

I was guessing maybe power or perhaps death since Kit had just pissed off a minor God. “Kit you aren’t winning any friends here.” I warned him.

“You won’t let them harm me and you did want a lesson in auras right? How else are you going to learn if you don’t experience all the colors first hand?”

Owen grimaced and shifted to an olive green. Kit raised his eyebrows and bowed his head to Owen. “Well done.” He breathed, and then to me he said. “Olive means peace.”

“If you like Lexi,” Owen offered suddenly. “I’d be happy to assist you with your aura training.”

“Thank you Owen, I believe I’ll take you up on that.”

“Fine.” Kit grumped. “But it won’t be as much fun.”

“Well at least it won’t get anyone maimed or killed.” I told him and pushed away from the bed.

## Chapter 29

Owen provided the appropriate attire for everyone not already dressed and we managed to get through our run and kata training without any incidents. Amras and Cursed went off to practice with their swords and I wandered around assisting with forms until I couldn't stand it anymore and asked Owen to provide me with a blunted sword. We ended up on the far side of the mats watching Amras and Cursed go at each other like they had the previous day.

Kit offered to drill with me and my look must have been skeptical enough that he became offended and leaned forward to hiss in my ear. "Just because I was a clerk doesn't mean I haven't been brushing up on my fighting skills."

His vehemence surprised me so I motioned to an open space and we took our places. Owen watched from the sideline with a worried expression. We touched the hilts of our swords against our foreheads and circled each other looking for an opening. Kit was in front of me smiling one second and the next I was being swatted across the bottom with his bare hand. I growled and elbowed him turning with my sword up between us.

"Not everyone you'll go up against will fight fair." He warned me and disappeared again. I swung around just in time to block his downward swing which would have brained me if I had been half a second slower.

My sword weighed four or five pounds and was finely made with a slightly curved blade and a handle that seemed custom designed for my grip. Kit's sword easily weighed twice what mine did and when our blades connected in a flurry of parry and ripostes the force shook me to the marrow. Obviously full on contact wasn't going to be a good plan and surprisingly Kit did seem to know what he was doing with a blade so I reevaluated my defense and began slipping his blade whenever possible.

Kit seemed to use every nasty trick in the book and I found myself struggling to stay on my feet let alone mount an offense. At one point he tripped me and leapt at me while I was down on the floor. I kned him in the thigh aiming for his nether regions and he laughed and shifted giving me enough time to regain my feet. It seemed no matter what I did I was always half a step behind him. If I wanted to win, I was going to have to play as dirty as he was doing. But the concept went against the grain and I struggled against my own inner sense of fairness.

Distracted by my musings I was late at the parry and took the flat of his blade against my shoulder sending me reeling across the mat. He laughed again and it was enough to irritate me. Principals be damned I thought and circled with new intent. My smile made him laugh again as he leapt at me sword swinging. I ducked and came up under his swing aiming for his stomach with the flat of my blade. The air left him in a whoosh and I kicked him in the back of the leg as I went past, buckling his knee and sending him to the mat. Normally I would have stood back and given him the opportunity to regain his feet, but with all the tricks he'd used on me I wasn't feeling all that charitable and aimed another kick at his head forcing him to lift his arm to protect himself which left his back unprotected while he raised up on his knees and tried to swing at me with his sword. I danced around in front of him aiming a foot at his chest as I went but he disappeared and I nearly went down when my foot failed to connect.

Kit rematerialized several feet away and behind me and I barely raised my arm in time to block his swing. My arm vibrated all the way up to my neck and I lost feeling in it for a moment as I scrambled backwards out of reach, giving my nerves time to regain function.

“Are we having fun yet Mistress?” Kit asked, and the damn Demon wasn’t even breathing hard while I was gulping for air like I’d run a marathon. I think I growled at him which caused him to laugh. He disappeared again and I swung around but too late to prevent him from wrapping an arm around my throat while his blunted blade poked me in my side just at the base of my ribcage.

“I yield.” I gasped and bent over double when he released me, placing my hands on my thighs while I sucked in air. Owen handed me my water bottle muttering under his breath. Amras and Cursed wandered over and added their support letting me know they were impressed with my skill and that they were certain I could have beaten the Demon if he had played fair. I nodded; it seemed all I was capable of at the moment.

When I’d regained my breath I glanced around to see that most of the students were busy hacking at each other and Nick was nowhere to be found. El wandered over and chatted with me briefly, giving me an update on several of the students and asking if the Elves would be willing to do some individual training. I deferred to them and listened with half an ear as they arranged their schedules.

“Who are you looking for?” Owen leaned down to whisper in my ear. He’d edged in beside me while the others were talking. Kit had wandered over to the wrestling mats and was giving what appeared to be encouraging advice to the two men grunting and trying to tie each other into knots on the floor.

I bit my lip and glanced up at him. I hadn’t realized I was looking for anyone, but it was about that time of the day when Gareth or Jace showed up and we spent a few hours...entertaining ourselves.

He gave me a crooked smile and closed his eyes for a moment. With my shields down I felt...something brush past me before it rose and shot toward the roof. Less than a minute later Owen blinked open his eyes and smiled down at me. “Gareth is meeting with Nick in the conference room going over tonight’s security. They’ve got maps laid out everywhere. Jace is upstairs trying to deal with the crowd surrounding the dance club. They both send their regrets.”

I frowned and glanced down at my water bottle. No one to blame here but me I reminded myself, since there wouldn't be a crowd issue if not for my presence. I sighed. "Thanks Owen I appreciate the update."

"Jace said to tell you..." He hesitated a moment then continued, "He said to tell you that he got it out of his system when your Mother was here. And not to hold it against me."

"What?" I asked watching Owen's dark brown eyes and wondering if he knew what Jace had been talking about.

"My past."

"Oh."

He just smiled. "Would you care to work on your aura lessons now?" He offered. I looked at him thoughtfully and noted that his aura seemed an even orange color, not at all threatening.

"That's because orange represents enthusiasm, fascination, happiness, creativity, determination, success and encouragement."

"Don't forget stimulation and attraction!" Kit yelled over at us then stuck out his tongue at me before turning back to watch the pair on the floor.

Owen chuckled and told me, "Who could forget attraction and stimulation with you around, eh?"

Amras and Cursed glanced over their shoulders at me and there was a twinkle in Amras' eye but Cursed just looked annoyed and I couldn't help noticing his aura shifting to a darker green.

"I'm fairly certain I don't need to tell you what that means." Owen added softly.

"We're going to head downstairs." I told Amras and Cursed, feeling very uncomfortable when they both turned polite blank stares on me. I glanced toward Kit and waved him over which seemed to surprise and delight him. Behind me Owen just signed but didn't say anything.

I'm not sure why I felt like a kid caught with her hand in the cookie jar, or what right they thought they had to make me feel guilty about it. I just know I wasn't too happy about it.

Amras immediately flinched then dipped his head giving me a contrite smile. Cursed muttered something under his breath and rudely turned his back on me which pissed me off even more. I didn't give myself time to think about it, I merely reached for his wrapped hair and using my entire body strength yanked him over and onto his hands and knees at my feet. All sound and motion around me ceased abruptly as I forced his head up and shoved my face into his all but yelling. "Don't you dare turn your back on me like that again...ever!"

Cursed bared his teeth at me and I shook him, hard. At which point his eyes dropped to half mast and he twined his arm around my calf and knee just before he leaned toward me and purred. I stared down at him surprised once again by his abrupt nature but even more shocked at my reactions to him. It would never have occurred to me to handle one of the others in such an abusive way, but Cursed seemed to actually enjoy it. Even worse, it made him happy, a point in fact confirmed by the sunshine bright yellow haze surrounding him.

"May I get up now My Lady?" Cursed asked in a calm voice, his black eyes sparkling and a smile tugging at his beautiful lips.

"Apologize first." I demanded understanding that he would not respect me if I allowed him to get away with rude behavior in my presence. Something in him needed me to be strong and I wasn't about to fail him by exhibiting a sweet and biddable nature.

He immediately dropped his forehead to the floor, taking my hand with him as I refused to release him just yet. "Forgive me."

I held onto him for another few seconds then slowly unclenched my fingers from around the leather binding his hair. I went to a knee on the floor and ran my hand over his back chiding him softly. "Cursed, why do you do this to yourself?" I asked.

His fingers found my ankle and delicately wrapped around me, as if he found some sort of solace in the touch of me.

“I know no other way, My Lady.” He whispered, his face still pressed to the mat.

His admission pierced my heart and I went down on both knees and lifted him into my arms, hugging him to me while we knelt on the mats and he buried his face in my neck. “Were you ever this much trouble to my Mother?” I asked.

His teeth grazed my neck as he lifted his lips to my ear and whispered just low enough so only I could hear. “Never.” Then he bit my earlobe and his grip tightened on me as I jerked. I knew he’d bled me again when I felt his tongue lick my lobe just before he sucked it into his mouth. I closed my eyes and wished we were someplace much more private, like my room, crying out when the ground lurched and colors swirled then I opened my eyes and found myself kneeling in the middle of my bed, Cursed still locked in my arms.

He didn’t even ask he simply began removing my clothing. There wasn’t much there and it wasn’t long before he was leaning over me, his long hard length sheathed within. His aura has shifted to a blood red and he purred as he stroked in and out of my body urging me to rise up to meet each thrust. My fingers dug into his lower back and my legs wrapped round his thighs.

“We haven’t much time.” I told him wishing we could finish without being disturbed but knowing the others might arrive at any second.

“Then we’ll need to make every second count.” He told me gruffly.

His lips found my breast and I hesitated while he sucked my nipple into his mouth. Lifting his eyes to mine he licked and sucked at me until my eyes closed and my head fell back on the bed. I expected him to bite me, was even braced for it. But he surprised me by wrapping my braid around his wrist and pulling out of me. “On your knees.” He growled pulling gently on my hair when I didn’t move fast enough for him. He grabbed a knee and turned me, lifting my hips and holding my face to the bed with the threat of his hand on my hair.

He pressed in behind me, covering me with his body and hands, sliding his erection over my sensitive parts before burying himself once again inside. He used me that way for several minutes then urged me up off my elbows and onto my hands and knees. I moved with him matching his rhythm, flesh slapping flesh and the rumble in his throat the only sounds in the room. And then he pulled out of me again and lay back on the bed, his hand still holding my braid so that I was forced to turn. I found myself kneeling between his legs as he urged me forward and onto his lap.

His face looked urgent and I moved to cover him, sliding my hands over his chest and pressing myself over his length before I captured him and brought him into my body. He sighed and threw back his head and the sound that came from him was almost a whimper. I stilled my movements and he opened his eyes and reached for me. "I need...please don't stop." He begged.

"Cursed?" I whispered.

"The memories...help me erase the memories." He breathed his dark eyes full of every pain and horror he'd endured.

Every move, every position....all those years, my eyes filled with compassion and my hips moved, rocking him gently as I lay my body upon his wrapping as much of myself over him as I could. I kissed and licked my way up his chest biting gently at his jaw our speed increasing. He moaned beneath me and I sank my teeth into the lee of his neck, tasting blood and the tangy sweetness of his skin. He jerked and grabbed my hips bucking beneath me as his pleasure exploded pushing me over the edge so that I buried my face in his neck and bit down on the tender skin as I came for him.

I collapsed on his chest with my cheek pressed to his and his arms wrapped so tightly around me that I could feel each shudder and breath he pulled into his lungs. Wetness touched my cheek and I pushed up turning to see tears trailing down his face. "I'm so sorry." I whispered, kissing away the moisture. "Please don't cry Cursed...you're safe here with me."

"Am I?" He asked as he raised a finger to touch the tender skin at his neck...it came away with just a hint of blood. His eyes were calmer, a small smile playing about

his mouth as he raised his finger to my lips. “Blood is the most precious of all fluids.” He told me, watching as I pulled his finger between my lips wrapping my tongue around it just before I sucked the full length into my mouth. I felt him move within me and he lifted his hips offering himself to me in every way. I pushed down and tightened around him widening his eyes and causing him to purr for me again. “Give me but a moment My Lady before we begin again.”

Unfortunately round two wasn’t to be as the door burst open and my other three piled in. I growled at Kit who loped to the bed and placed his front paws on it shoving his face into mine and licking my cheek. “I’m so proud of you Mistress!” He exclaimed. “I see we got here just in time.”

Just in time for what?

“Well Owen’s supposed to be next not the Goblin who’s already had his turn, or maybe you’d like to take me for a...more thorough test drive?”

“Wait...what do you mean you’re just in time?” I asked and Cursed pushed up on his elbows and glanced at Amras in confusion.

Kit dropped back to the floor as I sat up on Cursed and leaned over to look at him. I knew I probably shouldn’t be sitting there naked with Cursed still buried inside of me but something about the way Kit had said that alarmed me. It was as if he thought we had just arrived when in fact we’d been in the room for a good fifteen minutes or so.

“That can’t be.” Amras breathed his eyes glancing between Cursed and myself.

Owen looked pained but added. “We just now left the training floor not seconds behind you.”

On the floor Kit was having a quiet conversation with himself. The only words I caught were “I can’t bend time,” which scared me so it must have sent me into shock. My body began shaking so badly Cursed reached for me as my eyes rolled back and I slumped in his arms.

Someone was arguing and there was a cool cloth over my eyes. I had a bad moment of déjà vu for a second remembering the other night on the couch but realized I was lying in my bedroom having just discovered I could somehow bend time.

“She’s awake if anyone’s interested.” Areth’s calm voice informed the room. I reached up and pulled the cloth off of my eyes in time to see her disappear in a little black swirl. Kit crawled onto the bed and pushed back a strand of hair from my face.

“You aren’t supposed to be able to do that you know?” He told me bluntly. Then he kissed my temple and moved back as the others leaned in to get a good look. With all of them staring down at me I couldn’t help feeling like one of those fish in a bowl.

“How are you My Lady?”

“I’m fine. How long was I away?” I grumbled.

“Less than a hand of moments.” Amras replied.

“What were you arguing about?”

Owen leaned in and his dark brown eyes looked like warm gooey chocolate. “I thought we should advise the Dragons but the other’s....felt it unnecessary.” He replied, a smile playing about his lips.

I glanced around at the four of them. Cursed was without clothing and the others were wearing only the shorts they’d had on upstairs. Maybe it was that I was lying naked and helpless under their gaze or perhaps it was their solid red-orange haze and their combined interest aimed at me? Whatever the catalyst, I licked my lips and reached up to run my fingers over Owen’s stomach muscles. His breath stilled when my fingers caught on the elastic top of his shorts.

“Jace says I should forgive you.” I told him breathlessly. “Would you ask my forgiveness?”

“No.” He replied. “There can be no forgiveness for my crime.”

I nodded, agreeing with him completely. “But you have been punished have you not?”

“Yes for many a millennium. I pray it is enough for you.” He told me.

I tugged gently at his shorts and he stepped closer to the bed. “We shall see.” I told him and pulled him into my arms and onto the bed. The others moved back and there was only Owen whose clothing melted away beneath my fingers. His skin was the color of pale milk chocolate all creamy and smooth. He smelled of the sea and of the wind. His hair was a warm caress of pale yellow light upon my skin and his hands were so large he could easily have spanned my waist. His body was covered in fine pale yellow hair over his arms and legs and down the center of his chest.

He bore me to the bed and covered me in kisses and I fell into his eyes. “You are not fertile.” He whispered against my ear. “Do you wish to be?”

“Not yet.” I replied thinking that perhaps he had come to my call for just this reason.

He nodded and ran his hand over my ribs and cupped a breast then lowered his mouth to me. I writhed feeling the length of him pressing against my hip. He was huge and I became moist anticipating the feel of him inside me. His hands cupped my face and his lips met mine in a kiss that rolled my senses. I opened for his tongue and sucked it into my mouth hearing him groan above me. My hand slipped down his body and he lifted so I could wrap my fingers around him.

There was a strange noise and then the crackle of flames. He raised his eyes to me and said. “I hope you do not mind?” We turned toward the wall separating the bedroom from the bathroom and where there had been rock before now there was a large fireplace with a crackling fire. He rose up on his knees and slipped from the bed lifting me into his arms. Then he was lowering me into bedding of rich animal pelts and onto his lap, just as he’d shown me in his fantasy.

I licked my lips again and glanced down his body seeing the strength of him and marveling at his beauty. I very much wanted to taste him and he released me so I could lick and kiss my way toward the apex of his legs. He lay back on his elbows upon the pelt and watched as I settled between his thighs running my tongue up the length of him, grasping him in my hand when he jerked beneath me. I pulled him forward and slid my mouth over his tip, running my tongue over and around until he clenched the

bedding in his hands. Then I slid down the length of him until he pressed against the back of my throat and I had to pull back slightly so I could breathe.

“Your mouth feels incredible.” He whispered on a moan. “I’m not going to be able to take much more of that.”

I smiled and worked him back out again using my tongue and teeth to tease and excite him. He struggled to keep his hips still and I felt that heaviness building low inside me. His sac felt tight and hard as I cupped him in my other hand and gently rolled him across my palm sliding my mouth down his shaft again taking him in even deeper this time as my throat relaxed with the excitement building in me. He growled and reached for me, lifting me under the arms and pulling me into his lap and onto his tip. His lips devoured mine, our tongues meeting briefly before he dropped his forehead to mine and muttered. “You are very wet, but tight.” And despite his need he gently eased inside me until I was seated on his lap with his entire length within. When he was certain I was well he wrapped one leg round to his back and pulled my hips in tightly causing him to bump into my cervix and me to inhale sharply.

“Too deep?” He asked his eyes full of concern.

I wiggled my hips slightly and shook my head. “Just perfect.” I assured him and he smiled again and lifted me up his shaft nearly to the end before sliding me back down again. The move made me breathless and I dug my toes into the bedding. I reached for his broad shoulders to balance myself as he forced me up and nearly to his tip again, this time though he pulled me down his length faster nearly dropping my weight to his lap. The feel bowed my back and I found myself bent over his arm while he worked my hips and lathed my breasts with his tongue and teeth. He wrapped one arm around my lower back just above my cheeks and one around my upper using the strength of his body to lift and drop me back onto him.

I’d never felt anything quite like it and it didn’t take long before the warmth pooling in my body burst its dams and I convulsed around him my body spasming with the force of my orgasm. He laughed then and worked me faster, building up the force within me again until I came crashing like a tidal over him. I yelled and Owen’s voice

drowned me out as he lifted his hips on the last downward thrust and he burst inside of me, spilling his seed.

He gathered me up and against his chest, holding me when I would have slumped to the fur in a boneless heap. “Thank you, I think I need a nap now.” I muttered and he chuckled and crushed me in a nearly bone snapping hug.

“What you need is a nice swim in the sauna then a rub down.” He informed me. I wasn’t going to argue with him especially since I didn’t have the strength to do so. When he stood I simply held on the best I could while he walked us across the room and out the door. I caught a flash of the other three before we cleared the doorway and realized they must have stayed for the entire show. Have to worry about that later I thought and burrowed my face in against Owen’s neck. He chuckled and ran his hand over my bottom caressing my skin with a gentleness that pleased me.

“Aren’t you worried about Spot?” I asked as he tromped with me across the sand right down to the water and into it.

“No. The Wyrms won’t bother us.”

“Okay.” I muttered as the water slipped over my waist and I clung to Owen and rolled my hips against him. I could tell he was only slightly smaller than he’d started off and I wasn’t too proud to admit I enjoyed the feel of him inside me. “More please.”

He chuckled and slid me down his length then pulled me back onto him. He continued doing that for what must have been ten minutes or more just slowly sliding himself in and out of me while we paddled around in the warm water.

He eased us into the shallows and lay back on the sand so that I was still seated on him, my body resting across his chest. He worked the rubber band free from my hair and spilled it out of the braid and across our bodies. When he’d finished with that he pushed it to the side and used his hands and fingers to massage me from the back of my thighs all the way up to my temples then back down again. I muttered and moaned and purred in delight. Then he pulled me off of him and turned me over so that I lay back upon him. He reached down and guided himself back into me and I wiggled my

hips and braced my feet on the sand so I could continue enjoying the feel of him while he proceeded to massage up the front of my body.

On his second pass his palm cupped my pelvis then his finger slid into my curls and gently massaged my nub in time with my thrusts. When my breathing became ragged he sat me up and bracing his feet lifted himself to meet me all the while playing me with his fingers so that pressure built and I came for him slamming myself down his length while he gripped my hip and pumped into me twice more before he too reached orgasm.

This time I didn't give him the choice, I simply slipped off to sleep when he turned me over and into his arms.

Chapter 30

“Okay so maybe you didn’t kill her.” Kit remarked with a touch of sarcasm to his voice. “But that last one sent the Elves to their knees and singed my eyebrows!”

I cracked open an eye and glanced up at Kit who was sitting on the sand next to me. My cheek was resting against one breast, my body spread out across Owen where he’d placed me just before I fell asleep...oh who was I kidding, I’d practically passed out. I had no idea what Kit was talking about and wasn’t sure I wanted to so I closed my eye and rubbed my cheek against Owen. He responded by caressing down my back and cupping my bottom in his large hand.

“Do you mind?” Kit grumped. “Some of us are still celibate!”

“Quick what color is Kit’s aura?” Owen asked.

I didn’t even bother opening my eyes just replied. “Kit’s always orange-red because he’s a Lust Demon.

Beneath me Owen stilled and I managed to crack open an eye and lift my head to look at him. “Is that truly how he looks to you?”

“Yes, I’ve never seen his aura change not since Mi touched me.”

“Interesting.” Owen told me then glanced at Kit who simply shrugged a shoulder.

I put my cheek back down and asked “Why?”

“Because that’s not how he appears to me.” Owen stated quietly. “For instance at this moment he is as dark purple as you can get.”

“Dark purple?” I said, lifting my head and glancing at Kit who just like always appeared red-orange.

“It means gloom and sad feelings...which leads to frustration.” Kit told me in a voice devoid of emotion.

Owen nodded and Kit glanced down at his feet which happened to be bare at the moment. I noticed even his toenails were tipped in silver and couldn’t help smiling. “Lexi.” Owen called to me. “I have a bad feeling about this meeting tonight.” He sat up and I slid down his body forced to sit up or fall onto my face in the sand. “I sense you will need to have each of us bound firmly to you. I can’t explain it.” He told me holding my shoulders, his dark eyes serious. “I called Kit because I think...I think you need to bind him more firmly to you.”

I stared at him in surprise. “You think something is going to happen tonight and you want me to make love to Kit to what....protect him?”

Owen frowned and thought for a moment. “No I think you need to protect yourself. And it’s not just Kit. I think you need to spend more time with Amras too.”

My gaze swung to Kit who was looking at Owen as if he’d grown a second head. “Together or separate?” And then spent a moment wondering how I could be so blasé about what he was proposing.

He dropped his hands and spread them palm up as if to say he had no idea. “I’m sorry the future just isn’t that clear. I only know what my instincts tell me and right now they are telling me that you need to protect yourself by binding the Demon and the Elf more closely to you.”

“Fine but I’m going to need some food and a shower first.” I told the two of them. Owen just nodded but Kit snapped his fingers and started shoving bite sized pieces of pizza at me from the tray that appeared on his lap. The cheese nearly scalded the roof of my mouth but the flavor was divine. Owen brushed the sand off his hand and snagged a couple, popping them into his mouth much to Kit’s dismay.

“And privacy. We’re going to require a little privacy.” Kit added.

“Like you gave me earlier?” Owen asked, lifting one eyebrow as he stared the Demon down.

Obviously I was the only one who hadn’t realized the three of them were still in the room.

“That was different.” Kit informed him with a sniff. “Who knows what kind of damage a Viking your size can do to someone as delicate as my Mistress.” Owen just rolled his eyes and I glanced around the cavern chewing my pizza bite and wondering what was wrong with this picture.

“Owen what did you do with Spot?” I asked thinking he should have shown up long before now and hoping nothing was wrong with him.

“He’s sleeping at the other end of the pool.” Owen told me his voice sounding curious.

“Did you put him to sleep or just ask him to absent himself?” I asked, pushing to my feet and looking around the room in concern.

Owen must have caught the edge in my voice because he too stood up and glanced around cautiously. “He was resting when we came in. I did nothing to him.”

The pizza disappeared and Kit shifted to a black haze from which a large silver tipped bat appeared. He circled my head once and sped off to the opposite end of the cavern and I watched him go with a sense of dread.

I sent out a frantic call to Gareth and Jace and then slammed my shields into place hoping Amras and Cursed were close enough to sense me. “Clothing.” I whispered to Owen and found myself sheathed in a black leotard that covered me from ankles to wrists while he was dressed in his standard black guard attire a wicked looking knife held in one hand.

“Look at the wall.” Owen growled and I turned from watching where Kit had disappeared to the wall Owen indicated. What I saw there turned my blood to ice. The wall was swarming with some type of furry round black creatures that didn’t appear to have legs or arms but huge mouths with very sharp teeth.

“We need more light.” I whispered and the room lit up like the Las Vegas strip on New Year’s Eve. On the far cavern wall was a hole where they seemed to be arriving from. The floor was flooded with little black fuzzy balls of teeth, all headed in our direction.

“Don’t let them touch you.” Owen told me abruptly. “They can eat through Dragon scales.”

“What can we do?” I demanded. “Fire?”

Owen nodded once and held out his hand. A pale blue flame speared out from his fingers, hitting the closest fuzzy ball and igniting it instantly. The other black balls fell on their comrade and ripped it to shreds. Owen laid down a suppressing fire and backed us up to the edge of the water. “There are too many of them.”

“Kit!” I yelled, which seemed to agitate the black creatures as more dropped from the wall and onto the floor. Something splashed in the water behind me and I turned placing my back to Owen’s as a large ripple appeared headed straight for us. “I need a weapon.” I told Owen and a sword similar to the one I’d used earlier only this one was not blunted, appeared blade down in the sand at my feet. I grasped the handle and braced myself, hoping that whatever was headed our way was friend not foe.

I heaved a sigh of relief when Kit poked his head out of the water and drug as much of Spot up onto the sand as he could manage. “He’s still alive.” Kit told me his breath coming fast. “I thought you might be able to heal him.” I glanced over my shoulder at Owen who was struggling to keep the nasty black fur balls at bay. “Help Owen.” I urged dropping to the sand as my shields fell away. I closed my eyes and remembered what Amras and Cursed had told me, reaching down to lift my crystal shield halfway. “Someone bring me Amras and Cursed.” I yelled.

Before my hands touched Spot the two of them appeared next to me. Amras immediately grabbed for me alarmed by the sight of Spot so near. Cursed freed his blade took one look and pivoted to face Kit and Owen behind us. “I need to heal him, help me.” I begged Amras who dropped to one knee in the sand and placed his hand on my shoulder. “Do what you must; I’ll help to deflect the energy.”

I nodded and placed both my hands on Spot one on his head and one on his neck as close to his body as I could reach. I closed my eyes and thought of Spot holding my golden shoe in his mouth and how much he enjoyed being scratched over his eye ridge. A tear slipped from my eye and my heart contracted. I couldn't let him die, not like this. Heal I breathed at him forcing the command down my arms and out through my hands and fingers. Spot jerked and thrashed on the sand his head lifting as he sucked in air through his snout. I shoved Amras into the water and shifted to Dragon using my body to block the burst of fire from reaching Owen and the others as it speared from Spot's mouth while he screamed and rose to his feet.

Spot ignored me completely, screaming again in defiance at the little black fuzzy creatures then harrumphing out of the water and nearly knocking the others into the swarming mass as he skidded onto the sand and began cutting a huge swath of destruction with his fiery breath. Kit took one look at him and shifted to Wurm, getting into the spirit and blowing fire everywhere. Cursed and Owen backed into the protection of my body and I wrapped my tail around them, turning to look for Amras who seemed dazed and shaky in the water on the other side of me. "Cursed, help Amras." I growled my voice sounding much lower in Dragon form.

Cursed glanced at Amras sagging in the shallows and placing one hand on my back, vaulted to my other side then waded to Amras and lifted him into his arms, carrying him back to the strip of land directly behind me.

I turned my head and glanced at Owen with one golden eye. "Bring me Gareth and Jace." I told him. They should have responded by now and I was afraid that any moment they might rush through the doors and be burned to a crisp or worse, cut apart by razor sharp teeth. Owen nodded and snapped his fingers and my Dragons stood before me slightly shaken but unharmed.

"What the hell!" Gareth growled and Jace glanced around in horror.

"I need fire!" I told them. "Are there no Dragons that can breathe it?"

Jace glanced at me and shook his head looking back at Spot who'd pressed forward but was still struggling to contain the sheer number of the little black beasties.

“Owen can you give me fire?” I asked and he shook his head and glanced at Kit. The Demon nodded and flicked his tail at me. “Shift now.” I told Gareth and Jace afraid that with Kit’s concentration elsewhere the two of them might suddenly begin spouting fire from their human mouths.

No questions asked they both simply shifted and suddenly there were three Dragons and two Wyrms standing on the sand. “Move.” I told Owen and he vaulted over me just as Cursed had done earlier. “Get into the water and get them out of here if it gets bad.” It told him bluntly. My head swung back to Jace and Gareth. “We may not want to be looking at each other when we do this.” I warned and they turned outward leaving me the middle between Kit and Spot. “Now Kit!” I roared and he flicked his tail again and flame shot out of me singing my lips when I was too slow in opening my mouth.

I took moment to get my range and frequency then lifted into the air aiming for the walls where the black beasties were still streaming through. Behind me I felt the wind from Jace and Gareth as they followed me flaming the floor to either side of us as they went. I was hoping the three of us together would be enough to melt the opening and stop the flood of beasties from wherever it was coming.

“What are they?” Jace called to me.

“I have no idea. Someone tried to kill Spot to prevent him from stopping them. If we hadn’t been here when they arrived...” I said then shuddered to think of the damage these things could have created unchecked. “I think they were meant to overrun the entire den.”

On my right Gareth flamed the wall then added. “There are passages to the other rooms from here. No doubt that was the intent.”

“This hole doesn’t look natural.” Jace growled his green head turned sideways as he stared at the opening.

I looked at the wall and noted that the edges seemed blurred as if the rock started here but simply disappeared around the edges into some other place. “Can we close it?”

Jace let out that high pitched noise he used to call Snick and the Elemental appeared hovering in the air in front of him. They conversed while Gareth and I turned and spent a couple minutes doing flybys destroying all of the little black fur balls within reach. Across the room Kit and Spot appeared to be doing well. For some reason the creatures were drawn to them. I glanced around the room looking for stragglers and wasn't able to find any. Perhaps they were all teeth and stomachs with very little brains and the promise of a potential meal had them throwing themselves to their death in an orderly fashion. All Kit and Spot needed to do was stand there and continue charring their little bodies into extinction.

"Snick says it's a portal to another world." Jace yelled at us over the sound of our flapping wings. Sand billowed up under us and I lifted a little higher to get out of the backdraft.

"Can he close it?" Gareth asked.

"No but he says the Elf should be able to."

"Which one?"

"Amras."

I nodded and turned for the water flaming the straggler while Gareth and Jace kept an eye on the opening, ensuring no more creatures bled through.

I landed in the water beside the other three and turned my head to Amras who still looked slightly shaken. I realized he must have taken the brunt of the recoil from my healing of Spot. "Are you well?" I asked lowering my head to look at him and realized I couldn't see his aura. My eyes flicked to Cursed and Owen who appeared as they had before Mi had touched me. Interesting.

"I'm fine Princess." He told me his eyes taking in the shape of me. Aside from a brief moment on the roof the other night this was the first time Amras had seen me in Dragon form. No wonder he looked so shaken.

I nodded and told them. "Someone has opened a portal to another world. Snick seems to think you can close it?"

Amras stared at me and seemed to think about it for few seconds. "I can try.

“You’ll need a lift over there. We haven’t completely eliminated all of the creatures yet.”

Amras bowed low and glanced at Owen. “Some leather clothing please?” He asked. “And my sword?” Owen snapped his fingers and Amras was dressed in clothing similar to the dark grey leather he’d worn yesterday.

“This won’t be pleasant.” I warned him as he eyed the sharp ridge down my back. “Owen perhaps some padding, or a harness of some sort?” Across the room Jace yelled for me and I urged Owen to hurry, bending down so Amras could climb onto me once the saddle like harness had been conjured. “Hold on.” I told him and vaulted into the air.

The hole was swarming again and Jace and Gareth were taking turns burning the black creatures as they appeared. I settled in behind the others at shoulder height so Amras could get a good look at the fissure. “I’ll need to touch it.” His mind whispered to mine and I turned to look at him with horror in my eyes.

“Can you not close it from here?”

“No Princess I can not.”

Gareth and Jace turned to look at us. “We need to clear the area. He has to touch the wall to close it.”

“Stay here.” Gareth told me his wing brushing against mine as he backed from the wall with a mighty sweep of his wings and twisted about. Jace followed him and the two of them crisscrossed the cavern billowing fire over the sand and rock as they went.

“Princess!” Amras yelled and I swung back to the wall in time to see several little black bodies squeezing through. They burst into flames as I released fire at them and Amras yelped holding his legs out away from my body.

“Sorry.” I told him and glanced around then dropped lower to the ground as Jace and Gareth circled back around toward us and covered my flank. “Quick Amras before another wave appears.” I urged and he vaulted off me and ran to the wall placing his hands flat on the rock to either side of the hole. In my mind I chanted hurry

hurry at him and dropped to the sand at his back. Nothing happened at first and then the rock seemed to shimmer and flow as it closed in on itself and suddenly where there had been a hole it was smooth and solid. Amras stepped back and slipped sideways his body hitting the ground before I could catch him.

Gareth yelled at me as I shifted and sank down on the sand beside Amras, turning him over in my arms. He moaned and I happened to glance at one of his hands and cried out softly in horror. All that fire on the rock had heated it. Amras' long delicate hands were black and the skin was horribly blistered. My eyes lifted to Jace who stood next to me a sick expression on his face. "Can you heal him?" He asked.

I nodded and bent my head over him remembering the smooth feel of his fingers as he touched me. How his palm had felt against my bare skin as I reached for his hands, biting my lip when he moaned a second time the pain fluttering his eyelids. Heal...I breathed, pushing the weight of my command down my arms and out through my hands into his.

His eyes met mine as I lifted my head. "Thank you Princess." He whispered then gently pulled his hand from mine and held them out in front of him.

Jace's hand fell on his shoulder and squeezed. "That was very brave." He told Amras. "Thank you for saving us all."

There was a hint of something deep in Amras' eyes as he looked back at Jace and nodded thoughtfully. "It needed to be done." He replied and I hugged him briefly then pushed up and onto my feet. Turning I noticed we were surrounded by the rest of the men. Even Gareth had shifted. Apparently the crisis was over. At the water's edge Spot was pacing back and forth, clearly still agitated as every third step steam rose from his nostrils and his pale eyes swung back and forth around the cavern obviously looking for more intruders.

"All gone?" I asked and got nods all around. "Great maybe someone can explain to me what just happened?"

Gareth stepped forward and pulled me in against his chest holding me silently for several minutes. I think the stress must have gotten to him because his grip was

tighter than normal. Whatever the cause I was happy to be held and wrapped my own arms around him squeezing him just as tight as I could while he kissed the top of my head then buried his face in my neck. When he finally released me Jace was there and his hug was equally as tight. “Can’t leave you alone for five minutes.” He muttered against my ear. I couldn’t help but smile especially when I realized I’d just healed Amras and didn’t feel the need to pass out.

## Chapter 31

No one seemed to know who could have caused the tear but Gareth and Jace seemed pretty sure it was another attempt to sabotage the meeting. Owen admitted he'd seen the creatures before but didn't have a name for them or any other information. Only that they appeared to be some sort of parasite or rodent from another world and they hunted in packs. When I asked where he'd seen them before, he simply shook his head and refused to discuss it. Some things were best left unsaid.

Gareth insisted on sweeping the entire cavern and would have taken Kit and Amras off with him but Owen pulled both Jace and Gareth aside for a little private chat. When they came back it was decided that Kit and Amras would go with me, while Owen and Cursed would assist Jace and Gareth. Not only were they planning to sweep the cavern, but also mentioned creating doors at all the entrances to the bedrooms and other passageways. Obviously they were done with uninvited guests and it was fairly clear that someone had gotten in again and this time they had not only nearly killed Spot but opened the portal, neither of which they could have done remotely.

The four of them left us there and I had the distinct feeling that I'd had my dance card filled out for me, compliments of Owen.

"Ah...alone at last." Kit smirked.

"Shall we?" I asked then turned and headed for my bedroom.

Amras gave me a strange look and I reached out and placed my arm through his dragging him along with us. “What is this about Princess?” He asked quietly.

Kit moved up on my other side then passed me so he could get the door for the three of us. “Apparently the Viking believes it is a matter of utmost security for the three of us to have intercourse.”

I glared at Kit when Amras jerked to halt and stared in dismay at Kit. “With me.” I corrected. “Not with him!”

Kit laughed and skipped down the hall towards the bedroom. Amras looked relieved then his eyes lit up and he nearly dragged me down the hallway toward my room. When he would have veered to the left I dug in my heels and yanked us to a halt. Amras skidded to a stop and turned to look at me with a surprised on his face. “What is it?” He asked his hand sliding down my arm so he could entwine my fingers in his.

I ignored him and reached for the door handle turning it and pushing back the door. The last time I’d been in here the room had been a pigsty with the Troll’s clothing everywhere. This time the entire area had changed and where one bedroom and a bath had taken up the space, there was now a hallway. I wandered in towing Amras behind me. We entered a common room with chairs and a couple couches much like the room off the kitchen except here the color scheme was a little different. The couches and chairs were mostly black leather with accents in creams and a few splashes of dark red. There were four paintings on the walls all of the same forest scene but each depicting a different time of day.

At the other end of the room was a hall and I led Amras that way and wasn’t surprised to find four doors. Kit wandered in behind me grumbling under his breath about impending doom and sightseeing and why was it that when it was finally his turn I suddenly decided to become a tourist.

I rolled my eyes and Amras pressed his lips together forcing himself not to laugh.

“This one’s mine!” Kit informed me stepping around us and swinging open the first door on the left. I stuck my head in and pulled it right back out again. The room looked like a near carbon copy of the one I’d occupied briefly with him in Hell.

“How can you stand that?” I asked, closing my eyes to stem the slight feeling of vertigo I got from the oddly angled walls and floor.

Kit just shrugged and seemed a little annoyed but simply shut the door and moved off to the next one on the left. “And here’s the Goblin’s.” He told us, turning the knob and shoving it open. I hesitated wondering if I should be doing this while Cursed and Owen weren’t there but Amras urged me forward and I caught my breath when I glanced in.

The room looked more like something a Monk might occupy. It was utterly bare except for a woven mat on the floor and a door which I guessed might lead to a bathroom. I worried at my lip and glanced at Amras who shrugged a shoulder and reached out the close the door.

“Not exactly warm and fuzzy, no wonder he prefers sleeping in your bed.” Kit remarked then hurried across the hall and threw open the next one. “Guess whose room this is?” He said rolling his eyes.

A fireplace and thick skinned furs lined one side of the room. There was a doorway leading to another bathroom I presumed. A bookcase filled with books lined one of the other walls and there was a chess board set up in the corner on a low table with a couple pillows strewn around . Kit pulled the door closed and we walked back to the first door on the left.

Kit reached for the knob but Amras beat him to it. My breath caught as I looked in on what appeared to be a forest glade. Amras’ hand at my back urged me across the threshold and into the room. The sharp scent of pine and rich dirt filled my nostrils and I glanced around at the trees, bushes, and ferns growing all around. A thick layer of pine needles lined the floor and filtered sunlight shined down from somewhere overhead. I couldn’t see the far wall or the ceiling and wondered just how big this indoor forest was.

Amras leaned down and whispered. “We could get lost in here.”

“I think I’ve got ants crawling on me!” Kit cried in mock horror. “Nasty little creatures!” He grumbled then moved back toward the door as I laughed at him. Amras smiled down at me and I winked back at him.

“Are we done now? Can we get on with it?”

I winced and Amras squeezed my shoulder his touch sympathetic. Damn Demon it was just lucky for him I liked him and he was attractive or I might have taken my chances.

“Yes, yes I am aren’t I?” He asked, turning to look at me. “What?” He demanded. “Did you expect me to romance you into submission? Please you’d see through that in a New York minute!”

“Ah Kit, you do realize the conversation you’re having is outside your head right?” I asked slightly annoyed by his flippancy.

He stopped suddenly and glanced down at me. “Are you seriously irritated at me because I want to make love to you?” He asked, his voice sounding baffled.

I tossed up my hands and glared at him. “Yes, no! Ugh! Why do you have to be so....obnoxious?” I demanded.

“Oh I don’t know, maybe it’s because I’ve known you nearly all your life and you’ve made me wait till last?” He asked leaning forward and growling at me.

“You came first before any of the other three.” I grumbled.

He frowned, put his hands on his hips and considered me for a moment. “Well maybe so but you still walked away from me.”

“I didn’t leave you there. And you said no last time, not me.” I told him quietly and reached for my bracelet, slowly rotating it around my wrist so that he knew I wasn’t talking about my bedroom the other day. We were standing in the common room, having made it that far. Amras was waiting quietly behind me, listening but not interfering in any way.

Kit heaved a sigh and delicately shuddered. “It is wrong for me to want to show you my appreciation Mistress?” He asked reaching for me and slowly tugged me toward him. I went reluctantly, my hands coming up to brace against his chest.

“No, but is there some reason you have to make it feel so...dirty?” I whispered.

“I thought you liked my sense of humor?”

Truthfully I did....usually, even when it was irritating me. “Yes but not now. Not our first time.”

He nodded and bent down to lift me into his arms. “If you’re coming Elf, make yourself useful and get the door.” He told Amras then turned and strode toward the hall.

Everyone’s clothing disappeared as we reached the bed and Kit climbed on with me still in his arms. “You didn’t snap your fingers.” I told him.

“My hands are busy.” He replied and settled me in his lap at the head of the bed amongst the pillows. “Now,” He told me as he wrapped his arms about my waist and leaned me sideways against his chest. “Do you remember that night when you were...seventeen...no wait eighteen and you were in the mountains outside of Albuquerque during one of your training exercises? There were four of you on your team and they dropped you in the middle of nowhere near a nest of young rogue Vampires?”

“Yes.” I replied, stiffening slightly in his arms.

He nodded and continued. “One of your team was a Vampire himself. What was his name....Brad or Brian?” I tried pushing up from his chest but he held me tighter and shushed me. “I just thought you should know that he wasn’t good enough for you, and that is why I made him impotent. And over the years, he wasn’t the only one.” He told me calmly while my mind sputtered around the words he was speaking.

“What?” I demanded, twisting my neck to look up at him. His black eyes twinkled as he stared down at me with a mischievous look.

“And just so you know that Were Lion the other night...well, he wasn’t for you either.”

“Oh my God!” I breathed, my hands clenching in my lap as I thought about what he was saying. “Each time I thought it was me! I thought they didn’t want me.” I whispered...my voice sounding oddly hollow.

“Oh no Mistress, it was never you.”

“How could you? I thought you weren’t supposed to interfere, that it would nullify the contract?”

Kit smiled and shook his head. “It prevented me from approaching you, not from keeping track of you and preventing others from doing something to you which you would later regret.”

I growled and demanded, “How do you know I would have had regrets?”

“You forget I’ve been watching you since you were just an itty bitty little girl. You would never have been happy with a Vampire or a Were.”

“Wait...did you...do something to Gareth or Jace?”

He smiled and shook his head again. “Oh no you showing up here was a complete stroke of good fortune. I simply made sure no one distracted you. The Dragons did all the rest. I can’t tell you how long I’d waited for just such an opportunity! You know only a real immortal will satisfy you, not a converted human. Admit it.”

I didn’t want to, but when I was done being pissed at him I would probably agree and that made me even madder. At least he hadn’t interfered with Jace or Gareth! Dang it, I never could stay angry in the face of logic. “Why are you telling me this now?”

He shrugged and admitted. “I just thought you should know because tonight we’ll come face to face with at least one or more Vampires and I know of your aversion to them and the reason. I didn’t think it was fair to handicap you. Given what the Viking said, I just felt I should tell you so you wouldn’t be conflicted with any self doubts.

I glanced at my hands and nodded. “Every single time?” I asked softly.

He chuckled and hugged me tight. “You have no idea. I had to beat them off with an impotency stick. Even hiding behind your Plain Jane mantel the bastards still wanted at you. Heaven take me, you’ve got no idea how much trouble you’ve caused me over the years.”

I smiled, I just couldn’t help myself. His words lightened my heart and I took a deep breath and slipped my arms around him laughing. “How ironic...my very own Lust Demon and you’ve spent nearly my entire life keeping me celibate! You really were the chaperone from Hell!” And I fell against his chest laughing. Kit joined me and behind us on the bed I heard Amras chucking too.

“And now I am truly next. No escape for you this time.” He told me, his voice turning low and smoky with desire. Gooseflesh erupted on my arms and upper chest as he pushed me back onto the bed and leaned over me his lips burning a path over my shoulder and up my neck. His hands wrapped around my wrists, pulling my arms over my head while he slid a knee between mine and nudged my legs apart so he could position himself over me. “Do you remember what I told you?”

I struggled to concentrate but couldn’t seem to think beyond the feel of him pressing down on me.

“Now is the time, and here is the place. Are you ready Mistress?” He whispered his tongue dipping into my ear causing me to moan and writhe pressing myself against him as I became enveloped in his aura.

“Yes.”

“Yes what? Tell me what you want.”

“You, I want you Kit!” He made a sound of pleasure and sheathed himself inside of me then he shifted, growing larger and thicker until I threw back my head panting while he lay there not moving but driving me wild with the feel of him throbbing inside me. He was saying something but it took me a moment to realize what he meant.

“Open the door, open the door Mistress.” He called to me softly. I opened my eyes and looked into the red flame burning in his eyes and reached for my funnel and

cracked open my shiny red door. “All the way.” He urged, his voice sounding strained as he held himself still above me. At the end of the bed I heard Amras gasp as I shoved the door open and desire rushed out like water bursting its dam. Kit threw back his head his skin seeming to expand somehow as if he absorbed the desire into his body. His flesh flared dark red and I stared at him helplessly as he glanced down at me, his eyes burning a path to my soul. And then he began to move and I clenched my fists, still held tightly in his hands and lifted my hips for him as he filled me completely. “Now.” He said and my body clenched and spasmed with no warning. “Again.” And his eyes narrowed as I came clenching tightly around him while I stared breathless up at him. “Once more.” He purred pulling air through his teeth as he held on and seemed to revel in the feel of me coming around his thick shaft.

My breath came in short pants and I struggled to remain conscious. Up to now he had been in control, but I closed my eyes and breathed deeply then reached for my desire and shoved it full force at him. He thrust into me, his hands clenching hard around my wrists and I opened my eyes to find his back bowed a look of wonder on his face. “Thicker.” I whispered and felt him grow even larger inside of me. The feeling caused me to clench around him again and he sucked in air and pulled his hips back. “Faster.” And his smile looked almost predatory as his hips began moving. I lifted to meet each thrust clenching down on him as he buried himself to his hilt.

Kit leaned down and our lips met, melded as he pumped into me faster and harder than I’d ever experienced before. I moaned and slipped my tongue into his mouth tasting cloves. I struggled to free my hands which seemed to excite him even more and his kiss became harder, his body pounding into mine. I writhed and gathered my desire and shoved it at him hard. His body froze above me then like a mad man he pumped into me his breathing quickening as he tore his mouth from mine and pressed his forehead into the pillow at my neck as he strained his body rushing toward orgasm. “Now.” He moaned and my back bowed with the strength of my pleasure and he forced me back onto the bed as I felt him spill his seed within me. He kissed my neck and pulled out of me immediately moving to the side while still holding my wrists.

Then Amras was over me. His body slipping into mine and I moaned and lifted to take him in while Kit held me for him and he rode me his face and body shining like he'd swallowed the moon. His pupils were dilated so that only a thin slice of violet was visible around the very rim and he looked nearly consumed with passion. I stared back at him in wonder then wrapped my legs around his thighs. His tongue and lips found my breast and he pulled me into his mouth rolling my nipple across his teeth. His hands wrapped round my forearms holding on tightly.

Kit clenched his hands at my wrists drawing my gaze. He smiled a wicked smile and whispered. "Come for him." And I gasped and exploded around Amras causing him to grunt and shove himself harder into me.

"Bigger." I ordered and Kit smiled again and glanced at Amras who had his eyes closed and was breathing hard. I felt him grow larger inside me and purred deep in my throat. Kit leaned down and his lips found mine our tongues meeting while Amras held onto me and rode my body. I reached for Kit and he released one wrist so that I could wrap my fingers around the length of him, pulling him through my palm in time with Amras' thrusts. He moaned and wrapped his hand around mine squeezing harder moving me faster. I sucked his tongue into my mouth and whimpered wanting the feel of him in my throat.

Kit pulled back and released my other wrist as I turned my head toward him while he slid his body over me from the side and I guided his length between my lips sucking him into my mouth. He moaned and I smiled, once again reaching for my desire and shoving it at both of them feeling their bodies absorb the impact in the way they tightened and thrust at me. I could feel the warm pleasure pooling between my legs and worked Kit faster. I'm not certain who came first but it sparked a reaction that swept all three of us as the pleasure exploded feeding back amongst us all. Amras and Kit both cried out and filled my body with warmth and I held on struggling to swallow and breathe simultaneously.

Amras slumped across my body his head resting between my breasts. Kit eased himself out of my mouth and curled around my head and shoulders, his arm draping

over my neck. I slid my fingers over Amras' forearms to either side of my body, gently caressing his skin while I lay there enjoying the moment. He lifted his head, his eyes looking slightly unfocused the pupils still dilated, though nothing like they'd been earlier. His voice was deep and almost rusty sounding as he informed me. "Princess if it is your intent to increase my size each time, I'll soon not fit in clothing." And to emphasize his point he pressed his hips against me.

Kit chuckled and I smiled while Amras made a pleased sound then kissed my breast and laid his head back upon me.

Chapter 32

I laid there drowsing, thinking about getting up and showering then finding something to eat. Lunch earlier had been cut short and I realized my activities had given me an appetite of another nature.

Amras' breathing was deep and even and I wondered if he hadn't fallen asleep. Above me Kit wound my curls around his fingers quietly leaning over to kiss me on the temple every so often.

"Yellow is the color of joy, happiness, intellect, and energy." Kit told me softly and I glanced down at Amras realizing he was surrounded in a thin haze the color of warm sunshine.

"Kit why do you always only ever appear the same color to me?"

"Possibly for the same reason you only ever appear the same color to me." He replied and I turned my head so I could see his face.

"Am I red-orange to you too?"

He tugged slightly on a curl and smiled. "No Mistress."

"Then what color is my aura?"

"Gold."

I nodded. "That makes sense."

“Hmmm, it means illumination, wisdom, and wealth. In nature gold symbolizes quality.” He whispered and pressed his lips against the top of my head. “It is the color which evokes feelings of prestige.”

“Truly?” I asked grinning up at him.

“Yes Mistress.” He replied his voice sounding somber. “It is quite rare.”

I thought about it for a moment then asked. “Is that one way you can tell a Demon? Their aura doesn’t change?”

He nodded then added. “Demons infuse their aura with their very nature. You haven’t been exposed to any since you came into your power, but humans have very pale, barely discernable auras. Most immortals, depending upon their nature tend to shift with their moods. Weres are usually pale brown or reddish-brown in color while Vampires have none.”

“No aura for the undead huh?”

“No, Zombies don’t either.”

“What about Wizards and Witches?” I asked.

“Humans with natural abilities still have pale auras which tend to be static. Including Necromancers; their aura is hard to miss as it tends to be a black miasma that saturates the very air around them, nasty individuals.”

“Interesting.”

“Auras come in eight main colors some with varying shades.”

“What are they?”

“Pretty much what you might expect; red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, white and black.” He replied.

“Only Owen, you, and I can see them. Are there any other races that can?”

Kit nodded. “Necromancers, your friend Mi, some species of Faerie creatures, but not many. Every once in a while a human pops up with the ability. Though I expect it’s just a latent power from somewhere back in their ancestry.”

“Pixies.” Amras added softly. “And some Goblins. It’s a rare talent and highly valued. It gives you an advantage over your enemies. Cursed has the ability.”

“Really?” I asked my hands stilling on his shoulders and I realized I’d been idly stroking him while Kit and I chatted.

He lifted his head and nodded, resting his chin on my ribs. “It is one of the reasons he was selected for the Queen’s guard, that and his battle skill.”

“So why can Owen see you as different colors?” I asked Kit.

“That Mistress is a mystery.”

I was mulling that over when Mi suddenly appeared on the bed next to me causing me to jump. “Oh this should be good.” She muttered glancing amongst the three of us then turned toward the door as it swung open abruptly and my Mother strode in with a chagrined Owen and distressed Cursed on her heels. I squeaked and grabbed for Amras who would have moved had I not wrapped my arms around him and held him down as a covering.

“Kit some clothing please?” I hissed and found myself wearing a skimpy baby doll in violet and black. I closed my eyes, briefly wondering at his humor since the color matched Amras’ eyes to perfection. Kit managed to clothe himself in black silk pajama pants but purposely neglected to provide Amras with anything. I would have said something but my Mother was already standing beside the bed having crossed the room in a hurry and was just now realizing the situation she’d stormed in upon.

“Hello Mother.” I muttered my hands still clenching Amras’ naked body. Kit curled around me a little closer and propped his head up on his hand.

She took a slow moment her eyes traveling over the bed and each occupant before she pressed her lips together and focused on me. “Lexi do you have any idea what you’ve done?” She demanded.

I thought about it for a moment, my mind blanking on a reason she could be there until Mi leaned over and whispered. “Newspapers.” I sucked air and nodded back at her.

“What were you thinking telling the press you were royalty?” She cried leaning her hands on the bed. “The press is hounding me. How am I supposed to get any work done with camera crews and reporters camped on my doorstep?”

Sometimes you lean in and sometimes you lean back. Right then I leaned in just accepting the anger aimed at me, wondering how I was going to make this right. The room went silent and I realized she must have asked a question but I hadn't been paying attention and simply did the best I could. "I'm sorry?" I offered lamely, wincing at the look of complete frustration covering her lovely face.

"Ah Mom do you think we could....continue this conversation in the other room?" I asked, noticing that Amras hadn't moved or said a word. He was holding his head up having pressed his arms into the bed in preparation of raising himself, probably so he could bow to her. The position didn't look comfortable and he flicked his eyes at me.

"No we will not young lady. You will explain to me right now what you intend to do about this."

My gaze shifted to Cursed and Owen who were standing behind my Mother. It looked like both men were doing their best to school their features. Given Amras' state of undress it didn't take a genius to understand their reason. I gave Owen an imploring look and he simply shook his head crossing his arms over his chest. I glanced back at Amras who raised an eyebrow and surprised me by pushing himself up onto all fours, leaning forward and kissing me softly before gracefully sliding along the covers toward the edge of the bed. He deliberately moved to the side closest to the door, forcing my Mother to take several steps back as he slipped to the floor his hair spilling around him like a pale curtain as he swept it over his shoulder. The look on her face was beyond priceless as she struggled, seemingly unable to prevent her glance from perusing his body.

"Princess." Amras acknowledged stopping so that he was in profile to me but facing her, he waited a heartbeat before dipping his head in deference.

"Lord Amras." She replied. "You look....well."

He smiled at her and replied. "Thank you Princess...apparently I improve with use." Then he dipped his head again and walked across the floor disappearing into the bathroom. I don't think it escaped anyone's notice that he was now very well endowed.

I choked then coughed while behind me Kit made amused sounds.

“Well, well, well.” Mi breathed under her breath and I had to bite my tongue as Cursed shot me an incredulous look. Owen rolled his eyes but said nothing.

“Mom, I can’t really deal with this now.” I told her suppressing the urge to grin as I pushed myself into a sitting position and tried to cover as much of me as possible with the short hem of my nightie.

“And why not?” She asked, shifting back to look at me. Her voice sounded odd and I bit my tongue again trying not to think of Amras naked under the water as I heard the shower start up. I clamped down on my wayward thought but obviously not fast enough because Mi turned her knowing amber eyes on me and made a purring noise in her throat.

“Maybe because someone is trying to kill us, or because Gareth and Jace have an important meeting here tonight with some very sensitive people and we’re just trying to get through it before we figure out what to do about this latest debacle.” I admitted.

Cursed looked like he wanted to say something but I glared at him and he subsided.

My Mother noticed my look and shifted to face Cursed. “Who wants to kill you and how could you have let this happen?” She demanded her tone turning nasty.

Cursed looked as if he’d been slapped and dropped his head, that’s when I lost my temper and practically screamed at her. “Don’t talk to him like that! Haven’t you done enough damage already? He’s not yours anymore Mother, he’s mine now and you’re not going to blame him for something he didn’t do!”

Mi’s eyes widened to the size of saucers as she glanced between my Mother and me. I had pushed up onto my hands and knees and discovered I was clenching the bed covers in my hands.

Cursed dropped to the floor his face clearly horrified before it disappeared from sight below the crown of his head. I frowned at him but was honestly more concerned about my Mother who slowly turned back to me with a look of pained surprise.

I took a deep breath, not really sorry I'd said what I had but worried I might have been overzealous in my delivery. "I'm sorry Mother I should not have raised my voice at you, but I'm the one you should be angry with not Cursed. I realize you are distraught and didn't mean to take out your anger on the others. I promise first thing tomorrow I'll sit down with Gareth and Jace and we'll figure something out. In the meantime I have no plans to go out in public anytime soon and am hoping this will blow over. Maybe you and Mi can take a nice long vacation. Visit Dad or something?" I told her waving a hand in frustration. Obviously she needed to get out of town.

She frowned at me her pale blue eyes narrowing slightly. "All this sex seems to be affecting your temper daughter. However that is not entirely a bad idea, maybe it is time I returned home for a visit." On the floor behind her Cursed jerked as if hit and I was glad that Amras was in the other room.

I forced myself to smile at her and nod. "Tell Grandma hello for me."

She seemed to mentally shake herself and added. "It's about time the Sidhee reopened its doors don't you think? Maybe I can salvage this after all. In the meantime I suggest you refrain from making any comments to anyone."

I nodded again and glanced at Mi who was surprisingly quite for a change.

"Come along Mi we've arrangements to make. Lexi dear try to stay out of trouble will you? I'll be in touch soon to let you know our plans." And with that she turned and strode toward the door, brushing past Cursed without stopping or even looking at him. My heart broke a little and I struggled to control my anger at her callous treatment of him. I'd never known my Mother to be outright cruel before and it shook me.

Mi stood and flicked her tail. "Don't be too harsh on her." She whispered, pressing her body against me as I knelt on the bed my hand automatically reaching out to stroke her back. "It's hard realizing you were two times a fool."

She jumped from the bed and wandered over to Cursed seating herself before him and waited patiently until he lifted his eyes to her. "Consider this Goblin," she informed Cursed. "Our Lexi may well be a Dragon, but she has never stood up to her

Mother before...not ever, not for anyone.” Then she trotted out the door leaving utter silence in her wake.

I felt sick to my stomach and was irritated seeing Cursed practically prostrating himself and snapped, “Get up!” at him, my voice harsh with emotion. He stood immediately looking confused. I dropped my face into my hands and fought to restrain a sob, my body shuddering with the effort. I considered what I’d just done and felt my stomach roil and cramp in warning so that I clapped my hand over my mouth, scrambled off the bed, and ran for the toilet.

I barely made it to the bathroom before I heaved out what little food I’d eaten that day as well as last week’s too. Or maybe it just felt that way. No one should be seen with their head lying across a toilet seat but that didn’t seem to worry my guys. The shower had long since turned off and I imagined Amras had left the room when I heard the bathtub start up and felt someone slip in behind me and muttered. “Go away.”

I recognized Gareth’s chuckle and whined. “I yelled at my Mother.”

“So I heard.” He replied pushing back a strand of hair from my face. “Are you quite done?” When I nodded he handed me a wet washcloth and a glass of water waiting while I rinsed before picking me up and carrying me to the tub. I realized he was naked when he set me on the edge and helped me out of my nightie. Jace was already in the water waiting for us.

I put down my glass on the tub and slipped in, dunking my head under and scrubbing at my face with my hands, trying unsuccessfully to erase the last twenty or so minutes.

“So I spoke with Snick and it seems someone tried to poison Spot. We found some kind of animal carcass near where he sleeps.” Jace told me as he reached for the shampoo and turned me around so he could soap my hair. I stood quietly while he worked then dunked myself getting out the soap so he could use the cream rinse. When my hair was clean I seated myself between them and leaned my head back.

“With Snick and Owen’s assistance, we added four inch titanium doors to all the outside entrances and tied them in to our security system. We tried steel first but Cursed had a very bad reaction to the iron content so we quickly switched. You’ll be happy to know that we are Elf Friendly at all the doors. We also created doors on the cavern side for all passageways leading to the bedrooms and up to the other levels. By the way, the chip in your arm will open any of the new doors.” Gareth added.

“Assuming you did have it implanted?” Jace queried then smiled when I nodded.

“Did you find any more beasties?” I asked staring up at the rock ceiling.

“No it seems we got them all earlier.”

“We should have put the doors in a long time ago; it was overdue and lax on our part.” Jace added.

“Do you think whoever got in is still here, hiding?” I asked, turning my head to look at Jace.

“No we believe they left the way they came. Probably worried they’d get eaten themselves.”

I caught the look that passed between the two and sat up. “What?” I muttered, my gaze slowly swinging between them.

Gareth gave a nod and replied. “Cursed was able to track the intruders through the tunnels. He believes it was two men....a human and someone that smelled of Hyena.”

I thought about that for a moment then leaned forward on the seat. “You think it was Ricky?”

“I should have just killed the bastard.” Jace muttered an angry expression on his face.

“We don’t know for certain, though he had knowledge of the tunnels.”

“Had being the key word here. I thought Snick erased his memory?”

“He did.” Jace growled. “But that doesn’t mean someone didn’t find him and tamper with him.”

“Great,” I moaned, “so if it was Ricky, whoever is behind him knows about me too.” I was suddenly glad I’d already heaved everything there was to heave.

“Well the good news is that he’s gone, we’re protected, and you were there when the attack began so the creatures didn’t get out of the cavern and we didn’t suffer any damages.”

I chewed my lip and stared at nothing. “Ricky couldn’t have opened that portal. What human has that kind of power?”

Gareth and Jace didn’t seem to know and I could tell it worried them.

Jace tried to lighten the mood by stating. “So it was pretty cool breathing fire. Do you think we’ll still be able to when we shift next time?”

If our change was anything like Amras’ alteration the answer would be yes. “Maybe, I don’t know.” I admitted.

Gareth raised an eyebrow at me and I felt a slow flush creeping up my neck and cheeks. “No bigger.” He warned and I knew he somehow knew about Amras’ second growth spurt.

Someone had obviously tattled on me.

Jace snorted and gave me a look. “No one had to.” He informed me sourly.

“She hasn’t a notion.” Gareth replied dragging a hand over his face and rubbing his jaw.

“How can she not?”

Gareth shrugged and stared up at the ceiling. I started feeling antsy wondering what it was I was missing. “She did warn us.”

“Yes she did.” Jace grumped.

“It is most distracting.”

“Makes it hard to concentrate, you just don’t know when the next jolt is coming.”

“Two or three times a day and I’m still hard as a rock the rest of the time.”

“Staying away is difficult.”

“It’s not so bad when she is working out.”

“Or sleeping.”

“Hmmm.”

“I suppose it could be worse, at least we aren’t changing our clothing as often as the others.”

“Yeah well abstinence will ruin a man’s control. That is for certain.”

“Her range is improving.”

“I know.”

“Should we be worried?” Jace asked and they both turned to look at me.

I wasn’t sure what they wanted me to say. I was having a problem trying to figure out what they were talking about. It was like... “I’m broadcasting when I’m... oh God!” I whispered feeling a sense of horror and embarrassment tingling through my body. They nodded at me in unison and I groaned and dropped my face into my hands. Why hadn’t someone told me sooner? Then I thought back over the last couple of days at all the hints the others had dropped and wondered how I could have been so oblivious. “I am so sorry.” I muttered from behind my fingers. My face on fire.

“When it was just the three of us, it wasn’t an issue.”

“We thought you knew and were aware of our mutual sharing.”

I had sensed it. That each felt the other’s pleasure. I just thought that was because we were together at the time and because they shared some kind of bond between them. I hadn’t realized they would still feel something even though they weren’t actually with me. And I had no idea that I was broadcasting to all six of them, every time. I groaned again and rocked forward slightly. This was a disaster. Even buried under several hundred feet of rock I couldn’t be trusted.

“I wouldn’t go that far.” Jace soothed. “If it’s any consolation, we have our license for sex for the club, and the recruits seem happy.”

“Oh God!” I moaned, not them too! Was there no one I wasn’t infecting?

Gareth made a sound in his throat. “Jace is teasing. This isn’t some form of disease to be infecting anyone! And the recruits have no idea what is happening. I

spoke to Nick and it seems all they get is a sense of satisfaction or well being which doesn't compare to those of us that have actually.... experienced your body first hand."

"Well actually you only seem to be affecting the six of us and some of the others were feeling it before you actually....became intimate. So we aren't certain if it's all immortals or just those that you've formed some sort of bond with."

I peeked at him between my fingers his words making me feel somewhat better. "What about the club?" I asked my tone husky.

He gave me a lopsided grin and put his arm along the top of the tub behind me. "We didn't have to use our new license last night, if that's what you're asking."

That at least, was something.

"Indeed it is."

"Why didn't one of the other's tell me?" I asked wrapping my arms around my waist and slumping back into the water.

"Hmm let me think." Jace added his tone teasing and I realized that perhaps that was a silly question.

I remembered something Kit had said when he'd come into the sauna earlier. I hadn't taken him seriously at the time...but could the strength of my passion really drop Amras and Cursed to their knees?

Gareth's fingers brushed my shoulders his hand stroking gently. "On more than one occasion." He admitted. "In fact...whatever you were doing earlier nearly laid them out."

"But not you or Jace?" I asked shyly.

Gareth pulled me in for a hug and chuckled as Jace remarked. "Damn near but we just happened to be holding onto the tunnel wall at that moment and managed to retain our feet...barely."

"You aren't mad at me?"

"Hardly," Jace teased, "I think I'm in love!"

I smiled at him and remarked. “Are you sure you’re not in lust...or just want to be?” And I wiggled my eyebrows at him pleased as his face tightened and his eyes narrowed.

“Yes I would, very much.” He assured me reaching out to run the back of his fingers down my arm.

“Now don’t start that.” Gareth muttered and I slipped a leg across his thighs and pulled myself onto his lap while I stared back at Jace. I wrapped my arm about Gareth’s neck and leaned over to offer my lips to Jace. I’d never been able to be near them for very long without wanting either or both of them.

“Start what?” I asked breathlessly as I pulled back from Jace and moved against Gareth feeling his body respond to mine. I tightened in anticipation and leaned forward running my tongue lightly over his cupid bow lips pulling the scent of him into my lungs. “This?” I asked, pressing my breasts against him and reaching between us to cup him in my hand.

“Nevermind.” He groaned his hands reaching for my hips as he raised himself and pulled me onto the length of him.

Chapter 33

I slept deeply and woke to my stomach growling amidst a pile of naked arms and legs. I glanced down and recognized Owen's brown skin and pale hair on the arm covering my chest. Turning my head I found Cursed's face on the pillow next to me and there was a head laying across my inner thigh or so I thought as it had fallen asleep at some point and I couldn't feel much below my hip.

I lifted my head and glanced around, wondering what time it was and noticed Kit curled in a chair across the room reading from a red leather bound book. One of Jace's I wondered? He glanced at me and winked as he closed the book. "Interesting reading, I'll have to ask where he came by it." He told me softly.

"How long have I been asleep?" I asked.

"Long enough for the horde to pass out while they were waiting for you to wake up. Actually, I'd say about three or four hours." He told me when I frowned at him.

"What time is it?"

He turned his head to the side and stilled. "Almost ten." He replied then waved his arm and the book disappeared.

I needed to get up and eat then start thinking about getting dressed. Just the thought made me groan and Cursed slipped his arm over my waist snuggling in tighter against my side. I turned toward him and found myself looking directly into his dark expressive eyes. "I didn't get the chance to say thank you earlier." He whispered and

kissed the tip of my nose. “I have never had a Princess do battle for me before. Actually you saved my life more than once today. I thank you My Lady.”

“I doubt my Mother would have ordered your execution.” I replied. “And you should thank Kit who gave us the fire we needed to destroy the black creatures.”

“Still, one never knows what a jealous woman will do.” Owen offered. “And I should know. It wasn’t my brother that erased my memory.” He muttered as he pushed up into a sitting position.

I was still looking into Cursed eyes and didn’t miss the flash of pleasure at Owen’s words.

“I take it nap time is over?” Amras asked wrapping his arm and leg over mine.

“Yes please I can’t feel my leg from the hip down.”

“My apologies Princess.” He replied quickly lifting himself off me. I tried to wiggle my toes and braced myself against the onset of prickly needles when I moved my leg. “I think I owe Kit a thank you too.” He remarked. “Nudity can be so...liberating.” All four of them chuckled and I took the opportunity to sit up, wincing as the blood started flowing through my lower extremity.

Apparently we were going to discuss my Mother so I asked. “Do you think the Queen will be angry at me?”

Amras pulled his knees up and rested his arms on them. “I think she will be delighted at the Princess’ return.”

Cursed leaned up on an elbow amongst the pillows. “Do not be surprised My Lady if you receive a summons to the Sidhee.”

Amras nodded thoughtfully in agreement. “Most likely it will be contingent upon reopening the doors.”

I glanced between the two, not sure if I liked the sound of that. Though I’d always dreamed of visiting, I’d never actually considered it a possibility. “Will she like me?” I asked, my voice sounding hesitant.

Amras smiled and rocked slightly his beautiful eyes lighting up. “The Queen will adore you Princess and so will the court.”

“Even with my mixed blood?”

Cursed ran his fingers down my forearm gaining my attention. “Had you been Human it would not be the case My Lady. But the powers you possess will guarantee your acceptance in Faerie.”

I had a terrible thought and turned to Cursed. “Will my having taken you to my bed be a problem if we return?” I asked, my eyes searching his face as he absorbed my words.

His voice was hesitant when he spoke. “It could be a problem.”

“One the Queen will likely ignore.” Amras added. “As long as you are discreet and the Princess is well. The onus will not be on you to assume the throne and since you are not betrothed you break no vows by taking lovers.”

Cursed nodded but still looked uncomfortable. “But the court will not be pleased.”

“The court will overlook her indiscretion or risk losing her.” Amras replied strongly. “Having grown up outside of Faerie will allow our Princess...some certain leeway is granted her.”

I couldn’t help chuckling at that. “You mean because I was raised amongst the humans they won’t expect much?”

Amras winced slightly yet in the end he nodded.

“I’ve never been in a Sidhee.” Kit remarked and we all glanced at him as he sat on the edge of the bed. Amras and Cursed glanced at each other with raised eyebrows. “You don’t think I’m letting my Mistress out of my sight do you? I’m legally bound to her for all eternity.” He reminded them primly.

Owen nodded and looked at Amras then Cursed. “I too feel bound to the Princess; though I hold no contract and my reasons are not mine to discuss. I have been in a Sidhee just not here in America, and it was a very long time ago. Like the Demon, I’ll not be left behind.”

“I think,” I told them all with a sigh. “That we should worry about getting through this evening before we plan any vacations.”

“And to do that we must need feed the Princess who appears to be losing weight. I fear our selfishness may be endangering her health.”

I frowned and glanced down at my body, wondering if Amras wasn't correct in that my hip bones seemed to be sticking out a little more than normal. Then I smiled. With the six of them around I wasn't going to need to worry about getting enough exercise!

“No that won't be a problem.” Owen chuckled as he slipped off the bed and reached for his pants pulling them on and fastening them. Cursed and Amras also left the bed and dressed themselves in their leathers. Kit was already dressed which left me sitting there naked. I hadn't had any clothing to leave by the bedside.

“Areth?” I called and a dark red dressing robe appeared on the bed beside me. I reached to pull it on, belting it tightly then struggled to lift my hair out from beneath it. Cursed leaned over and helped me and I was glad Jace had taken the time to comb it out and let it dry before he'd put me to bed. There were fuzzy red slippers on the floor next to the bed and I slipped them on. The subterranean floors around here could be cold on the feet at times.

No one else had any ideas for dinner so I ordered us up salad and manicotti. It was a crime not to have garlic bread with the cheesy goodness of the stuffed shells but I didn't think that was the message we wanted to send to our guests that evening so we settled for bread with olive oil and vinegar instead.

The first thing I did after the food arrived was make up two spare plates and called for Areth asking her to deliver the food to Jace and Gareth since I was concerned that they had not eaten and were too busy to come down to join us.

Areth left us a bottle of red and I sipped from my glass while Owen entertained us through dinner with a story of Olaf the Crafty who'd gone a-viking but ended a thrall to the King's son. Gareth and Jace wandered in just as desert appeared and they left their empty plates on in the sink and joined us for gelato.

When I would have cleared, Jace told me not to bother. It was getting late and he sent me off to get dressed promising to join us shortly as Gareth led me to his bedroom.

“He has some information we needed to share with the others.” Gareth told me as he closed the door behind me and swept me into his arms. His lips were tender and stole my breath. “Thank you for dinner, it was wonderful and so very sweet of you.”

“Well I can’t have you passing out from hunger on such an important evening.” I teased running my hands over the muscles of his chest.

He dropped his forehead to mine and sighed. “Stay close to Jace and I tonight.” He whispered. “We will keep you safe.”

The door opened and Jace stepped in giving Gareth a searching look. “Did you tell her?” He asked and I stiffened not liking the sound of the question or the way Gareth’s body responded.

“Not yet.”

“Tell me what?” I asked pulling back and looking between them. Gareth led me across the room and seated me on the bed. When he clasped his hands behind his back I knew for sure I wasn’t going to like whatever he was about to say.

“You are making her nervous, just tell her.” Jace hissed.

Gareth closed his eyes and took a breath then opened them and looked directly at me. I stared up into the dark blue of his gaze and braced myself. “We won’t be the only Dragons in attendance tonight.”

My eyes widened and I asked. “Not Dane?”

“No.” Gareth frowned. “It’s a female. Her name is Belinda and she’s red and....volatile.”

“Vicious you mean.” Jace added.

“You’ve slept with her?” I asked and Gareth shook his head vehemently denying my question while Jace refused to look at me.

“One does not sleep with Belinda, not unless one enjoys torture. I’d say it was more an exchange of sexual favors quickly followed by a strong need to bathe

repeatedly and change my geographical location. It was a mistake. One I made a very long time ago and have never repeated.” Jace admitted.

I couldn’t help wincing on his behalf. “She sounds...scary.” I told them. “Why is she coming?”

“We received word that she’s taken up with Valentine Loveless our resident bad guy Vampire.”

“Nice name, did he think that one up all by himself?” I commented, chewing at my lower lip.

“Probably, who knows what his real name is.”

“You don’t suppose she’ll invite me out for tea or anything do you? You know, compare Jace stories?” I smiled, trying not to show my concern.

“I seriously doubt it. She’s not going to like you one little bit.” Jace growled. “This is why we have decided to dress you up as an Elf, with Kit around your neck, just as he was on the Courthouse steps.”

“We’re hoping his scent will throw her off and we can get through the evening without exposing you as a Dragon. Also, Owen will accompany you in his wolf form.”

I was nodding as he spoke. It made sense. Cursed and Amras would play up my Elf appearance while Owen and Kit would remain with me but in disguise. There was much to be said for hiding in plain sight. I thought about it for a moment and remembered something. “We need Owen.” I told Jace, and he frowned but left quietly coming back with Owen in tow. Both men moved into the room and everyone looked at me. “You said you’d been to a Sidhee before right?” I asked then smiled when he nodded. “As a...Minor God did you perhaps attend any formal affairs?” Gareth and Jace frowned down at me no doubt wondering where I was going with my questions.

“Several.” Owen agreed.

“And were the Elven women dressed richly?” I asked and smiled when his dark brown eyes turned nearly liquid with memories.

“Yes indeed. More beautiful than anything I’d ever seen.” He agreed.

“And could you work with Areth to recreate something similar? For me?” I asked. “If I’m to be Elven then I believe I should be Elven in appearance too.”

“Brilliant.” Gareth breathed his blue eyes shining. He bent to my ear and whispered softly. “Both Jace and I have also been inside a Sidhee...but we’ll leave Owen to work this out with your Gnome.”

I stared up at him in surprise a million questions running through my mind which I’d have to leave till later. Instead I called Areth and asked her to work with Owen. The two of them went to the far side of the room and put their heads together. I watched for a minute then turned back to Gareth and Jace. “Is there anything else you want to tell me?”

Gareth shook his head and Jace muttered. “You took that much better than I thought you would.”

If I didn’t know better I would swear he looked like he was pouting. “Jace, whom would you prefer in your bed, Belinda or me?” I asked, tilting my head to look up at him.

He looked slightly horrified and quickly responded. “You, of course you.”

“Then why should I feel jealous?” I replied calmly.

He frowned and then smiled at me. “No reason, no reason at all.”

I chuckled and leaned forward to whisper. “Besides I know something she doesn’t.”

“And what is that?” He whispered back.

“I....don’t have dangly parts.”

Gareth laughed suddenly and so did Jace. Across the room Owen looked up and gave us a curious smile before he turned back to Areth.

Jace turned serious and gave me an odd look. “Whatever happens she can’t find that out. If she does there won’t be any stopping her. She will try to kill you.”

“I figured.” I told him, no longer smiling.

“I already warned the others.” Jace assured me and I took a deep breath and tried to regain my smile. In the end I slipped into his arms, letting him hold me while I tried not to think about how many things could go wrong.

Fifteen minutes later I was sitting on a chair Areth conjured for me in the bathroom while she worked on my face and hair. Jace was seated on the tub and Gareth was leaning against the wall behind us. Owen had gone off to bathe in his own chambers leaving the four of us alone. Jace was running through last minute details while Gareth watched Areth transform me in the mirror and brooded.

“Areth can you provide clothing appropriate for Lord Amras and Cursed?” I asked and the little woman nodded.

“It’s already done Mistress.” She assured me. The Elf shall be dressed as befits an Elven Lord and they have been provided the appropriate festive clothing for a Royal Guard of the Faerie. “Snick is assisting them.”

“What about us?” Jace asked. “What do we get to wear?”

Areth glanced at him in the mirror her black eyes dancing. “Did the Master wish leather or fine garments?”

Jace thought about it for a moment. “I’ll wait to see what Lexi’s wearing.” And I bit my lip trying not to smile.

Areth nodded thoughtfully and wove more curls into place. A good third of my hair was piled on the top of my head which added height. I was short for an Elf, something Areth was working to correct. Thinking about it I suspected I’d be stuck wearing high heels tonight. Nothing like a nice pair of four inches to raise me up to normal Elf stature.

When she was done the three of us followed her into the bedroom and I couldn’t help gasping in awe at the dress laid out on the bed. It looked like light and air shot through with golden threads I suspected might be real. At first glance it appeared to be a pale cream color which would surely accentuate my golden hued skin, but as I got closer the color changed, bled to a richer almost golden color with touches of wine and

green and blue. The fabric was nothing I'd ever seen before and nearly looked alive as it whispered across the bed when I brushed it with my fingers.

I pulled off my dressing gown and Gareth assisted me into the dress, something that made me smile since it was usually the other way around. Areth stood on the bed, hands on hips as she watched with approval as I eased it onto me. No underwear again and possibly for the same reason as this dress was quite low in the front with a cut out scooped neck that exposed my breasts almost to the nipples. Below my breasts the dress was fitted across my ribs and stomach to my hips where it flared to the floor. There was a yoke across the top of my shoulders front and back which buttoned the high collar then nothing to the base of my spine. The bodice was covered in delicate embroidered flowers which flowed down the sides of my breasts and ended in a v between my hips. My long flowing sleeves nearly brushed the floor and the skirt was very full with a short train. There was more than ample material to hide the fact that I was missing dangly parts.

For all that the dress must have contained five yards of material it was light and shimmered and flowed around me like air. When I glanced at the back of my dress the embroidery was continued and I could see a multitude of extremely detailed flowers which started at the base of my spine and flowed down and across the back of the dress, wrapping round at the hem in the front. I looked closer and noticed the flowers seemed to be of all types and shapes and were embroidered in very pale colors, their detail so fine I felt I could pluck one and smell its sweet fragrance.

Gareth buttoned my high collar and stood back to look at me. He smiled and I licked my lips feeling very feminine from the gleam in his eye. "Exquisite." He breathed.

Jace turned to Areth and simply said. "Not leather." Areth nodded and waved her arm and the men's clothing appeared on the bed. Then it was my turn to watch as the two of them changed into their slacks and shirts. For this evening Areth had opted for finely woven linen instead of the normal silk and both men's shirts were in their signature colors.

Areth provided Jace with cream colored slacks that matched my dress when you looked at it from the front. Gareth's pants were the darker color my dress appeared when you turned your head slightly. Both had high collared jackets that matched the overall theme with gold threads woven into the fabric at the cuffs and collars. Down the front of both jackets Areth had added embroidery to match mine only instead of flowers they had Dragons in flight. The embroidery was so very fine I couldn't help running my fingers over the miniature figures which seemed to actually move with the men's motions.

"Wow." I breathed. "Areth you've outdone yourself! Thank you."

She smiled proudly and waved her hand again. "Do not forget your shoes." She told us and then she was gone, leaving the three of us to pull on our footwear and gawk at each other.

When we were all dressed and ready to go, Gareth pulled open the drawer in his nightstand and took out two black velvet boxes, one large and one small. He handed the large box to Jace and turned the smaller one to me. "We would be honored Lexi if you would wear this." He told me his voice sounding very serious. I leaned forward as he opened the box and found myself captivated. There nestled within the velvet was a beautiful golden ring. Miniature replicas of Gareth and Jace in dragon form circled a large red-orange multi-faceted cut stone and looked up at me out of emerald and sapphire eyes. The workmanship and detail was exquisite and I lifted a finger tracing the perfect figures.

"It is beautiful." I breathed. Gareth nodded and pulled the ring from its holder. He held out his hand to me and I gave him my left and watched in pleasure as he slipped it onto my fourth finger. Jace made a pleased sound and his teeth flashed pearly white when I glanced at him.

"Now this one." He told me and stepped forward. "We thought it would be appropriate to provide you with a weapon for this evening." And he cracked open the box so I could stare in wonder at the beautiful dagger resting next to a dark sheath of

leather decorated in fine carvings. End to end the dagger was about nine inches long. The hilt was inlaid with emeralds and sapphires and the blade looked very sharp.

“If you’ll lift your dress?” Jace asked, and I couldn’t help the wicked smile I sent him while I pulled my dress out of the way and offered him my right leg. He laid the box on the bed while he strapped the hilt to the outside of my calf making sure it wouldn’t slip before he stood. He then lifted the blade to me giving me a minute to feel its weight and balance. I leaned down, lifted my dress and slid the blade home, liking the way it had felt in my hand.

“Thank you.” I told them both and stepped forward to hug first Jace who was closest and then Gareth.

“Let’s get out of here before we do something rash and end up missing the meeting.” Jace urged.

The other four were waiting in the living room and I took a moment to admire Amras and Cursed’s attire. Amras looked like every girl’s vision of an aristocratic Elf all sumptuous in his well tailored black and amethyst coat which reached to mid thigh. His pants were black and fit him like a glove, showing off his thighs. He had a silver handled blade belted at his side. His pants disappeared into knee high black boots which were shined to high gloss and looked like they could reflect a person’s image. His hair was loose and hung down his back like fine pale silk. At his brow was a coronet of finest silver inlaid with amethysts the exact color of his beautiful eyes. He bowed to me and I smiled and turned from him to Cursed who stood as we approached.

My Goblin looked like a portrait of beautiful death, the sight of him nearly stole my breath. His clothing was solid black on black and like Amras’ was well fitted and showed off his body to perfection. His leather coat was long, nearly brushing his ankles. Around his waist he wore his sword and I could see the hilt of a blade peeking out the top of his high black boots. His shirt was open at the neck and looked like silk. He looked dark and serious....deadly. He too had opted to leave his hair down and it swung around his hips like black thunder clouds. Across his forehead sat a thin circlet of finely woven silver.

“My Lady.” He acknowledged me, bowing low at the waist before standing.

“Gentlemen.” I greeted them all, my eyes moving to each one in turn. “Shall we go?”

Owen stood and shifted turning into a huge white timber wolf with large brown eyes and a beautiful jewel studded collar. “You look incredibly lovely.” He told me.

“Thanks in no small part to you.” I told him and he nodded his great white head and flashed his canines.

Kit was still sprawled across his chair and I could feel his black eyes following my every movement. His face looked intense and just a tad mischievous and I hoped he’d behave himself tonight. “No Little Johnny jokes.” I warned and nearly groaned when he simply lifted an eyebrow in response. He shifted to his miniature black and silver Dragon form and launched himself into the air flapping his beautifully barbed wings as he led us down the hall toward the elevators.

We crowed in and I pressed back against Jace who wrapped his arm about my waist. Kit settled onto Owen’s back and I heard the wolf sigh. He was standing next to my leg and I buried my hand in his ruff letting him know I appreciated his patience. At which point he chuckled and sat, causing Kit to slide onto the floor with a bump and an indignant cry.

The doors opened onto the lobby for the conference room and no one moved, none of us wanting to step on Kit. Cursed took pity on him and leaned down to offer him his left forearm. Kit turned his head his little black eyes whirling as he jumped onto Cursed who winced slightly as the tiny claws dug in.

“Behave.” I hissed at Kit who seemed to hunch in on himself as he wrapped his long barbed tail about Cursed’s forearm.

“I am trying Mistress.” Kit informed me stiffly.

I wasn’t certain what was the matter with him but now was not the time to discuss it as Cursed stood and led us out into the foyer. There were guards on either side of the elevator doors, at the entrance to the conference room, and another two at the entrance to the living quarters. We stepped out and I caught the smell of wolf as

well as leopard and bear. Two of the guards glanced sharply at Owen and it was almost as if they were struggling not to react to his presence.

“What is their problem?” I whispered to Jace who’d taken my arm and was leading me through the conference room doors.

“I don’t smell like wolf.” Owen replied as he walked at my side his head swinging from left to right as he surveyed the room. He left me then and made a circuit of the table, his nose twitching as he checked out everything.

Jace led us just a little way down the table before he turned us to face the foyer. From where we stood we had a good view of the doorway and would be the first thing anyone stepping into the room would see. His arm slipped around my back beneath my hair and I could feel his fingers gently stroking my skin. I suddenly felt nervous and rolled my ring round my finger.

Owen came back to me and sat quietly on my right side his head level with my waist. My fingers slid into the soft hair at his ruff and rested there.

Gareth was standing at the door speaking into his communicator and I suspected our guests were about to begin arriving. How nice of them to be on time.

Like Owen, Cursed and Amras made a circuit of the room, no doubt walking off the steps and checking to ensure there were no hidden doorways from which someone might spring out and attack us. They both gave the bathroom corridor a thorough search.

Out in the hall we heard the elevator start up and Amras and Cursed crossed the room slipping in behind us to either side. Cursed lifted his arm and Kit hopped to my shoulder opposite Jace. I stood quietly while he rumbled softly and rubbed his head and body against my cheek his tail draping about my neck. Perhaps he was picking up on my nerves and trying to soothe me.

“Here we go, lift your shield and think happy thoughts.” Jace whispered and I snapped my crystal shield into place.

“Both?” I asked.

“No this is fine for now. I trust you’ll know when or if the other is needed.” He replied, his eyes focused on Gareth who turned to nod at us as the elevator dinged and we heard the sound of the doors opening.

## Chapter 34

A tall thin man wearing a dark overcoat over a grey shirt and pants stepped into the foyer followed by two Dwarves. One of the Dwarves was dressed in brown leathers while the other wore dark red and black. Gareth stood at the door and greeted each of them by name.

“Milos.” Gareth’s deep voice broke the silence. “Good to see you. And Eldal.” He continued as the red clad Dwarf stuck out his hand to shake. “Dten.” He responded when the other Dwarf simply nodded and stepped around Gareth. Everyone’s eyes moved to my little group and Gareth cleared his throat and introduced us. “I believe you all remember Jace and this is Lexi and her guard. Lexi may I present Milos the Skilled, Eldal Orral and Dten Kilmalk.” I nodded to each of them in turn.

Eldal and Dten grumbled something then ignored me while they moved to seats on the other side of the room. Milos on the other hand seemed very interested in Kit and wandered over to get a better look at him.

His aura was a very pale dark orange and I was making a mental note to ask Kit later what that might mean when he slipped his muzzle into my ear and whispered, “Deceit or distrust.” I smiled as Milos stopped in front of me and held out his hand to me. Beside me Jace immediately reached out pulling Milos slightly to the side.

“An interesting specimen you have there.” Milos muttered his eyes swinging back to Kit who turned his head and hissed at him while the tip of his tail flicked warningly. I reached up and gently brushed my fingers down his body, causing him to press in against me.

“Thank you, he is very precious to me.” I replied and smiled up at the Wizard. Kit rocked from foot to foot on my shoulder and I stroked him again.

Out in the hall the elevator door dinged again and Jace stepped in front of me, swinging his arm toward the table and inviting Milos to have a seat. The Wizard went slowly, his eyes glued to Kit who leaned in and flicked his tongue in my ear causing me to stiffen and growl softly in my throat. His tail stilled on my shoulder and we prepared ourselves as a small Asian woman swept through the door followed by a tall clean cut giant of a man who carried the sent of wolf before him.

Gareth bent low over the woman’s well manicured hand as she glanced about the room, her eyes narrowing as she caught sight of me. Happy thought, happy thought that’s what I was thinking as Gareth turned to shake hands with the other man and urged them both on toward Jace who had rejoined us after seeing Milos seated.

Jace stepped forward and greeted the woman who he introduced as Adara much in the manner of Gareth. To say she yanked her hand out of his would have been a slight overstatement however she was rather abrupt. Perhaps touching Jace was distasteful to her?

The Werewolf looked to be about Owen’s height but was wider through the shoulders. His name was Bodark and he wore black leather and was from Russian decent, judging by his accent. He made up for Adara’s lack of courtesy by giving Jace a hearty handshake as well as a clap on the shoulder that would have knocked a smaller man to the floor. Jace merely braced for it smiling as he turned to introduce me. Bodark bowed low over my hand, but unlike Jace or Gareth with Adara, he turned my wrist over at the last second and pressed his lips to my palm. Behind me both Amras and Cursed took a step forward while Kit hissed and Owen raised his lips, baring his three inch fangs.

“What a vision of loveliness.” He remarked ignoring the four of them. “And you taste....enticing.” Jace cleared his throat and Gareth was suddenly standing behind Bodark the weight of his presence urging the man to drop my hand.

Beside him the Sorceress Adara stood with a haughty look in her dark brown eyes. Her body language was stiff, her expression annoyed, as if Bodark’s comments were a direct insult upon her person. Gareth bundled the two of them away and Jace leaned in his breath teasing my ear as he whispered. “She believes her powers come from her virginity. I don’t think I need to tell you where he believes his lay.”

I flicked my eyes to his and quickly schooled my features back to haughty indifference. Elven culture was very strict and I’d yet to meet anyone to whom I needed to bow or acknowledge in anyway my superior. So it was up to me to stand there looking ethereal and unaffected. A task more difficult than it might sound, at least for me.

The next two that exited the elevator couldn’t have been more different than if they had planned it that way. Gareth walked them both over, managing to nearly insert himself between both the woman whom he introduced as Angel the head of the local Werehyena pack and Alan who represented the local Werejaguars.

Angel shuffled in looking like she was expecting to be pounced upon at any second which I thought strange given that she was larger than Amras with a set of shoulders nearly as wide as Gareth’s. She was wearing chocolate brown leathers which looked uncomfortable and ill fitting. Her eyes flicked to mine briefly and she mumbled something before she shuffled off to find a seat dragging the two smaller males she’d brought with her along in her wake.

I watched Angel for a second then swung back to Alan who looked suave and sophisticated in a dark and sexy way. He looked Spanish or maybe South American and was dressed tastefully all in black and I could tell that his clothing was finely tailored. His hair was black and swept his shoulders. He had a small cleft in his smoothly shaven chin and a finely chiseled face dominated by his eyes which were dark brown and looked deliciously dangerous. He gave Owen a dismissive look as he

flowed like his namesake to me across the floor. I braced myself when he reached for my hand glad for my long sleeves as I felt the hair on my arm stand at attention. Instead of kissing me, he simply inhaled my scent and lifted his dark lashed eyes to mine. Wow talk about sex appeal I thought, then immediately regretted it when Kit painfully squeezed his tail about my neck.

Jace's smile was a trifled forced as he urged Alan along to the table and I struggled not to watch them go. Gareth's eyes narrowed and he dipped his head toward me his perfect mouth hesitating just above mine while he breathed, letting me pull the flavor of him into my lungs. "Behave yourself." He whispered and I nodded and licked my lips when he moved back. Beside me Owen pressed against my leg and I glanced down at him and gave him a shaky smile while I mentally growled at Kit letting him know he should stop trying to strangle me.

The elevator dinged again and Gareth and Jace both tensed causing me to jerk and Kit to dig his claws into my shoulder while Owen pressed himself a little tighter against my leg. This time Gareth merely turned toward the door opting to stand with our group instead of greeting the newest visitors at the doorway.

A breath of cold air flowed over us and a pale well built blond haired man of medium height entered the room. He was attractive, dressed in black leather and I had to suppress a smile as he paused and looked us over. Behind him an exquisitely beautiful woman dressed in dark red leather slid into the room. Her hair was very short and flaming red and she yanked on a leather leash wrapped tightly round her hand. The sharp yank causing a red haired man also dressed in leather to trip and grunt as he slammed into the doorway behind her.

He entered the room bent over rubbing his shoulder with the leash fastened about his neck. When he stood I could see he was a tall young man who didn't look much older than me. He was broad of shoulder but seriously underweight; his skin looking unwell with a wraith-like pastiness.

I stared at the man something about him seeming familiar. Then I felt my stomach clench horror dawning as he lifted his dark pain filled face to me from across

the room. Our eyes met and I watched his widen in surprise while his nostrils flared as he stared back at me. He took a step in my direction and was immediately yanked to the floor by the red haired woman who shoved her foot into his chest and turned her evil gaze on me.

Around me I felt my men struggle not to react as each recognized the Red Dragon from the painting.

Ignoring the woman I stared back at the man on the floor, feeling his mind brush mine and his words sear as he silently cried out to me.

“Well it looks like your little pet is causing quite the stir.” The blond whom I assumed was Valentine Loveless joked.

I blinked; realizing both Jace and Gareth had a hold of me, one on each arm. Around my neck Kit was hissing and flicking his tail in agitation. Owen was on all fours and was pressing his body against the front of me as if to prevent me from moving forward. Behind me I could feel both Amras and Cursed’s presence.

Gareth took a breath and introduced us all. When he was finished I looked down at the man whom Valentine had introduced as Marcus and simply said. “Please do not do that again.” I had to force myself to sound cold and callous. Then nearly bit my tongue in half when the hope in his eyes died and he seemed to collapse into himself on the floor with a cry. Belinda’s cruel laughter was like a knife through my heart but I somehow managed to ignore them both.

Turning abruptly I slid my hand through Gareth’s as if the man was nothing to me. Jace’s fingers released me immediately making it seem as if his intent had been to caress me all along. Owen stepped back and my eyes flicked to Amras and Cursed letting them see my rage and determination once my face was turned away from the three across the room. Neither hesitated, they simply fell into step behind me as Gareth swept us toward the head of the table.

Around my neck Kit pressed himself to me and whispered in my ear. “You aren’t fooling me.” He hissed. “But you need to consider this...he’s damaged goods. So please tell me you don’t want him!”

“I have no choice.” I breathed then slammed my upper shields into place and smiled darkly as Belinda let out a cry of pain.

At the moment it was all I could do. Gareth and Jace had a meeting to conduct, and somehow we’d all have to get through it. But I’d be damned if she’d be leaving this building with my Red, damaged or not.