

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

*Subtle*  
**RELEASE**

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Subtle Release

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# ***SUBTLE RELEASE***

**Beth Kery**

### *Dedication*

I would like to dedicate this to my husband. Thank you for your unwavering support and love.

### *Author Note*

So there may well be in existence a creature endowed with a rational spirit and a corporeity less gross, more subtle than man's.

For the incubus, by reason of his rational mind and immortal spirit, is equal to man; and by reason of his body, more noble, because more subtle, so he is more perfect and more dignified than man. Consequently, when having intercourse with an incubus, man does not degrade, but rather dignifies, his nature.

They (incubi) practice perfect coition, and sometimes beget.

Incubi, from their nature, may be well be styled Sons of God.

It is clear that (incubi) are neither evil Demons nor Good Angels.

...the children thus begotten by incubi are tall, very hardy and bloodily bold...It is generally a fact that men thus begotten (by incubi) excel other men, yet such superiority is not always shown by their vices, but sometimes by their bravery, and even their virtues.

– Lodovico Maria Sinistrari, *Demoniality*

The Watchers were 'a specific race of...beings known in Hebrew as *nun resh*, meaning 'those who watch' or 'those who are awake.'

– Andrew Collins, *From the Ashes of Angels – the Forbidden Legacy of a Fallen Race*

"The sons of gods saw the daughters of men that they were fair..."

– Genesis 6:2

## Glossary

*Dionytion Ceremony:* The Watcher celebration that occurs when a mate in her new incarnation reaches her Second Change, and thus can be reunited with her Watcher lover.

*Dionytion Stone:* An ancient, columnar stone that is a tool for raising the vibratory rate of subtle energies. Watchers use it to amplify the power of a mate's Rush in the Dionytion Ceremony.

*Druaga:* The ancient line of priestesses who were identified at birth as being able to wield power in the subtle realms and then trained for that specific purpose. It was only women such as the Druaga who were able to successfully mate with the mysterious Watcher fathers.

*First Change:* This is the change in a female human's subtle and physical bodies that equates with what humans would call puberty.

*Grigori Council:* The Watcher ruling body consisting of the king and five other Watchers who have been chosen and tested for their degree of wisdom and strength.

*Leman:* A human female, not powerful enough to be a true mate but still having the sexual power to feed and empower a Watcher to a greater degree than typical women.

*Rush:* The burst of rarified subtle energy provided by a human female's orgasm. A Rush is essentially Watcher food, their sustenance for existence in the physical world.

*Second Change:* The refinement of a woman's subtle bodies that occurs when she is in her thirties or forties. The Second Change is too subtle for humans to acknowledge it physically but it is this change that signals that a female human is sexually viable to a Watcher and thus able to perpetuate their species.

*Sigil:* Every Watcher possesses a generally known sigil, or symbol, that connotes him and him alone, in addition to a private one, which he reveals only to those he trusts and loves. This symbol is placed above the right breast of the Watcher mates.

*Subtle Bodies:* Generally speaking, any of the several energy bodies, all of which are more rare or subtle than the physical body but which permeate it and act as the template for the flesh.

*Truest Image:* This is the Watcher's most genuine form, the one he takes when he is on the Astral Plane, but also at various times in the physical world, such as during his sexual climax, when he takes the Path of Sorrow or during special ceremonies. To see a Watcher in his Truest form can be potentially fatal because of the power and purity of the energy. Only a true mate can witness her lover's Truest Image. Also known as "Truest Self".

*Truest Self:* Also known as "Truest Image".

## Prologue

She dreamt that she was at Dunleavy again. Not the Dunleavy of the present but that other one, that hazy one from so long ago...

"Later, Bonnie," Helen said evenly to her maid as the little woman bustled around her and began to unfasten her riding dress. "My husband is coming."

Bonnie's eyes rounded. She glanced over her shoulder toward the doors to the luxurious king's suite. The gaslights cast shadows on the heavy oak door, which remained closed.

"It's your power that tells you so, milady?" Bonnie asked uneasily. Although everyone who worked in Dunleavy knew its mistress was fey, knowing it and coming into firsthand contact with it were two separate things.

Helen smiled. Bonnie had just turned eighteen years old and this was her first position. Never mind that she came from a family that had served the Ammadons for centuries and was well-versed in their highly unusual ways. Bale Ammadon, her husband and the leader of the mysterious race of males called Watchers, was not something to which a maiden could easily accustom herself.

"No, just my ears, Bonnie," Helen replied. She was so nervous at that moment about the critical Watcher decision that had been occurring downstairs that even her subtle awareness of her mate had been dulled. Both women turned when they heard the knob on the door turn.

Bonnie stared when Bale Ammadon entered the room. She'd grown up on Dunleavy's grounds and so had become somewhat used to seeing such unusually tall and divinely proportioned men. But Bale must be the tallest, most divine one of all. She shivered as his sharp royal blue eyes briefly flickered over her before they landed on their true target, her mistress. Bonnie suppressed a shiver of anxiety as she moved toward him. At least the slight convulsion that coursed through her body was partially from apprehension. Bale's dark good looks and potent sexuality might have been responsible for the remainder.

Bale just closed the door and leaned against it after Bonnie departed, silently regarding his wife.

"Don't keep me in suspense any longer," Helen entreated huskily.

"Surely you know the results of the final vote?" he said as he slowly began to come toward her.

Helen shook her head. "I do not. My nerves are blocking me." Her anxiety must have been responsible for the fact that she flinched slightly when he placed his hand along her neck.

"What happened?"

"The Rush Initiative was defeated, Helen," he said softly. He felt her start and then her tense exhalation of relief. She hugged him tightly when he took her into his arms. Their bodies fit together like two halves of a sexual template.

"Was it a close vote?" Helen asked after a long moment. She felt more drained of her subtle energies than she had...ever.

He sighed. She had released her hair after her ride. His fingers delved into the golden waves. "Yes. The Rush Initiative was three votes away from becoming sovereign Watcher Law."

Helen gasped in shock at the small margin. She looked up into his face. "Three votes away from turning Watcher mates into slaves," she whispered in anguish.

"I would never have allowed that, Helen."

When she felt his tension she attenuated. "I'm sorry. I know you don't appreciate it when I state it so starkly."

"It's a —"

"Complicated issue. I know, Bale," Helen finished for him against the crisp white shirt which was really just a manifestation of his subtle essences—a solidification of the Will and Strength of the incredibly powerful being that she held in her arms.

"You should find comfort in the fact that the majority of Watchers feel that what is between a Watcher and his mate is an exclusive affair." His hands rose to cup her firm breasts. "What happens between you and me in this bedroom, Helen, is for us and for us alone to enjoy."

Helen blinked in surprise and moaned softly at his skillful ministrations on her breasts.

"Have you time, then? Aren't Duse and Che and the rest waiting for you?" she asked, referring to the members of the Grigori Council, the Watcher ruling body.

"Who wants to spend time with Duse and Che when I could be making love to my beautiful mate?" he murmured huskily. Even as he spoke he was reaching behind her to unfasten her dress. His eyes flashed with greedy lust when she turned in his arms and lowered her head, granting him complete access to her. When he'd unbuttoned her velvet riding habit he abruptly pulled at the sleeves, revealing the pale luminescent skin of her neck and lithesome arms.

"Ennonia," he whispered before he pressed his lips against the pulse at her throat.

Helen shivered at his touch. Goose bumps pebbled her skin when his hands came around to the front of her. He slowly, tortuously began to untie the ribbons on her chemise then deliberately unfastened the four pearl buttons as though he were unwrapping a gift of great value.

Which he was, of course—the greatest gift a Watcher could ever know.

“What is that you said?” she asked as she bent her head forward and swept her long hair to the side, providing his talented mouth more access.

He gave a deep groan of satisfaction when he parted the sheer fabric of her chemise and slid his hands along her warm satiny skin. He cradled both of her small, perfectly shaped breasts in his hands.

“Ennonia,” he said in a voice gone harsh from desire. “The light of the universe trapped in flesh...and mine for the taking.”

Uncertainty flickered across her face like a breath of chill wind upon a calm loch.

“Bale?” she asked as she turned in his arms. While she studied his beloved face his gaze remained fixed on her exposed breasts. She felt her nipples tighten despite her rising apprehension. Warm fluid gushed at the gate of her pussy.

Without answering her he leaned forward and took the delicate pink tip of one of her breasts into his mouth. His cock surged into a gratifying, leaden readiness. He had gone through such an ordeal to make this possible.

Surely the Blessed Fathers had never tasted human flesh such as this. Gods, she was so sweet she practically melted on his tongue. He could already feel her subtle power flowing into him and empowering him, intoxicating in its monumental strength.

All of that from just suckling Helen’s breast.

“So beautiful,” he murmured against her glistening tight nipple as he rolled the sensitive bud between his lips.

He demanded tautly that she hold both breasts up for his mouth, knowing all along that her breasts were so firm, like two fleshy triangles rising up starkly from the plane of her chest, that the support of hands would be superfluous.

Still, there was nothing more arousing than the image of her offering herself to him.

Helen watched him tensely after she’d done as he directed and he merely stared at her. She started and then groaned when he leaned forward and lashed at a nipple with an agile tongue.

Surely that flash of orange fire in his blue eyes had been her imagination. Bale’s fires were white, singeing, fierce and pure. She murmured in anxiety despite her rising desire.

His eyes snapped up to hers when he heard her say his name shakily but he refused to abandon the nipple that he’d just slipped between his lips.

“Stop for a moment, love,” she whispered, confusion mixing equally with arousal in her awareness.

Her body began to shimmer in his arms, at first subtly but then with increasing force. Helen gasped. He was stimulating her brain with his mind, forcing her body into a growing sexual frenzy. Every square inch of skin that covered her prickled with an itchy friction. She rubbed up against him desperately to quench it. Her lips, fingertips, nipples, clitoris, anus and the soles of her feet began to throb with an ache that was



beyond anything she had ever known, piercing her with a sharp blade of desire. Her pussy flexed inward with a sharp pain even as her juices trickled out of her, lubricating her delicate tissues.

Her face became incredulous as she watched him while he continued to suckle her breast hungrily.

"What...why are you...doing that?" she asked, her expression one of stark incomprehension. She had to focus her attention with monumental effort in order to speak. She struggled mightily against an onslaught that would have turned most mortal women to a puddle of convulsing, rippling flesh that existed for one thing and one thing only – release from the most dangerous, addictive realms of pleasure.

"No," she whispered raggedly.

He bit down on her tender nipple. Pain sliced through her, blessedly clearing her consciousness for a moment. She pulled back from him, stumbling clumsily on the riding dress that was now falling past her hips. She gasped in shock when the blood on her nipple caught her eye. He merely raised himself and stepped toward her, his face impassive.

Why was he doing this? she wondered in growing disorientation and fear even as darkness began to shadow her vision. Bale occasionally stimulated her brain during sex but when he did it was with the most subtle, knowing touch. He had been her Watcher mate for the last five of her incarnations in the material world. He knew her nervous system and the subtle matter templates that were the framework behind it better than he knew his own.

"What's wrong, love?" he asked soothingly as he reached for her again.

At his touch on her shoulder the unbearable sexual onslaught surged like an angry wave within her. Her breasts thrust forward as her back curved into a taut arch. Her backbone made an audible cracking sound at the intense pressure placed upon it. She blinked heavily to clear the occlusion that began to block his handsome face.

He cocked his head when he saw that a blood vessel had burst in her right eye, slowly obliterating the cornflower blue of the iris like a blooming crimson flower. He made a sound of regret and eased up on his battering seduction fractionally.

"I'm sorry," he whispered next to her parted lips, his expression tight with pity and greed at once. He hated that he had marred her sublime beauty. "I'm so sorry but I must have your light. Release it to me, beautiful Helen."

Her neck snapped back sharply as a tsunami of pleasure obliterated her sense of self.

## Chapter One

### *Dunleavy Castle, the Isle of Skye, the Present*

"By the fucking Fathers," Duse Ammadon gritted out tensely at the same time that he clamped his eyes shut and spun around on his heels. He'd been so put off by what was occurring at that very moment in front of the large wooden table in Dunleavy's enormous kitchen that he hadn't had the foresight to still his tongue. Bale traditionally became furious at a Watcher for using that particular curse, especially if the Watcher was one of his own brothers.

Duse identified with his mental body, fading from visibility in the material world. He spoke to Bale in a terse telepathic voice edged with panic.

"Avery Coyle's niece. I swear that child is hornier than a Watcher at the first Issian Festival following his Ritual. She just started working here two weeks ago and damn it all to Hades if this isn't the second time I've walked in on something like this. Let's get out of here!"

His consciousness was already transferring to Bale's office when it caught the edge of his awareness that Bale hadn't moved. Nor had he identified with one of his subtle bodies. He remained corporeal, fully present and focused in the material world. He didn't even blink as he watched the First Change woman in the kitchen avidly—and undoubtedly expertly—servicing the cocks of two young men who stood before her with their pants around their ankles, buttocks flexed tight.

Bale wore a strange, inexplicable expression that Duse couldn't identify.

One thing was for sure, that look on Bale's face wasn't panic or vague disgust like any other Watcher's expressions would be in the same situation. Granted it wasn't sexual interest either but why in Hades wasn't he scattering in twelve directions to the wind? That's what Duse wanted to know.

Of course Watchers logically knew that human women engaged in sex before their Second Change. It was how they perpetuated their species, after all. But it was only after the subtle body shift that occurred in a human woman's thirties or forties that she became sexually mature in Watcher terms.

So the fact that Bale stared fixedly at this young woman—a girl that Duse doubted had seen the passage of her first quarter century mark, a mere infant according to Watcher culture—as she alternated back and forth deep-throating two cocks that were so erect that they bobbed at an upright angle when they popped out of her red lips not only seemed strange, it was downright inappropriate.

Duse used his subtle essences to rattle his older brother's consciousness and finally jerk him away.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nell Scott would have been smiling hugely if it weren't for the fact that her lips were full of swollen male flesh. Neither of her current victims was even aware that the imposing master of Dunleavy stood just twenty feet away, which was for the best because then her little show would have come to an abrupt end.

Nell wished she had a more unobstructed view of Bale Ammadon. From what she could see he looked like a man in the brief seconds after he'd just received a mortal blow in battle who kept standing, blinking and breathing because the rest of his body hadn't caught up to the fact that his brains were leaking out the back of his head.

She held the bloody King of the Watchers' gaze as she took a slow, deep breath and eased the young man's cock so deeply in her throat that she cupped his balls and treated them to an open-mouthed kiss. To be quite honest, she wasn't clear anymore on the boy's name—Billy or Bobbie...Calvin? He was mates with Carlie Vandy, the other bloke who stood beside Calvin, waiting impatiently with his cock in his hand. She barely noticed Calvin's low guttural moan while she kept him lodged deep, letting the vibrations of her gag reflex stimulate him to excellent effect.

Nell didn't even acknowledge Calvin's disbelieving shout of anguished pleasure as he climaxed. Her moment of triumph came when she saw the barely discernable widening of Bale's piercing blue eyes.

She glanced away briefly. When her gaze returned to the entryway he was gone.

She gave Calvin his due although she was no longer interested, squeezing every last bit of juice out of his quivering meat. By the time he slid out of her lips he slumped forward like the completely satiated, desiccated lump of flesh that he was.

"God Nellie, do me like that, eh?"

But Nell just raised her eyebrows at Charlie Vandy, a friend of her cousin's who worked in Dunleavy's stables. She stood and reached for the bottle of whiskey on the counter. She'd told herself she would try to exclude her cousin's friends from her seductions. Her Uncle Avery and his family had been kind to her, taking her into their home despite her mother's hysterical wailing about Nell's impossible ways. But Charlie had a devilish glimmer in his brown eyes and a right lovely package nestling in the crotch of his jeans. In the end Nell wasn't able to resist.

Charlie pumped his ruddy, saliva-slick cock in his hand, groaning in misery when he saw Nell got up off her knees and reach for the bottle of whiskey instead of him. She lazily watched him stroke his tool as she took a slug.

"Please, Nellie!" he begged.

The living, breathing sex goddess who stood before him reached out and gave the head of his cock a friendly squeeze as she knocked back another healthy dose of whiskey. Just the sight of those plump red lips, milking the whiskey bottle the way she had his brother Tim's cock, almost made Charlie spill his load then and there. Nellie

must have sensed his brief crisis because she slammed the whiskey bottle down on the counter and knelt before him. "Hold on now, Charlie m' boy," she murmured kindly.

Charlie couldn't fathom how the newest addition to the housekeeping staff at Dunleavy could be such a phenomenal slut and yet possess eyes that sparkled with all the innocence of a virgin May Queen. He didn't believe for a second those ridiculous things they were whispering about her in the village. She was the most beautiful, warmest, funniest girl that he'd ever encountered, even in the realms of his very fertile imagination.

But it wasn't those aspects of Nell's character that he considered as she arrowed his straining penis into her mouth.

She ducked her head forward like a snake at the strike, sinking him deep with an electrifying stroke to the balls. The next thing he knew she was giving the swollen crown a sweet kiss.

Charlie's face went rigid in disbelief.

"Whiskey and cum are my favorite cocktail, Charlie. Pour me one, won't you?" Nell murmured with a mischievous wink.

Charlie complied enthusiastically even before her lips reached mid-staff.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What was that all about?" Duse asked pointedly.

"What was what all about?" Bale asked as he sank into the leather chair behind his massive desk.

Genuine puzzlement filtered across Duse's expression. He probed Bale's essences, searching for an explanation. But his search was fruitless. He'd sensed more consciousness and emotion from a rock than he did from his brother at the moment.

"Is Skylar still in London?" Bale asked abruptly.

Duse's confusion mounted at the unexpected change of topic. What did his wife and mate have to do with any of this? "Yes. She returns tomorrow."

Bale nodded distractedly. "I need to speak with her when she gets back. Will you let her know?"

"What in Hades is wrong with you?"

"How long did you say she's been here?"

"Who? Skylar?"

"No. That young woman in the kitchens."

Duse scowled, not appreciating having the lurid scene inserted into his consciousness again. "A couple of weeks. She's from London. Avery has a sister there named Martha. She used to work with Able in Dunleavy's gardens. Seems she met some financial type on a girls' weekend in London with some locals, married, had Nell and divorced the bloke in a neat two years. From what I gather from Avery, Nell is like

an out of control, unstoppable torpedo. She's gotten away with everything her whole life with the exception of grand larceny and regicide, and those are probably just in the planning stages. She's an infant, after all. Amazing what two parents can unintentionally concoct in a petri dish steeped in guilt."

"Maybe Martha has a thread of sense, though," Duse continued, "because she did ask Avery to take in Nell and get her a job here at Dunleavy. The lass burns bridges wherever she goes though. Wouldn't be surprised a bit if she does the same here at the rate she's going."

Duse began ticking off on his fingers. "Her mother couldn't keep her in a regular secondary school due to her constant pranks on increasingly irate teachers. Despite that, her university testing scores were through the roof. She managed to get kicked out of university as well though, for throwing down hundreds of books in the library stacks during a fit of rage. She's been in numerous rehab facilities for her drinking and more recently spent time in jail—probably not for the first time—"

"For what?" Bale asked sharply.

Duse shrugged. "I don't know the whole story, Bale. I agreed to put in a good word with her with Mrs. Southwick for Avery, then left the final decision up to her. Mrs. Southwick must have seen fit to hire her on as a maid. Avery and Linda have been griping about her since the night of her arrival. I can't say that I blame them," he said off-handedly. Avery and Linda Coyle were both employees of Dunleavy. Avery was Duse's manservant.

"Why all the interest in a promiscuous, reprobate Dunleavy maid?"

"I've seen her before," Bale said.

"You mean around the castle?"

"Yes but not recently. It was seven...no, eight years ago."

"Avery told me this was her first time to Dunleavy."

Bale frowned. He chose not to tell his brother, but he knew for a fact that Nell Scott had been to Dunleavy before. He may have only caught a glimpse of that pale, fey face before it disappeared out of the shattered window of the Dunleavy library, but Bale wasn't likely to forget the face of the thief who had stolen the Dionytion Stone directly out from under his nose.

## Chapter Two

Hours later Bale unlocked the wooden box that contained the Dionytion Stone, ensuring himself that it was present and intact. It was, of course. It had been used at the last Issian Festival. Che Ammadon, his cousin, had recovered it very soon after it had been stolen from Dunleavy nine years ago. Asmoday, or Day, as he was more commonly known, had masterminded the theft.

The Dionytion Stone was sacred to the Watchers, a relic that had existed since their earliest memories of the physical world. Its use was undoubtedly connected to their origins as energy beings that could become visible and manifest into physical matter with varying degrees of strength.

The Watchers had been conscious of their existence for thousands of years. Humans throughout the ages had called them all manner of names. Since a Watcher could take any form that he pleased, at least for a short period of time, they were bound to be the source of myth and speculation over the ages. The myth of the incubus—the spirits that sexually tempt and seduce women in their sleep—at least captured an element of truth about the Watchers' long and complicated evolutionary and genetic history with human women. Every Watcher had a human mother, and every Watcher craved human women, especially the extremely rare type that could possibly conceive his child. Human women provided them with the sustenance they required to exist in the physical world through the burst of energy they released during sexual climax.

Human females throughout history owed their most explosive, sublime wet dreams to Watchers.

The Dionytion Stone was used ritualistically with a mate during the Dionytion Ceremony or a powerful leman during the Issian Festival..

Sexual climax—the highest, most potent form of conscious acknowledgment of the Watcher's existence on the physical plane—from those rare women strong enough to be mates had the power to grant her Watcher lover with a fully functioning corporeal body. The deepening of the Watcher and mate's bond throughout the centuries and millennia, over several of the human female's incarnations, allowed for the realization of the most elusive Watcher dream, that of perpetuating their slowly dying race.

Helen had blessed Bale beyond any Watcher's imagination by bearing him not one but two sons, Aga and Ari.

Bale's eyelids closed in a wince of suffering.

To be without Helen while she was incarnate was always an incessant pain almost too difficult to bear. But knowing how she had died in her last incarnation—how she had suffered, murdered by the depraved Watcher Asmoday merely for the selfish purpose of gaining the power she released during orgasm—was a pain that Bale

questioned whether he could survive day by day, hour by hour. The twisted Watcher had forced Helen's response psychokinetically, creating a massive hemorrhage in her right temporal lobe in the pleasure center of her brain.

Day's rape of Helen had resulted in her murder as surely as if he'd cleaved her skull with an ax.

A spasm of grief, always fresh, never dulled, shuddered through him.

He replaced the ancient columnar stone and focused his attention in order to weave the protective shield that surrounded the box. Ever since the Dionytion Stone had been returned to Dunleavy he'd kept it in his private quarters. As the King of the Watchers he was the guardian of the Stone, after all.

He was determined not to fail in his mission as miserably this time as he had the last.

The Dionytion Stone was traditionally used during the Dionytion Ceremony, the celebration of a Watcher mate's Second Change and her subsequent reunion with her mate and the rest of the Watcher race. The Stone was both an amplifier and also a transformer used for turning subtle energy into material substance, a compact, exponentially more precise Stonehenge in a matter of speaking. Its history was sacred to them, especially considering their unclear memories of their origins.

His clothing faded back into his subtle essences as he lay down in his massive bed. Bale was the most powerful of all the Watchers and as such, the most present and vital in the corporeal world. He could maintain his physical body for extended periods of time and as a result he was subject to the laws of physical matter. He required more than an hour of sleep at night and his corporeal body was aging...albeit extremely slowly. He might have a thousand years yet.

Still, unlike most of the Watchers who existed only briefly in physical form, the terms of his existence had been set.

Bale *would* die.

But neither his inevitable death nor sleeping was on his mind at present, despite the fact that he was weary from trying to puzzle out why the thief of the Dionytion Stone was in Dunleavy Village. His thoughts tonight were all of Helen, as they often were in the silent, inactive hours during the middle of the night. Potent sexual arousal was part of his grief on this night. His cock lay heavy and throbbing on his belly.

He closed his eyes and focused intently. As a Watcher Bale was able to switch his consciousness to one of several subtle bodies. Each body was associated not only with a certain level of molecular density but also with the different vibrational rate of an entire world. Currently he focused on the desire body. The vibrational rate of the desire body induced a hazy, dreamlike consciousness. All of the senses were maximized although the rational mind was dulled. Voluptuous reality. It was not Bale's favored manner of experiencing sexual pleasure but it was the closest vibrational rate to the faeries' rapid, effervescent consciousness that he could maintain.

"Eleanor, come to me," he demanded hoarsely.

But just as had been the case for the last three times that he had tried to summon the Queen of the Faeries, Eleanor remained glaringly absent. Bale couldn't understand why. It had never happened before. Trickster though Eleanor could be she always responded to his desire. He may not trust the Faerie Queen but their spirits were entwined.

Their love for each other, as different and incommensurate as their realities were, was inevitable. Eleanor was the manifestation of Helen's spirit in the world of the *fairie don* after all.

His need and frustration resonated out of his being in subtle waves of power that were even more concentrated than his previous unanswered summons. The degree of focus required was difficult while in the desire body.

*Eleanor!* he commanded irritably.

*If that is all you want me for than I send you these.*

Bale's handsome face crinkled with puzzlement. Three glowing balls of light hovered over his erection. He blinked and they slowly coalesced into three delightfully formed female faerie elementals.

*I don't want your dirty little thoughts! I want you, Eleanor.*

*I cannot come to you. Law forbids it. These will suffice.*

Bale frowned at the uncommonly haughty, irritated quality to her tone. What law? What in Hades was she talking about? That she withheld herself from him bothered him deeply, niggling at his consciousness in some incomprehensible manner. He shook his head in befuddlement. It was too difficult to maintain a logical focus, one of the things he disliked about the desire body.

His eyes sharpened on the three vibrating, sparkling creatures that hovered over his cock like humming birds over a flower. They were no more than six inches tall but perfectly formed. One of them leaned over and dipped her tiny red tongue into the slit on the head of his cock.

He groaned at the potent pinprick of pleasure. The elemental gave a quivery bell-like cry of approval and fluttered her tongue over him with breathtaking rapidity.

Maybe Eleanor was right. This was all he required. Eleanor and Helen were manifestations of the same spirit in different realities – Eleanor in *fairie don* and Helen in the physical world – but it wasn't as if Eleanor or her elemental thought forms had the power to actually confer him with a Rush like a human woman could. A comparison to sexual communion with Helen wasn't even possible. Helen's essences were exquisitely rarified and pure. The Rush of subtle energies that Helen released during an orgasm was the most concentrated and powerful on the planet.

Consorting with the faeries, on the other hand, was purely for his release, the Watcher equivalent of masturbation but so much more enjoyable than his own hand.



He grasped his cock at the root and held it straight up like a maypole for virgins to dance about. Never mind that a faerie elemental was the exact opposite of a blushing virgin.

“Remove your clothes,” Bale muttered as he watched the voluptuous little creatures all zoom over to the head of his cock, greedy for a taste of his pre-cum. When their shimmering garments faded Bale looked upon three pale, lovely nude nymphs, their skin as flawless and luminescent as Eleanor’s.

Or Helen’s.

Their bodies felt whisper-soft and warm where they flickered around the top half of his cock. Only when they concentrated their focus on their mouths and caressing hands was their touch fully felt.

For a few minutes Bale just watched in appreciative silence as the three tiny beauties danced around the end of his cock, quick, vibrating tongues exploring the tip all at once until the engorged head was glossy, six little hands rubbing and pressing on the sensitive skin with a surprisingly hard friction. Every once in a while they made trilling sounds of excitement as they charted new territory, thrilling to the subtle vibrations of his arousal.

“Ooh, he loves it here!” one of them called out in triumph.

Bale communicated non-verbally just how he wanted her to stimulate him in the spot just below the thick, defined ridge of the head of his cock. She gave a fey giggle and stretched her arms around the head as far as she could. He groaned deep in his throat as she pressed her soft, firm breasts into his cock. She squeezed tight with her arms and began to shift her body up and down on him with a sinuous, subtle movement. It wasn’t long before all three elementals were doing the same at different points on his cock—one just above the hand on the shaft, one at the ridge below the head and one around the tip—each one milking him in a highly pleasurable synchronized dance.

Bale let them squeeze and hump him like that for awhile. It felt wonderful but he wished desperately that he could sink into one of them.

No, it was human flesh that he longed for.

His eyelids narrowed as he focused on the tight, round bottom of the faerie elemental that had her back to him. He released his cock from his hand and let it fall heavily to his belly.

“Line up,” Bale ordered tensely, knowing they would intuit in exactly what manner he meant. They twittered in high-pitched, melodious voices as they settled on his belly, two to the left of his cock and one to the right. Each of them bent over supplely and grasped her ankles, sticking her little bottom in the air for Bale’s inspection.

He grunted in approval at the erotic sight.

He raised his right hand and rubbed his smallest finger against his thumb, focusing his Will sufficiently enough to magically secrete a silky lubricant onto his fingertip.

"Spread yourselves."

Six little hands rose to plump, pale globes of flesh and separated them. Bale heard excited, apprehensive giggles.

He reached out and slid his pinkie finger into an exquisitely soft furrow of flesh, stimulating the diminutive tight ring that he found there. The little elemental moaned and rubbed up against his finger in heated excitement but Bale withdrew after she was well-oiled and slid his finger into the crack of the next tight bottom. When he had lubricated all of them he reached for his cock.

"Fuck your asses with your fingers," he ordered tautly.

He stroked himself slowly as he watched them. The two to the left of his cock reached for each other's ass enthusiastically, pushing their forefingers all the way into the snug holes and then pumping them in and out forcefully. The other just shoved her own finger into herself, spreading back one cheek firmly so that Bale could fully see her asshole being penetrated.

He imagined how they felt against their own fingers, so tight and hot and claspings. That was how Helen always felt. When he fucked her there it was like having his cock squeezed by an elastic band. And her heat... Fucking Helen's ass was like submerging himself in an inferno.

He rewarded the elemental who thrust into herself so enthusiastically—first two fingers and then three. She obediently spread her cheeks for him as he rubbed his pinkie against her rectum. He heard her groan in a guttural, very un-faerielike manner when he slid the tip of his finger into her. She took the equivalent of a very large cock in the ass, relatively speaking. She cried out brokenly as he sank himself into her began to fuck her. He saw her rub her clit frantically. The other elementals came to flicker around their peer, drawn not only by her pleasure but Bale's as he conferred it.

When he felt the little creature delicately spasm and shimmer around his fingertip and heard her ecstatic cries Bale knew that she had found pleasure.

The fact that he felt nothing made him bitter. The achy tightness of his erection felt like a nuisance...a necessary chore.

"You know what I want," he told them as he withdrew his finger from the elemental's ass. She'd been so tight that a vague soreness plagued the tip. He held up his cock for them once again.

The three nymphs rose and positioned themselves in a circle around his upright cock, their backs to it. A groan broke free of his throat when they all bent over and spread their cheeks once again, forcing the curve of his cock into the oiled furrows of their asses before they pushed the firm globes of flesh around him tightly.

Sweat broke out on Bale's taut belly as they began to move up and down about two inches, just above and below the head. It felt delicious, their three round rumps hopping and sliding along his cock. They cried out in tinkling voices of pleasure. He felt them shiver and heard them cry out their releases several times as they rubbed themselves from miniscule clit to anus against his hardness.

He could swear that he felt the heat emanating from the opened hole of the one elemental he'd fucked with his finger.

He should have done the same to all of them.

But it was too late now. He was about to come.

His mouth never opened but a low growl vibrated his throat. He closed his eyes as release broke over him, sharp and shuddering. When he opened his eyelids again it was to the sight of the little women hugging his cock desperately. All three of them were completely drenched in his cum. For once he didn't hear one of their silvery voices because they were all slurping at his semen madly, as though their ephemeral existences depended upon it.

Which perhaps it did. Bale knew precious little about faerie elementals.

He sank into the mattress as they cleaned his cum from his cock with manic excitement. Their little throats convulsed and rippled continuously as they swallowed the thick fluid without pause. He watched languorously as the little nymphs engaged in the erotic rite for a few moments.

But then the precise edges of rational thought beckoned him, as usual. Something bothered him deeply about Eleanor's continued refusal of him. As his Will and rational mind focused he automatically shifted his consciousness to the physical world. The last experience he had of the desire body was the poignant, mournful cry of one of the female elementals before he disappeared.

He stared into space blankly for an interminable period of time before the sensation of the cooled cum on his belly, cock and thighs prompted him to let go of his fisted cock and reabsorb his most vital physical essence into his subtle bodies. For some reason the cry of longing that Eleanor's elemental thought form had made as he re-focused on the physical world—thereby disappearing from the world where he had communed with them—kept itching at his awareness.

Why did he keep thinking about the thwarted faerie nymph when he was trying to puzzle out why he couldn't summon Eleanor?

He sat up abruptly in bed.

The only remote reason that Eleanor might not have responded to his summons for sexual commerce was if Helen—her manifestation in the physical world—was in close proximity to him.

And in her Second Change. For a reason that Bale couldn't fully understand he'd never been able to speak or commune with Eleanor once Helen had reached her Second Change and was back by his side. Perhaps it related to the mysterious "law" that Eleanor mentioned.

No. It couldn't be. It wasn't possible.

When he reminded himself that thoughts like that had created the permissive environment that allowed Asmoday to murder Helen a century ago, tension leapt into his muscles.

An uncomfortable sensation sank like liquid lead over his corporeal flesh. Before a second had passed the king's suite at Dunleavy was silent and empty.

## Chapter Three

Avery Coyle hesitated for twenty long seconds before he rapped at the heavy oak doors. He'd never dared to approach the master of Dunleavy before in a private matter, but his father and his father before him had assured him that it was his right. Things in the world had changed greatly even in the past one hundred years but the owner of Dunleavy was still the unofficial laird of the land. If a man like Avery couldn't govern his own household then it was always his right to take it to a higher power of authority.

He swallowed heavily when he heard the deep resonant voice bidding him enter. Some of his hard-won confidence faded when he saw that Bale wasn't alone. Skylar Ammadon, Duse's wife, rose gracefully from the chair in front of an enormous carved desk that was polished until the dark wood shone. The late morning sunlight streamed in through the windows, casting her hair into a soft, luminescent wreath of golden curls.

"M'lady," Avery said gruffly with a dip of his head. Skylar was so beautiful and so kind that he found himself blushing as bright red as his thirteen-year-old son did whenever he came face-to-face with a pretty lass. He nodded once respectfully at the big brooding man behind the desk, as well.

"I'm sorry to have bothered ye, m'lord. I'll come another time."

Bale's eyes made brief contact with Skylar's. "We were just finishing, Avery. I am in fact glad that you came by."

"And how is Linda, Avery?" Skylar asked him politely as she turned to go.

"Acchh... Well a bit wore down at the moment, I'd say."

"She's ill? Should I make a visit?"

Avery grimaced when he saw the concerned expression on Skylar's face. "No, m'lady. The ill mae household is plagued by at present cannae be healed by your kin' of magic," he assured her, referring to her fey abilities to heal sickness.

Like most rational human beings in the twenty-first century the Coyle family went to the local physician when they were ill. But the Coyles were also steeped in the occult traditions of Dunleavy and the Ammadon family. So when Avery's brother's wee bairn started to ail several years back and the doctor's advice and medicines had little effect. Avery had asked Duse to intercede. It hadn't been Duse who had arrived at Avery's brother's home, however, but Skylar Ammadon.

And sure enough, after the mewling infant had been cradled and touched by Skylar's gentle fingers her crying had ceased. She'd taken milk from her mother's breast and fallen into a healing sleep by the time Skylar had walked out of the cottage.

Everyone in Dunleavy village, including the thickest fool and the tiniest lad, knew that the woman of an Ammadon or one of his like was always just as extraordinary as her mate.

Skylar's eyes flickered over to Bale. "I've heard rumors about some strange happenings in the village these past weeks," she said thoughtfully. "Perhaps it is Bale's type of magic you need then."

"That's what I was hoping fer," Avery admitted gruffly, not accustomed to speaking of such things aloud.

"I'll just leave you to it then."

"Please sit down, Avery," Bale said quietly when the door closed behind Skylar. "What can I help you with?"

Avery settled uncomfortably in the chair. He would have preferred to stand in Bale Ammadon's powerful presence.

"It's my niece, m'lord. Her name's Nell."

Bale sat forward slowly in his chair and placed his elbows on the desk. "She's just recently come to Dunleavy, hasn't she?"

"Aye and already created more havoc than our little hamlet's known for centuries," Avery said in an aggrieved tone of voice. He glanced up at Bale beseechingly.

"Ye've got to help me, m'lord. I've got no power o'er the lass. She won't listen to Linda er me. She runs wild every second she's not working here at the castle, knocking more whiskey down her throat than 'ol Kenny Myerson, who gets his mail down at the Boar's Head Tavern on account of him being there so much. 'Tween that and the whorin' and the lying and the pranks and the stealin'..."

"Stealing?" Bale asked sharply.

A sweat broke out on Avery's brow when he saw the lancelike quality of Bale's gaze. A primitive part of his brain sent out a warning signal to his body. He shivered despite the warmth of the room. It happened that way sometimes with Duse Ammadon as well, that Avery came face-to-face with something eerily strange, even alien, about the Ammadons and the group of men called Watchers.

Had he perhaps put Nell in undue danger by this visit?

But then the moment passed and Avery noticed that Ammadon's raven black brows tilted with concern in his otherwise impassive face. He sighed heavily and reached into his deep pants pocket. Avery waited in trepidation when Ammadon merely stared at what he set on his desk, a slight muscular spasm in his eyelid his only reaction.

"She stole it from ye, m'lord," Avery said after an uncomfortable silence. "I'm ashamed to say that a member of mae own family would ever stoop to stealin' from Dunleavy after we've served ye all these years."

"You found it on her person?" Bale asked. He immediately recognized the small silver cup with the words *1st Prize, Scottish Equitation Jumping Championship, 1898*

inscribed upon it. It used to stand with a myriad of other trophies that had been acquired by Dunleavy inhabitants over the years in a glass case in the stables.

Helen had acquired more trophies than anyone, human or Watcher.

Avery couldn't meet his laird's eyes he was so ashamed. "Aye. Linda found it underneath Nell's pillow this morning when she was trying to rouse the 'toxicated little hussy for work. I doubt you ever met the vixen, m'lord, but she lies wi' the skill of a will-o'-the-wisp and a whore combined. Had the nerve to look a' me with those wide innocent eyes of hern an' insist she had no idea how the cup got there! After which she got outa bed and boked what smelled like the entire whiskey reserve of Ballack Distillery into the toilet! Achh!" Avery grunted in disgust when he realized how loud his voice had become in his rising frustration.

"The fact of the matter is I cannae handle the little baggage. She's turnin' mae household upside down. My wife and half 'o Dunleavy are set to hang Nell, me or both! I hope you don't think it impertinent of me to bring this to ye, m'lord, but the lass did steal the cup from ye and —"

"It's all right, Avery. You did the right thing. I'll handle this. Tell me though, what did you mean when you referred to Nell's *pranks*?" Bale asked intently.

Avery scowled. "That'd be the worst of it. All the knocks and bangs and bumpin' about the house in the dead of night. Abou' ten days ago for instance, while Nell was in the bathroom Linda and I heard an alarmin' commotion! When Nell finally unlocked the door the bathroom looked like it'd been in the eye of a hurricane, paper swirled abou' the room, bottles crushed to bits, mirror busted, water splashed everywhere..."

"And Nell?"

"The lass was cut on her arms and her cheek. She claimed she had no idea wha' happened." Avery sighed deeply. His expression was deeply troubled. "You'll think this foolishness no doubt, m'lord, but there be those in the village who're whisperin' the lass is a witch."

Bale's eyelids narrowed. "And you? What do you think of that, Avery?"

"What I think," he said with a weariness spiced with irony, "is that you are the man to look into the matter of my niece, m'lord."

Bale smiled. "You are a wise man, Avery. Send Nell to me when she's recovered sufficiently from her...unfortunate condition."

"Thank ye, m'lord," Avery said with profound gratitude as he rose.

"Avery?"

Avery turned as he twisted the handle of the heavy doors.

"Better not tell your niece the specifics of who she's going to be meeting with when you escort her here," Bale suggested quietly. "It might complicate things."

A puzzled expression flickered across Avery's face at first but then he recognized the wisdom of Bale's statement when he recalled how nervous he'd been himself about coming face-to-face with Bale Ammadon.

"Aye, m'lord. That's likely good advice."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Good evening, Evan," Bale said when the butler of Dunleavy knocked and stepped into the outer chamber of the king's suite.

"Evan. How are you, my friend?"

Evan's usually stoic face broke into a wide grin when he saw Paim Alexander stand from one of the lounging chairs in his master's private sitting room.

"I am well, sir, and you?" Evan asked as he shook the handsome, gregarious Watcher's hand.

"Oh as well as can be expected with the Issian Festival just five days away," Paim said with a harried expression.

"Yes, the staff is gearing up for it as well, sir." Evan cleared his throat as he glanced up meaningfully at Bale.

"You have a visitor, my lord."

Bale didn't miss the hint of disapproval in his fastidious butler's tone. He inhaled slowly and stood.

"If you don't mind, Uncle Paim? A domestic matter to which I must attend," Bale began apologetically.

"Hades, no. I've had enough of rehashing these old plans. You'd think the damned festival would run itself after all this time, wouldn't you?"

"Maybe you'll be able to scare up a victim for chess," Bale said with a small smile as Paim headed for the door behind Evan.

"Indeed? I'll look for Nix then. That boy is going to be even sharper than his father—no longer easy prey for the likes of me!"

The smile still lingered on Bale's lips when Nell Scott sauntered into his suite. For a moment they just regarded each other from across the room.

She was a tall girl. At six foot seven inches himself, Bale considered height a relative variable. But Nell might have been several inches taller than his sister-in-law Skylar, and Skylar was taller than most women. Her legs looked long and slender in the pair of faded, clinging jeans. The rumpled t-shirt that she wore looked like she'd slept in it. The logo on the front read *Acid Kiss Live at the Roxy*. It was too short, allowing a strip of pale belly to show over the low-riding waistline of her jeans.

Nell noticed the way Bale Ammadon's gaze paused on her heavy boots before they swept back up the length of her.

"My sincerest apologies, Your Highness. It's raining outside and the grounds are muddy. My uncle practically dragged me by my hair straight through every puddle in Dunleavy." She crossed her arms and cocked her hip. Her refined accent fell away like a mask that she donned and removed according to her purpose.



"Maybe you can get that snotty butler of yours to lick 'em off to keep your precious Oriental carpets safe."

"It's not the carpets I'm concerned about."

"I didn't steal that bloody cup!" she hissed, arms falling rigidly to her side.

Nell felt her heart rate increase alarmingly when Bale abruptly came around the chair and stalked toward her. She forced herself hold her ground although she wanted to back away more than anything. She'd thought that perhaps her vision of him had been skewed last night, kneeling as she had been on the floor. But he really was as tall and imposing as she hazily recalled. And this evening she didn't have the benefit of copious amounts of whiskey running in her blood to give her courage.

"How did it get beneath your pillow then?" Bale challenged evenly.

He'd stopped several feet away from her. He studied the breathing enigma before him as her chin went up defiantly. Her cheeks were very pale, most likely a result of her hangover. Her red lips were an almost shocking contrast against her pallor. Her large blue eyes glittered at him ominously.

Bale had tried not to smile earlier when she'd said that Avery dragged her by her hair. That would have been a difficult undertaking to say the least, since her blonde hair was chopped down to within two inches of her skull. It currently surrounded her angelic face in a thick forest of finger-combed spikes and soft waves.

Most women would have pledged their firstborn to Lucifer himself to look so beautiful at their finest moment and never have had the forethought to wish to look so ravishing after being forced out of bed with a wicked hangover.

"Maybe *you* put it there," Nell said softly. Her lips curved into her most sinful suggestive—and practiced—grin in order to hide her confusion. "Maybe you required a piece of ass delivered directly to your bedroom on a platter by your servant. Would you like me to climb off or just slide directly into your lap, Your Highness?"

Despite the tension inherent to the meeting Bale nearly smiled broadly once again. Her delivery had been perfection, comprising a strange combination of a world-weary Mae West sexuality and a wide-eyed Marilyn Monroe sweetness.

By the Three, it was going to be tough to break her.

And what if he broke too much in the process?

"Why do you call me 'Your Highness'?"

He saw the slight flicker of her eyelids, the flare of her nostrils. She stepped boldly toward him.

"Why shouldn't I? Isn't that what you are? The bloody King of the Watchers?" Nell demanded.

Despite her bad-girl image her accent betrayed her most when she was angry. No matter what she tried to portray, Nell had still been brought up in an elegant wealthy neighborhood in Knightsbridge. That was one of many facts that he'd milked out of various sources around Dunleavy this afternoon. Most of those "sources" had been

frowning furiously when they delivered. The ones who hadn't been had nearly been salivating with lust instead.

"It isn't a commonly known fact among your kind and most who know it tactfully forego the descriptor in my presence," Bale replied drolly as he looked down into her upturned face.

Nell swallowed hard. She felt like a moth that had dared too close to the flames. She could smell his scent from this distance, spicy and clean with an underlying male musk. Her nostrils flared again, catching the intoxicating difference in him in comparison to other men that she'd breathed.

Maybe that was why she'd just misplayed her hand.

"So what if there are morons who call you that title in earnest? A pompous ass like yourself would be all too willing to accept it as your due," she accused sourly. "I didn't grow up like these fools who were homegrown in the soil of your conceit and supposed all-encompassing power." She turned away, unwilling to keep looking into his starkly handsome face.

"I didn't steal that damned cup," she repeated staunchly as she stepped away from him. "Why don't you call the cops if you think I did?"

"Your uncle knows why. I deal with justice in my own way at Dunleavy."

"So what? You're going to punish me?" Nell asked provocatively as she whipped around. "Planning on putting me over your knee, King?"

"Most likely, yes."

He saw her cheeks pale and then go pink at his calm response.

But then she rallied.

"Fine," she murmured as she seductively sashayed toward him. "Just as I thought. You just wanted a piece of ass all along and wanted to dress it up to suit your ego. Whatever, Ammadon. My ass has known it all, bannock or caviar."

"And the paddle?" he asked quietly.

"Kinky, but I'm up for it, lover."

He did smile then. She was a nimble little minx.

Nell's eyes narrowed as though to dim the impact of that sudden flash of distilled male potency.

"It won't be sexual, Nell," he said, unsure of his allegation despite the quiet confidence of his tone. "You're new to Dunleavy. You aren't familiar with Watcher ways. You're not old enough for me to be attracted to you in a sexual manner."

She went very still at that. The smile that slowly curved her red lips was far too knowing.

"You don't think I'm beautiful?"

Her low husky voice had the effect of a fingernail scraping lightly down his spine.

"You redefine the meaning. But that doesn't change what I said, Nell. It's a fact of Watcher life. So is this. I'm going to take charge of you."

"Take charge of me?" she scoffed, one side of her mouth curling up in amused disbelief.

"It seems no one else can do it, including yourself."

"I can control myself just fine thank you very much!"

Bale ignored her. "For starters, I want you to collect your things from your uncle's and move them to the castle."

Her tense expression segued to one of genuine amusement. "You're barking mad, mate," Nell said succinctly before she turned and headed for the door.

"If you walk out I'm going to call the police and have you arrested," Bale said quietly. "I understand from your uncle that you're already on probation. The new charge will make the future grim for you, Nell."

"I didn't steal that fucking cup!"

"I won't belabor the point with you. I know for a fact that you *did* steal the Dionytion Stone from me eight years ago."

She started in shock. Bale could almost tangibly feel the already well-guarded fortress of her mind seal ominously shut. Dread weighted his limbs.

What further proof did he require that she somehow was conspiring with Asmoday?

"Not in the mood to discuss it, I see," he said softly.

Her chin went up. "Hard to discuss something when I haven't got a clue what you're talking about, Your Highness."

He meticulously searched, body and soul, for chinks in her armor...but no. Talk about an iron maiden. He was going to have to land some heavy blows to break through to her, and how would he know exactly when he should change to a whispery soft, nurturing caress? The subtle messages that he had previously received from her were so strange...so mixed.

Despite what he had come to suspect last night, he couldn't quite bring himself to believe it. Millennia of experience wouldn't allow him to. He had to find out firsthand.

"I'll give you a choice," he said. "If you take your punishment here and now I'll let you return home, Nell."

She looked him over disdainfully. "That paddling thing? Fine. Whatever. I'm not staying in the same house with your gargantuan ego and I won't go to jail again. I can take anything you can dish out, Ammadon," she spat out contemptuously. She bristled when he just shrugged slightly, the movement barely discernable beneath the crisp white button-down shirt that he wore.

"We'll see," he said quietly.

He turned and opened the cabinet door to a beautifully restored antique armoire. Her heart began doing a jerky, erratic dance in her ribcage when he drew out a black leather paddle.

"Have you ever been punished before?" Bale asked as he took a seat in one of the wing-back chairs in the luxurious sitting area of the king's suite. Nell felt awkward and foolish remaining standing. She couldn't keep her wary eyes off the black paddle that lay across his long hard thighs.

"Plenty of times. Much good it did," she replied insouciantly.

His sculpted lips tilted slightly. "Consistency is the key with a wayward child. Something tells me you've had precious little of that, whether it was for praise or punishment." Before she could get off the acid comment that lingered on her tongue he continued, "Come over here."

His right eyebrow quirked upward when he saw her hesitation. "You know where the door is, Nell, just as you know the consequences for using it at the moment."

Pure hatred streamed out of her blue eyes as she neared his chair.

"Unfasten your jeans and push them down around your knees."

"Lecher," Nell murmured softly as she gave him a nasty knowing smile. She shimmied her hips as she worked both her jeans and her panties down her thighs. Bale caught a glimpse of the soft golden nest of hair that covered her sex.

He stiffened.

"Leave on the panties, Nell," he commanded in a hard voice.

She smirked at her small victory. Once she'd whisked her bright pink satin panties back into place she gave him a bored look. "What now? Want me to kiss the paddle? Give me a fiver and I'll lick it. Ten and I'll lick you."

A cry of surprise slipped past her lips when he stood faster than she'd ever seen a human being move. Of course he wasn't human...not completely anyway...and she would do well to remember that. The next thing she knew he had her turned and shoved down over the enormous coffee table. Her hands went out just in time to break her fall. She shouted in outrage when he struck her across the butt with the paddle. Hard.

"Ouch! You bloody...!" She gasped in shock and struggled to rise when he paddled her ass again. He readjusted his hold, reaching around her waist with his left arm and holding her securely against his hip, his elbow locked at her back, preventing her from moving an inch. She experienced firsthand that Bale was every bit as strong in fact as he appeared to be...and every bit as solid. She'd never pressed against such uncompromisingly hard flesh. Recognizing that she'd never break free of his steel-like hold she took the only way out that she could think of in her panic.

Bale frowned when he felt her knees give way but he just firmed his hold on her and smacked her ass again, this time with more strength.

Nell's eyes went wide in shock. Instead of losing his hold on her like she'd assumed would occur he'd merely taken the entire weight of her lower body and continued to paddle her. She moaned in humiliation when she realized that her feet were no longer on the floor as he held up her ass in the air like a suspended target for his descending paddle.

"You would have started out by getting ten strokes in that position, Nell, but every time I crack your ass while you're struggling you'll get an additional one. You're up to thirteen so far."

She growled like a feral animal and pushed up wildly on the table with her hands. He paddled her without pause, the resulting sound resounding like a gunshot in her ears.

"Fourteen," she heard him say with a calmness that infuriated her.

Her ass sizzled with heat and tingling pain.

"Fine! Just put me down then, you bloody sadist!" she spat out breathlessly.

He smacked her ass again. "Let's make it a round fifteen. I've had enough of your name calling, Nell. Are you ready to cooperate?" he asked.

"Yes," she hissed furiously through clenched white teeth.

He replaced her booted feet on the floor. Much to her surprise he released her upper body from his hold as well. She instinctively rose. He tapped her on the ass with the end of the paddle, not hard like before but as if in exasperated reminder.

Bale saw her throw him a poisoned glance over her shoulder before she placed her hands on the coffee table, sticking her ass in the air.

He paused for a moment before he continued.

He'd told her to keep on her panties for her punishment in some kind of stab at propriety. The only problem was that she was wearing a thong. He might as well have just paddled her bare-assed from the start. He carefully studied the impact that the paddling had made on her so far, gauging the right pressure for the remaining strokes in order to give her a deep butt burn without causing any lasting harm. She already glowed pink.

And a lovelier ass had never existed.

His mouth hardened when he registered his thought. Normally when he paddled a woman for sex-play he placed a hand on her hip or shoulder to keep her steady but he didn't trust himself to touch Nell.

"Hold tight," he cautioned softly before he brought back the paddle and smacked her right in the center of her plump cheeks. He heard a whimper escape her throat, muffled at the last minute by her pursed lips.

By the time he'd reached number ten Nell was biting her lower lip anxiously. She was sure she couldn't make it until fifteen. Her ass felt like it was on fire. Her emotions were just as hot and volatile. How dare he force her to submit to this humiliation? She glanced over her shoulder, eyes blazing.

She swallowed heavily at what she saw. Why did the face that haunted her night after night have to be the epitome of masculine beauty? He paused, arm drawn back, paddle ready to strike, when their eyes met.

Nell had never felt so vulnerable in her life than she did at that moment. His eyes reminded her of twin lasers, precise and incising. She felt him bore right down into her spirit. For a fraction of a second she spun in mental confusion.

Sexual desire flashed through her, melting her flesh, enlivening every nerve in her body. Dread and fear followed close on its heel.

"You bastard," she whispered shakily. "I'll kill you for that."

Surely that couldn't have been a tiny convulsion of pain that ever so briefly tightened his handsome features. Nell was sure that it must have been when his mouth hardened and he cracked her ass with the paddle, harder than ever before. A sob tore free from her throat.

Stark fear rose in her, the same fear that had plagued her for so long now, the fear of her own madness. What if she broke irrevocably? What if she succumbed to the darkness?

She turned her head, unwilling to let Bale see her even more vulnerable than she already was.

But although she could hide her face she couldn't disguise the fact that her pussy felt achy and heavy or that the only thing that prevented her complete exposure to Bale's searchlight eyes was a tiny strip of thin cloth. Her emotions spun chaotically in her chest, shame, fear, fury...desire.

When Bale saw the tremor in her arms and thighs he forgot about his self-imposed directive not to touch her. He felt her start beneath his hand when he spread it along her neck and shoulder.

"Just four more," she heard him say. His rough voice abraded even as it soothed.

"I hate you," she whispered bitterly when he paddled her again. Her ass pulsed with a hot sharp sting that began to coalesce and merge with the deeper, more profound throb of her pussy.

"You're mistaken," Bale replied.

He stared down at her fixedly at the same time that he flicked his wrist, tossing the paddle an inch into the air. It fell back into his palm at the precisely adjusted angle that he required. His next stroke bit at the tender swell of her buttocks that curved up from her thighs. He watched as her firm flesh shimmered slightly in reaction when he withdrew the paddle. He snapped his wrist, popping her again with a loud thwacking noise. His hand tensed to hold her when she pitched forward slightly.

Nell's breath caught when she felt one long finger rub against the side of her neck softly. Physical sensations and emotions bombarded her, the burn of her ass connoting shame and humiliation, the stab of desire at her clit creating fear and fury, the

tenderness of his touch almost blinding her with confusion and a painful swelling in her breast.

"Just finish it!" she said desperately as tears began to stream down her face. She cried out sharply when he complied and she felt the final pop of pain conferred by his paddle on her already sorely punished ass.

Bale didn't stop her this time when she rose. Her movements were so hasty and jerky as she clawed at her jeans and moved a step away from him that she stumbled.

"Let go of me!" she shouted heatedly when he steadied her at her upper arm. Her fury mounted because his interference had caused her to spin around as she threw him off her, allowing him to see how wet her face was with tears. When he dropped his hand she shot like a rocket toward the door.

"Nell," he called sharply.

Her pace slowed and then paused but she didn't turn around.

"Get your things from your uncle's. I'll send someone with you to explain and to help you. You'll be staying in the castle from now on."

Her wet face looked stunned and outraged when she turned. "You said that if I let you punish me I could go home!"

"I did. Dunleavy *is* your home, Helen."

Helen's breath hissed past her teeth. The silence that followed sparked with unspoken emotion and almost tangible energy.

"Why did you call me that?"

"It's your name isn't it?"

She merely stared.

"I'm such a fool," he said softly. "I should have known eight years ago. Because of a prophecy that Skylar had given me I altered the wards of Dunleavy, making it possible for you to enter. But you must have figured that out...or more likely your accomplice did. You were perhaps the only human being in existence who could have stolen the Dionytion Stone, Helen."

"To be quite honest with you," Bale continued, "when I saw you there in the window of the library I thought you were a boy. You were very young, as you still are. But it was what I saw in your eyes as you glanced back at me as you perched there on the windowsill with your flashlight held over your head that fooled me the most. I've never seen so much concentrated hate coming from a human being in my long life let alone ever anticipated seeing it from my life mate. I knew there was something singular about the encounter but I couldn't put my finger on it," he went on thoughtfully.

"And then that poison emotion disappeared completely in the instant before you did, Helen. But of course, you've become an expert at blocking me haven't you? One might even say you've made it this lifetime's work...or part of it anyway."

A frigid silence followed but Bale seemed unaffected. "And then last night the truth struck me. Eleanor could no longer come to me because you—the corporeal Helen—

were within close proximity to me. You and Eleanor are one, different manifestations of the same spirit on alternate planes of reality, like separate ripples of the same divine fingertip on a pool of water. She is Helen's manifestation in *faerie don* just as you are Eleanor's in the corporeal world."

He stepped toward her, blue eyes blazing so fiercely that they seemed to give off a pure white fire.

"I don't know what sort of lies that fiend Asmoday has been feeding you but I am *not* what he's led you to believe. He is the one who means you harm. He is the one who has done his best to shatter our bond, Helen."

She surged toward him just as surely, but it was blind hatred that shone forth from the depths of her gaze not the fury of love that was in his.

"I don't need anyone to tell me that you're my enemy, Bale Ammadon. Seeing your face every night in my nightmares has taught me enough!"

She saw the way the blood drained from his face, the whiteness at the corners of his mouth. Still when he spoke he was completely in control, every inch the king that he was.

"And what of you, Helen? You believe that you are my enemy, in turn?"

Her lips stretched into a snarl.

It was answer enough.

"Then I'm right to order you to get your things. You know the saying about keeping your enemies close," he said wearily as he turned away. "Perhaps when you regain familiarity with my face in the light you will become more discerning at recognizing it in your darkness."



## **Chapter Four**

Her laughter drew him as surely as a siren's call. For the past two nights he'd guarded over her vigilantly, foregoing even the hour of sleep that he usually allowed himself. Once he'd understood that the young woman in Avery Coyle's small house was not only Helen but that by some strange twist of fate she was already in her Second Change, Bale had existed on a knife's edge of anguish and worry. Her escalated development must be associated somehow with the trauma of her death in her past lifetime. As vulnerable as she was he couldn't risk setting the protective spell that would shield her from another attack by a rogue Watcher and a repeat of her brutal rape and murder.

Problem was he couldn't risk not doing it either.

The protective spell that he'd created for Watcher mates following Helen's murder required corporeal intercourse in order to set it. Bale had told himself repeatedly that he would set the spell with Helen on first contact with her no matter what the circumstances. Her psychic wounds he could heal but he would *not* stand by and allow her to be murdered again so that a greedy Watcher could gain power from her Rush.

But as things stood, he recognized just how profound her psychic scarring was. He knew the irrevocable damage he could do by seducing her by stimulating her brain psychokinetically. Despite Helen's vigilant self-erected psychic barriers he had caught the flavor, if not the content, of her dreams as she lay sleeping at night.

Bale had been forced to face the grim reality that in order to protect her he was going to have to take on the considerable task of gaining her trust. But in order to do that he was first going to first have to batter down and breach her strong barriers.

He paused in a copse of conifers, wanting to appreciate the golden, rich sound of her laughter in the brief moment before Helen noticed him.

Her laughter would cease then, no doubt about it.

She had to be vigilantly aware of him, in order to avoid him, because she'd done it with stunning accuracy for the past few days. Clearly the last thing on Helen's mind at the moment however was the hatred that she reserved in such vitriolic potency just for him.

Bale couldn't say he blamed her for her feelings, although he refused to allow her riotous emotions to harm her health or put her into danger in any way.

Since moving into the castle Helen had made fast and immediate friends with his nine-year-old nephew Pheynix, more commonly known as Nix. Currently the two of them cavorted and wrestled on the lawn with Nix's dog Obi. Helen laughed hysterically as she lay in the grass, a tooth-dented red Frisbee hovering over her head

just out of reach of Obi's jaws and Nix's clawing hand. She rolled away from both playful puppies and sprang up to her feet agilely, still laughing.

"Hey no fair," Nix complained from the ground when she neatly tossed the Frisbee and Obi leapt after it energetically. He pushed a dark brown fringe of bangs out of his flushed face and sank into the cool grass. The shape of the boy's chin, cheekbones and nose were Skylar's but his coloring and the exotic slant of his blue eyes were definitely Duse's, just as they were Bale's and those of the youngest Ammadon, Jax.

"Obi always wins on a toss," said Nix through a wide yawn.

"That's when those two extra legs come in handy," Helen stated breathlessly as she fell onto the ground next to Nix heavily. When Obi bounded up with the Frisbee seconds later, Helen threw up her hands in surrender before she sank her fingers into the German shepherd's thick fur. "I give up, Obi. You wore me out."

She glanced around when Nix sat up abruptly. She stiffened when she registered who it was that towered over her while she sprawled with such careless abandon on the lawn.

"Hi, Uncle Bale! You want to play Frisbee with us? Uncle Bale is brilliant, throws it further than anybody," Nix said in a casual aside to Helen.

"Not right now, Nixy. I need to speak with Helen about something."

Nix itched his nose, smearing some dirt on the side of it in the process. "How come you call Nellie Helen?"

Helen opened her mouth to say it was because Bale was a pain in her arse but stopped herself when she glanced at Nix. "Your uncle is being fancy, Nix. Nell is short for Helen, like Bob is for Robert or Liz is for Elizabeth."

"Oh like Nix is short for..." His eyes shot up to his uncle. He'd forgotten that he wasn't supposed to tell his true name to just anyone. That was the same as going home with a stranger or chatting online with a bloke you didn't know in person.

"It's okay, Nix. Helen is family."

Bale watched as Helen's eyes flickered up to him in disbelief and suspicion at his statement.

Nix gaped at Helen. "You're family then?" he asked in amazement.

Nell smiled as she ruffled the boy's silky hair and stood. "Your uncle's word is law isn't it?"

Nix didn't catch the sarcasm in her tone but just grinned widely, dimpling at this piece of smashing news.

"Well?" Helen asked Bale tersely as she brushed grass and dirt off the knees of her faded, holey jeans.

"I just had a visitor on your behalf. May I speak to you about it?" He hitched his chin toward Dunleavy.

Helen's negligent shrug belied her uncertainty. She hadn't been alone with Bale since the infamous paddling incident. Once she'd gotten over both her shock that he'd

been entirely serious about her moving into Dunleavy and the fact that her aunt and uncle accepted without pause Bale's royal proclamation that she would be taking up residence in his home her complaints had become more a show of obstinacy than any genuine protest.

Her plans necessitated nearness to the bloody King of the Watchers, after all.

Her luxurious private suite was a far cry from the closet-sized room that she'd slept in at Uncle Avery's or the barrenness of a jail cell, which had shortly been her residence prior to coming to the Isle of Skye. It was pleasant not to have to walk through the dusty or muddy streets of the village in order to get to work just past dawn.

And then there was the crucial absence of her long-standing problem since she'd moved into Dunleavy. That was reason not to complain in and of itself. Still, she would never have admitted even to herself that she had never slept so peacefully in her life than she had within Dunleavy's walls or that she had never felt so safe.

Night and fear would inevitably find her again. They always did in the end. But for now she was enjoying the precious peace that encapsulated her at Dunleavy.

Of course she would have been a hell of a lot more vocal in her protests if Bale had forced himself into her presence either by word or deed. If Helen didn't know better though she'd have guessed that he was avoiding her as carefully as she sidestepped him.

Until now anyway.

A tense silence prevailed between them as he led her into a back entrance to Dunleavy and finally into an entirely masculine room containing book-lined shelves, an oval conference table and most notably an enormous oak desk that impossibly looked like it was carved from a single tree. Helen paused for a moment when she saw it and blinked several times. She started when Bale leaned down over her shoulder, his voice low and intimate.

"You recognize it, don't you?"

Her heart skipped a beat when she registered how close he stood. Her gaze trailed down his length. He wore a pair of black pants that were perfectly tailored to fit his long legs and lean hips. Her eyes lingered on the simple, austere silver buckle on his belt that pressed against his stomach inches below where she guessed his bellybutton lay. Just the imagined sight of that indentation in his taut flesh, the thin line of black hair that trailed down to the thicker, more abundant thatch around his cock caused heat to flash through her cheeks and neck and then to fan out over her chest.

Her nipples pulled tight.

His nostrils flared slightly as though he had just participated in the sensations along with her. Helen cleared her throat and glanced away.

"You're asking if I recall your desk? Not much of a throne is it, Your Highness?" she asked scathingly as she stepped away from his overwhelming presence. "No, Mrs. Southwick wouldn't allow a hussy like me to clean your precious room. She only allows Stella to wipe up after Your Holiness."

He hardly heard her sarcasm. Disappointment briefly flickered over his expression. "You often retain a few memories from your former lifetimes, more than most Watcher mates."

"Which would be relevant if what you allege about me were true but I have yet to see any proof of it."

Bale stiffened when he saw the small, knowing smile and the glint in her wide cornflower blue eyes as she glanced over her shoulder. He would swear she was teasing him, taunting him with the knowledge of who she was, *what* she was to him—his life mate, his lover, his wife, the mother of his children, his best friend, the Goddess in flesh.

The light of his universe.

In the next second though, confusion and something else—something that made his gut clench in anguish—shadowed her features. Then that disappeared as well.

Her golden eyebrow arched expectantly. "What's with the summons, Your Highness?"

He scowled darkly as he went behind his desk and lowered himself into the large leather chair. "I would appreciate it if you would stop calling me that. Although I technically do hold the title of 'king' among Watchers we are a small race of beings. In addition, our governance is actually quite liberal and decentralized." He sighed when he glanced up and saw that her voluptuous mouth was pulled into an amused grin at his show of defensive pique.

"Right. I'll get to the point then." He gestured for her to sit, which she did with a graceless plop into the chair before his desk.

"A young man named Charlie Vandy has just paid me a visit on your behalf," Bale began tonelessly.

Helen unhooked her knee from where she'd just flung it over the side of the arm on the chair and sat up from her slouch. "Charlie Vandy? Came to see *you*?"

Bale nodded as he scrutinized her reaction. "That's right. I gather that you know him then?"

Helen laughed softly as she slouched back in her chair. "Not well, no. He's a good friend of my cousin Ralph and he works in the stables. He gets arseholed on the same amount of whiskey that my gran takes for medicinal purposes. I had his cock in my mouth the other day when you saw me in the kitchen."

She watched for his reaction with a provocative gleam in her clear summertime eyes.

"He came to ask me for your hand in marriage," Bale said impassively.

Her expression segued from incredulity to hilarity in a second. "You're talking bollocks!" she managed between peals of laughter.

"You're surprised that he wants to marry you?"

Her expression told him that he'd completely missed the point. "I meant that I don't believe for a second that Charlie Vandy would come to *you* to ask permission to marry me."

Bale leaned back in his chair. When Helen saw the way that his eyes seemed to glow with banked power in his dark face her amusement faded.

"Your uncle told him to take his petition to me. It would seem that the general consensus in the environs of Dunleavy is that Nell Scott has become the official ward of the "bloody" King of the Watchers."

A tense silence ensued for a few seconds before Helen lunged out of her chair. "A general consensus that was no doubt instigated and then supported by you!"

Bale merely shrugged in the face of her fury. "Someone's got to take charge of you. Everyone seems to think that I can. I haven't done a bad job of it for the past few days have I?"

"That's got nothing to do with you! I just haven't felt the urge to get pissed and blow cock that's all!"

"Or steal from your employer?"

The riot in her eyes escalated to lynch mob proportions. "Yeah whatever! But that's all going to change tonight! We'll see how admirable of a job these gormless subjects of yours think you're doing warding it over Nell Scott come morning! And maybe after that I'll just take Charlie up on his kind offer of marriage. Won't your subjects think it's right funny to see how the stable boy can take charge of me when the mighty king can't?" she shouted furiously before she started to storm out of the room.

Helen never saw the cornered expression in his eyes or the tensed muscle that flexed just beneath the skin of his cheek. She was too busy squawking in outrage when she realized that the heavy oak doors to his inner sanctum had been sealed shut like a tomb with her inside of it.

She hated herself for it but she found herself pressing her back against the heavy doors as Bale came around his desk and walked toward her as if she was a wide-eyed virgin on her wedding night who had nothing between her and her new husband but the bobbing, weaving head of his penis looking like an angry serpent ready to strike and sink deep.

"Unlock this door!" she demanded hysterically.

"It isn't locked."

"Liar! I can't open it. Unlock it now before I scream 'rape' at the top of my lungs. Don't believe I won't do it!"

"I'm not that much of a fool. I'm sure you'd do much worse. I know how angry you are with me," Bale said as he stopped a few feet away from her. "I'll never forgive myself for leaving you vulnerable like I did, Helen. I've cursed myself almost every hour of every day for the past century for not protecting you from Asmoday or some

other like him. Helen! Listen to me!" Bale almost shouted when she tried to duck under his armpit and he halted her by grabbing her shoulders.

His sharp order didn't make her stop struggling against him but the wild, fierce light in his royal blue eyes did.

"You have to tell me what you remember," Bale entreated.

"What I remember about what?"

"Don't play with me. You must recall some of what Asmoday did to you. Isn't that why you're angry with me? Because I didn't protect you from him?"

"Whaa... I don't know what you're talking about, you bloody loon!" she accused hotly. She twisted herself frantically and reached again for the doorknob. She paused when she glanced between the two massive doors and saw a seamless crack.

"Why won't this door open?" she asked in dawning amazement.

"Because I'm Willing it to stay shut," he replied blandly.

She turned around, mouth hanging open. He recognized what flashed into her eyes.

"If you scream no one will hear. I've shielded the room. It's just you and me, Helen. You're going to have to deal with me now."

Bale didn't have time to interpret the expression that flickered across her beautiful face before she lunged at him and snaked her arms around his neck. "All right. I'll deal with you, lover," she murmured seductively before she pulled his head down to hers.

The sound of protest on his tongue melted into nonexistence when her lips touched his. His throat vibrated with a low groan as he experienced the exquisite, hauntingly familiar taste of her. He felt himself being submersed in a sensual fog that blended memory with the sensations of the present, the softness of Helen's lips as they parted for him, revealing the delectable flavor in the hollow of her mouth. In his memories as well as his dreams the sensation of kissing Helen was often paired with that of pressing his cock to her tender, damp nether lips, parting her to make way for him, the feeling of her opening like the petals of a fleshy flower, granting him access to her singular fluid fires that flexed and squeezed around him. As he plundered below he did the same to the liquid center of her mouth, piercing and prowling among her sweetness, swallowing her cries of desire...

Helen opened her eyes sluggishly. A purr of sheer pleasure vibrated in her ears. It took her a second to realize it was emanating from her own throat. Her eyes focused dazedly on a glossy raven-black brow and a lean dark jaw. As she watched his cheek flexed inward with a subtle, sinuous movement.

She moaned shakily, feeling the impact of Bale's exquisitely applied suction at her sex as if his hot, talented mouth had just suckled her clit as well as her tongue. She bathed in the luxury of his scent and his taste, so rich, complex and elementally male. The kiss liquefied her. Blood ran hotly through her flesh, making her torpid, fluid, infinitely moldable to whatever shape of passion that Bale desired for her to take.

That hazy realization made an alarm blare madly in her brain. She jerked her head back but her shoulders remained fixed in his large hands.

"I thought you said you couldn't feel sexual toward me," she managed to say despite the fact that breaking their kiss had been the equivalent of diving into an icy loch.

"I did," Bale admitted. His gaze remained fixed on her red shiny lips. "You're too young to have reached your Second Change. I don't understand it. It's unprecedented in Watcher history." His nostrils flared. "But you have, haven't you, Helen? You're purposefully blocking your sex energies from me."

He shook her shoulders in frustration. "You know precisely what you're doing, Helen. Only you could block those particular energies from your life mate purposefully and only with full knowledge of who and what you are to me. Tell me why you're doing it!"

She twisted her shoulders to be free of his hold but he held her fast.

"You want to know why I did it, Bale Ammadon? I didn't want you to sense me in that way because I came here to kill you!"

She choked back hysterical laughter when she registered the fixed look of shock on his handsome face. It was almost worth having blown her cover just to see the mighty, impenetrable Bale look so thoroughly poleaxed.

He shook his head slowly. "You hate me so much then?"

The fact that a vulnerable, hated part of her seemed to fold up and die at the look of stark sadness in his eyes made her reply even more forceful in order to compensate for her weakness.

"Yes! You betrayed me and I hate you for it!" she hissed.

His abrupt release of her upper body left her slightly disoriented. She stumbled forward a step before his hand steadied her at the shoulder.

"You came to Dunleavy to kill me?"

"Yes," Helen replied defiantly. She stared up into his cold visage as her breath came fast and choppy.

"I invite you to try it then, my Helen."

Her lip curled in bitter contempt but her heart skipped a beat at the stark tenderness of his voice. "What do you mean? What do you plan to do?"

He turned and walked back toward his desk. He didn't speak for several full, tense moments.

"The only thing I can do," he eventually said evenly. "While you plot my death I have to try and express to you the depth of my regret for not protecting you during your last lifetime, for leaving you vulnerable. If you kill me after I've tried my best then there is nothing for it. If *Lamad* requires the sacrifice of my conscious existence then I am willing to atone."

Helen's eyes widened slightly in surprise. Somehow she instinctively knew that by *Lamad* Bale meant karma – the impartial action of universal Judgment.

He watched her unflinchingly as he stood behind his desk. "I have to find a way to reach you, Helen."

"Why? So you can steal my energies from me? Make yourself strong?"

"No," he said softly. "So I can heal you, lovely."



## Chapter Five

Helen bristled uncertainly at Bale's quietly spoken words. The degree of her hesitation shocked her more than a little. She'd successfully resisted temptation for half a lifetime. Despite the fact that she knew Bale must be a master of deception she found a part of herself not necessarily believing him but wishing — oh so much — that she could.

Bale saw her wavering. "It wouldn't hurt for you to talk with me for a few minutes would it?"

"Talk about what?" she asked cautiously.

He shrugged casually as he walked toward the fireplace. Two deep, crimson-colored upholstered chairs were intimately situated before it. "Whatever you're comfortable discussing." He sank into the decadently soft chair. His long legs bent at the knee. His thighs parted in a thoroughly insouciant, masculine pose.

Most human women with a pulse would have been ready to offer themselves mind, pussy and soul to the altar of relaxed, potent power and distilled male sexuality that was Bale Ammadon, Helen thought dazedly. She scowled when she recognized her thought.

"So what do you want to know?" she demanded.

Bale would have gladly torn the very real, beating heart out of his chest at that moment if he thought it would have prevented on a long-term basis the squeezing pain he felt when Helen slowly moved toward him like a wary dog advances to the master's hand that strikes as well as feeds.

"Relax, Helen. This isn't an inquisition."

She cast a doubtful look in his direction before she lowered into the chair.

"I see you've made friends with my nephew."

"Yeah. He's a doll, that one is," Helen murmured, relaxing slightly. "His mom came and introduced herself to me the other day," she added as she pulled at a loose string from a hole in her jeans.

"Skylar?"

"Yeah. She's all right."

Bale leaned slightly closer to her. "You don't remember her, Helen?"

Her expression was guarded when she glanced up at him but still Bale would have sworn what she said next was the truth.

"I don't know what you're talking about half the time. I have memories. I have dreams of things that I know never occurred in this lifetime but I know happened to me nevertheless." Her eyes flashed. "I know I'm different from other people."

Bale nodded. "You're a rare human, Helen. Because of your refined essences you have certain gifts—what humans would call clairvoyance, foreknowledge, telepathy, telekinesis. In the past you could focus your consciousness on other planes of existence, such as the Astral world. Your most natural realm of existence though, after the physical world, is the *faerie don*."

She continued as though he'd never spoken. "I don't remember much, a flash here and there."

"Like when you walked into this room earlier?"

Helen shrugged. What difference did it make if he knew? "Yeah. Like that. Or like when I was in the stables earlier this week, talking to Charlie."

"You've always loved to ride. You were an accomplished equestrian."

Helen laughed bitterly.

"What? Don't you like riding presently?"

"I would if the bloody beasts would come anywhere near me. They go nutters whenever I get close," she said in a flippant tone that belied her profound hurt at being rejected by the majestic animals.

Bale's brow furrowed in puzzlement.

"What about Charlie, Helen?"

"What about him?" she asked suspiciously.

"He has asked to marry you."

Helen scoffed. "What a wanker, that Charlie. Men are always mistaking sex for love."

"Are they?" Bale asked.

She paused when she noticed his narrowed gaze but recovered quickly enough. "Sure. The ones who aren't just looking for a bit of selfish gratification. They're wankers too but at least most of them are honest about it," she replied sagely. She blinked at her next thought and grinned slowly.

"Why ya asking, King? Jealous, are we?"

He stared at her for a long moment without answering then stood and made his way over to the bookcase where he drew down a polished wooden box approximately two feet long and one foot wide.

"What's that?" Helen demanded curiously when he sat back down with the wooden box in his lap. He merely opened the lid. She gasped.

"Bloody hell!" she hissed, impressed despite herself. Inside of the box four beautiful daggers of various shapes and designs nestled in rich brown velvet, each unique and beautiful in its own way. Two had meticulously wrought gold inlays on the hilt and three of them were decorated with rubies and emeralds as well. The only thing that they had in common was a lethal-looking blade.

"Choose one," Bale ordered quietly.

Helen swallowed, unsure of what to make of his strange behavior. Nevertheless she couldn't resist reaching out and grasping the hilt of the second dagger from the right, the one with no jewels and pure, elegant lines. It fit in her palm perfectly.

She didn't notice Bale's small smile. The dagger she had chosen had been her preferred weapon for three of her past lifetimes. He had personally trained her in how to use it both with stealth and in an open fight.

"Take it."

The weight of the weapon felt good as she lifted it out of the box. Her eyebrows furrowed in confusion when he stood again, turning his back to her, and replaced the box in the bookshelf.

"I have thought many things of you but never that you were a fool," she whispered when he faced her again.

"You will soon learn what I am and what I am not, Helen," he said as he returned to the chair next to her. His eyes caught on the dagger she gripped in her hand. The blade shimmered with life, fueled by her depthless, profound fires.

"I taught you how to use that blade, just as I taught you another skill that you use in the present just as deftly as any weapon."

"What?" she asked, curious about his direction despite herself.

"How to suck cock."

Helen felt as if she couldn't draw breath in the silence that followed.

"More specifically how to suck my cock. As most of the young bucks and half of the not-so-young ones in Dunleavy already have learned, you were an extremely adept pupil. You like doing it so much presently because it makes you feel powerful, isn't that right, Helen? It's nice to know that even though you're the one on your knees you call all the shots?"

Helen laughed shortly. "I can't help it if all men are the same."

"Ruled by the pecker, is that it?"

"You said it, I didn't," Helen replied flippantly as she studied the silver and gold dagger in her hand with affected fascination.

"And it certainly doesn't hurt to know that while men are blinded with desire for the bliss that your lovely mouth can confer, chances are that the rest of you will go untouched both literally and figuratively."

Her gaze shot up to his. He sensed that her fingers flexed hard around the hilt. Her eyes glittered with a tight focus as she watched him.

She never batted an eyelash when he stood and deliberately began to unbuckle his belt.

Helen could not only feel her heartbeat in her ears, she could actually hear the blood gushing and flowing in her veins in the moments that followed. Once Bale's belt was loosed his long fingers deftly unfastened the button and zipper. She swallowed

convulsively, unable to say honestly to herself if the instinctual response originated in fear or hunger.

He stretched the waistband of a pair of white briefs forward and lowered them, along with his pants, to his knees. Helen stared. She wasn't used to seeing men when they weren't aroused. By the time they opened their flies the skin of their penises were usually stretched tight with their desire for her. That's how she liked them, hard and ready to get down to business.

Even in his unaroused state he hung long and full below his round, full testicles. Despite his dark coloring his cock looked pale at that moment in comparison to his thighs and the black thatch of hair at his groin.

Desire washed through her. The sheer magnitude of the feeling left her stunned and weakened. Memories tickled Helen's awareness—misty, sultry recollections of stroking and licking him until he swelled past two times the size of his already considerable length and girth, darkening as hot blood filled and stiffened his turgid member.

And every one of those vague, unformed memories was sweet.

Before she realized her intent she rose from the chair.

Bale saw the battle in her wide eyes. When she stepped closer he felt his cock stir with desire. He sat down on the chair, his eyes never leaving her face.

"You hold the knife, Helen. I'm in your hands."

Her gaze flickered up from the mesmerizing sight of his growing cock. "You're mad," she whispered.

He slowly shook his head as he held her gaze. "Not mad. Just at your mercy, lovely. I would be whether my pants were around my ankles and you held a knife in your hand or not. You sense that a man is completely in your power when you take him in your mouth. I can tell you from personal experience that it's true. Come, Helen. Glory in your power."

He held his breath when she stepped closer. Her grip on the dagger made her white-knuckled. Bale truly was uncertain whether she would caress him or stab in those taut few seconds but he forced himself to hold steady. Not until she knelt before him did he allow himself to exhale. She stared fixedly at his penis.

"I'm only going to do it because you've got the finest piece of meat I've ever seen," she finally said. Her expression was defiant when her eyes flickered up to him. "May as well enjoy it before I kill you."

A grin tugged at his shapely lips. "Much good it'll do either one of us then."

Helen frowned at his amusement. She gratifyingly saw it fade when she placed the dagger on his hard, hair-sprinkled thigh, the tip just inches away from his full testicles. Only when she saw his wariness did she reach out for his thick root. She heard his ragged, deep groan when she fisted him from the balls to the quickly swelling, bulbous crown. She felt him expand and grow in her hand. The sensation paralleled that of the warm gush of fluid flooding her panties.

For a full, sensual minute she just studied him as she stroked him slowly and deliberately. His color deepened. The veins that had merely been obvious to her eyes now became delineated beneath her curious, sensitive fingertips. She traced the defined ridges, learning their topography through her touch. She gently slid her fingers below his balls and lifted up, testing their weight.

Helen bit her lower lip to prevent a moan of arousal. He felt so heavy. She'd never known anything like it.

Or she had. She often had cause to be grateful at how vague her memories of her previous incarnations were but at that moment she wished fervently that she could recall the erotic memories of pleasuring Bale Ammadon's beautiful cock in graphic detail.

But since the ugly images would accompany the alluring, she determined it would be best just to create some brand-new ones.

She leaned forward and inhaled his musky male scent deeply. Her eyelids partially closed in sublime pleasure as she bathed the thick, fleshy head of his cock with her tongue. She inserted just the tip of the succulent spear into her mouth.

Air filtered past his lips in a low hiss. His eyes narrowed as he watched her use her hand to arrow his cock between her red lips. When she had the head positioned in the warm cave of her mouth, her lips stretched tightly against him, she fluttered her tongue over him first with the quick, elusive caresses of a butterfly's wings and then with the hard but no less rapid strokes of a skilled whore in a hurry.

He groaned in pleasure.

He furrowed his fingers in her soft, thick hair, pressing them to her skull. Bale realized his mistake too late. She didn't stop the intoxicating movements of her clinging, sinking lips or flickering tongue.

She did move the point of the dagger up his thigh until it tickled his left testicle.

He looked into her wide blue eyes and slowly uncurled his fingers from her hair. Even as he retreated she approached. She sank several inches of his stalk aggressively into her mouth. He grimaced at the sensation, both singular and hauntingly familiar at once.

"Helen," he whispered feelingly when she began to slide him in and out between her lips from mid-staff to the thick ridge below the head of his cock. He saw the confusion in her gaze at his tone, knew a split second before she closed her eyes that she would. Her pink-tinged, delicate eyelids lowered over the windows to her soul, blocking him from her. As if in conciliation, the tight ring of her lips lowered another inch until he felt the sensitive skin at the tip of his cock brush the back of her throat.

She backed off him almost immediately but her flushed cheeks drew inward as she treated him to her singularly strong, steady suck. She maintained it even as she moved him in and out, her lips clasp him impossibly tighter. She beat at the head with her tongue in a slapping caress before she sank down on him again, each time just a bit further down on his shaft.

It would be worth it to have felt this pleasure even if she castrated him right now, Bale thought as he watched her through slit eyelids. His cock stretched her lips wide. It struck him sadly that it was the only way that he could make her smile, for the time being anyway.

Helen's entire focus narrowed to the sensation of him in her mouth, the musky, rich taste of him. She wished that she could encompass him, swallow him, absorb him into her wholly. But of course she couldn't. The King of the Watchers was no Charlie Vandy, and no matter how much she wished otherwise the circumference of his cock would not fit into her straining throat.

Her clit tingled with a sizzling heat as she worked his organ two-thirds of the way into her mouth. There were other ways she could harbor him in her body, ways that her hungry pussy and achy clit demanded of her at that moment.

But no, even the thought made her muscles tighten with fear.

She slid the first inch of his tapered head into her throat. Despite the fact that she began to gag she kept the tip inserted without flinching, letting her throat muscles clasp and release him, massaging him. She kept him there, breathing through her nose, utterly focused on the pain mixing with the pleasure of taking him so deep.

She would never admit it to herself but the manner in which she stroked the base of his stalk with her fisted hand as he groaned loudly with pleasure was almost loving.

Sweat glistened Bale's abdomen and upper lip. He doubted that Helen recalled but the manner in which they were making love was unheard of among Watchers. Because of the nature of their existence, because of the fact that they usually had the strength to become corporeal only through the power of a woman's orgasm and Rush, Watchers always conferred their lover—whether she be a sleeping, unaware woman, a leman or a mate—with her pleasure, usually several times, before they even considered taking their own. It was a bittersweet experience for him to have her pleasure him so completely when he couldn't return the favor.

When she inevitably pulled back, tears glossing her face, it was only to catch a full breath before she leaned forward, pushing him into her tight opening again. A groan of mixed ecstasy and concern vibrated his throat just as hers clasped and shuddered erotically around his cock.

"No, lovely...don't," he gritted through clenched teeth. Nevertheless the Will of the most powerful creature on the planet wasn't sufficient enough to retreat from the immense pleasure. He felt his cock jerk uncontrollably in her warm, tight, vibrating space. Her stroking fist only splintered his restraint further. When she slid him out of her throat he couldn't stop himself from lifting his pelvis off the chair.

Helen opened her eyes, daring a glance up at him as she flogged the head of his penis with a limber tongue. His eyelids squeezed together tightly. A light coat of sweat glistened on his forehead and upper lip. She experienced an urge to lick that salty fluid off, to let it melt on her tongue before she carefully, deliberately fit her lips to his. The

relatively innocent fantasy felt potently forbidden to her but the power of it created an almost painful pinch of lust at her clit.

She wanted him. Despite everything her desire for him had escalated to an alarming feverish pitch.

Bale opened his eyes at the sensation of her tightening her grip on the dagger. He only felt the lightest whisper of a touch on his scrotum. Her gripping hand on his thigh was where he felt her hardening resolve.

"If you kill me without facing your fears you'll run for the rest of your life," he rasped.

He saw her nostrils flare. She dipped her head down, taking him in the first of many deep, swift strokes that would inevitably end with him convulsing helplessly in orgasm.

It felt unbelievably good. Bale would never have willingly replaced Helen's loving touch for anything. But even so he had to admit that her anger toward him, her anger toward life in general at present, seemed to add an exciting, hard edge to her already divine suck. All he could do was grip the arms of the chair and surrender completely to her relentless sensual onslaught.

She gave him no other choice.

Helen sensed him cresting. She moved the dagger slightly back from his testicle, honest enough with herself to know that there was no way in hell she would forego the pleasure of having the King of the Watchers' semen flood her mouth and throat.

And for some reason she was firmly confident that he would do just that.

She took his right testicle in her fingers, squeezing gently, once again marveling at its weight and density. The pace and pressure of her fucking motions over him increased, making him grunt in surprised pleasure. Helen continued to gently stimulate the round testicle in her fingers at the same time that she began to pump the base of the thick pillar hard, demanding her due.

Bale threw his head back and roared as he gave it to her.

Helen closed her eyes, although she wanted to watch him climax. Perhaps it was the sheer power of the moment that overcame her. She shivered eagerly as she positioned him in her mouth so that her tongue could lave him quick and hard as his cum spurted against it. A more indefinably gratifying, exciting experience she had never known. It was as though all the trapped, immense power of the male being that pulsed in her mouth was abruptly released through the gush of thick, hot liquid that jetted onto her tongue. She wasn't quite prepared for the volume that so quickly filled her mouth. She swallowed and sucked, swallowed and sucked and still he tensed and ejaculated more until finally she lost the battle and his cum spilled out of the right corner of her mouth.

Only then did he begin to slow, his convulsions less intense and frequent. She glanced up at him warily and saw that his eyes were closed. Quick as a blink she

scooped up the stream of cum that leaked down her chin and pushed it back between her lip and the underside of his cock.

She couldn't have said why she did it. The action had been purely instinctual.

Too late she realized that his piercing blue eyes were open, the full impact of his razor-sharp consciousness present in his gaze. She deliberately swallowed the remaining cum in her mouth, her throat convulsing while she held his stare. A small post-orgasmic shudder went through him as she slowly drew her lips off him.

For a moment neither spoke. Then his gaze transferred significantly to the floor. Helen's eyes trailed instinctively.

Her facial muscles stiffened when she saw the dagger flash where it lay abandoned and forgotten on the Oriental carpet.

She was up off of her knees with the dagger in her hand and moving toward the doors so quickly that it would have shocked Bale if he hadn't been expecting it.

"Helen," he called sternly before she turned the heavy brass doorknob in her hand. She paused.

"You will find that your things have been moved to the king's suite."

Her face looked pale and outraged when she glanced around but Bale noticed that she didn't launch into her usual vitriolic verbal display. He was more than ready to explain to her that while he needed to be vigilant in his guard of her, he still required his small amount of nightly sleep to survive.

He had not yet told those closest to him—his brothers or his cousin Che—about Helen's reappearance in his life or requested their help in protecting her until such a time that he could set the spell and place his sigil on her. Perhaps something about the fact that Helen was such a young woman was making him uncomfortable about revealing the truth. Although he couldn't usually sense her Second Change sexual energies he could sense the barriers that she'd erected against him. And in those moments before, during and after the thunderous climax that he'd just had she had let down her guard.

If Bale had ever doubted for a second that the young woman who currently glared at him in fury was his Helen and that she was definitely sexually mature those uncertainties were now completely put to rest.

Still he doubted that Duse, Jax or Che would sense the same things about Helen that he could. They were likely, at least initially, to think he'd gone the twisted path of the perverted criminal Asmoday and began thirsting for First Change women.

And there was another reason that he hadn't revealed the entire truth about Helen, including the fact that she had stolen the Dionytion Stone, to his Duse, Jax or Che. Although they loved Helen they would recognize that she was a risk, that she must have stolen the Dionytion Stone for Asmoday since he was the one who possessed it just following the theft. Helen had also threatened to kill Bale, of course. His brothers and Che would tell him his plan to keep her so close and to try to win over her trust was foolish given the circumstances.



They wouldn't understand that Bale had no other choice.

He sighed under the weight of Helen's angry stare. Well perhaps he could get his knights – six Watchers who had pledged to his service in order to learn what he had to teach them, who would not question him like his relatives would – to watch over Helen for him. He acknowledged sadly that her defenses against him at least protected her from a greedy Watcher bent on forcing her into orgasm so that he could empower himself with her energies.

"I suppose I don't have a choice in the matter?" Helen asked acidly.

"No," Bale answered honestly. "I'm sorry. I'm doing it for your own good, Helen."

As had historically been the case with her the riot that escalated in her eyes conveyed loud and clear how much she despised that particular phrase.

Helen started to protest but then swallowed it back when the memory of his desire-roughened voice entered her awareness.

*If you kill me without facing your fears you'll run for the rest of your life.*

He could have said little else that could have given her such pause.

The knob turned smoothly in her hand when she twisted it. She fled Bale's office like she was escaping the inevitable. The inevitable *what* she couldn't say. Whatever it was it *was* going to be awful.

That much Helen knew for a fact.

## Chapter Six

Bale had a long discussion with his sons that night. Aga he spoke to in person, more or less, Ari telepathically. Watcher-human children differed in their degree of skill in maintaining focus in their subtle bodies. All of them were of course more naturally at home in the physical world. However they greatly varied in their powers and abilities from one child to the next.

Aga was much more of an air spirit than his brother. He possessed Helen's blonde hair and fair skin and the Ammadon exotic, slanting blue eyes. Aga was much more comfortable than his brother focusing his consciousness on his mental body and traveling wherever he chose in the physical world at the blink of an eye. Ari had a much stronger earth energy, which was revealed in his raven black hair and dark complexion. Although his coloring was his father's Ari's mercurial, fluid expression was pure Helen, as were his summertime-sky eyes and quick, potent smile.

Both of his and Helen's sons had done their initial training in Watcher ways under Bale's tutelage. But as was natural they had eventually wanted to expand their horizons. Ari had decided to pledge service to Che Ammadon and currently lived in California while Aga had chosen to study with Batos, one of the most revered and wise of all the Watchers.

When Bale had told his sons about their mother, Ari had insisted that he was flying to Scotland immediately. Aga had remained quiet but Bale had sensed the tension that had leapt into the fine, subtle matter of his mental body. For a few seconds Aga had shimmered and faded as if his Will to be in his corporeal body—the flesh that epitomized solid action and the ability to *do* in the physical world, at least when you were not as powerful a being as his father was—was too strong at that moment to keep him concentrated at the vibratory rate of the mental body.

Aga and Ari had both been profoundly grief-stricken by Day's murder of their mother, of course.

Bale had finally succeeded in stalling both of them. They were attending the Issian Festival at Dunleavy in three days and that would give Bale a little more time to chip away at Helen's thick barriers.

Or at least that had been his hope. As he stepped into the inner chamber of the king's suite at half past three in the morning however, his hope flagged. Helen had disdained the obvious comforts of his large luxurious bed and lay curled up, back facing him, on the couch in the seating area. Evan must have supplied her with a pillow and a blanket but she'd kicked the cover off her during her sleep. Her sleepwear consisted of a pair of black low-riding shorts and a t-shirt.

Bale paused for a moment, studying her as all the moisture drained from his mouth.

Her shapely limbs and torso seemed to give off a pale, ethereal glow in the dim light of the suite. Her right arm sprawled over her head as though she'd impatiently rearranged the pillow and fallen back into a deep sleep before she had the chance to completely finish. The opened palm of her left hand lay on the back of the couch. The posture struck Bale as poignantly vulnerable. Tenderness swept through him like a palpable force, creating a potent brew as it mixed with the myriad of other feelings he felt.

Her unfinished motion of reaching for the pillow had raised her t-shirt, leaving her narrow waist, the graceful swell of her hip and her ribcage bare. Bale caught just the hint of the lower swell of a small pale breast before he forced himself to walk away.

He moved about the room silently, finally turning out the dim lamp next to his bed. After a moment of lying on his back and staring into the blackness he realized that the rhythmic, soothing sound of Helen's breathing had ceased.

He wondered if she came toward him stealthily in the darkness, dagger in hand.

Helen listened with pitched alertness to the small, subtle sounds that told her of Bale's presence in the room with her, his even breathing, a strained swallow, the slight rustling of the sheets against his body. Perhaps it was a memory or perhaps it was her piqued awareness where he was concerned but she was suddenly one hundred percent certain that Bale never wore a stitch of clothing to bed.

She shivered with excitement. Something quickened in her blood, making it run hot and fast.

She was not as frayed as she had been when she'd fled his office hours ago. Her earlier emotional volatility had fueled her up the steep path of the mountain nearest to Dunleavy to an ancient stone circle the locals called Noddin's Ring. Helen had collapsed in the middle of it and soon fallen into a deep sleep as a result of her mental and physical exhaustion.

When she had awoken she hadn't been alone. An old crone had knelt in the grass just feet away from her, examining her curiously. Helen had thought the little woman's face looked as weathered and ancient as the monoliths that surrounded them. Despite the fact that Helen had clearly sensed no threat from the old woman, her fist must have instinctively tightened around the hilt of her dagger. She'd blinked at the noise she heard, like dry paper being crumpled and torn, before she realized it was the sound of the woman's laughter.

"Gave that to you, did he? Bale once again earns his right to be called King of the Watchers."

"He's earned the right to be called much more than that," Helen said testily as she sat up and brushed grass from her hair with her empty hand. When she was done she studied the gray-haired woman with just as much interest as she was being studied with in turn. She wore an ugly gray cotton skirt that had more colorful patches on it than it did the original cloth. The loose red top she wore looked more like a sack than a

blouse. Despite her gypsy appearance the little woman's light gray eyes were sharp and incising.

"I know you, don't I?" Helen asked slowly.

"You recognize the spirit within if not the coarse body without."

Helen's eyebrows rose in initial surprise but then she nodded matter-of-factly as she began to stand.

"You are fey?" Helen asked bluntly as she brushed off her jeans.

"Some have called me that, just as they have you. You and I are of a kind, Helen. Just as that stubborn one who came to live at Dunleavy years back is," the crone added with vague irritation.

Helen paused in her brisk actions. "Skylar?"

The old woman grunted in agreement. "We are Druaga, one and all."

Helen didn't bother to ask her more about the latter. Somehow she instinctively knew that the woman meant something akin to an ancient line of witches, or no, priestesses, when she said Druaga.

"Skylar does not claim her heritage then?" she asked instead.

The crone's mouth twisted in dissatisfaction. "She fears too greatly that she will find out something about herself that she dreads if she hones the subtle arts to the degree that I would demand of her."

"I seek power."

The girl stated it so starkly that it brought a small smile to the old woman's faded, thin lips. Why shouldn't one who had been forced to feel powerless seek to fill herself again with her birthright?

"I would like to learn from you if you have any answers for me."

Maerda sighed heavily. Bale had long ago forced his brothers, Che and herself—Helen's former instructor in the female subtle arts—to take a solemn oath that they would not reveal to Helen the details of her former life when she eventually returned, or more specifically her traumatic murder, until he could gauge how much damage such a revelation might incur.

But with the amazingly strong boundaries this slip of a girl had erected, Maerda doubted Bale had figured out much of anything except the true meaning of confusion.

"Perhaps a few answers but not likely the ones for which ye search," the crone finally admitted as she stood as well, with amazing agility for one so ancient. "Come. We'll have tea at my cottage. I may not have all the answers for which ye seek but I have a few questions which are more worthy of being asked than others."

The old woman's eyes glinted with power as she glanced back at Helen over her shoulder.

"My name is Maerda by the way, in case ye've forgotten, dear Helen."

Helen spent a lovely hour with Maerda. The old woman's cottage turned out to be a two minute walk from Noddin's Ring and was quite a cozy little hovel when one become accustomed to all the clutter. She was not so sure that she'd learned anything earth-shattering on her visit but her nerves had been noticeably calmed by the time she returned down the mountain.

Presently, Bale went utterly still when he heard the solemn, bell-like tone of Helen's voice vibrate through the dense blackness of his shrouded suite.

"I met someone called Maerda today. She is under the impression that you are wise."

"And did you quickly disavow her of her belief?"

"I would never dream of disillusioning another on beliefs they hold dear, no matter how foolish or ill-gotten their faith may be," she replied loftily.

Bale smiled into the darkness. She really did have a knack for drama and subtle humor, his Helen. His appreciation of it dulled the fact that he was the butt of it.

A little anyway.

"I am glad you met her. I meant to introduce you to her. Maerda is the last of a long line of powerful women. My mother was such a woman, as was my cousin Che's mother."

"Human women?" Helen asked curiously.

"Yes."

"And they mated with beings that were...not human?" she asked tentatively.

"Yes. Because of the mother's rarified subtle essences, such an unusual mating was possible."

Helen shivered again as his deep, quiet voice rumbled through the pitch blackness, entering her ears and vibrating her eardrums but also affecting her skin and body, prickling along her neck, her spine...her sex.

"Unusual because the Watcher fathers were not human beings?"

Bale paused at the uncertainty in her voice but he was also strangely gladdened. Their exchange echoed five poignant, familiar conversations that they'd had with one another over the past sixteen hundred years as he began to orient—or reorient—her to Watcher ways after locating her upon her Second Change.

"No, the Fathers were not human. Whether they were beings of the physical world but not of Earth or creatures of an interpenetrating subtle realm that parallels earthly existence we don't know. Personally I'm an adherent to the latter theory. It seems that every day I glean just a shadow, a hint of a different vibratory frequency that is an entire different world colliding with this one. Whatever the case the Fathers left us—their defective progeny—behind, disappointed that we were sterile for mating with females of their kind and human women, as well."

There was a long, gravid pause.

"But they were wrong," she whispered fiercely into the darkness.

"Yes, albeit in very rare, wonderful cases."

Another pause.

"Helen?"

"Yes?"

"Come here."

"Why?" she asked shakily.

"Tradition. I refuse to have this conversation with you unless I can touch you."

When he had first been granted a fully functioning physical body by Helen's monumentally powerful sexual response to him more than fifteen hundred years ago the sound of his own blood pounding in his veins had been by far the most unpleasant experience that accompanied corporal existence. He suffered through that sensation now in the silence that followed. It only highlighted his vulnerable, thoroughly mortal state.

"I do not want to converse more about etiology of Watcher existence."

Bale blinked in surprise, not only because the sound of her voice clearly indicated that she was coming closer but because she suddenly sounded one hundred percent like the Helen of old, refined and intellectually incising. He might have been lying in this same bedroom over a century ago as she came to him in the darkness.

The impression totally faded when she spoke again, this time directly next to the bed.

"Guess you're wanting a repeat performance of this afternoon, eh lover?"

Bale frowned into the darkness. "I would be lying if I said no but that's not why I called you over here, Helen."

She gasped when he reached for her and pulled her down directly on top of him on the bed. Her struggle was not a sharp thing of elbows and fists but instead a muted one, his hard, hair-sprinkled thigh abrading against the silk of her skin, soft breasts rubbing against the ungiving plane of his chest, the ridge of his penis pressing against the tender juncture of her thighs and smooth belly. When Helen felt his cock harden and lengthen beneath her she stopped her squirming, although she remained hyper-aware of every point of contact that their bodies made with one another's.

His muscular abdomen flexed beneath her and the bedside lamp switched on. Helen blinked at the brightness, dim as the light was. She scowled into his handsome face.

"What'd you do that for?"

"Don't you want to ask me any more questions?"

"Not particularly," Helen said in a sultry voice. He started when she reached down and fisted his cock.

Her smile was as innocent as warm milk yet mysteriously sexual as well. Or maybe the latter was purely associated with the way she began to slowly pump his cock.

Helen gave a small cry when Bale abruptly rolled her beneath him on the bed. Her eyes widened in surprise at so suddenly staring up into such a stark masculine landscape consisting of rounded hard muscle and ridged sinew, all tightly gloved by smooth, thick olive-toned skin.

“Your mouth’s performance was not the only thing that occurred between us today in my office,” he said.

“Wha...?” But her query was cut off by his mouth covering her own. His tongue, a supple plunderer, immediately penetrated her open lips. Helen recalled with a rush of excitement to what he referred – that kiss that she’d much rather have forgotten.

Which Bale knew full well, and that was why he was forcing her to re-experience its potency.

Her protests melted from her brain at the same rate that her flesh began to heat and liquefy. This indescribable sensation was what she had fought against earlier, his heavy, torpid feeling, this strange blend of relaxation and wild arousal. She gave a broken cry of uncertainty.

He seamlessly changed his tactic when he felt the vibrations of that shaky moan. His muscular arms braced on the bed, he spread his palms on either side of her head as he held his upper body off her and began to gently make love to her mouth. He molded her full lips against his, shaping their flesh together softly, sensually. He sipped at her sweetness, appreciating her nectar in a way that no other being in existence possibly could. Helen’s lips became the center of his universe, his own the only means of navigating that intoxicating world. He gloried in the similarities of her flesh and essence from her past incarnations and avidly sought out the subtle differences. He learned her well, sipping and rubbing and coaxing until the moan that broke free of her lips was the polar opposite of anxiety.

Helen held a small part of herself in reserve as she fell under the spell of Bale’s masterful yet patient kiss. But the portion that she allowed to participate did so fully. When she felt him withdraw slightly she strained up against him, blindly seeking out his warm, firm lips with her own parted, hungry ones.

A shock of pure pleasure went through her when he ducked his head in a forceful strike, spearing her lips once again with his tongue. Her body flexed as if by instinct when she felt his tongue penetrating her. She pressed her groin against his and groaned into his mouth at the sensation of his bare penis pressing into her where she needed the pressure most. He felt hot enough to burn through her flesh and yet she pushed up harder, wanting nothing more in that moment but to be incinerated by his desire.

One of Bale’s hands snaked around to the small of her back. He spread it wide, gratified at how much of her flesh he could encompass by doing so. Their mouths began to mate in a focused frenzy, heads twisting to optimize the pleasurable friction. He clasped her waist tightly and deliberately shifted her body up and down against his. The movement was small but potent. Helen groaned into his mouth, obviously liking

the sensation as much as he did. She quickly joined him in the erotic caress, cradling and rocking his cock in the soft juncture between her thighs.

Desire rivered through her flesh, pooling hotly at her clit and deep within her womb. Her emptiness haunted her in that moment even more poignantly than did her dreams. She surged up against him, wildly hungry to be filled. As if in answer to her need the hand at her back suddenly swept beneath the waistband of her shorts and circled to her front in the blink of an eye. Helen gasped when one long finger sought—and found.

She unintentionally dragged her mouth from his and stared blankly at a rounded, hard shoulder muscle. Pure pleasure blossomed inside of her, leaving room for nothing else.

His hand opened wide across her belly and pelvis, his forefinger burrowing boldly into the cleft of her sex. Bale groaned. She felt like liquid silk in his hand. He kept still for several seconds, letting her become accustomed to his presence and subtle energies...waiting...waiting.

When he heard her whimper he moved.

He pressed softly against her, up, down and around until she arched up against him and he felt a fresh surge of warm juice against his finger. His eyelids narrowed as he gauged her reaction with his eyes while his subtle energies lightly probed her as well.

He felt her pleasure as surely as he felt her denial of him cresting the horizon.

His finger continued to stimulate her clit as he dropped his head. He nuzzled her left breast and found a nipple. He sipped at the taut peak through her t-shirt.

Helen moaned shakily as a bolt of desire shot from her breast to her womb, making it contract in acute longing. The potency of the pleasure shocked her to her core. The first dim edges of panic rippled into her awareness.

But in the next second Bale lifted his head from her breast. His hand slid out of her panties and shorts until it tenderly encircled her waist. Her lips shaped themselves to speak. It abruptly struck her that what was on her tongue wasn't an insistence that he stop but instead a cry of protest that he'd ceased supplying her with that hot, sizzling pleasure.

The realization made her push back on his shoulders. He complied without protest, letting her roll over him and then to his side. She fisted and began to pump his cock with a forceful precision that had him seeing double for a few seconds.

"Let's get back to the point then shall we?"

"I hadn't realized we'd digressed," he grunted as she stroked him harder.

Her eyelids narrowed as she studied his handsome face, tightening in a pleasurable agony.

"There. That's more like it," she whispered. Her gaze flickered nervously to where he gently caressed her shoulder.



"You're beating my cock like a mechanical milking machine, Helen," he said wryly before her protest left her mouth. "Surely it won't kill you to let me lightly touch your shoulder in turn."

Her upper lip curled with fury as the frenetic up and down motion of her entire arm increased. Bale resignedly took her restrained silence as a good sign and continued to caress her, soothing her volatile subtle energies through his touch. He tensed when several tears scattered down her cheeks but he didn't speak. She just continued to jack him like her entire existence depended on it. Despite the thick emotion that surged and bubbled out of her Helen's arm and squeezing fist didn't flag.

Nor, in all honesty, did his monumental arousal.

He accepted that she was taking her revenge on him for making her feel in those all too brief electric moments when he'd made love to her. But knowing that didn't alter the fact that her angry fist squeezed and slid against his cock with a ruthless brand of perfection. After several minutes of that pleasurable, unceasing agony Bale felt himself cresting.

"Come," Helen whispered harshly.

Her muscles were almost clenched as tightly as his as she pounded his cock with her fisted hand. She blinked in order to clear the blur of tears from her eyes. She was so focused on bringing him to climax that she didn't protest when his hand on her shoulder decisively jerked up her t-shirt, exposing her breasts to his eyes. His gaze fixed on her, hot and hungry. She bit her bottom lip hard in order to attenuate her body's instantaneous, powerful reaction, as if he'd reached out and pinched her nipples instead of just looking at her.

The pain helped but not much. She felt her clit throb acutely and knew that if she just squeezed her thighs together she would come.

What a betraying little piece of flesh it was.

Helen pried her thighs open instead, the effort costing her. Her athletic pounding of his cock faltered slightly.

But it didn't matter to Bale because she'd already shoved him mercilessly past the finish line, or maybe the sight of her shapely, pink-tipped breasts tightening so responsively had done that. Whatever the case, he closed his eyes and exploded. Pleasure seemingly fractured his flesh.

Helen's eyes closed briefly as well, her teeth clenching just as tightly as his. When she felt the warm spurt of wetness on her hand though, she turned quickly.

Bale came mostly in silence, with the exception of a few tense grunts. But when she abruptly slid him between the tight ring of her lips and fluttered her tongue across his sensitive head he became more vocal.

"By the *fucking* Fathers, Helen!" he roared.

For several full moments following that Bale panted madly for air. She sucked not only every last drop of semen out of him but what felt like every bit of his energy as well.

When Helen eventually noticed that his breathing had returned to normal she slowly sat up, eyes cast pointedly away from him. The cool air of the air-conditioning brought her nipples to further, painful erection. She flushed and moved to pull her t-shirt down. Her eyes flashed up to meet Bale's gaze when he stopped her with a hand at her wrist.

"I came for you, Helen. Who will you come for?" he rasped.

"No one. I will never be a fool for a man again, let alone a Watcher, and last of all for you, Bale Ammadon!"

He watched her soberly as she moved away from him on the bed, jerking her shirt down as she went.

"What about for yourself? Do you at least provide yourself with that pleasure?"

She glanced back at him in surprise as she stood by the bed. "Not since coming to Dunleavy," she said acidly. "I remember enough to know what a woman like me is to your race. Your kind covets my energies like a human would money or fame or..."

"Power?" Bale asked through a rigid mouth.

"Exactly! I can't believe Skylar willingly put on the shackles of slavery. I can't believe I ever did! It makes me sick. *Sick*, do you hear me?"

Helen took a step back and tried to take another but only succeeded in stumbling when she saw the white-hot fires that blazed into Bale's eyes. How could she have forgotten what a fearsome creature he was? For the past week she'd fallen into the trap of believing that he was the flesh and blood man that he appeared to be, albeit a singularly powerful one.

But Bale was no more just a man than Helen herself was a cockroach.

"Slavery?" he thundered. "Is that what you would call the love we had — *have* — for one another? Asmoday may have done his best to damage our bond but what lies between us still glorifies that which is too high to put into words, Helen. And in regard to the rest I would joyfully be your mate even if you never conferred me a whisper of your power as long as you were happy and healthy!"

Both of their breathing was audibly escalated in the silence that followed. Bale quieted his own with a supreme force of Will. But even though the blazing white fires had diminished to a mere glint in his royal blue eyes Helen couldn't still her racing heart.

"But that will never happen," Bale admitted after a moment. "Your denial of me is harmful to you. You're blocking your energies in an unnatural manner that is dangerous to your well-being." His eyes entreated her. "As your mate it's my duty to protect you, Helen. At the rate you're going you'll end up killing both of us."

"And how do you know that hasn't been my plan all along?"

Her tone of bitter weariness sent a shimmering wave of pure fear through Bale's subtle essences. Resolve came quickly on the tails of his dismay but as usual his grief carved him deeply.

"Perhaps there is something crucial you don't recall about Watcher ways, Helen."

She turned her chin toward him warily.

"You could stab me with your dagger now and there is a small chance you would kill me on all known realities. I am more corporeal than most Watchers, thanks to your generous response to me in the past. But my subtle bodies still interpenetrate my physical one at present. If you really want to ensure my destruction you will have to strike in the moment when I am most vulnerable."

Helen paled.

Bale nodded slowly. "That's right. If you really want to succeed in killing me you have to confer me with your Rush. You have to let me love you, let me bring you to climax so that for a short period of time I am truly mortal."

His small smile squeezed at her heart.

"It's a paradox, Helen, but so are most things that strike so closely to the truth. Only when you allow yourself to become vulnerable to me will you truly have me at your mercy."

## **Chapter Seven**

Helen must have truly resented his allegation that only by completely giving herself to him would he be at her mercy, Bale determined, because she'd spent the next several days devising ways to prove that she was the one who controlled the strings upon which he dangled like a helpless puppet. She seduced him at every turn with a flicker of her eyelashes or a too-brief, luminescent smile. She didn't return to his bed to service him like she had before but everything she did seemed designed to make Bale beg her to do just that.

Bale moved uncomfortably in his chair at the head of the conference table in his office, arousal plaguing him when he thought of what she'd just pulled this morning. He'd watched over her in his ethereal body while she slept then identified with his physical body just minutes before he'd sensed that she would awaken. Helen had risen groggily from her couch, not even glancing his way as she passed the bed toward the lavatory, although Bale was certain that she knew he was awake. Their awareness of each other was always too pitched to a point of near pain for her not to have known that he was completely aware of her.

When she'd exited the bathroom a minute later she hadn't been wearing a stitch of clothing.

Bale had had to use every last resource of self-restraint that he possessed not to lunge up off the bed and touch the essence of beauty manifested into physical flesh. She was one with the morning sunlight that streamed through the windows, golden, flickering and warm. Her movements were graceful. The curve that flared from her small waist to her round hip and bottom held him spellbound. Just before she burrowed back into her nest of blankets she turned in profile. Her breasts were fuller than they had been in any of her past incarnations but, as always, high and firm with large, succulent pink crowns.

He had lain there for a full ten minutes paralyzed with desire. When he had finally made himself rise and move away from her vicinity it was only by testing the extreme limits of his Will.

It was no wonder that he was having trouble focusing during the meeting of the Grigori Council. He cleared his throat, trying to clear his mind of the breathtaking image from this morning of his nude, luminescent mate, the same woman who professed that she planned to kill him.

"Jax is coming to report on the progress that he and Sophia have made in starting up those clinics for pregnant women in several African countries," Bale reported with a nod toward Che Ammadon, his cousin. Sophia Galanis was his mate and had long been involved in humanitarian efforts.

"I think Jax is trolling for volunteers," Che admitted with his typical disarming grin.

Bale saw that Duse tensed at the mention of their younger brother's name. Che noticed from his place across the large oak table as well.

"Sophia has really appreciated Jax's ability to get things organized and funded in regard to programs for lowering the maternal mortality rate in Africa but he's also been busy in opening those women's shelters and vocational rehabilitation facilities in the United States. Busy Watcher, your brother."

"He's done wonders with it. Luminescent Beginnings, that's what he calls the program for women he started in the United States. I never guessed he'd be such a genius for organization and execution but he's a natural," Che attempted evenly. Like Bale, Che hated the seemingly eternal rift that had divided Duse and Jax Ammadon.

The four of them—Bale, Duse, Jax and Che—had been so close until about eight hundred years ago. That was when Jax had first laid eyes on Duse's mate, Skylar, and recognized that she could have been his mate if his brother hadn't already completed the mating bond with her centuries before. It had been an unprecedented event in Watcher history, the realization that a woman powerful enough to be a mate could bond with more than one Watcher. It was only after Asmoday had realized it that he had begun to plot against the Ammadons and the Grigori Council, both legally and illegally, attempting to make a mate's powerful sexual energies the possession of all Watchers and not solely her Watcher lover's.

As usual Che tried to alleviate the tension that always arose when Jax's name was mentioned in front of Duse but his attempts were like trying to fill the Grand Canyon with soil using a teaspoon. The fact that Jax had willingly conspired with the outlaw Watcher Asmoday in order to kidnap Skylar and take her as his own mate, unintentionally putting both Skylar and the unborn Pheynix at risk, didn't make his attempts at fraternal reconciliation very likely.

Duse just grunted in irritation. "I always wondered what my sullen little brother would be good at. Looks like he just needed a good dose of guilt to set him off in the right direction."

"Duse, Jax has worked hard to atone." Bale said it almost mechanically. Only he knew that Duse's feelings toward Jax were in fact much more complicated than most Watchers realized.

"Did I say he hasn't?" Duse asked, cerulean eyes blazing. "Excuse me for not wanting to volunteer as the president of the Jax Ammadon fan club. Looks like you and Che will have to spar for that position."

Bale scowled and opened his mouth to counter but then decided it would be best just to change the subject. "Before Jax gets here we need to see to the matter of selecting the *scisen* for the Issian Festival and..." He paused in mild irritation when someone rapped on the door. He'd left specific instructions with Mrs. Southwick not to be disturbed while they were in Council.

"Yes? What is it?" Bale bellowed.

He abruptly went rigid, as if an electric current had just been applied directly to his body, when the door to his office swung open.

Helen backed into the room, pulling a tray heavily laden with the accoutrements for a full tea service for six.

"What's this?" Duse asked bemusedly. Suspicion flickered into his dark countenance when his eyes landed on Avery Coyle's promiscuous niece. He'd heard nothing but worshipful ravings from Nix for the past several days or so in regard to her, and even Skylar had chided him for being uncharacteristically judgmental in regard to Nell Scott. Still, his neck had prickled with wariness when Skylar had told him that Bale had insisted the girl move into Dunleavy.

There was something very strange going on with his older brother but Duse couldn't quite shape the truth using words.

"Tea time, of course," Helen answered with a brilliant smile.

Bale couldn't understand how the other Watchers in the room didn't fall over in a sexually induced palsy at the sheer potency of that smile.

He certainly almost had.

Five puzzled, razor-sharp gazes shifted down the table to Bale. Saya and Dante, who were the newest members of the Council, both blinked in shock, having never had cause to see their usually cool, impenetrable king and leader looking so thoroughly at a loss as he stared at a First Change maiden.

What the hell was she up to? Bale fumed. He was so shocked and furious with her that he couldn't think of what to say, a highly unusual state of affairs for him. It wasn't just fury that was currently making him speechless however. It was the fact that she was concentrating the full impact of her Second Change sexual energies in a precise, laserlike beam of power directly at him. It was the first time that she'd fully exposed herself to him in her current incarnation and the fact that she focused her power solely on him made him nearly collapse at the explosive sensation.

Her cheeks dimpled in picture-perfect innocence as she held Bale's stare. "Mr. Ammadon requested that tea be sent in," Helen murmured docilely as she pushed the cart toward them and bent to retrieve cups and saucers.

Bale made a choking sound in his throat at the sight of her bending over. He was going to paddle that sweet little bottom that she wiggled around provocatively in his face the first chance he got. It was on the tip of his tongue to demand she tell him why she'd felt it was necessary to dress herself in a French maid costume that was intended to induce wicked fantasies and a riot of lust in a human male's brain and body, but then the answer struck him.

He was half-human after all. And never mind the frenzy of lust that a woman could work her Watcher mate into if she so chose.

This was Helen's idea of fun, to watch him sweat in her presence while all the other Watchers present were blocked from perhaps the most rarified Second Change female on the planet's sex energies. Every member of the Grigori Council would think their king was a disgusting pervert.

Helen knew that as well.

"You ordered *tea*?" Che asked Bale incredulously.

Helen glanced up at Bale in polite curiosity as she poured a perplexed-looking Saya a spot of orange pekoe. Bale's mouth hung open. He didn't know if Helen actually knew it or not but Watchers didn't require food and water in order to live. Those who were more powerful like Duse, Che, Eli or himself were primarily sustained by the energies of their mates. He and some of the more corporeal Watchers occasionally ate, but very little. A muscle in his cheeks ticced when he noticed her knowing smile.

She knew all right.

Maybe it was memory but more likely it was Maerda's doing. The old Druaga must be educating Helen on Watcher ways because Bale had increasingly become aware during the last three days that Helen was using that knowledge against him. This was third occasion that she'd teased him while he was in the presence of other Watchers, although on none of the other occasions had she revealed this much of her subtle essences to him.

Bale cleared his throat roughly. "The Issian Festival is tomorrow night. This is the last meeting of the Grigori Council before that time so I thought a special ceremony might be called for," Bale said falteringly.

By the Three, was it even tea *time*?

Still, it wasn't that farfetched of an explanation was it? He wondered when he noticed Eli's and Dante's dubious expressions. Watchers did occasionally exchange food and drink ritualistically. The increase in vibrational frequency conferred by the heightened consciousness during a ceremony imbued food and drink with subtle qualities. Watchers also "fed" off the subtle essences of ritualistically burned incenses or other similar deliberate conscious offerings.

"So you ordered tea?" Che asked bluntly as he picked up his cup and stared down into it as though it contained a rare mystery. The delicate porcelain looked like a child's toy in his large hand, as it did in Eli's and Saya's.

"I think we've established that, Che," Bale bit out but it was a grinning Helen that he was shooting arrows at with his eyes, not his cousin. She noticed but didn't seem effected in the slightest as she set a tray filled with scones, clotted cream and raspberry jam on the table. Next she took a pile of starched white napkins off the rolling cart and began laying them across the amazed Watchers' thighs.

Che glanced up bemusedly at the young woman who dropped a square of cloth in his lap gracelessly. "Okay whatever. Tea's a brilliant idea, obviously. Don't know what I was thinking before. So what are we drinking to, fearless leader?"

But Bale wasn't paying any attention. He was too busy watching Helen as she made her way around the large oval table. He admitted that her outfit wasn't really like a French maid's, more like an English equivalent of that. Whatever the case, with Helen in it that outfit equated to an instant erection. Or at least equated an instant erection for Bale, a throbbing, tight, thoroughly obvious affair. The pants that he wore suddenly felt cramped, supplying an unwanted friction across the length of his cock.

She wore a dark gray skirt and blouse, both made of a smooth satiny material. The skirt was essentially modest but the way it clung to Helen's ass and slender thighs and the enticing mound in between them, hinting at more than it actually gave away, was driving Bale into a frenzy of lust. He couldn't keep his eye from straying to the perky bow on her apron that twitched cheekily just above her rear end. Bale doubted that the frothy confection served any practical purpose but the way the bow made her ass look like a luscious, decadent gift might have been designed to send him into a sexual berserk. The satiny top fit her upper body snugly, contouring every soft feminine curve. The swells of her creamy breasts were pushed into the blouse's deep oval neckline. Every time she bent down to place a napkin Bale wondered if a rosy nipple was going to spring free.

He tensed when she came toward him, vaguely realizing at the same time that Che and the others were waiting for him to speak. He searched desperately for the question as Helen slowly unwrapped his napkin as teasingly as if she were doing a strip tease for him.

"Uhh... Duse, you think of something," Bale said. He vaguely realized that his brother stared at the other Watchers at the table with an expression that clearly said they were all witnessing the first onset of madness in their king.

Still Bale couldn't remove his eyes from Helen.

His cock surged almost painfully as she neared him. Was she psychokinetically stimulating him? She'd never been able to do that in the past but there had to be some explanation for the incredible potency of his response. By the Fathers, if she didn't stop her teasing soon his cock was going to be rising so high it would be lifting the table off the ground.

Helen's smile was the picture of innocence as she came within a foot of him but the gleam in her cornflower blue eyes might have been borrowed from Beelzebub himself.

"You'll have to scoot back from the table a bit, Mr. Ammadon, so I can put the napkin on your lap," she said in a facsimile of timidity.

Bale felt the sweat bead on his brow. His nostrils flared and his jaw went rigid. He could smell her fresh floral scent but it was what his powerful Watcher senses picked up beneath it that created the electrical storm of lust in his body.

He could smell her pussy. She was aroused. Her juices were running sweet and thick from the scent of things.

"Bale?" Duse asked sharply, getting concerned by his brother's bizarre behavior. Because of the angle where he sat he saw the way Bale stared up at Nell Scott like he



was considering taking a bite out of her. He sincerely hoped that no one besides him noticed. The young woman obviously wasn't familiar with his older brother because there were less than a handful of Watchers who would stand so close to Bale when he looked that fearsome.

"Never mind," Helen said warmly. "I'll get it."

Bale's expression went blank with shock when she matter-of-factly reached under the table. What must have been a fraction of a second expanded into a tortuous eternity when he felt the weight of her hand in his lap. Her fingers stroked the thick ridge of his cock through his pants. Just before she pulled her hand back she gave the engorged head a taut tug.

He jerked spasmodically in his chair.

"To the Issian Festival and she whom it celebrates!" Duse boomed loudly, hoping to divert attention away from his brother.

The Grigori Council seconded the impromptu toast with hearty cheers and raised the dainty china cups to their lips. Bale blinked several times in disorientation before he lifted his. He was so tense that when he set the cup back down in the saucer the fragile handle broke loose and skipped down the table, finally landing in the bowl of clotted cream.

"I'll get it!"

"No!" he practically roared. "Just..." But it was too late. Helen's round ass, topped with that saucy bow, plopped down on the table in front of him like a succulent, savory entrée.

Although the tool that Bale thought of stabbing into such a luscious dish was hardly a fork.

"It's such a nice day. Why don't we transfer this meeting over to the solarium?" Duse suggested abruptly.

"No!" Bale repeated, sounding like a toddler in its terrible twos. He scowled at Helen as she rose up off the table in front of him and dropped the china handle in Bale's saucer, creating a loud clinking noise that seemed to echo around the large, still room.

"That will be all, Miss Scott," Bale insisted in a strained voice.

She curtsied, only the mischievous glint through her long lashes betraying her farce.

Bale mentally prompted himself to unpry his jaw. He tore his eyes from the sight of her. "As I was saying before we were interrupted, Jax is... What are you doing?"

"Who me?" Helen asked from where she'd stationed herself next to the fireplace, significantly in Bale's unobstructed view. She looked for all the world like a shy, innocent waif.

For all the Watcher world anyway, minus Bale Ammadon.

"Yes, *you*," Bale answered acidly. "*You may leave now, Miss Scott.*"

She shook her head, cornflower blue eyes wide. "Mrs. Southwick told me I was to stay and attend you."

"Mrs. Southwick would have..." *said no such thing*, Bale finished in his head. The realization struck him that the more he fought against her the more suspicious the other members of the Grigori Council became. Duse already looked like he was ready to take him to the sparring room and beat an explanation out of him.

"Fine. Just keep very quiet," he ordered stiffly after a pause.

Helen gave a small innocent smile that to Bale screamed of triumph.

She placed her hands behind her back in what she hoped resembled a position of militant readiness but which she knew for a fact stretched her tight blouse against her thrusting breasts. It was difficult not to laugh out loud when she saw Bale's eyes widen as they fixed on her chest. Her nipples puckered against the fabric of her sheer bra, making them feel itchy and tight.

Like they needed to be soothed.

The strength of her lust since she'd entered Bale's vicinity had taken her by surprise. Her gaze lowered instinctively to Bale's hands where they lay on the tabletop. They were large, the fingers long and sprinkled lightly with dark hair. They looked strong. Infinitely capable.

He moved his forefinger slightly.

Helen bit her lower lip to prevent gasping out loud. The sensation of that long finger embedded between the swollen lips of her sex flashed hotly into her mind. Her eyes flickered accusingly up to him.

He watched her with an unwavering gaze as he spoke to the Council in a mesmeric low tone, the content of his words incomprehensible to her. Suddenly she clearly heard his voice in her head.

*You're playing with fire, Helen*, he said telepathically.

Sweat began to bead on her upper lip. *Don't. Don't stimulate me with your mind. I'll never trust you again if you do.*

*Are you saying there's a chance that you could at some point?*

*No!*

Despite what she'd said her glance returned to his hands on the table. The cuff of his shirt looked starkly white in comparison to his dark skin. For some reason the sight of his hands was driving her mad.

*She needed him to touch her.*

*I'm not stimulating you psychokinetically, Helen. What you're experiencing is your own desire. Our subtle essences have been fitted to make a perfect resonance, like a crystal clear mirror. You took a risk in exposing your sex energies to me and now you're paying the consequence.*

*You're lying*, Helen accused in a growing panic. But still she couldn't remove her eyes from his hands. She couldn't stop thinking of him caressing her sex. Her pussy felt heavy, achy...empty.

*I don't lie to you, Helen!*

That broke the spell. Her eyes flashed up to meet his. He saw her lips tremble as she tried to scowl in contempt.

But she couldn't manage disdain. Fear overwhelmed her.

"Duse, please continue. I've told you my vote for *scisen*. Just make sure that whoever is chosen fully understands that it's his responsibility to prepare whatever woman he selects as his *scinten* for the festival. Excuse me, all of you," Bale said with a brisk nod.

The Grigori Council all watched in amazement as Bale stood and hastily followed the young maid who had just run in panic out of his office.

## Chapter Eight

Duse came up behind Skylar silently as she worked over a potted fern in the solarium. He had adjourned the council meeting shortly after Bale had torn out of his office after Nell Scott.

Duse couldn't ever fully block his presence from his mate nor did he want to. But there were times when he wished he could just observe Skylar in her natural element without interfering.

She seemed to understand because she kept working for a minute, adding soil to the pot and patting it down with her gentle knowing touch. The midday sunlight turned her soft blonde curls into a halo of brilliant light. Duse experienced a palpable need to bury his fingers in that warm glorious silk. She sighed as she came back on her heels.

"There's something you want to ask me," Skylar said quietly without turning around.

"Yes. You knew about what was happening with Bale and this young woman, Nell Scott, didn't you? I've been wondering why you had designated yourself as her protector whenever I complained about her. Is it your power that told you so or did Bale reveal it? And why didn't you say anything to me before?" Duse asked.

When Skylar began to rise from her knees he caught her hand and helped her. She smiled up at him as she turned in the circle of his arms and glanced ruefully at her soiled hands.

"I've gotten you dirty."

The dimples that dented his cheek when he smiled were a twin threat that made the blood rush to her nether regions even more powerfully than when he'd first exposed her to them in this lifetime. "You've gotten me dirty more times than I can count," he said in a low voice. "I cared as much then as I do now."

"Bale asked me not to tell you, Duse. He told me the day I returned from London," she answered finally.

He studied her for a long moment. "Then it's true? Nell Scott is Helen?"

Skylar nodded. "How did you find out?"

Duse rolled his eyes and shook his head as the different ramifications of the news circled around his awareness. "It was the only explanation given the bizarreness of Bale's behavior. I still don't understand though. She's only a child! Nix told me that she's twenty-three years old!"

The sunlight caught her rich curls when she shook her head. Before he knew what he intended Duse fisted a handful of the swirling silk.

"She's reached her Second Change, Duse." She nodded when she saw his look of stark disbelief. "Bale thinks it might be because of the trauma of what happened with Asmoday. He didn't tell me all the details but he did say that Helen was blocking her energies from him. Purposefully denying herself."

"Helen deny Bale?" Duse asked incredulously.

Skylar sighed. "What Asmoday did to her, Duse...it's left her scarred."

Duse looked deeply unsettled. He loved Helen not only as a sister but as a true reflection of the divine Goddess manifest in the physical world. What was between Helen and Bale was sacred. Helen was sacred. To think of anyone desecrating either was sickening to him.

Skylar knew what he would say the second she saw the bitter tilt to his sculpted lips.

"I wish I would have finished him once and for all."

"I know," she whispered. She went up on her tiptoes and encircled her arms around his neck. She knew that it had deeply bothered Duse that he had been the first Watcher to have ever killed another of his kind when he killed Asmoday in Che's defense. But her husband had been much more unsettled by the fact that Che had discovered that Asmoday was still creating havoc on the physical world through the subtle realms. Asmoday had identified violent human beings by their thought forms and manipulated them into attacking Sophia Galanis, Che's mate.

"You must let Bale try to heal her," she said softly.

His hands came up to bracket her delicate jaw. He tilted her back so that their eyes met. "But surely you..."

"No," Skylar whispered. "It is not a wound that I can heal, much as I'd like to try. I have sensed it though," she said sadly. "I...I don't know exactly what Asmoday did to her but whatever it was it..." Her voice faltered. "It wounded her spirit deeply, Duse. It's made her question her own power, violated her sense of wholeness...of *rightness*."

He stared down at her. Tears shimmered in her agate eyes. Skylar was so exquisitely precious to him. It pained him to think of what his brother must be experiencing. He didn't know how Bale functioned and remained cohesive. It was more than Duse could consider at times.

He sank his head and kissed Skylar ravenously. She responded with just as much hunger, straining upward and against his long hard body. His hands lowered to find her breasts, his flexing palms overfilled with her firm, abundant flesh, his fingertips seeking out the taut centers. He dipped his knees, pressing his cock along the soft cleft between her legs and onto her belly. Skylar moaned hotly into his mouth when he grabbed one buttock and thrust their flesh together rhythmically.

"I don't have long before the Council reconvenes," Duse managed tensely next to her lips a second later when he came up for air.

"I don't care," she whispered. Her fingers formed into claws as she lightly scraped his back, pressing him into her, needing more of the sensation of him. "Fast with you is so good."

He smiled as he pushed her back to a table and spread his hands across her bottom, lifting her. "Fast is superb with you, baby, just like slow is and everything in between." His hand skimmed beneath the hem of her sundress and glided across a silky thigh. His cerulean eyes went wide when it reached her warm moist center.

"You're not wearing any panties?"

Skylar bit her lower lip to stifle a cry of arousal when he inserted a long finger into her slit. "Must have been foreknowledge," she whispered unevenly. His laugh, low and sexy, caused fresh liquid to seep around his finger. Duse growled appreciatively and disbursed the juices between her outer lips, relishing her gasp of pleasure.

"Baby, if that was the case your powers of foreknowledge should be telling you never to bother buying the damn things." He watched her lovely, flushed face as he lifted her knees and placed her shins over his shoulders, spreading her wide for him.

The second that he dissipated the clothing that he'd formed from his subtle essences Skylar reached for his cock. He felt both silky smooth and iron hard in her hand. A desperation that she couldn't quite name took hold of her throat and chest as she guided him to her entrance.

They both gasped in fresh awe at the impact of that fluid, taut joining.

Duse thrust once hard, embedding himself in her warmth. Her hands came up to cradle his face. Her sensitive fingertips traced the glossy trim goatee that perfectly highlighted his sensual mouth.

"I love you," she whispered hoarsely.

His raven brows pinched slightly at the vehemence in her voice. But then he thought of what had led up to this. She must have been feeling the same emotional upheaval that he had. As if in confirmation he felt her begin to shift against him with tiny, circular, erotic movements. He let her taunt him like that for a moment, loving the feeling of her tight sheath milking him. He bent his head and nuzzled her sweet-smelling neck. Her murmur of approval vibrated from her skin into his lips. His nose and lips found the fullness of her breasts. His cheek lightly nudged up on her softness, his lips enclosed a fabric-covered nipple.

Skylar's fingers gripped his buttocks and squeezed demandingly but it was her pussy doing the same around his cock that made him move.

His eyes opened and pinned her as he began to rock slowly in and out of her, controlling the movement with his hands on her hips. He continued to suckle the tip of her breast, his cheeks hollowing as he drew on her steadily. When he lashed at the prominent bud through the damp fabric with a long, agile tongue Skylar cried out sharply and came.

His own flesh began to shudder as her Rush energies sheared into his subtle essences in waves, pleasuring and empowering him at once. It didn't matter how many

times Duse had felt the impact of Skylar's Rush. Every time he experienced it he was stunned anew. His rarified bodies and his corporeal body vibrated as her distilled energies poured into him, creating profound changes in the chemistry of his subtle essences as well as his flesh.

"I don't ever want to lose you," she gasped.

Duse paused in his stroking of her, puzzled once again by her pressured quality. He resumed, this time with more force. Skylar gasped when she felt the round, fat head of his penis plunging deeply into her, massaging her deeply. The friction created a heavenly torment that built and built. Their flesh slapped together forcefully in a more rapid, demanding rhythm.

When she felt him stretch and expand inside of her, saw the rictus of intense pleasure on his handsome face, she grabbed onto his shoulders and arched her back, thrusting him as deeply as she could take him. They shouted out their pleasure uninhibitedly, both unconsciously confident in the knowledge that he had shielded the room from others during their lovemaking.

Her eyes flickered open in the midst of her orgasm to capture the most divine image of her lover. The outline of his body seemed to vibrate back and forth between flesh and pure incandescent light. He towered over her, making her feel small but infinitely cherished. His eyes blazed with a bluish-white fire as he pinned her with an unearthly stare.

She blinked and the image dissipated, leaving the equally sacred one of Duse, dense muscles tight and rippling under the pressure of a powerful orgasm. He slumped forward a few moments later, his forehead falling against her neck.

His exotic eyes seemed to still flare with subtle fires when he eventually lifted his gaze to meet hers. "You're never going to lose me, baby," he said gruffly against her parted lips.

"I know," she whispered softly.

He stood slowly, kissing both of her knees tenderly before he lowered her legs. She made a sound of longing when his still-ample sex slid from her body.

"Bale will never lose Helen, either. You don't know him like I do. There's not a craftier Watcher in existence," Duse said with a sparkle in his eyes. "Or a more stubborn Ammadon for that matter."

Skylar's brow crinkled when she saw the sudden faraway expression on Duse's face.

"What?" she asked.

Duse blinked his eyes and shook his head. "Maybe we should be worried," he said with a grim laugh.

"What do you mean?"

"I'd forgotten that Helen was an Ammadon when I said that."

They shared a look of helpless concern.

After he'd left to return to the meeting Skylar couldn't regain her practical, industrious mood. She lay back on the sofa in the solarium, drugged by the warm early summer sunlight, hypnotized by the unworldly quality that the shadows of dust motes made on the tile floor.

Duse's lovemaking had ruined her for the afternoon, she thought with a small smile. Memories of their quick, potent tryst crowded into her awareness. When she realized that her fingertips were caressing the damp spot over her nipple that Duse's warm mouth had created she glanced furtively at the open doorway of the solarium. She reminded herself wryly that surely Duse had taught her enough over the years that she could cast her own shield. A shield protected one from the awareness of any other living creature, after all, even in the most public of places.

She cast the shield and lowered the halter of her sundress.

The warm sun felt wonderful on her exposed breasts. She watched her fingertips lightly skim the tips, making the coral flesh tighten. Her belly and legs were just as appreciative of being bathed in the golden light when she lifted her dress to her waist. She buried one hand between her thighs and closed her eyes, remembering what it had felt like to have Duse fuck her so deep and hard just now. She used the fingers of her other hand to lightly pinch and pluck at a tight nipple.

As her excitement mounted the quality of her fantasy altered. She began to think of how erotic it would be to have Duse watch her right now while she found her own pleasure. His cerulean blue eyes would be so hot. His facial muscles would be tight with desire.

*You're the essence of beauty in flesh.*

His voice sounded reverent in her vivid imagination. The quality of it excited her so much that her sliding, pressing movements on her clit redoubled in strength. She cupped her breast from below as though making an offering to him. Her fantasy was so rich that she almost felt the whisper of pleasuring fingertips on her hyper-sensitized nipple.

*You're the one who is beautiful,* Skylar replied. *Touch yourself.*

*Do you think I would stop myself, watching you like this? Do you think I could?* she imagined him saying.

She spread her thighs. Power tingled in her flesh. She felt his desire like a palpable force, like an electric current zinging beneath her skin.

*That's right. Let me see you, beauty. Show me how wet you are.*

She plunged her first two fingers into her pussy and withdrew. She held them up, feeling her juices trickle across her knuckle.

"For you," she actually whispered out loud.

In her mind's eye she saw his look of stunned arousal. Her other hand went to her sex. She worked herself furiously as that image expanded and crystallized in her brain. His male beauty was so wild that it hurt a little to look upon him. When she came her



orgasm exploded her sense of self, blew it into a million rapidly expanding little pieces of light, each consisting of worlds of consciousness.

A minute later she blinked in disorientation when she opened her eyes onto the bright solarium. She sat up slowly, not knowing if she should be alarmed or amused. What had just happened to her went beyond an afternoon masturbation session, way beyond even the description of words.

Her confusion made her wary. She tied her halter around her neck, vowing to never masturbate anywhere but in her and Duse's shielded bedroom suite again. She shook her head and laughed at her ridiculousness before she stood.

The smile remained on her lips until she saw the pool of white fluid on the tile floor, just inches from the couch where she'd lain. She paused and stared. Her gaze quickly transferred to where Duse had made love to her on the table but no, that was over fifteen feet away from here.

She licked her lip nervously and glanced around the room. Of course it was empty. Her subtle senses told her the same thing.

Nevertheless, Skylar couldn't get out of that room fast enough.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey. He just sent me out to find you. You're late," Che said amiably when he saw Jax Ammadon standing in the drawing room.

"Bale?"

Che looked a little uneasy but he hid it quickly enough. "No, Duse actually."

"Oh. That makes sense," Jax said blankly. Which it did, of course. If it were Bale he would have just summoned him telepathically. Duse hadn't communicated with him in that intimate fashion since their falling out over Skylar.

"Yeah, Duse is taking over for him for the afternoon. Some kind of weird stuff was... Hey, Jax? You okay?" Che asked. It was actually why he had offered to find his cousin in physical form. Inside of Bale's office he had suddenly sensed Jax's chaotic emotional state. His physical appearance wasn't much better. Che was reminded of just how powerful the youngest Ammadon was when he saw how his emotions were directly affecting his flesh, making him appear pale and tense.

Jax swallowed convulsively. His mouth felt uncomfortably dry.

"I'm okay. Lead the way, Che."

Jax took a deep breath in preparation for the ordeal of staring into his brother's—Skylar's mate and husband's—recriminating eyes for the next hour. Duse's diamondlike stare would inevitably make him feel guilty for what he'd done in the past.

But Jax doubted that even the Goddess herself could make him regret what he'd done in the solarium five minutes ago.

## Chapter Nine

"By the Fathers, Helen, stop running!" Bale demanded both in irritation and rising alarm. He'd followed her from his office to one of the back entrances of Dunleavy then across the lawns to the stables. Toward the end she hadn't been hard to keep up with as she tired and inevitably stumbled in the high-heeled pumps that she wore. She still wasn't blocking her essences from him and he could easily sense how her volatile emotions were affecting her heart rate and breathing. That was part of the reason that she was tiring so quickly as well.

Helen glanced around in panic before she opened the door of the stables. Sure enough Bale stalked only fifty feet away. The expression on his face terrified her. She flung open the heavy wood door.

"Charlie!" she screamed as she ran into the dim interior. Her heart pounded so loudly in her ears in the seconds that followed that she wasn't sure if the answering voice was her imagination or reality. But then it came again, closer and louder.

"Nellie? What's wrong, lass?" Charlie asked, brown eyes wide with concern when he took in the sight of her. He'd been mucking out one of the stalls when he heard her panicked cry. He wiped his hands on his jeans distractedly as he came toward her.

"What's the flutter?" Jamie McTavish, the manager of the stables shouted out irritably from his office at the far end of the building.

"I don't know, sir," Charlie answered, his eyes never leaving Helen's beautiful tear-stained face. "What happened, Nellie?" he asked in a quieter voice.

Like several of the horses in their stalls, Helen's eyes skittered nervously to the entrance.

"Him. He's what happened," she muttered tautly. She stepped behind Charlie rapidly when a shadow darkened the sunny entry.

At first Charlie just glanced up curiously to the door. But when he saw what stepped into the doorway a fraction of a second later he instinctively stepped backward, stumbling into Helen. It must have been a trick of the light but for a terrifying moment it seemed that a figure of giant proportions loomed there.

After he'd blinked and realized that it was merely the master of Dunleavy, Charlie couldn't quite understand why his anxiety didn't diminish. Running into Bale on any occasion was reason for alarm, granted, but compared to what he'd just experienced...

"Mister Ammadon?" Jamie called out in surprise from the back of the stables.

"Aye, Jamie," Bale replied absently. His eyes hadn't left the sight of the woman hiding behind the shocked-looking stableboy since the second he'd entered the room.

His mouth pulled tight with irritation. "Helen, stop cowering behind that boy. Find your courage."

Charlie felt his vision start to blacken as a result of the cold, lashlike quality of that voice. The master of Dunleavy really was as fearsome as rumor portrayed, although he admittedly had heard the man spoken of as generous and kind much more frequently. The only thing that stopped him from passing out in fear was his dawning amazement when Nell Scott, slender, fragile lass that she was, abruptly stepped out from behind him. The absence of her clawlike hold on him left him slightly unbalanced.

Bale's eyes narrowed as he studied his life mate. Her cheeks were damp and her breathing was still ragged but her shoulders were erect and her chin was held high. A message flashed between them, exchanged quicker than electricity.

Bale nodded his head once.

Helen blinked back tears from her eyes. There had been more in Bale's slight look and subtle gesture than just satisfaction. There had been respect.

"What can I do for ye, Mr. Ammadon?"

"Jamie, take the boy. You and he may have the day off—paid of course," Bale instructed calmly.

Jamie's grizzled eyebrows rose in surprise but he waved for Charlie to follow him almost simultaneously. He'd done his years of service in the military and he knew the difference between a request and an order. In Bale Ammadon's case the difference between the two was as clear-cut as black and white.

Bale's brow crinkled in disquietude a second later. He pried his eyes from the sight of Helen and zeroed in on the boy as Jamie pushed him past. He blinked. The defiance and hatred that blazed forth out of Charlie Vandy's eyes took him admittedly by surprise. Apparently Helen's lovesick suitor wasn't the wilting wimp that he'd gauged him to be a few moments before.

Jamie slammed the stable door shut behind them. A horse whickered softly in the tense silence that followed.

"Tell me why you're so afraid."

Every muscle in Helen's body clenched tight at the sound of his hoarse, whispering voice slicing through the dim shadows. It entreated. It caressed. A tingling sensation like electricity began buzzing beneath skin.

How could she tell him that his voice alone was enough to make her weak with fear?

Bale glanced away when a loud popping noise suddenly occurred, as though a thick log had just been split with one fierce blow of an ax. A gust of wind swirled through the room, causing the suspended wrought iron lanterns that hung from the beamed ceiling to sway several feet in a north-south motion. His gaze flickered to the windows. They were closed. Outside the sun shone brightly. Not a leaf on the oak outside one of the windows stirred.

Helen started when the rake and mop that Charlie had been using both banged to the tiled floors with a sharp retort, as though the wooden handles were made of metal and the floor was a powerful magnet.

*Oh no.*

As if he'd read her mind, his searchlight eyes swung to her face.

"Stop it, Helen."

She shook her head in mute denial as she stepped backward. Bale followed. She winced when several pieces of hay that had been picked up by the increasingly powerful, swirling wind struck her face, causing a stinging pain. Several horses whinnied anxiously.

"Stop it," he snarled.

"I'm not doing anything!"

"You are!" he insisted, eyes blazing in the dark stables as he came toward her. He'd seen this type of phenomenon before, many times in fact. Sometimes children or young people with powers like Helen's did it unconsciously during times of emotional unrest and conflict. Humans called it a poltergeist.

Watchers called it psychokinetically acting out in order to keep an ugly truth buried in the unconscious mind.

"I'm not doing any—" Her protest was cut off when his fist abruptly snapped shut next to her temple. One second he had been several feet away from her and the next his thighs pressed against her own and one hand encircled her waist. Her eyes widened in shock when he opened his palm right in front of her face. A heavy silver bridle buckle lay in it. The redness of the skin outlining it on his palm indicated how fast the piece of dense metal had been flying through the air directly at her head when he'd caught it with superhuman quickness. She glanced up furtively into his face and cringed. She thought she'd seen Bale angry before.

She'd been wrong.

He turned over his palm and dropped the buckle. Without a word he grabbed her with both hands and Helen was flying through the air, seemingly like everything else in the room although at the nominally slower pace of Bale versus the fey wind.

"Put me down!" she demanded furiously.

No sooner had her feet hit the hard ground than she was pushed down over an empty stall door. She yelped in indignation when she felt him yanking up her skirt.

Bale didn't even blink when he saw the delicate white garter or the stockings that she wore that were even paler than her thighs. The only thought that penetrated the red-hot fury that hazed his awareness was that he was glad she wasn't wearing panties so he didn't have to bother with ripping them off her.

The same palm that carried the deeply bitten ridges of the silver bridle buckle began to make its imprint on Helen's bare ass. He spanked her several times, crisp smacking blows that caused both of their skin to burn. He initially was oblivious to her

outcries and struggling but after several moments he paused, hauling her body against him so that she was secured in his grasp.

"That buckle could have killed you," he accused.

"I told you I didn't do it!" she screamed. "Let me go, you bastard!"

Bale took a deep breath to calm himself and glanced back over the stables. Outside of the pocket of protected space that he'd created around them and the horses in their stalls, chaos reigned supreme. Every piece of hay in the stables was currently flying around the center of the large space in a rapid, swirling vortex of air. Two of the suspended lanterns had broken free of their fastenings and had been sucked into the vortex as if it were a gigantic vacuum.

He could have counteracted the whole phenomenon with his magic, but there was a point that he wanted to make.

There was a point he *would* make.

Helen's harsh inhale scored her throat when she felt his large hand move slightly on her bared ass.

"Cease what you're doing and I'll stop punishing you."

She just panted wildly for air as her panic escalated.

"Helen?" he demanded tautly. But still she would not look at him and the cyclone of emotional chaos continued outside their calm bubble.

Bale's jaw hardened and he drew his arm back. Tears sprang out of her eyes when he made contact with her bottom. Her face clenched tight when another stinging smack and then another followed in quick succession.

Bale's large hand completely covered her burning right cheek in an instinctive need to soothe when he heard a whimper escape her lips at the last blow.

"Stop it, Helen. Now."

This time he didn't demand. He begged.

Helen blinked, trying to clear the fountain of tears that gushed from her eyes. She'd never known that it was possible for a person to cry this profusely. His hand gently moving across her tingling, hot ass made the spurt of tears mount, not fade. She kept squeezing her eyes shut tightly in order to clear the vision of his dark hands resting on the oak table earlier, in order to vanquish the subsequent memory of how it had felt when he touched her. When he suddenly moved his other hand to her back, rubbing upward as though he were trying to clear the tight, heavy clogs of emotion in her spine and throat, she sagged against the gate helplessly.

Bale's expression tightened in panic when he heard her start to cough to clear the mucus from her throat. He felt his resolve waning.

His head came up sharply when she glanced furtively over her shoulder and he saw the gleam of defiance in her wide eyes.

A few seconds later his palm likely stung as much as her ass as he spanked her repeatedly and without pause.

He stopped himself eventually, fully cognizant that he must or he would actually cause her harm. He glanced back into the stables. Her physically manifested inner turmoil continued as defiantly as ever.

Helen inhaled shakily when she felt him pause. She bit her lower lip anxiously, anticipatory about what he would do next. Although her struggling had ceased long ago it kicked up again to full throttle when he abruptly spread back her sore ass cheek and thrust a long finger into her pussy.

Bale grunted in intense appreciation and profound lust despite her curses and thrashing hips.

"Gods you're wet," he muttered. His expression had frozen in shock but it quickly segued to one of tight desire.

Helen cried out helplessly as he sluiced his finger in and out of her slit, at first gently but then with increasing force. It humiliated her beyond belief that she was so aroused that she could clearly hear him thrusting wetly in and out of her pussy.

"Stop. I'm begging you," she whispered desperately.

"You stop that first," Bale demanded, although he wondered if he really could stop plunging into her clinging, creamy pussy. He didn't want to stop.

Ever.

The sob that tore at her throat did make him withdraw instinctively. But it only moved him sufficiently to remove his finger from her pussy and push it against the tiny closed bud of her asshole.

"Ahhh!" Helen cried out in surprise at the sensation of him demanding entrance into her ass. He held her hip steady and pressed until she had no choice but to let him in. Her flushed cheek fell forward until it rested on the cool wood. A low groan vibrated her throat at the sensation of him fucking her anus steadily with his finger. Her head turned and her lips parted instinctively when she felt him lean over her.

His mouth closed over her, hot and demanding. He forced his way between her lips just as he had into her body, prowling around her sweetness, establishing it as his domain. Helen returned the kiss with wild abandon. Tongues lashed and collided and mated sinuously. Lips shaped and rubbed. Sensitive, prickly flesh was caressed roughly by the edge of teeth and then soothed moistly. His fucking finger paused for a moment while he released her hip from his captive hold and sought out her breast.

Helen moaned plaintively into his mouth when he plunged directly into her neckline, pushing back the fabric and lifting a naked breast free. He squeezed her gently in his palm and then cupped her more tautly. She tried to blink away the blinding pleasure when he whisked his fingertips over a sensitive nipple at the same time as he slowly began to penetrate her ass again. It took her a moment to realize that his mouth was no longer working its magic on her senses. She strained up, seeking him.

"Stop that damned cyclone, Helen."

She blinked in disorientation at the sound of his harsh, gravelly voice. A chill went through her when she met his gaze and she saw the white pure light of his inner fires leaping high. It left her speechless.

Bale watched as she rapidly shook her head. Her desire-stung red lips fell apart when he presented the naked, swollen head of his cock to her rectum. He admired her courage when her gaze never wavered.

She bit off her cry ruthlessly when he penetrated her.

He grunted in tense pleasure at the sensation of slipping through that tight ring. Almost immediately sweat started to pour off him. Maybe his whole body was reacting in sympathy to the heat that clung around the head of his cock. He knew he was just as emotionally worked up as Helen was... But by the Fathers, memory couldn't do justice to the sexually nirvanic experience of being inside Helen's ass.

"You've never done this before?" he rasped.

Helen shook her head slowly, momentarily caught and held in fascination by the expression on Bale's handsome face. The most powerful being she'd ever encountered looked vulnerable, helpless...

"Slain, lovely," he agreed in a soft growl before he moved deeper into her heat. He forced his gaze to stay steady on her when he saw her face flinch in pain. He stopped moving.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. He felt abruptly trapped. How had he ended up in this tortuous position? He couldn't move forward.

He definitely couldn't withdraw.

"I can use my mind to...."

"Don't. Please."

It was Helen's voice. Not the whirlwind, teasing, vexing Helen that he'd come to know, the one whom he held in his arms even now. *His* Helen. Wise, tender, passionate, beautiful mystery wrapped inside an alluring enigma.

Bale's face collapsed when he realized he stared into just another one of the myriad of facets of her complex character. His head fell against her shoulder as he began to fuck her. He couldn't stop. His suffering crashed down on him acutely. But Helen was there, surrounding him. Her heat paradoxically quenched his singeing pain with each frantic stroke.

She trembled as his cock cleaved further into her. There was pain at first, but then he must have felt her body shaking because he paused. And when he resumed he went no further into her, confining his thrusts to half the length of his penis.

Her flesh continued to vibrate but it no longer did so in pain. Her awareness of Bale's feelings and the sensation of him spearing into her flesh moved her in a way she could not name. She clamped her eyes shut, wondering desperately if this was it, if this would be the moment when she finally, inevitably broke and succumbed. Night was already upon her, uncontrollable and frightening. But Bale was here as well, a searing,

indomitable force of light demanding that she face something that was equally terrifying. Would the void follow, the death that she so feared?

The death that she so longed for?

The horses suddenly whinnied and reared in panic when the tight cyclone began to loosen as though it had a tail that suddenly spun crazily free, whipping everything as it passed. Bale's magic kept the animals protected but the sensitive creatures knew that a powerful force was uncoiling in their vicinity.

Helen felt the breath freeze in her lungs when Bale's thrusting stopped. His cock swelled noticeably inside of her as a fearsome growl vibrated from his throat to where he pressed it at her upper back. She waited breathlessly, like a woman tottering on the edge of cliff, when everything went into slow motion.

The world went silent.

Then Bale's mighty roar abruptly cleaved her eardrums.

The glass in the stable windows shattered violently. At first its powerful trajectory was inward. Millions of glittering sharp fragments spun and fell in the air above them.

Bale thrust out of her, then sliced into her heat one last time. His opened jaw vibrated as he shouted, completely at the mercy of the cruel pleasure that wracked his body. The rapidly spinning glass abruptly switched directions, flying out of the gaping windowpanes with a loud bang that was heard in the highlands for miles.

His head fell to Helen's back. Her panting and his much louder gasping for breath were the only sounds in the suddenly silent stables. Even the horses had gone eerily still.

The whirlwind had vanished.

Bale sensed when she opened her lips to speak. If he could have closed his ears like he could his eyes in that moment he probably would have. Not that it would have assuaged his guilt any, of course. It would have been a coward's instinct pure and simple.

But then he would have missed what she said.

"I'm still alive?" she asked weakly.

He lifted his head. "Of course you are, lovely," he whispered hoarsely. "Your fear can't kill you."

"I thought that you could." She dimly recognized the glaze of shock that fogged his eyes when she turned her head.

"Why would you think that?" he asked incredulously.

"Let me up," she whispered.

He clenched his teeth in anguish as he slowly drew his cock out of her tight channel. They both straightened awkwardly

"Helen..."



"It's alright," she said as she self-consciously arranged her skirt to cover herself. She stilled when he reached for her restless hand and held it in his own. Her cornflower blue eyes rose to his face.

Bale started when he saw how deathly pale and exhausted she appeared.

"You're not the man from my nightmares," she said starkly.

Before he could compute the meaning of her mysterious statements or the reason that she looked like she herself had been in the middle of that cyclone, she confounded him even further.

"Bale, will you give me the Dionytion Stone?"

"*Helen*," he hissed desperately before she collapsed into his arms.

She'd asked for the Dionytion Stone with the calm expression that Socrates might have worn when he accepted the hemlock.

## Chapter Ten

Maerda's face was entirely expressionless when she turned after closing the doors to Bale's office.

"Will she be all right?"

Maerda's sharp eyes flickered over to Bale where he stood with his back to her, one arm resting on the mantle of the fireplace. He hadn't asked the question, Duse had. But Maerda could see how tense Bale's body had become as he waited for her answer.

"Physically she's fine, although suffering from severe exhaustion. Skylar agrees with me," Maerda said pointedly when she saw the question in Duse's eyes. "She's still sleeping of course. Skylar mentioned that she was shocked at how much psychic energy Helen had expended. She said that she'd never seen the like of it, and neither have I to be honest."

Bale's head came up at that. "Yet you're certain she'll be all right?"

"Yes. She's got both youth and uncommon strength on her side," Maerda stated firmly. The already deeply etched lines in her forehead became even clearer as she frowned. "There's nothing for ye to be sulking about, Bale Ammadon. Ye can turn around and face me."

She shook her head irritably, utterly unaffected by the fierce glance that Bale sent her way that looked like lancing white fire and probably would have felt like the equivalent to anyone but the ancient Druaga.

"Males," she muttered under her breath. "Always the same, be ye Watcher or human. Always taking credit for things ye never did and then feeling regret when ye shouldn't. Only thing worse is when you're cocky when ye should be feeling the guilt!"

She proclaimed the last as an aside to Duse, who noticeably shrank in his chair. Still, the man who had been the true target of her small tirade began to walk toward her slowly.

"What do you mean?" Bale demanded. "Did you or Skylar learn something when you delved her spirit?"

Maerda crossed her arms over her pendulous breasts. "No," she stated imperiously. "But I know that you're that girl's life mate. Ye'd do anything for her if ye thought it would help her to heal, including giving her a dagger to kill ye so she'd remember her power or forcin' her to face her fears. Well? She did what ye asked of her. She survived and will be strong again one day soon. There's no reason for you to sulk around because you were the one who reminded her of her courage!"

Bale swallowed convulsively. "It's not that simple, Maerda. I've no reason to believe that Helen actually gained any insight into her situation this afternoon."

"You said that she told you that she realized you weren't the man from her nightmares," Duse interrupted intently. "That sounds like insight to me."

Bale started to reply hotly and abruptly stopped himself. Watchers were extremely private about lovemaking with their mates, both by word and deed. It was a custom that was difficult to override.

"She...she still withheld herself from me," Bale muttered gruffly as he turned away.

Duse and Maerda shared a quick significant glance. The old woman's gray eyebrows rose high on her forehead. "Well that would go a long way to explainin' why she was so emotionally exhausted," Maerda stated wryly.

Bale shook his head in exasperation as he turned. "No, you miss the point. There's something amiss with our bond. There's something going on with Helen."

"I thought that was a given," Duse said. "She was psychically wounded and scarred by Asmoday. She's understandably defensive and fearful about intimacy. We all know how powerful Helen is. One need only go look at the mess out in the stables to see firsthand proof of both her strength and how conflicted she must feel."

Bale shook his head distractedly. Earlier he'd carried a semiconscious Helen through a growing crowd on the grounds of Dunleavy. Everyone was curious as to the loud noises and final ear-shattering boom resounding from the stables. He'd had no choice but to confide at least part of his story to Duse when his brother had confronted him with his knowledge that he knew Nell Scott was Helen.

But he hadn't revealed to Duse what he knew about Helen and the Dionytion Stone, either that she'd stolen it eight years ago or that she'd said she wanted it presently.

"When I first understood who she was I suspected that she was conspiring with Asmoday," Bale said abruptly.

"What?" Duse barked.

"Why in the name of the Blessed Druaga would ye think that?" Maerda asked just as incredulously.

Bale raked his fingers through his thick hair as he grasped for a viable answer. They all firmly believed that the person who stole the Dionytion Stone was either Asmoday or his accomplice and since that person was Helen...well? He'd never fully understood until recently why he'd violated his sacred oath to uphold Watcher law by purposefully withholding from the Council that he'd seen the face of the thief who stole the Stone nine years ago.

"Because she said that she planned to kill me for one thing. She also just happened to mention that the reason she hated me was because I had betrayed her."

"That's not surprising, Bale," Maerda said evenly. "Chances are she feels betrayed on some level because ye didn't—"

"Protect her. I know," Bale finished, eyes flashing. "That's what I began to think too. But there's still the chance that Asmoday has been in contact with her, that he's

been feeding her lies about me. I'm still convinced that it's possible after what happened today. Helen isn't...stable," he finished tensely before he began pacing.

"We do know that Day has the ability to identify mates before their Second Change because he raped First Change women and absorbed their course energies," Duse said. His dark brows furrowed suspiciously as he watched Bale prowling around the room. His brother was definitely holding back on him.

Bale stopped abruptly and pinned Maerda with a hungry stare. "By the Three, why didn't I think of it before? Just because I can't summon Eleanor anymore doesn't mean that you can't! The Druaga can always summon the faeries with conventional magic. Talk to her, Maerda? Ask her if she understands something that we don't about Helen."

Maerda looked doubtful. "I can try. But you know Eleanor. She can be evasive and..."

"Bloody tricky," Bale agreed. What he was suggesting, of course, wasn't dissimilar from having a conversation with Helen's unconscious mind. Eleanor was Helen and vice versa but that was a twisted, incomplete truth. Just like a dream represented aspects of an individual, it was only a glimpse of the total person. What's more, a dream could be entirely misleading.

Still, a dream sprang from the truth.

"Perhaps there's an easier route," Duse said. "You could ask Jax to examine Helen in order to find out what she knows."

That was one of their younger brother's gifts. Jax could see truths when he looked deeply into a person's eyes, even those that were most hidden. Duse sensed Bale's hesitation in the seconds that followed.

"No, not unless it's absolutely necessary. I want to try this first. Do it, Maerda. Summon Eleanor. Please."

That was when Duse knew for a fact that Bale was covering up something. Jax not only could see secrets, he was the only Watcher designated to enforce Watcher law. He had taken that magical vow as a consequence of the crime he'd committed against Skylar and for conspiring with Asmoday. As a consequence, the most logical response that Bale should have had to Duse's suggestion was that it would have been an infringement on Helen's right to privacy to have Jax examine her so intimately because she wasn't an accused criminal.

But for some reason that hadn't been the argument he'd chosen.

"I'll try," Maerda agreed gruffly. "But I won't be able to until tomorrow night. Unlike you," she stated with a wry glance at Bale, "I require a full moon to summon Eleanor."

Bale blinked as realization dawned distantly. Of course there would be a full moon. Tomorrow night was the Issian Festival.

\* \* \* \* \*

Skylar paused in the shadowy hallway and turned to Duse. He didn't need to see the uncertainty on her features to know precisely what she was about to say. She said nearly the same thing every year on the night of the Issian Festival when they dropped off their son with a nanny and the other three precious underage Watcher children in existence.

"Duse, you're sure that there's no chance that Nix could..."

"Skylar, even if it was only my shield protecting Nix in that suite, wouldn't that be enough for you?"

"Of course," she replied without hesitation.

"As it is Nix is not only protected by my shield but by Caim's and Alain's," he said, referring to Zeva's and Nola's Watcher fathers. "And if that's not enough to make you confident that Nix isn't going to sense a single energy wave from the Issian Festival or set a toe outside the boundary of that suite, consider the face of that nanny. She makes Attila the Hun look delicate by comparison."

Skylar laughed softly, thinking that he probably knew that for a fact. Duse reached up to touch her cheek, found the caress insufficient and leant down to kiss her mouth, softly at first then thoroughly. He was in the process of unbuttoning her blouse when Skylar broke the kiss breathlessly.

"You see? This is why I get worried. The energies from the Issian Festival are extremely potent."

"And definitely far too X-rated for children," Duse chuckled. "Don't worry, Skylar, I couldn't agree more." He dipped his head and nipped and nuzzled in the shadowed cleft between her breasts. "It took you almost a year to have a bone-deep trust that I would always shield you from others when we make love. How long will it take you to realize that I'm just as likely to leave Nix unprotected as I would you?"

Skylar didn't even bother answering because of course he was right. Besides she was too busy focusing on what he was doing with his firm lips. Her fingers furrowed hungrily through his short, thick hair. "Do you want to attend? Tonight?" she asked breathlessly.

Duse smiled into her fragrant skin. It always took Skylar awhile to get used to the public displays of sexuality at an Issian Festival but once she did she usually became an eager channel for the Goddess. It didn't take a large dose of the Issian Festival to get Skylar—and consequently him—so horny that she wouldn't let him rest a wink until well past noon tomorrow. He grinned in anticipation.

"Yes, for a little while anyway. I need to meet with Bale and Maerda first."

Skylar's eyes shone brightly, as though she'd just taken a belt of potent intoxicant, which she had...just not of liquor. "I'm anxious to hear about Helen. She was still sleeping when I visited earlier. I'll wait for you in our suite?"

By the time she made her way down the dim corridor five minutes later, her cheeks were bright pink and her eyes were even more luminous with the essence of pure distilled lust. Duse was always more than enough to send her into orbit but add the

energies of the Issian Festival and Skylar's senses were opened onto whole new universes of sexual sensation.

The strains of upbeat, joyous rock music filtered down the corridor from the wing of Dunleavy that was reserved for Watchers, children that were of age and the exclusive circle of human women that were invited to join the Festival. Skylar recognized the popular song. It was still fairly early in the evening. Things would still be in the preliminary stages, although even that would involve more public sexual celebration than most humans ever dreamed of encountering. The earlier hours of the Issian Festival were usually attended mostly by younger Watchers who had likely been ticking off the seconds until the no-holds-barred night of rampant sensuality finally ensued.

The local people celebrated too, although they didn't call it the Issian Festival or participate in the sacredness of the night with as much precision as the Watchers. But in the village and all along the surrounding countryside Midsummer Night's Eve would be celebrated more faithfully here than anyplace on earth. It was an ancient rite. It was Astarte's night as well as that of Isis, Aphrodite, Venus and Aine. The Goddess had many names and faces.

Tonight though it was her sexual aspects that were at their richest, purest, most potent strength. People near Dunleavy would find their blood and loins blazing just like the bonfires that would cleave the black sky. Lovers would come together recklessly in the shadows of a protective oak or soft bed. Sexual commerce would always be spicy sweet on this night and never more wildly joyous.

As subtle energy beings Watchers were not only exquisitely attuned to the potent energies associated with this night, they knew how to magnify and utilize those vibrational frequencies to increase their own and their lover's power and conscious presence in the physical world. The first time that Skylar had attended the festival under cover of one of Duse's shields she had initially been both mortified and fascinated. She'd felt as though she'd just walked onto the set of a porn movie or worse, something from the depravations of history, a Roman orgy – Caligula's playground!

But it didn't take long for her to realize how skewed and downright wrong her perceptions were. She should have understood after being thoroughly submersed in Duse's uncommon brand of love that the way that Watchers perceived sex was utterly alien to human beings. Watchers sexually hungered with a wild, even frightening intensity, that much was true. But they also worshipped human women, especially on this night, as nothing less than the physical manifestation of the Goddess. They devoted themselves to freeing the divine essence within her.

That was what the Issian Festival was—a ceremony of liberation, a ritual that encouraged women to shed the shame, false pride or other baggage that might accompany their sexual identity so that they could recall the divine in themselves.

This was Helen's night.

The thought came to Skylar distractedly as the music continued to beckon her. It struck her as being poignantly wrong that the luminescent young woman would miss it.

She didn't recognize the sublimely beautiful male with the creamy light brown skin and strikingly green eyes who stood guard at the only possible entrance to this portion of Dunleavy.

He looked more than a little stunned when he saw Skylar approach him. He struggled to find his warrior persona but not very successfully.

"Devon, I mean...Sky..." The Watcher guard began awkwardly, initially using her "true" name, Devon, the name by which she was known in all of her incarnations. He cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Mrs. Ammadon, good evening."

Skylar smiled. "Hello." She began to move past him but he blocked her path. The magic from Duse's sigil made him take a step back, however. No Watcher but Duse could touch Skylar unless she was in danger. Watchers instinctively respected a six-inch circumference around her physical body.

"Where's Duse?"

His simple question brought on a cascade of doubt and acute embarrassment. What was she doing here without Duse? She hadn't planned on coming without him. Hadn't she told her mate she would meet him in their suite?

Skylar abruptly registered the way the Watcher's eyes narrowed slightly. She registered lust but that was nothing new. Watchers were fascinated and enraptured by the rare women powerful enough to be mates. It was the suspicion that flared into his green eyes that made her angry.

And her anger made something click on in her consciousness.

"Are you one of Asmoday's then? Do you think a woman's only meaning is in reference to a Watcher...or Watchers?"

He looked stunned. "Of course not. I just..."

"What's your name? Who do you serve?" Skylar demanded as she stepped forward, forcing him to back up.

"Uh... My name is Shem. I serve Che." He faltered under her wrathful gaze. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean any harm. It's just uncommon for mates to..."

"I don't require a male companion to attend this celebration."

Shem's mouth dropped open. He blinked at what he saw standing before him. "Of course you don't," he managed.

"Then stand aside, Shem," she said, more gently now. She felt his awestruck stare on her back as she moved past him down the corridor.

The hard, throbbing rock beat grew louder as she drew nearer to the large room at the end of the hallway. Skylar had never seen this enormous circular room or the multitude of private suites that branched off of it ever used for anything except the Issian Festival. It had been elegantly and comfortably decorated in a contemporary style

with brown, taupe and cream colors providing a warm, neutral background for bold accents, including several pieces of beautiful, tasteful and incredibly sensual pieces of sculpture and paintings scattered throughout the room. The lighting was elegant and muted, warm enough to cast its occupants in a flattering luminescence yet dim enough to encourage the shedding of inhibitions.

Where Skylar stood was a sort of raised circular balcony. Most of the deep decadent-looking sofas and chairs that were in the open space before and below her were empty right now with the exception of two couples and a group of one woman and three Watchers that appeared to be too near their wonderful culminations of lovemaking to have taken a break.

Skylar blinked in curiosity and rising lust when she finally absorbed what the three Watchers were doing to the nude woman.

The couple that made love on the raised stage in the center of the open space, the current *molesian caun*, two of several lovers specifically chosen because of their capabilities and potential strength for increasing the pitch of the energies for the Dionytion Ceremony, were also too involved with each other to heed their surroundings. Most of the eighty or ninety occupants in the room were gyrating and grinding enthusiastically to the music of the talented Watcher band. The degree of dress varied from fully clothed to complete nudity.

Heat immediately flooded Skylar's cheeks and sex. The visual stimulation was powerful enough but it was the energies in the room to which she immediately responded. Her subtle bodies and flesh began to resonate and hum with a pleasurable, sexual tingling sensation.

"I don't follow Roma, but I take it this is a popular song."

Skylar started at the sound of the deep voice. She glanced up at Jax in vague anxiety but then caught herself. He looked completely at ease. Her eyes flicked over him, taking in the faded jeans that clung to his long hard thighs and the casual button-down shirt that he wore over a t-shirt that seemed to flash white in contrast to his dark skin. He was such a beautiful male animal that it always hurt her a little to look at him but it pained sorely to look away. Skylar suspected that every female who had ever laid eyes on Duse and Bale's youngest brother felt the exact same way.

She forced herself to glance away presently however, when she registered the gleam of longing in his exotic eyes. He ducked his head as though he were trying to protect her from something she found offensive.

The small gesture caused her heart to squeeze painfully in her chest.

Skylar wanted to say something sisterly like, *It's wonderful to see you Jax! Why don't you visit us more than once a year during the Issian Festival?* But of course that would sound contrived. Neither of them could erase what Jax had done ten years ago, or the things he'd said.

She managed a bright smile. "This is one of the most popular songs in rock history, Jax," she chided him gently as she glanced over at the sexy, whipcord-lean Watcher



currently belting out the lyrics to the hard driving anthem. Skylar knew two of the Watchers that performed with him, although she didn't recognize the drummer. Roma couldn't bring his usual band members with him to such an occult ceremony of course. Watchers were filling in, and doing an admirable job from the sound of things. Roma had one of the most recognized faces on the planet, much to Bale and the Council's dismay.

"Nix always takes every opportunity possible to brag to other human children that he knows Roma."

"He's been chosen to be the *scisen* for the Dionytion *molesian caun*," said Jax conversationally.

Skylar's eyebrows rose. "Not Saya?" Saya was known to be one of the most powerful unmated Watchers, in addition to Jax. She knew from various sources that either Jax, Che, Zep or Saya had been the *scisen*—the Watcher who made love with the *scinten* in the climactic, most powerful session of public lovemaking during the Issian Festival—for the past few decades. Zep had been murdered by Asmoday years ago however, and Che was now mated. Saya had been named as the *scisen* for the past several years.

Skylar had carefully avoided the issue of why Jax had always refused the highly honored position since she'd come to Dunleavy.

Jax shook his head. "Saya's pretty wrapped up in a woman who isn't powerful enough to act as a *scinten* so he passed." He nodded casually toward the woman and three Watchers below them. "That's her right there being cock-flogged. Can I bring you something to drink or is Duse already getting you something?"

Skylar averted her face to hide her embarrassment at his incidental reference to the primitively erotic sexual activity in front of them.

She'd long ago learned from Duse that Watchers were very different from humans in regard to both spoken and visually graphic sexual content. It took Skylar awhile to understand that it was solely the heightening and exchange of subtle energies during sex that stimulated a Watcher and nothing else.

Once, Nix had told Duse and Che about a human boy who was his friend from Dunleavy village who was being punished by his parents for getting caught with a pornographic magazine. Duse and Che had looked at each other and burst out in laughter, although Duse had tried to contain his when he saw Skylar's expression of disbelieving irritation at his reaction in front of Nix. Later Duse had explained to Skylar that Watchers found humans' obsession with pornography utterly alien.

*For us it's like the equivalent of taking a picture of money and then trying to use the photograph as currency,* Duse had said before he shrugged apologetically. *We just think it's kind of funny.*

Her eyes inevitably went to what Jax had referred to, which was where she least wanted them to go while she stood next to him. An attractive auburn-haired woman

was perched on her hands and knees on a large, cushioned stool while three divinely proportioned nude males stood around her.

"Duse isn't here yet. He'll be along shortly. And no thank you. I'm not thirsty," she said distractedly. Her tongue skimmed her lower lip anxiously. "Co-cock-flogged? Is that what you said?"

Jax grinned. "Yeah, it must have been Gaby's fantasy. Too bad Bale isn't here to see it."

"Why?" Skylar asked through a dry mouth.

"It's one of Bale's things," Jax stated matter-of-factly. "Nobody's better at it. That's undoubtedly who Saya got the idea from, sometime before Bale was mated."

Skylar felt mortified at the fact that she was having this conversation with her brother-in-law about her *other* brother-in-law but she still couldn't take her eyes off the four lovers. The three Watchers all held their taut, very impressive erections in their hands and beat them against Gaby's body in a rapid carnal rhythm. Ron, one of Duse's knights, held the woman's head steady in one hand while he slapped his penis against her spread lips and protruding tongue, only occasionally sliding it into her captive mouth. A Watcher that Skylar didn't recognize flogged his swollen cock against the sides of Gaby's firm suspended breast while he lightly pinched and rolled an erect nipple between his fingers, using his hold on her to bat their flesh together with more force. Saya was positioned behind her. With one hand he spread her sex lips wide. With the other he popped his thick, rigid meat against Gaby's clit so quickly that his cock was a blurred arc.

From the tension in all their bodies and faces and the cacophony of grunts and groans, things were about to reach a glorious climax. Watchers were such beautiful specimens and always amply masculine. To watch such an erotic feast made Skylar feel slightly dizzy as the blood in her brain rushed to her nether regions. She held onto the balcony with a white-knuckled grip when Gaby screamed and her body began to ripple and shudder with orgasm. The three Watchers didn't outlast her for long.

Skylar must have blinked for too long because she never saw the three males Truest Selves flare into visibility as they climaxed. The sight that greeted her next was the intensely erotic one of three prolific streams of cum jetting onto Gaby's body. None of the Watchers stopped their flogging motions as they climaxed, causing it to shoot everywhere. By the time all the convulsions and groaning slowed and finally ceased Gaby's face, neck, breasts, belly, hips, thighs, ass and pussy were dripping with semen.

Which Skylar realized had been Gaby's fantasy all along when the cum-drenched woman suddenly gave a slow smile that was beautiful to behold. If there was one thing she knew from Duse, Watchers aimed to please, and their degree of focus was not only powerful but incredibly precise.

Jax turned toward her, looking intent on saying something when he abruptly glanced up to the raised stage where the *molesian caun* was being performed. A second later the Watcher there shouted out his name.

"Jax! You're needed."

The Watcher was positioned behind his lover, his cock fully embedded in her body. The woman's lips were stretched back from her teeth in a grimace of acute pleasure. Skylar's sexual awareness had been honed by her years as Duse's mate and on this particular night her senses were particularly powerful. Like most of the Watchers in the room she knew at that moment that while the Watcher calling out to Jax had already brought his lover to multiple orgasms, feeding, refining and escalating the pitch of energies in the room, he was having difficulty coaxing the last, potentially most powerful one from her.

Several of the Watchers in the crowded room glanced back toward where Jax and Skylar stood. As they began to make their way off the open space used as a dance floor several of them called out Jax's name as well.

She glanced up at her brother-in-law curiously. He just shook his head once tautly. Skylar thought he looked vaguely embarrassed, an emotion she'd never seen on Jax's face and only on the rarest occasion on *any* Watcher's.

"Maybe you'd like something to eat then?" Jax asked Skylar as though he were trying to ignore what was happening around them.

"Uh...no, but thank you. Why are they all calling for you?"

"Erec is requesting assistance with his leman. Jax can be helpful in these situations."

Jax and Skylar both turned toward the unexpected speaker.

"Hello, Batos," Skylar greeted the distinguished-looking Watcher. "You're here early."

Batos shrugged before dipped his head deeply in reverence to her. "I help Paim arrange these things sometimes. Aren't you going to respond?" he asked Jax.

Jax shook his head even as the sound of his name being called behind them was quickly being turned into a rowdy chant.

Skylar thought she sensed some shielded telepathic conversation occurring between Batos and Jax. Batos was known for his longer memory into the past in relation to other Watchers, along with his patience and wisdom. She knew that Jax had sought his counsel frequently in recent years.

"Perhaps you should, Jax," Batos suddenly said in a low warm voice. His mysterious near black, liquid eyes flicked ever so briefly to where Skylar stood.

Jax's expression was wooden as he stared at his mentor. He finally stirred. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to look."

Batos smiled warmly. "That's my boy. Go on then, before that crowd comes and drags you onto the platform. They're eager for Alana's Rush but not nearly as much as Alana and Erec are I'll wager!"

The boisterous crowd erupted with cheers when Jax stepped down the few steps into the main part of the room. Skylar watched, her lungs tight with anticipation, as he

finally mounted the raised dais where Erec continued to fuck Alana in a hard relentless rhythm that left Skylar breathless.

She could easily imagine what it was doing to Alana.

Still, something was keeping the woman from her release. Alana's eyes blinked open dazedly when Jax approached, as though she'd sensed him. He knelt down in front of her.

"Jax will tell Erec what she needs so that she may find her pleasure...and her freedom," Batos murmured softly, sensing Skylar's confusion from where she stood beside him.

Skylar stared, as awestruck as apparently the rest of the hushed crowd was when Erec's pumping slowed as Jax took the woman's chin into his hands, tilting her gaze up to meet his.

Alana was no raving beauty by any standard means of judgment. She had shoulder-length dark brown hair, a plump yet shapely figure and a rather regular, indistinguishable face. She might have been any woman—the teller at a bank, a lawyer, a mother. But Skylar could see with her subtle vision that she was in truth extremely beautiful. The essences of her aura were rapid, refined and vibrant.

It struck Skylar as powerfully arousing to watch Jax cup Alana's face and deliberately stare down at her. She looked up at him fixedly while positioned on all fours. Erec continued to hold one of her ample hips tenderly in his large hand and stroke in and out of her pussy sensually. Skylar knew, perhaps even more than the rest of the Watchers present, that Jax's focused stare was one of the most intimate things that a conscious being could experience.

Or endure.

Skylar became dimly aware that despite the fact that well over a hundred people were in the enormous room it had gone completely silent. The members of the band appeared to have forgotten their instruments as they watched. Even the couples who had been in the midst of focused ecstasy were staring at what was occurring on the platform. Gaby sat back on her haunches as an equally entranced Saya used a cloth to tenderly dry off the abundant emissions on his lover's neck and breasts.

The energy level in the room seemed to swell and throb.

"Too bad it's not the Dionytion *molesian caun*," Batos muttered wryly, referring to the fact that the singularly powerful energies mounting in the exchange would only be amplified a hundred-thousandfold by using the Dionytion stone.

But Skylar didn't answer. She was too involved in the spectacle on the stage and the resulting erotic sensations. A sense of unease rippled across the crowd when Jax slowly shook his head as he continued to stare at Alana.

No.

Even though no one precisely knew the hushed exchange occurring between him and Alana, Jax had just denied the woman something. His posture didn't waver but

Skylar had the distinct impression that Jax had just glanced over in her and Batos' direction. She was sure that Batos sensed it as well when he tensed noticeably.

After a pause, and without breaking his gaze with Alana, Jax murmured something quietly to Erec. Skylar saw the brown-haired Watcher nod in agreement and slowly withdraw from Alana's body. He bent and tenderly caressed and kissed her hips, bottom and thighs.

Jax sat on the floor before Alana. He slid his feet beneath her spread forearms and then her knees.

## Chapter Eleven

Helen imagined that her physical body and her subtle essences blended seamlessly with the wall behind her as she listened just inside of the sitting area outside of the king's suite. Making herself invisible was a piece of magic that she had mastered at an early age, a trick that came in extremely handy for surviving some of the more nasty situations that she'd found herself mixed up in for the past decade.

But blocking her essence from her life mate was so challenging that her body shook from the effort.

"Eleanor said what?" Duse asked.

Maerda nodded her head as if to assure Duse that he hadn't misunderstood her. "At first she denied any knowledge at all about the whole ordeal. But when I pushed her, letting her know what had happened to Helen, she became angry. Right before she faded she said, 'Remind Bale about Fernanda Osconso. He was right to have been suspicious of that. As a king he must know that there are exceptions to every rule!'"

Maerda shrugged and tossed up her hands. "And that was it. I tried to summon her back for more questioning but she didn't heed me."

Bale stared off into space distractedly.

"Do you know who Fernanda Osconso is, Bale?" Duse asked.

Bale shook his head. "The name seems vaguely familiar but I can't think why exactly. I'll have to consult the records, or maybe Batos."

A strange expression suddenly flickered across his features and he went very still.

Helen froze as well where she stood plastered against the wall just twenty feet from Bale in the well-lit sitting area. She closed her eyes, denying his laserlike gaze with every ounce of Will that she possessed. If it weren't for the adrenaline that ran potently through her blood she would have fallen unconscious at the effort it cost her to block him. But she didn't have time for any more fainting spells.

Helen needed to get out of there or her only chance for salvation was going to slip through her fingers. This was the night she had waited for, the night she had feared.

It was the night from her dreams.

"What's wrong?" Duse asked Bale sharply.

Bale's eyes narrowed. He finally shook his head. "Nothing," he said with vague irritation. He felt as though he were plagued by an itch but couldn't divine the exact location in order to scratch it. "I'm just puzzled by Eleanor's reference." He sighed and stood.

"I'll have to work it out later. Right now I need to take the Stone down to Uncle Paim for the Dionytion *molesian caun*. I'm sure Skylar is waiting for you but I won't be long. Can you stay here with Helen while I'm gone?"

"Of course," Duse replied.

\* \* \* \* \*

It felt like all the blood in Skylar's head sank to her genitals as she watched Jax slide beneath Alana. She wanted to leave the room. It didn't feel right to her to watch Duse's little brother take part in a sex rite.

Yet she couldn't bring her feet to move or her stare to waver.

Jax paused once he was supine beneath Alana. He still fully sensed Skylar in the room. He knew with the same sureness that he knew his true name that her entire focused attention was on him at that moment. He had wanted to refuse this situation entirely but Batos had warned him telepathically that his behavior would seem suspicious to the majority of the Watchers in the room.

The Council hadn't kept the discovery that Skylar could have mated with Jax had she not already mated with Duse a secret. Batos was extremely wary about that bit of knowledge which one day could destroy Watcher culture. Asmoday had been aware of it when he pushed his political agendas and later had used that fact to justify his crimes against the Ammadons.

Jax knew that Batos, along with everyone else in the room, expected him to join in the *molesian caun* in order to free Alana's constraints so that she could purely channel the Goddess's energies. When he had looked deeply into Alana's soft gray eyes he had seen her secret desire. She wanted to be penetrated by Erec and another Watcher at the same time.

But Jax had seen something else. Alana's wish for a second Watcher lover had been specifically for him—Jax. He didn't recall meeting her before but he must have met her on some Watcher occasion or another. She was a lovely, desirable woman. Jax wouldn't have hesitated to join in the rite under different circumstances or if it wasn't forbidden by Watcher law to cast a shield of privacy when one took part in the *molesian caun*.

But he couldn't bring himself to be so deliberately intimate with another woman when he knew Skylar stood in the room, watching him.

He reached up and tenderly took Alana's face into his hands. Her cheeks were flushed and warm beneath his fingertips. She looked uncertain about her exposed desire and that made Jax cringe with regret. He recognized the Goddess in her. Despite his uncertainties his cock stirred to life. He pulled her down so that her ass remained in the air. A groan fell across her lips as Erec began to run his tongue over her clit. Jax whispered softly in her ear.

*I'm sorry that I can't give you what you specifically requested, Alana. But I want you to know how beautiful you are to me. Give me your mouth. Let me kiss you.*

Skylar blinked in amazement. Her flesh liquefied with desire. She glanced in amazement over at Batos who was watching the *molesian caun* with fixed attention, as was everyone in the room. He didn't seem to have heard Jax's quiet whisper like she had.

He held Alana's face with both hands and began to kiss her softly, deliberately then deeply. His considerable focus of Will went into that kiss, into conveying to this woman just how unique and divine she was.

Skylar bit her lip to prevent herself from crying out. The tension in the room was rising exponentially by the second. It was almost painful for her to watch the tension growing in Alana's nude body as Erec ate her pussy and Jax kissed her with so much concentrated desire that it left her—and everyone in the room—spellbound. How did Jax do it? How had he turned the relatively mundane gesture of kissing into the most erotic of all acts of lovemaking?

Skylar realized that they were all experiencing Alana's increasingly mindless desire firsthand.

As Erec straightened and moved behind Alana again Jax gently sealed their kiss and looked into the woman's desire-drunk eyes. He reached up and palmed her ass cheeks, spreading her and holding her steady for Erec. The brown-haired Watcher placed his hands on the floor on either side of her hips and plunged his cock into her body with a loud growl of pleasure. Jax held Alana immobile for Erec's concentrated, hard thrusts. His pelvis slammed into her again and again with a precise smacking sound.

Alana keened desperately in pleasure.

Skylar's heartbeat hammered alarmingly fast in her breast when she once again heard Jax murmuring to Alana. She heard it inside her head, like she did when Duse telepathically spoke to her.

*He's letting me know what you feel like, Alana. You have the sweetest little pussy. It's the pathway to paradise, that's what Erec wants you to know.*

Alana stared down at the most beautiful male creature she could ever imagine. She wanted to reach up run her fingers through his wild pitch-black hair. She longed to brush her fingers across his lean, hard face and try to ease some of the suffering she saw there with her subtle sight.

But Erec was fucking her hard now and it felt so wonderful. She couldn't lift her hands or she would lose her balance.

Jax smiled slowly beneath her as he read her thoughts. Alana cried out in sharp protest as she neared the crest of an almost frightening orgasm.

"No, I don't want it to end yet. It's too wonderful," she cried shakily.

Jax caressed her face with his ethereal hand and craned up to kiss her.



*Let go. I'll stay here until you tire of me, and Erec is far from finished with you. And there's no need to worry about me, lovely woman. I'm enjoying myself more than I would have thought was possible.*

Skylar swallowed convulsively when she heard Jax's tender whisper in her mind. At the same moment that Alana screamed as climax broke over her she felt a long, hard body behind her. She shivered uncontrollably when she felt firm, skilled lips leaving a trail of hot kisses across her neck.

"Duse?" she questioned dazedly.

## Chapter Twelve

Skylar strained her head around to capture a glimpse of her mate. As she did so Alana's powerful release began to surge through the room and all its occupants. Dozens of other shouts and cries of bliss followed in its wake.

Duse bent his knees and pressed his erection into her ass. Skylar moaned. He felt enormous with need.

"Let's go to our room," Skylar whispered feverishly against him when he nipped at her lips hungrily with his own. Her eyes widened in shock when Duse shook his head. His face looked determined and stony with repressed arousal as he pushed her upper body down over the rail of the balcony.

"I can't wait," he stated starkly.

He saw the anxious glance that Skylar gave him over her shoulder as he reached around and unfastened her pants but he couldn't stop himself from continuing to undress her. He knew from where at least part of her anxiety arose. Despite the fact that she knew he would always shield their lovemaking from others' sight and subtle awareness, they typically didn't engage in sex publicly.

But he hadn't just walked in on a typical situation either. The sex energies in the room had been so thick when he entered that Duse had been stunned. Then he had sensed Skylar's intense arousal and knew that he had to have her, right there and then.

Skylar gasped loudly when Duse wedged the blunt, steely head of his penis into her cleft. She knew that he could feel how soaked she was from her arousal.

"Spread your thighs," Duse instructed tautly. When she hesitated he reached around and slid his finger between the tender, swollen folds of her sex lips. She made a mewling sound of sexual torment.

"You know I'm protecting you, baby. Let yourself go," he demanded in his characteristically hoarse, sexy voice.

Skylar clamped her eyes shut and spread herself for him. She cried out raggedly when he penetrated her. Her mouth hung open over the rail at the sensation of him filling her up completely only to retreat until his absence was a pain. But then he surged into her again, giving her the friction that she required and creating even more until she thought her flesh would combust and burn.

A cry of mixed surprise and arousal skipped past her lips when he grabbed a handful of her curls and tugged on her head, lifting her chin.

"Watch the *molesian caun*," Duse ordered through a tight jaw. He sensed her hesitation and her averted gaze.

*Watch it, Skylar!*

Skylar pried open her eyes at his tense telepathic command. Duse tugged again at her hair as he sliced his cock deeply and their flesh smacked together. She followed his demand and forced her eyes back open. She sobbed brokenly at what she saw.

Jax was again kissing Alana with erotic focus. This time his big hands had pried open her cheeks so that Erec could fuck her ass. The brown-haired Watcher's face was pulled tight with pleasure. He fucked Alana so hard that his heavy balls flung forward with his impact when he crashed into her and sank himself completely in her asshole. Skylar sensed that Erec had never been so present and solid in the corporal world as he was at that moment.

He was about to become even more so.

Alana's throat convulsed as she wildly returned Jax's kiss. Skylar knew for a fact that she was releasing an almost constant, vibrating scream of sublime pleasure into his hot, demanding mouth.

Duse bared his teeth at the expended effort it took not fall to his knees as Skylar's indescribably powerful Rush began to shear through his subtle bodies.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bale rubbed his eyes and leaned back in his chair. He'd been leafing through some old Grigori records but hadn't yet been successful in comprehending Eleanor's oblique reference. He was alone in the outer chamber of the king's suite, guarding Helen while she slept in the bedroom.

He couldn't stop thinking about what had happened yesterday in the stables. Concerns about Helen's safety as well as worries about whether he was doing the right thing or not in regard to his leadership of the Watchers by not revealing what he knew about Helen and the Dionytion Stone plagued him. She had stolen the Stone eight years ago. Asmoday had likely been her accomplice, since it was he who ended up possessing the Stone. Now she had indicated that she wanted the powerful transmitter of energy again.

Bale couldn't imagine why she would want the rare Watcher relic unless it was once again to procure it for Day. When she had stolen it eight years ago she had given it to Asmoday. The Watcher outcast planned to rape Sophia, Che Ammadon's mate, while he held the Stone. His purpose had been to harvest enough energy to return to the physical world. In order to do that, Asmoday needed to not only procure massive amounts of energy, but to kill three more of the Grigori Council members who had formed the energy bonds of his earthly imprisonment.

He'd already contrived to murder Zep, one of the original Grigori Council members.

Bale sighed dispiritedly. He was no closer to understanding the mystery of his mate. He perfectly sensed the sex energies building as the night progressed. This was going to end up being one of the most powerful Issian Festivals in centuries.

Gods what he wouldn't give to spend it in Helen's willing embrace.

He clamped his eyes shut as the brutally erotic memory of being inside her tight hot channel flashed into his consciousness.

The shattered expression that had been on her face afterward ruthlessly followed, the memory that he'd been expending enormous amounts of energy to avoid at all costs crashed into his consciousness.

*I'm still alive?*

*Of course you are, lovely. Your fear can't kill you.*

*I thought that you could.*

His face collapsed with pain.

He closed his eyes and entreated the Goddess whose powers were so strong on this night.

*Please, she is one of your own. Guide me. Let me know what to do to heal her. I'll do anything, anything you ask of me.*

Bale didn't know how long he prayed like that. His solid flesh trembled at the effort he expended in focusing his monumental Will on his plea.

He abruptly gasped in disbelief and stood jerkily.

A shock had just shuddered through his subtle and corporeal bodies. He froze but no...the sensation continued unabated. His level of consciousness had just pitched thousands of times beyond the vibratory level it had been at just a few seconds ago.

A mate currently held the Dionytion Stone. That was the only explanation for the completely unexpected sensation. Disbelief rippled through him.

He cursed in a language that would have been only remotely familiar to a Sumerian sage before he identified with his ethereal body and left the room.

Not just any mate currently held the Dionytion Stone.

Helen did.

\* \* \* \* \*

Roma Andrevin still couldn't believe that he'd been chosen by the Council to be this year's *scisen*. He had entertained tens of thousands with his music but he had never felt even a hint of the apprehension that he did as he waited for the Dionytion *molesian caun* to begin. His anxiety mixed with a pitched sense of sexual excitement. The energies being generated by this year's Issian Festival were exponentially strong.

He sensed that Michelle, his leman, felt just as anxious and anticipatory as he did where she waited in the suite across the main stage. His awareness of her nervous state did much to calm his own. He reached out to her with his subtle touch, instinctively wanting to soothe her sense of unrest. He gave a small smile when he felt Michelle's attention sharpen as she sensed his presence and the subsequent lessening of her anxiety.

"It's time to begin," Uncle Paim said as he stepped into the room. He regarded Roma with a smile. "I'm proud of you, Roma."

Roma was touched by the sincerity in Paim's tone.

"Feeling a little nervous?"

Roma nodded.

"Let Michelle set the pace and all will be well," Paim assured him quietly. Roma stood when he gestured with his hand toward the main room and the raised dais.

"You see where I've placed the Stone? Make sure that it is touching Michelle during each of her climaxes," Paim instructed.

He saw Roma's golden brown eyes widen as he stared at the Stone. Paim knew from experience that it took a moment for a new *scisen* to actually absorb the fact that he would soon be touching the sacred, powerful relic. He waited until Roma swallowed convulsively and finally met his gaze. Paim nodded once solemnly and stepped back.

"*Aeirren provle du shein*," he said.

"Thank you," Roma whispered gruffly before he stepped out onto the lit dais. He waited tensely for Michelle to join him from the suite that was attached to the opposite side of the stage. But it wasn't Michelle who walked onto the platform. Roma stared in stark disbelief.

When the young woman headed straight to the Dionytion Stone and grasped it in her hand he sank to his knees in awe.

\* \* \* \* \*

Helen blinked in confusion. She'd never been a sleepwalker but she felt like that's exactly what she'd been doing when she suddenly found herself standing on a lit stage. A man who looked exactly like her favorite rock star, Roma Andrevin, stood about fifteen feet away gaping at her. Her eyes widened in amazement. He was only wearing a pair of jeans. Michelangelo would have loved to use that lean, muscular torso as a model for his sculptures.

What a strange dream!

Then she saw it and the sexy rock star was forgotten.

A columnar stone that was about a foot long lay on a low table in the middle of the stage. The ridges and grooves had faded over the millennia so that it was hard to make out what the original carving had signified. It felt heavy when Helen lifted it in her hand. A surge of tingling electricity immediately flowed into her. She stumbled slightly on her feet at the wave of vertigo that followed.

Her vision blurred and swam. She struggled to maintain her balance.

"Bale," she entreated instinctively in the midst of her frightening disorientation.

"I am here, Helen."

She desperately sought to focus at the sound of that voice, which communicated such a profound sense of calm authority and strength.

Bale reached out to cup her shoulder, knowing that she was disoriented because he was as well. As their essences merged his vision suddenly took on a crystalline quality.

She'd never seen anything half so amazing as Bale looking down at when her vision cleared. The stark reality of him made her eyes burn. She blinked several times, trying to fully absorb the rugged yet harmonious lines of his countenance.

"Bale...?" Paim questioned anxiously from several feet away.

Bale raised his left hand in a nonverbal command for silence. Neither he nor Helen were even aware of the nearly three hundred other occupants in the room who were watching the enfolding events on the stage in silent fascination.

"Give me the Stone, Helen," he said quietly.

Two tears scattered down her cheek when she shook her head. "I can't, Bale."

"Why?"

"I need it," she replied in a quavering voice. "If you take it from me I'll destroy it. Don't think I don't know how. I had time to examine it nine years ago. I know the vulnerabilities in its essences."

His jaws clenched tight when he sensed her desperation. He'd never felt as torn between his duty as King of the Watchers and his loyalty to her. "You can explain to me later why you need it, lovely," he said softly. "But it's not part of the Issian Festival for a mate to hold the Stone. You *must* give it to me."

She shook her head rapidly.

Helen...

He ground his back teeth together in frustration when he heard Paim calling to him again.

"What?" he asked tersely, his gaze never leaving Helen's frightened yet determined face.

"If that is truly Helen...which of course it is, myself along with all the Watchers here can sense that perfectly, she would be permitted to hold the Stone for her Dionytian Ceremony. What more of a sacred Dionysian *molesian caun* could there be than a Ceremony between the most powerful Watcher and mate in existence?"

Paim took two steps back in obvious alarm when Bale turned his furious gaze upon him.

"I'm not making love to my mate publicly!" he hissed. "By the Fathers, our sons are in that crowd."

"Calm yourself, King."

Bale's gaze sprang over to where Batos had just stepped onto the platform.

"There is no reason that the same rules that traditionally apply to the Dionytion Ceremony can't apply here as well. You may take Helen to the king's suite," Batos said peaceably.

Bale just glared at the distinguished Watcher for several long seconds before he glanced down at Helen. She looked pale and frightened but her eyes were steadfast when they met his.

There were only two reasons in Watcher law for the use of the Stone. It was used in the Dionytion *molesian caun* during the Issian Festival, and for the Dionytion Ceremony—the celebration of a Watcher mate's Second Change and her subsequent reunion with her lover. What Batos suggested had never been done before, but technically there was no reason that he and Helen couldn't enact both rituals in one combined, sacred union.

No reason except for Helen's refusal, of course. She must climax while she held the Stone. He was bound by law to ensure that it occurred, even if he had to give her an orgasm by stimulating her psychokinetically.

*I will let you keep the Stone for now, Helen, but know the consequences of doing so. I'm going to take you up to the king's suite and make love to you. You must give yourself wholly. If you don't think that you can do that, than you must turn the Stone over to the chosen scisen and scinten for the Dionytion molesian caun. Do you understand?* Bale asked telepathically.

*Yes. I'm not letting go of this stone.*

His hand rose to cradle her delicate jaw. He could feel her trembling. The fact that she was so afraid and that he couldn't comprehend why almost drove him wild with despair. Dimly he wondered why her chaotic emotions weren't finding an outlet in the poltergeist activities she'd displayed yesterday when she was so afraid.

*You swear to give yourself, Helen?* he asked in a hard, unforgiving tone.

Her chin went up proudly but her shaking only amplified. She looked like a brave woman who was steps away from the headsman's ax.

"I swear it."

"Heed me, Helen," he spoke out loud as well in a low, furious voice. "There is nothing to fear. I will never, *ever* let anything harm you again!"

His eyes glowed with unfurling power as he bent and lifted her without another word.

Saya and Gaby were standing near the base of the raised stage. Like the rest of the crowd they watched the events that took place in awed silence. Saya saw the fearsome white fires leaping in Bale Ammadon's eyes as he stepped down the stairs with the slender woman in his arms, he grabbed Gaby's hand and pulled her back. Every Watcher and woman in the audience followed suit, beating a hasty wide path for the King of the Watchers and his mate as they swept past.

## Chapter Thirteen

Bale set her down gently on the edge of the bed. He never took his eyes from her as he turned on the bedside lamp to its dimmest setting. She held the stone in both hands across her lap with a white-knuckled grip. Bale realized that the anger and fury that had brewed in Helen's gaze since she'd first laid eyes on him during this incarnation had vanished.

He wished that her hatred was back so that it didn't leave such a distilled form of fear in its place.

"Tell me," he ordered. "Tell me what it is that you believe is going to happen right now."

She just stared at him as she trembled, her eyes enormous in her face.

"If you won't tell me, Helen, then my only choice—and your only chance—is for you to face it."

When she didn't respond he growled low in his throat and lunged toward her. It was the warrior in him that plowed his fingers through her soft thick hair and tilted her mouth up for his fierce kiss. Helen's fear was his and he refused to be vanquished by it. He leant down over her and fed her from the reserves of his courage even as he drank from her sweet, rarified essence in order to replenish it.

Helen strained up, desperate for more of the taste and sensation of him. He might have the face of her nightmares but she understood by this point that she'd been gravely mistaken to believe that Bale would ever even consider harming her. She was confused but presently her emotional unrest eagerly sought the path of voluptuous ecstasy for its outlet.

One of her hands left the Stone. She gripped the back of his head and increased the pressure of their embrace. Their kiss became wild and intensely carnal.

Bale called on a higher source of power in order to break it a few moments later.

He leaned back and gripped the bottom of her t-shirt, barely giving her time to shift her arm to accommodate the Dionytion Stone through the sleeve before he jerked it off of her. She wasn't wearing anything beneath it.

Bale's nostrils flared as his eyes trailed down over her pale, golden-hued, dewy skin. The lines of her neck and shoulders epitomized elegance. Her arms were lithe and graceful. The sight of her shapely pink-crested breasts made him want to weep. The rational, methodical aspects of his character, the parts of himself that could not rest until he solved the mystery of Helen, receded from his consciousness and his equally powerful sensuality crowded to the forefront.



Her jeans and underwear thinned in substance and finally dissipated completely. Helen gasped in awe. She glanced up into Bale's rigid features and realized that he had used his magic to do it. His eyes looked so brilliant at that moment that Helen would have had no trouble believing that the heat from his gaze alone had melted away her clothing. The thought made her clit twinge with a painful longing.

Bale reached between her thighs to soothe her.

"Bale!" Helen cried out in shocked pleasure. She'd almost unceasingly desired his hand to be right where it was doing precisely what it was doing for the past thirty-six hours. Despite the fact that she wanted his touch so desperately her thighs clenched together in anxiety.

Bale burrowed his fingers between her silky, tensed thighs. He didn't mind that she didn't open for him. The weight of her sustained sexual restraint was considerable but that just meant that her eventual release would be even more explosive. He moved his hand up and down, his forefinger wedging between the damp folds of her sex. He held her hip and pressed forward, optimizing the pressure on her clit. Helen's thighs clamped like a vise around his hand. She moaned uncontrollably into his mouth when he took her again in a ravaging kiss.

"That's right," he murmured a moment later as he examined her tense, beautiful face. He continued to strum her straining, taut body. "Fight it if it makes you feel better. You've always been a fighter."

"I don't want to lose!" she gasped out as the tension became unbearable.

"You're not going to lose, Helen," he said with harsh certainty. "We're both going to win. Now let go, lovely," he instructed more gently.

It was like jumping off a cliff because Bale told her there would be a glorious afterlife. Yet she'd already come to understand that succumbing to Bale was far different from surrendering to the ever-present darkness of Night. All she had to justify for refusing what her body and soul desired was her fear.

All she had to go on for following Bale's demand was her belief in him.

Helen released her desperate hold and let go.

For a few suspended moments she *might* have died, because jolts of pleasure ripped away her sense of self. She felt the Stone in her hand, picking up every shudder that crashed through her and magnifying it a thousandfold. The experience was as frightening in its intensity as it was glorious.

Awhile later she felt his breath in her ear before she comprehended his hoarsely whispered words. She recognized the profound truth of what he said even though her sluggish brain still couldn't comprehend speech. He praised her, he desired her.

He loved her with a depth and inhuman quality that astounded her.

Her eyes flickered open dazedly.

Bale's eyes glowed with a pale blue light as he speared her with his stare. Feeling her phenomenally powerful Rush energies shear through his subtle essences after an

absence of a century moved him deeply. He decisively took the Dionytion Stone from her hand and placed it on the bedside table. Her feeble protests were ignored as he grabbed her beneath her armpits and scooted her naked body back against the pillows. Helen moaned with pleasure when he climbed on the bed after her and leaned down over her. He began a sensual assault on her neck, ear and shoulder with his talented mouth.

"Bale, I'm not finished with the Stone," Helen whispered, distracted by his kisses despite the importance of what she said.

"Hush," he murmured before he opened his hot mouth against her wildly beating pulse. His hands found her breasts. He molded and shaped the soft mounds to fit his big palms. He groaned with intense arousal when he released her and her firm flesh sprang immediately back to its original pert position. His fingers found her plump, responsive nipples.

"Oh God," Helen moaned, losing herself again beneath his hot mouth and knowing hands. "Just let me have the Stone!"

"No," he whispered roughly against the slope of her shoulder. "If I understand correctly you have been equating sexual release with death. I will never allow that to happen to you. But climax isn't called the little death for nothing. The Dionytion Stone amplifies it so that orgasm becomes thousands of times more powerful. There's no need to push things. You will survive the little death a few more times before you hold the Stone again, Helen."

Having said that, Bale didn't appear to be in the mood to talk anymore about it, especially since he leaned down and slid a large pink nipple between his lips. He drew on her greedily but Helen loved it. Her back arched into him. Bale softened when she twisted frantically at the sustained pressure of his mouth.

He finally got to live his fantasy and run his tongue over the beautiful nipples that he'd spied as he lay in bed the other morning. He pushed them as close together as possible and alternated between laving one and then the other. Helen panted as she watched him pleasure her with such a tight focus. When he wasn't petting and whipping one sensitive peak with his warm tongue he teased and pinched lightly at it with his finger.

Bale heard her whimper.

He glanced up and met her gaze, continuing to tongue her pointed, erect nipple. His hand spread her thighs and plunged into her wet heat. With a finger that was now thoroughly lubricated he diddled her clit briskly.

Helen screamed in pleasure as she succumbed again to the little death.

Bale gritted his teeth as her exquisite energies pounded into him for the second time. If he hadn't known better he would think she was still holding the Dionytion Stone. It didn't matter how many times he'd loved her, he was always monumentally shocked when he was first reintroduced to the blinding power of her Rush. Her trauma

at the hands of Asmoday hadn't dimmed her exquisite energies in the slightest. If anything her suffering had made her stronger.

Helen gasped for air wildly as she recovered from having succumbed to Bale's most recent erotic siege of her body. Her eyes widened when she registered the sight before her. He knelt over her, completely naked.

"Bale," she whispered feelingly.

Helen hadn't *wanted* to become sexually preoccupied with Bale ever since she'd first set eyes on him when she was a mere teenage girl and saw him while she stole the Stone. She'd hungered for his presence, his touch and his taste ever since she'd moved to Dunleavy despite her fervent wishes to the contrary. Seeing him like this, naked, tight and stark with desire, affected her body and soul in unforeseen ways.

But despite her painful sexual thirst it wasn't his rounded, dense shoulders which epitomized his strength and fortitude that she reached for first, it wasn't his muscular, long thighs which suggested his stability as well as his springing might or his bulging upper arms which told of the warrior qualities of decisive action and swift justice. She gazed at his long thick cock. It teased her with a sure knowledge of his masculine potency and hinted at unimagined carnal delights.

But it was his hand that she reached for first, that piece of flesh which had caressed as well as challenged her, often doing both at once with startling precision.

It was the part of him that connoted their friendship, above all.

"I have missed you," Helen whispered, because no matter what came in the future that was the profound truth of this sacred moment.

Bale couldn't even form the reciprocating message in his mind he was so overcome with emotion. He came down over her, pressing their bodies together tightly, naked skin to naked skin. They gasped into each other's mouth, both of them stunned anew at the perfection of their fit. Their kiss was hot and greedy. Helen craned up after him desperately when he transferred his mouth to her neck. He proceeded to worship every inch of her skin with his lips, mouth and fingers. It wasn't a tame, measured adoration either but a fiery, singeing one.

Helen cried out in mindless need by the time he slipped her hipbone between his lips and laved the delicate structure with his warm, abrasive tongue. Her clit felt unbearably heavy and achy for him. She didn't think she could stand another second of his sweet tortures.

Their spirits were so entwined at that moment that Bale palmed her ass and raised her pussy to his mouth almost instinctively. His tongue prowled sinuously among her damp feminine folds until he found the kernel of flesh that he sought. He closed his mouth over her clit and rubbed with a stiffened tongue. He hummed and growled his gratification and arousal into her damp flesh when she broke beneath him yet again.

Helen keened as orgasm rocketed through her, more powerful than she'd ever experienced. Since she'd become sexually active she had always been insistent about

being the one in control of the exchange. Bale had been right when he'd accused her of that. It had felt almost overwhelmingly intimate to have him eat her.

Her mouth automatically rooted upward when she felt Bale's breath on her cheek.

"All right, lovely?" he asked in a desire-roughened voice.

"Wonderful," she admitted with a small smile. "Why would you even have to ask?"

His return smile was warm but tense with the restraint of his desire for her. "Could be the fact that you were screaming so loud that an innocent bystander might have thought I was committing an act of murder instead of love."

They shared a meaningful glance. She looked so beautiful lying there, her flawless skin glistening with the dew of her sexual exertions and the glow of relaxation and satiation that he'd longed to see on her face since he'd first understood that she'd come back to him. He spread his hand to encompass the entire side of her, fingers downward. His thumb and forefinger plumped her breast. His eyes found hers again.

"I'm going to enter your body now, lovely."

"Yes," she said softly. He felt tension and excitement surge into her flesh. But Bale didn't miss the unease that flickered across her face. Knowledge jumped through the air like electricity directly into him.

"You've never had a man inside of you that way?" he asked starkly.

Helen tried to read the expression on his handsome face. He'd just brought her so much pleasure. She didn't want to disappoint him.

"No. I never...wanted to," she said. She swallowed heavily when she thought of what he and Maerda had told her, about Watchers only finding older, Second Change women sexually attractive. "Have you ever been with a virgin?" Helen asked shakily, afraid to hear his answer. Would he find the thought of being with her repulsive?

"It's okay, Helen," Bale said tenderly when he sensed her thoughts and emotions. He glanced between their bodies. "As you can see I'm very, very far from finding you repulsive."

She made a sound of desire in her throat when she followed his eyes to his teeming cock that hung heavily at an angle between their bodies.

"It's true that the experience isn't a common one for Watchers but I happen to not be a virgin, in the sense of never having made love to a virgin, I mean." His slow, sexy smile almost made Helen forget what they were talking about.

"In fact," he continued evenly, "the most recent and memorable occasion that I was with a virgin was with you." His smile widened when he saw her look of disbelief.

"You were a nun in the second incarnation that we were mated, Helen."

Her eyes grew enormous. "You're talking *rubbish*," she said steadfastly.

"I'll tell you the details another time," Bale growled as he fisted his cock. "I have more important things on my mind right now. One thing that I have learned, Helen, is that if you turn over it'll make things easier for you."

Helen willingly turned over onto her belly, her gaze clinging to his beautiful cock as she did so. She couldn't help but notice how he'd said *easier*, not *easy*. Taking Bale into her vagina should be easier than it had been taking him into her ass, but it would still be pretty damn difficult from the looks of things. She peered over her shoulder when she heard Bale's low, sexy chuckle.

"I didn't penetrate you completely the other day, Helen, because I could sense that you were holding back from me. Are you planning on holding back now?"

"No," she whispered fervently, allowing him to rearrange her body until she was up on her haunches with her right cheek pressed to the pillows. She went utterly still when he pushed back one buttock and presented the wide head of his cock to her abundantly juicy entry. She shivered uncontrollably in anticipation.

"Then we've gotten past the most difficult part," Bale said gruffly. "Try to hold steady. I'll go slowly."

Despite his reassurances he wondered if he could restrain himself when he felt just the tip of the crown of his cock pry into her humid, clutching pussy. He'd suffered so severely in her absence, only to have her return to him so emotionally scarred and angry. The fact that she was willingly giving herself to him with such sweet generosity had his control close to snapping free.

He used one hand to guide himself into her while the other held her hip immobile. They worked together in tandem, he pushing with a gentle but firm pressure and she resisting against it until the head of his penis was fully encapsulated in her tight heat.

Once he was fixed in place Bale came down over her, holding himself off her with his powerful arms. She looked up at him with one wide eye.

"Do you want me to alter your experience of the pain?"

Helen shook her head rapidly against the pillows.

It made him feel sad to see her so fearful about being psychokinetically stimulate, but he understood that it would take time for her to completely heal.

He thrust into her abruptly. Sharp pleasure lanced through him. He pressed his lips to her neck and kissed her with tender passion while her physical and subtle bodies became accustomed to his presence.

Helen panted shallowly into the pillows. She closed her eyes and focused on the indescribable sensation of having Bale merged with her body so intimately. He throbbed inside of her, feeling hot and alive. She wondered at a part of her body that she'd never before given much thought. Wasn't it a miracle how the invagination of her flesh so perfectly harbored the protrusion of his, how the densely packed nerve endings and hotly flowing blood inside of her pussy so intimately pulsed and mingled with those of his teeming cock, almost as though they truly were one flesh?

The sensation left her stunned.

But then he began to move ever so slowly and her amazement segued to pure lust. As pain left her a singeing friction took its place. She began to dip her hips up and down against him but Bale tightened his hold on her.

"Let me do this." He grimaced when he heard how harsh he had sounded due to the amount of energy he was expending to keep his control. "I just want to feel what it's like to be all the way inside of you before I lose it, Helen," he managed more evenly.

Helen just nodded into the pillows, unable to speak in the face of the mounting pleasure and power of the experience. Her eyes clenched together tightly as he thrust his hips, pushed his cock slowly but surely into her pussy. She was amazed that he kept his control. She nearly lost hers several times and she had already experienced multiple climaxes. They didn't speak as he held her steady and pressed and slid and pumped. The only sounds in the still room were their heavy breathing, the sound of suction that the delineated cap of his penis made as it burrowed in and out of her wet, clinging channel and the wild pounding of their hearts in their own ears.

When Helen felt his heavy balls brush and then press to her outer sex she began to convulse around him in orgasm.

Bale hissed at the erotic sensation of her squeezing and shivering around his buried cock. Her Rush smacked into his awareness, its power so great that he almost lost consciousness from the magnitude of pleasure it conferred. His subtle bodies vibrated rapidly at the influx of pure energy. His physical body followed suit, shuddering at the jolt of vibrant life. He began to fuck her in earnest, pulling his cock out of her until just the head was still surrounded by her heat and plunging back into the heaven of her. There was no more hindrance to his increasingly demanding thrusts, she gloved him perfectly.

"Gods you're sweet," he muttered roughly when she semi-recovered from her orgasm and began to mate with him frantically. They crashed together with loud smacking noises, their once-anguished sighs of pleasure now sharp cries and grunts. Bale perfectly sensed her excitement as well as the fact that it slightly trailed his own. His eyes glowed with determination as he reared up over her, only his hands and feet in contact with the bed. Poised at this new angle he lunged, slapped and beat their volatile flesh together until the agonizing friction resulted in a mutual explosion that overtook them both.

Helen screamed at the monumental pressure and subsequent pleasure evoked by Bale putting his entire weight into his thrusts. She couldn't have endured him fucking her long like that. He was too big...too strong. But those uncompromisingly hard finale strokes were just what she required to pitch her over the edge again in a fit of release and concentrated bliss.

The mist of his warm, uneven breath on her neck struck her as soothing and somehow sacred a long minute later. When she opened her eyes she saw that his face was near her own on the pillows. He watched her through eyelids weighted with satiation.

"Should we get up and try and recover lost limbs and body parts?" she teased breathlessly.

He shook his head. "I've got all the parts that I need for the moment, thanks."

Helen smiled when she felt his still more-than-impressive sex lurch inside her. His stare remained steady but his eyes glowed warmer when she gently touched his chin and then his cheek softly.

"I know, Helen," he whispered hoarsely.

She blinked back tears at the evidence that he sensed what she couldn't find words for at the moment. For several precious seconds they remained like that, their bodies still merged by their sexes just as their spirits were by their gaze.

Then Helen spoke.

"I still need the Dionytion Stone, Bale," she whispered, as though she were entreating him to understand.

"*Why?*" he demanded tensely.

A few tears fell down her cheeks like clear liquid gems. "Because as long as I can remember my dreams have told me that the Stone would make me whole. I *need* it, Bale. I can't go on much longer like this."

"Like what, Helen?"

"*Broken.*"

## Chapter Fourteen

Bale rolled rapidly onto his back and brought her on top of him. His physical hands cradled her head. His ethereal hands surrounded her waist and spread across her back. Helen's distress was such that her eyes only widened briefly in disbelief at the wonderful sensation of being held in his manifold loving embrace. One glance at his intense expression and Helen accepted this new demonstration of his power.

"You're not broken, Helen. You suffered a trauma in your past life that wounded your spirit. You just need time to heal."

Helen shook her head rapidly. More tears skittered down her cheeks. "No. You've told me that I have my own kind of powers. Don't you believe that my dreams could be telling me the truth of exactly what I need?"

He tensed with indecision. The degree of her present distress only amplified with each passing moment. Bale knew that what she said was a definite possibility but still, what if Asmoday was interfering with her unconscious mind somehow?

"Helen. Do you recall Asmoday at all? Do you remember what he did to you?"

"No. I don't remember him, Bale. I don't!" she added, stung by the shadow of doubt that flickered over his face. "I only know that I've been haunted my whole life by something that has a stranglehold on me. At first I thought it was you. I was mistaken. I know that now. You would never harm me. Now I realize that I not only need the Stone to free myself from this poison, I need you too, Bale. *Please.*"

Bale's mouth opened wide as he sensed the degree of her desperation. "All right, Helen, all right," he placated. His anguish only increased when he saw the way she sagged with intense relief.

"You just want me to make love to you again while you hold the Stone?" he asked in rising confusion.

Helen nodded as she lunged off of him and reached for the columnar artifact.

Bale started in shock a moment later when he finally fully took in what she said next.

"Not just holding it, Bale. The Stone needs to be inside of me when I come."

His tense exclamation of surprise stilled on his tongue.

"What?" Helen whispered when she saw the indefinable expression that sank over his features.

What she had said, bizarre though it seemed, pulled at his consciousness like an elusive dreaded truth, like something he had dreamt long ago or overheard in a conversation to which he'd been paying little attention. Whatever Helen read in his dazed eyes she didn't complain or struggle with him when he took the Stone from her.



He watched her narrowly as she unhitched her leg from around his waist and lay on her back next to him.

She spread her thighs wide.

In every Dionytion Ceremony in which he'd participated with Helen in the past the Stone had only resonated with her, amplifying *her* energies and Rush. But as he slowly raised himself and straddled her thighs and she stared at him with wide trusting eyes, Bale definitely felt his own subtle life force begin to thrum and vibrate within the Stone, blending with Helen's ethereal rhythms to make a physically inaudible but no less stirring divine music.

Helen grasped one of his elbows and pulled him toward her. "Please, Bale. Help me."

He wanted nothing more than to respond to her desperate plea and alleviate her suffering but something wouldn't let him push that hard stone into Helen's tender body. He resisted her pull. Helen began to sob softly, making him want to howl in misery.

Despite his suffering the subtle sounds of their blended essence continued to hum through the Stone. It abruptly came to Bale what he was supposed to do.

"Shhh. It's going to be okay, lovely," he promised as he brought the Stone between her thighs and leaned down over her.

He examined her face closely as she was breached.

Helen gasped when she felt the smooth surface at the gate of her entrance. It felt ungiving and hard but also warm and fleshlike. Her eyes flashed up to meet Bale's.

"I'm blending my ethereal body with the essence of the Stone," Bale whispered tautly, made breathless by the strange, wonderful sensation of mixing his essence with the vibrating transformer of subtle energy and slowly submersing it in Helen's soft, clinging warmth. He shook his head when he saw the question in her eyes. "I don't know how I knew. It just seemed like the right thing to do."

Helen gasped in rising tension and pleasure as the Stone and Bale both slid further into her pussy. God, it was *most definitely* the right thing to do. She fought for air as the pillar of stone and flesh slid fully into her vagina. It was a strange experience, somehow the epitome of both a sublime and primitive possession.

Bale glanced downward once he was fully sheathed. Her hips and belly glowed with a soft golden light. It permeated the subtle essences of Helen's flesh until Bale could see, even with his physical eyes, the dancing, luminescent substances of her subtle bodies.

"Are you alright?" Bale whispered hoarsely, overcome with sensation and desire. The Stone was making Helen's refined bodies more present, although her physical body still interpenetrated them. The resulting sensation was paradoxically carnal and divine.

"Yes," she whispered. Her face looked transfixed with power and pleasure. "Move. Please, Bale."

He did. Helen's eyes widened and then clamped shut. She screamed. The ridges on the Dionytion Stone had been softened by blending with Bale's ethereal body but they were inspiringly placed. Her eyes blinked open after her consciousness had become somewhat accustomed to the blinding, blissful sensation. She sought out Bale's face, needing the familiar, reassuring sight in the midst of such alien pleasure. He continued to fuck her steadily as his eyes burned down into her.

"You can feel it?" she panted.

"That's my cock inside of you as well as the Stone, Helen."

She strained to keep him in focus. The pleasure mounted at an almost frightening rate.

"I have to do this," she whispered entreatingly.

Wariness prickled through him. His bucking hips slowed. "What do you mean?"

"No! No, don't stop!" Her hands pressed against his ass frantically, urging him to continue.

"Helen...I can't."

A light abruptly overwhelmed his consciousness. He blinked in disorientation. The light took on a less harsh, golden quality. As it pulsed gently Bale thought he heard a voice.

*You said that you would do anything to help heal her. Without this she will never find the path.*

*No! Not this! She'll be left vulnerable.*

*She has her own brand of protection now. You must trust in this. You must trust in her.*

*I can't!* Bale howled out in his mind, feeling wild and cornered.

*You have asked her to risk all. Now you must do the same.*

The light abruptly vanished. Beneath him Helen was crying out in the throes of a climax. Her Rush was more powerful than any he'd ever experienced from her. For a moment he went blind from the crashing impact. He reached and grabbed onto the carved headboard of the bed as if it were the only thing that could keep him afloat in a torrential sea of waves. His face was damp with tears.

When he came his Truest Self roared in anguish. Residents of Dunleavy village created various reasons to explain the eerie goose bump-inspiring yell that tore through the night. The utterly rapt Watchers in the castle went pale with apprehension beneath their temporarily fully physical flesh.

Minutes passed.

Bale felt like he didn't have the energy available in order to raise himself off Helen. He wondered if he'd ever have an interest in moving again. She stirred beneath him, feeling warm, soft...

Separate.

His face clenched in pain. Her hands were immediately there, soothing him.

"I had to," Helen choked out through a tightening throat. But now that the deed was over and her misery was just as profound as Bale's she had to question her sanity in severing their mating bond, no matter how great the damage to it.

No matter how great her taint.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I get the feeling there's something you want to ask me," Duse murmured huskily as he stroked Skylar's sweat-dampened shoulder.

Skylar made a face into his chest. She had been thoroughly enjoying the languorous feelings following a particularly arousing and exuberant round of lovemaking. Not that every time before hadn't been equally inspired. This year's Issian Festival had been one for the record books, most likely thanks to Helen's dramatic revelation to the Watcher world. If she had been thinking something that would have inspired Duse's current tone she hadn't been aware of it.

"I don't know what you mean," she said contentedly as she lazily lapped at a dark brown nipple. He stiffened for her in a gratifying manner.

Duse laughed deep and low as he rolled her beneath him on the bed. The morning sunlight streaming through the windows made her hair look like a rare alchemical treasure of silk and gold combined.

"Don't try and change the subject, Skylar Ammadon," he admonished as he furrowed his fingers into her curls. He cupped her skull in his hand and regarded her steadily. "You want to know why I made you watch the *molesian caun* when we made love the first time tonight."

Skylar's eyes flickered up at him in surprise. She thought she'd been keeping that from him in her thoughts.

"I didn't divine it telepathically," he said with a small smile. "It just makes sense, given the way things are, that you would wonder about that."

"What do you mean?" Skylar asked uncertainly.

Duse shrugged. "Every Watcher in existence knows the truth about what Jax did when he allied himself with Asmoday so that he could have you as his own, Skylar. Everyone except perhaps Bale believes that I have a profound hatred for my little brother." He noticed her expression. "I see that you thought it as well, babe."

"You don't hate Jax?" Skylar asked slowly. The topic of Jax and more specifically the volatile subject that he could have been Skylar's mate if Duse had not bonded with her first was typically a subject that she and Duse safely avoided.

Duse frowned and stared out the window. Skylar had opened it when they had come into the room last night and a soft breeze currently unfurled the edges of a white sheer curtain. "I feel like beating his all-too-solid body into a bloody pulp every time I see his face. There isn't a day that goes by that I don't think of his betrayal. The pain still feels fresh."

Skylar brushed her sensitive fingertips across his cheek. "You and he were very close."

"Yeah," Duse admitted woodenly. "I don't want to see him. I would rather not have dealings with him, although that can't entirely be avoided. But he's still —"

"Your brother," Skylar finished for him.

His striking eyes met hers. "My brother and much more, Skylar. I want you to know that just because I would rather be anyplace else than where Jax is at this point in my life I don't resent you for having a friendship with him. Bale and Che have forgiven him and I don't hold that against them."

Skylar's mouth fell open in confusion.

"I know. You're wondering how that relates to last night. It doesn't really I guess. I just wanted you to know," said Duse. He leaned down and kissed her softly, unable to resist the temptation of her parted desire-swollen lips.

"The reason that I insisted that you watch last night, Skylar, was that the sight of Jax, Erec and Alana was arousing you. Period. There's no other deep dark secret to it, babe. I want you to find freedom in your sexual expression every time we make love, not just at an Issian Festival. Hades, if Erec had been sticking it to a she-goat up there and it had made you as hot as you were last night I would have done exactly the same thing. I'd have just made sure I avoided the sight at all costs," he teased when he sensed her discomfort.

After a few more seconds he sighed heavily. He had been hoping to make her more at ease by bringing it up to her not less so.

Well some things just took time and that was true in both his and in Skylar's case. At least, thanks to the elixir, he and she would have that time together.

Duse and Uncle Paim had concocted an elixir that would lengthen Skylar's mortal life by a thousand years. Powerful Watchers like Duse and Bale were aging, albeit extremely slowly. As they became more and more corporeal their bodies came under the dominion of the laws of the physical world. Duse had contrived an elixir which would expand a mate's lifetime so that it would approximate the length both of a Watcher corporeally powerful enough to be mortal and the lives of Watcher-human children. For although children such as Nix had no where near the lifetime of a Watcher, their life expectancy was still close to twelve hundred years.

When Skylar heard Duse's sigh she tightened her arms around his torso and squeezed.

"Hey, careful, you might break a rib. Thanks to last night I'm solid as a rock," Duse teased into her neck.

Skylar pressed her groin upward and made an appreciative sound. "I noticed."

The glitter in his eyes when he glanced down at her flushed breasts made her satiation transform to anticipation with breathtaking speed. She watched him narrowly as he leaned down and slid a nipple between his lips. He did it with a mixture of

conscious deliberation and laziness that had her panting. She murmured in protest when he lifted his head from her glistening tight nipple.

"Do you feel it?"

Skylar's eyes widened in surprise at his question but she immediately caught his meaning. And yes, she *did* feel it. She'd felt it all night whenever he'd loved her breasts with his mouth, that exotic, potent mixture of contentment and excitement, the shocking amount of warm fluid that spurted in her pussy whenever Duse even looked like he was about to suckle her breast.

Her hands cradled his head. "Yes. Now that you mention it I do. You think I'm going to get pregnant again?" she asked in growing awe. His slow grin created a cascade of potent chemical reactions in Skylar's body.

"That's what I think." He glanced down to her breast and gave an exaggerated leer. "Just let me know how you want to proceed in regard to the pregnancy but as you'll recall from our time around with Nixy, *this* part of the process is a force of nature that we can't stop. Thank the Gods for that," he added gruffly under his breath.

He referred to the fact that for a Watcher to reach full corporeality in order to impregnate his mate he needed to strengthen himself in the physical world by drinking a special substance from his mate's breast. It was his first true food in the physical world. The preparation of his body so that he could impregnate Skylar with Nix almost ten years ago had been a particularly powerful, erotic, singular experience for Skylar and himself.

"Duse."

Skylar said it so sharply that his eye shot up to hers in mild surprise. She parenthesized his dear face with her hands. "I love you so much," she whispered desperately.

"I know it, babe. That was what I was trying to tell you before. I *know*."

He kept her eyes locked in his electrical gaze even as he lowered his head to her taut nipple.

He abruptly made an exasperated sound and his face pressed to the pillow next to her head.

"What?" Skylar asked in alarm. "It's not Nix is it?"

"No," Duse said hoarsely as he raised his head. "But it is an emergency. I've got to go. There's a problem with Helen. Bale needs help."

"I should go as well," Skylar said automatically. Having delved the young woman's spirit she had firsthand knowledge of the intense emotional pain that Helen sheltered at all costs from the outside world...and even herself.

\* \* \* \* \*

Helen braced herself to face Bale when she heard the door close behind Paim. Her heart had thundered in her chest as she eavesdropped on his and Bale's conversation a few moments ago. She'd just caught a few disjointed phrases here and there.

*Our race has never been so fully corporeal... Batos said he's never known anything like it... Do you authorize extending the Issian Festival through this afternoon? Roma isn't complaining but surely he deserves his due.*

And then after a long pause.

*But surely Helen will be well again?*

It had been those final words uttered by Paim that made Helen go still with wariness. Bale's answering reply had made her chest spasm with pain.

*I wish I knew, Uncle Paim.*

Her wretchedness felt like a weight that had been applied to every inch of her skin. She had been the one to cause that strain of uncertainty and sadness to creep into Bale's typically calm, forceful voice. What if he refused to ever take her back?

She would undoubtedly deserve that cruel fate.

Bale glanced up tiredly when Helen entered the outer room of the king's chamber. She stared at him like a wary, wild animal. She had just showered and her short hair was still damp. Despite the dewy glow on her flawless skin and the shine in her eyes he knew for a fact that she had never rested last night. Even her youth and resiliency couldn't completely disguise the weariness of her spirit.

Helen paused when he gestured to her in welcome. She eyed his outstretched hand hungrily.

"Come, Helen. Sit. We need to talk," Bale said quietly.

She sat next to him on the plush sofa, deeply aware of his masculinity, his large body, the sheer vibrant reality of him. Her soul had cried out in pain when he had left the bed last night. She had lain awake and miserable all night wishing she could sense him, wondering if he was ever going to return after what she'd done. She had felt broken before but with the bond severed she felt empty and incomplete. It had shocked her to realize that she had gone through all of her life without knowing how elemental her and Bale's bond was to her existence. It was like breathing. One never gave much thought to it until the ability to do so was taken away. Helen knew that Bale must be experiencing a similar pain of loss.

She wondered if he could ever forgive her.

When she'd heard his voice in the outer chamber conversing with Paim after she'd got out of the shower this morning her stark fear had segued to brittle hope. At least he hadn't left for good, which was what she'd been dreading.

Bale sighed heavily as he studied Helen's profile. Before last night he had been able to sense her emotions, albeit imperfectly. Presently he couldn't read her thoughts any more than he might have done with a stranger. The realization was like a spear in his side. Still, he didn't need the telepathic communication that was inherent to the mating

bond to know that she suffered. The last thing he wanted was to make her suffer more but...

He tipped her chin until her face turned toward him. He hated that she kept her cornflower blue eyes averted.

"I don't want to frighten you, lovely. But I need to tell you what happened the night that you died before, that night with Asmoday. I need to tell you because you're no longer under my protection. You need to have all the information you can so that you can protect yourself if need be. Do you understand?"

Helen nodded. The motion caused a tear to spill down her cheek.

Bale pointedly looked away from the sight.

"About five hundred years ago one of our most powerful members, a Watcher named Asmoday, started a political movement that came to be known as the Rush Initiative. It gained momentum among our members over the centuries. The essential elements behind Day's movement were these—Watchers who were mated had no inherent right to keep the power of their mates' Rushes exclusively to themselves, that it should be made illegal to place shields upon a mate's Rush, that the entire race of Watchers should be allowed to benefit from her release.

"Day had a small group of followers who were steadfastly loyal to him but it wasn't near enough for him to push through The Rush Initiative. His political agenda was based on his own hunger for power, and had nothing to do with the welfare of the Watchers or the gifted women that we call mates. By the time the Rush Initiative had enough power behind it to come up for an official vote it was defeated resoundingly."

"He told me that it didn't pass by a slim margin," Helen said dully as she stared past Bale's shoulder. "The Rush Initiative was three votes away from becoming sovereign Watcher Law."

"Asmoday?" Bale asked slowly after he'd recovered from his shock that Helen had just been quoting the depraved Watcher. "Day said that to you on the night that he..."

Helen nodded.

"But you told me that you had no memories of Asmoday."

"I was telling the truth, Bale. That night when he came to me after the vote... He must have used a spell, you see. Once I met you I was confused because I sensed that you couldn't have done that, even though I was so angry that I convinced myself for awhile otherwise."

She started when he gripped her shoulder. "Helen, what are you saying?"

"I thought it was you who came to me that night. I thought it was you who forced pleasure on me."

Bale's expression was impassive at first but then his skin took on the slightly gray tinge of illness.

"That's what you meant when you said I wasn't the man in your nightmares? You were saying that you realized that it wasn't me who'd *murdered* you?" he murmured, his distress palpable.

"I'm sorry, Bale," she whispered. "But that's what I remember. I couldn't understand *why*."

He merely stared at her in rising comprehension and subsequent horror. She was telling him that the thing that haunted her most about the experience was that she had died not comprehending how the man whom she'd believed loved and cherished her had psychokinetically raped and murdered her for no apparent reason. The thought of her existing with such a soul-twisting belief at her core made him want to shout out in grief. By the Three, no wonder she'd felt so ambivalent about him.

No wonder she'd wanted to kill him.

And could it be any clearer why she'd wanted to sever the mating bond?

But part of this just didn't make sense...

Bale swallowed back the taste of vileness that had risen in his throat. He hated to ask this of her. And was he really sure that he wanted to know himself? But what other choice did he have?

"Helen, if you would allow me into your memories of that night I think it could help both of us to understand. I think it could help both of us to heal."

"What do you mean?" she asked warily.

"You could host me. It can only be done with your conscious agreement. I promise to do it only for the moment in time that is relevant. If you agree to it I would see and experience everything that you did on that night."

He sensed her indecision and fear. He didn't speak, knowing the degree of trust that was required in order to host another. Either she trusted him enough to do it or she didn't.

"All right," Helen finally said shakily.

"Thank you," he whispered. "I know how hard this is for you."

"What do I do?"

"Nothing. Your agreement is all that is required." He spread his large hand along the side of her head. A cacophony of emotion and images entered his awareness. His lancelike consciousness narrowed and focused, narrowed and focused until her memories flashed into him, disjointed and fragmented due to the highly charged emotional state that accompanied them.

*"The Rush Initiative was three votes away from becoming sovereign Watcher Law. Find whatever cold comfort you can in knowing that a little more than half of Watchers believe that what happens to you in this bedroom, Helen, will benefit your mate and your mate alone..."*

*"Ennonia..."*

*Confusion and fear swamped her like a crashing wave, leaving her paralyzed in its wake. She shivered uncontrollably at his touch. Goose bumps pebbled her skin when his hands came around*



to the front of her. He gave a deep, guttural groan of satisfaction when he parted the sheer fabric of her chemise. He cradled both of her small breasts in his hands.

"Ennonia," he said in a voice gone harsh from desire. "The light of the universe trapped in flesh... And mine for the taking."

"So beautiful," he murmured silkily against her glistening, tight nipple as he rolled the sensitive bud between his lips.

His eyes snapped up to her when he heard her say his name shakily but he refused to abandon the nipple that he'd just slipped between his lips.

"Stop. Please stop."

She gasped as her body began to shimmer in his arms, at first subtly but then with increasing force. Her face became incredulous as she watched him while he continued to suckle her breast hungrily.

"What...why are you...doing this?" He was stimulating her brain with his mind, forcing her body into a growing sexual frenzy.

She struggled mightily against an onslaught that would have turned most mortal women into a mere puddle of helpless, convulsing climaxing flesh.

"No..." she whispered raggedly.

The pain of him biting down on her nipple blessedly cleared her consciousness for a moment. She pulled back from him, stumbling clumsily on the riding dress that was now falling past her hips. She gasped in shock when the blood on her nipple caught her eye. He merely raised himself and stepped toward her, his face impassive. Darkness began to shadow her vision.

"What's wrong, love?" he asked almost soothingly as he reached for her again.

At his touch on her shoulders the unbearable sexual onslaught surged like an angry wave within her. She was powerless...utterly helpless. Her breasts thrust forward as her back curved into a taut arch. Her backbone made an audible cracking sound at the intense pressure placed upon it. She blinked heavily to clear the occlusion that began to block his face.

Blessed Goddess, she was dying, Helen realized with growing amazement. And she'd never had a chance to say goodbye.

She was now completely blind. But her sense of hearing remained. Before the blackness completely encapsulated her she heard him speaking to her...

"Helen. Open your eyes. Open your eyes!" Bale demanded harshly.

The sunlight streaming through the window and her abundant tears created a rainbow effect on her vision. She sought out Bale's face. Her hand went up instinctively when she saw that his cheeks were damp as well.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," she whispered fervently.

"You have *nothing* to apologize for, Helen," he insisted fiercely. Experiencing her memory had been by far the most difficult thing he'd ever endured. He gathered himself as best that he could, consciously altering the pained expression that he knew likely clung to his features. He didn't want Helen to see his misery and misconstrue it.

But it seemed that he was too late. Mating bond or no Helen was still one of the most sensitive creatures on the planet when it came to reading emotion.

"It must have been difficult for you to see, especially since Asmoday bespelled himself to look like you," she said hoarsely. "He must have been one sick bastard to have done that. *What, Bale?*"

Bale was the one who avoided her gaze presently. He stared into the brilliant sunlight and waited for divine intervention. But no, it looked as though the Goddess was leaving him to handle this particular conundrum on his own. But he still had the memory as a guide.

*She has her own brand of protection now. You must trust in this. You must trust in her.*

"Bale?" Helen repeated, puzzled and slightly alarmed by his emotional state.

"Helen, I don't know quite how to tell you this but Asmoday didn't alter his appearance when he raped you that night." She just stared up at him, open-mouthed. He continued when he saw her disbelief.

"I investigated the matter fully, Helen. Do you think I would have done otherwise? Duse, Che and I discovered that Asmoday had forced himself psychokinetically upon several women in Dunleavy village right after the vote that shot down the Rush Initiative. His defeat sent him over the edge. He must have figured that if he was going to rebel against the entire Watcher way of life he might as well go out with a bang. When he raped those innocent women it was as if he was working himself into enough of a frenzy to finally attack you."

"And you in the process of course," Helen stated grimly, recognizing the element of revenge in Asmoday's crime against her. "But I still don't understand what you mean about him not conjuring himself into your appearance. You saw my memory didn't you?"

Bale looked uncomfortable. "Yes. I saw the memory that you provided me. I saw my own face." He held her gaze. "But that's not the way that it happened, Helen."

"What are you talking about?"

Bale swallowed convulsively. "Do you remember Bonnie, your maid?"

Helen shook her head. Her memories of that other lifetime were sporadic and always centered on intense emotion. They almost exclusively revolved around the paradoxical experiences of her immense love for Bale and her simultaneous fear and anger toward him for what she'd once believed was a cruel, senseless betrayal.

"I not only questioned her extensively about that evening. She hosted me. I saw her memories. You went out for a ride because you were tense and worked-up about the vote on the Rush Initiative. When you returned to the suite Bonnie began to undress you. But you told her to wait because you heard someone approaching in the hallway. It was Day."

"Looking like you," Helen stated steadfastly.

"No, lovely. Bonnie recalled that it was Day who entered the suite that evening. She could tell that you were as surprised as she was. But when he said that he wanted a private word you dismissed Bonnie, although you seemed highly uncertain about the whole affair."

Sensing her rising dismay, Bale put his arm around her. He felt her stiffen at his touch.

"You believe Bonnie's version of events over mine?" she asked incredulously.

Bale closed his eyes briefly. "In this singular case, yes."

"Why?"

"Helen, Bonnie was extremely upset about your murder. But her amount of emotional unrest in regard to the whole affair was minimal in comparison to yours. She had no reason, no emotional pressure to repress or alter her memories in any way."

"And I did?" Helen demanded coldly.

Bale grasped her narrow shoulders. "You ask me so I will tell you the resounding answer if you will only listen. *No*. The answer is no. But that's not what you believed in your deepest self, Helen. I believe, no...I *know* that you are the last person in the world to feel guilt or self-recrimination for what Asmoday did to you. He forced a sexual response from you. He reached into your brain, bypassing all your defenses, and pushed and pushed on the delicate workings of your nervous system until it was as inevitable that you would climax as it was that you would die. You had as much control over the matter as you would have if he had bound you, put a gun to your head and pulled the trigger. But in your confusion and pain, in your emotional turmoil, you blamed yourself for responding to him, for not being strong enough to resist."

"You're bloody mad," Helen hissed as she stared at him in dawning horror.

Bale shook his head. He reached up and cupped her cheek but she flinched away from him. "No I'm not," he said. "I'm very clear on this, Helen. I understand better than you think. It was too painful for you to consider the idea that you'd succumbed to another, no matter the struggle. So in your misery you made it that mine was the face that you surrendered to. As soul-wrenching as it was to consider that I had betrayed you, it was a good sight more palatable than admitting to yourself that you had betrayed me."

"*Nooo!*" Helen cried out as she stood and lunged away from him. She paused in her flight when Bale grabbed her hand.

"Listen, Helen," he said tensely. "Understand what I'm saying. You no more betrayed me than I purposefully did you by not being there to protect you. It was Asmoday that was at fault. *Asmoday* and Asmoday alone. His crime was unthinkable. Don't let him continue to inflict it upon you. Helen, please..."

But she'd pulled her hand until she broke free. He watched in rising dismay as she bolted toward the door of the suite. He let her go, unsure of what to say in order to soothe her when everything he'd said so far had culminated in this frenzied flight.

## Chapter Fifteen

Duse studied his brother closely when he returned from seeing Batos out of the outer chamber of the king's suite. Skylar had left earlier to follow Helen. Bale had sent one of his knights, Dashia, to discretely follow both of them to ensure that they were safe. Presently, Bale looked extremely thoughtful and tense, making Duse think that he'd understood Batos' flimsy memory about Eleanor's enigmatic reference to the woman, Fernanda Osconso, better than he did.

"You have a better understanding of Eleanor now?"

Bale regarded him distractedly through narrow eyelids as if he were surprised at Duse's presence.

"I'm not sure. I do dimly recall the case now, though. Seville, 1248. Batos had asked the Grigori Council to investigate the case of a woman who claimed she was being tempted and haunted by a demon."

Duse smirked. "The investigations that Watcher Law required us to make in the instance of those claims increased a thousandfold in Catholic countries during the Middle Ages. I don't remember the case specifically but if it was anything like the tens of thousands of others that we obligatorily investigated to ensure that a Watcher wasn't involved then Fernanda Osconso was a young woman who could psychokinetically manipulate both subtle and gross matter but wasn't aware of or denied her powers. Not surprisingly given the climate of the times, she also had quite a few repressed sexual desires in addition to any number of un-guessed-at turbulent thoughts and emotions. Take the ingredients of that volatile combination, mix them together and *voila*. The result is what humans nowadays call a poltergeist. For poor Fernanda though, it was a comely incubus begging for her to surrender her innocence to his lecherous intent, bizarre physical manifestations and things that go bump in the night."

Bale went eerily still. "Things that go bump in the night," he repeated as if Duse had just said something dreadfully profound.

\* \* \* \* \*

All in all Skylar thought Helen was doing much, much better than she had been when she'd first come upon her sitting just off the path of the lovely glen that ran east of Dunleavy in a cool valley of the Cuillan mountains. She'd looked so young, ethereal and miserable when she'd glanced down at Skylar's approach that Skylar had mentally compared her to a distressed faerie crying out her woes in a clump of heather.

"Bale called me a liar!" Helen had wailed immediately upon looking down the incline and noticing Skylar standing on the path.

Without another word Skylar had climbed up the small hill and plopped down next to Helen. The rest of the story had spilled out of its own accord like a fountain that had been forced underground for eons which had finally found a crack in the earth and sprung free to the sunlight. Skylar sat on the earthen floor and listened, alternatively sympathetic, amazed and aghast at Helen's story. Her face was tight with compassion by the time Helen reached the part where she revealed what had passed between her and Bale both last night and less than an hour ago.

"That must have been hell for you to reexperience," she empathized after Helen had told her about Bale hosting her and his subsequent reaction. "But Helen, I can't agree with you that Bale was calling you a liar. He's concerned that you're feeling guilty when there's not the remotest chance that you should. I know exactly what it's like to be psychokinetically coerced by a Watcher. There's no way in hell you can control the experience."

That slowed Helen's sobbing like magic. "You do? You were coerced? *Not* by Duse?"

Skylar shook her head emphatically. She hesitated, but then she saw the hunger in Helen's wide eyes. "Bale or Maerda haven't told you about Jax? About why he and Duse are alienated from one another?"

"Maerda told me that Jax's spirit matches with yours as well as Duse's and that you two could have been mates but I didn't need her to tell me so. I can sense the truth of it."

Skylar started slightly when she met Helen's gaze. Gone was the vulnerable waif. In her place was a poised, wise, beyond ancient creature. She blinked and the impression faded. But Skylar wasn't likely to forget that flash of insight. Helen was far, far from being just the fragile, helpless, wounded victim that Skylar had occasionally envisioned her as since she'd delved her spirit the other day.

She looked up into the clear blue sky. "The magician that Jax pledged himself to—enslaved himself to more like—was an evil, rotten jerk. He ordered Jax to seduce me while Jax and he were joined. I still hadn't reached my Second Change. I could feel how revolted Jax was at the prospect of doing it. But he couldn't deny the pact he had made to the magician. I felt helpless in the face of his seduction. He battered relentlessly at my consciousness in order to get me to respond."

"And did you?" Helen asked.

"No."

Skylar noticed Helen's reaction. Her hand went up to her back, automatically needing to soothe and comfort. "I've never told Duse this but you have no idea how hard it was for me to resist Jax that night, Helen. I'm not at all positive it was my efforts that stopped the seduction. I think it was Jax's. Even though he shouldn't have been able to resist the direct demand of the magician he somehow found a way to do it. I saw evidence of his ability to resist later on when Rolland Ockley, the magician, succeeded in kidnapping me. My point is, Helen, that I know how a psychokinetic rape can breach

all your defenses, material and spiritual. There's no fighting it. I had the fact that I had an unwilling, uninterested assaulter on my hands while you had Asmoday to deal with, and we all know that bastard is never anything but thoroughly determined in his twisted plans."

Helen didn't speak for a minute as she stared blankly at a dense copse of conifers across the path, her chin propped on her hands and knees. "So do you agree with Bale that I inserted his face into my memory so that I wouldn't have to deal with the recollection of it being Asmoday that forced me into responding to him?"

Skylar hesitated when she saw that silent tears streamed down Helen's pale cheeks.

"What do you think about it?"

She frowned. "I think it's bloody disgusting to think of Asmoday doing that to me. It makes me want to scream or run or fight someone...or do *something* to make the thoughts go away." She turned her face away from Skylar and rested her cheek on her hand for several seconds. Skylar felt Helen's tremors as she cried quietly but she didn't speak. Only her hand continued to soothe and comfort.

"My dreams of that night with Asmoday were never precisely the same. Some things would change, others were always a constant. There were times when the dreams were more...erotic than others. I think I sometimes must have inserted memories of what it was like to make love with Bale. Other times the dreams were just frightening. But there was always one thing that was the same. I think that I would make myself sort of forget it because it was so bloody awful...and it didn't make sense, given the rest of the dream..."

Skylar saw her elegant throat convulse with difficulty in the seconds that followed and knew that whatever she was about to reveal was a particularly poisonous memory for Helen.

"At the end," Helen began in a low, barely audible voice, "at the end I think that the hemorrhage in my brain had made me blind. Everything was blackness. Everything was night. But I could still hear. Just when I lost control, just when I came he said '*I knew it. I knew that you would be a whore for any Watcher's touch, Helen.*'"

Skylar blanched.

Helen lifted her chin off her hands and sniffed. "But it wasn't just what he said. It was how he said it, you know? Like I'd just handed him unquestionable proof of every one of his nasty beliefs."

"What a slimy, disgusting bit of foul fungus Asmoday is!" Skylar said in such a low, vibrating, powerful voice that Helen finally turned and met her eyes in amazement.

"Helen, *no* Watcher ever suspected that a mate could sexually respond with another and they certainly didn't believe that she could confer a Rush to another. Because of the intricate matching of spirits that occurs during the mating bond, Watchers had assumed that a mate was sacrosanct, inviolate and most certainly safe. The idea of forcing a mate into an orgasm wasn't even a remote consideration before Asmoday conjured it up in

his sick mind! Of course Day was smug when he was able to force what he wanted out of you! So is *every* rapist or murderer triumphant when he catches his victim vulnerable or unaware. But just because they 'succeed' in their depraved minds into forcing something out of someone doesn't make it *right* any more than it means that innocence and not guessing at evil motivations before the fact is *wrong*! Tell me that you realize that, Helen!"

Helen blinked in the face of the terse question.

There was even more to Skylar Ammadon's character than she'd guessed.

"Yeah, Skylar. Sure," Helen responded in amazement.

Skylar's lips fell apart. "Sorry. I didn't mean to lecture."

"S'okay. It was brilliant." Helen dimpled when she saw Skylar blush.

"You asked me what I thought about whether or not Bale was right in saying that I inserted his face into my memories and nightmares because I felt guilty," Helen said after a moment. "The answer is yeah, I think it's possible. I think I'd rather consider just about anything but letting that wanker Asmoday force me into coming for him."

Skylar couldn't have agreed more with Helen's stark assessment. Neither of them spoke for the next several minutes. When Helen did eventually speak again it was with a spirit that Skylar was gratified to hear.

"Bale still thinks I'm a liar about other things though! It's true that I stole the Dionytion Stone nine years ago. But I never did any of those other things he accused me of!" she said hotly, looking every bit like the rebellious Nell of old.

"Wait, you stole the Dionytion Stone?" Skylar asked incredulously.

Helen waved her hand as though that detail were incidental. "Much good it did me. My dreams told me I needed to have that bloody stone in order to heal so – yeah I stole it! You would have too and probably got arseholed on whiskey just as much as I did as well if you thought it would end anything like the tortures that I went through for so long. Night stole the Stone away from me quicker than it took for me to ever even get a glimpse of the damn thing in daylight of course," Helen said, her face twisted with bitter emotion at the memory.

Skylar opened her mouth to clarify her confusion at Helen's strange revelation when a strong gust of wind suddenly swept through the glen, causing the rowans and conifers to wildly sway. Skylar wasn't sure what happened when she felt a forceful blow against her head just above her left ear. Her hand automatically rose to the spot. Her fingers were covered in blood when she withdrew. She blinked in rising bafflement when she glanced up and saw a handsome young man, his brown hair whipping around in the wind, looking down at Helen and her.

"I didn't do it! It was a tree branch. It fell," he said, pointing to the ground where a two inch thick, four foot long, recently cracked branch lay on the ground beside Skylar.

"It wasn't you, Charlie," Helen agreed wholeheartedly. She was so angry about what was happening and the fact that Skylar had been hurt that she didn't even think to

ask Charlie Vandy what he was doing there. Her gaze was furious as she glanced around the windswept valley. A clump of dirt with rocks embedded in it flew into her forearm at high velocity, leaving a smear of blood in its wake. Helen didn't even flinch. She leaned closer to Skylar and whispered in her ear desperately.

"It's him. It's Night. I told you he's made my life a living torture since I was thirteen years old."

\* \* \* \* \*

"What's wrong, Bale?" Duse demanded when he sensed Bale's rising trepidation. Why'd he gotten all tense at the phrase *things that go bump in the night*?

"Bizarre physical manifestations have happened around Helen since she reached adolescence. She was kicked out of secondary school because she of a long history of playing pranks on teachers and classmates. You mentioned what happened to the books in the library when she was in college. Her uncle said that poltergeistlike phenomena were happening at the cottage and in the village when Helen moved in. That was why people were saying she was a witch. But nothing unusual has happened since Helen came to stay in the castle."

"What about that afternoon at the stables?"

Bale's eyelids seemed to narrow over shards of blue ice. "The stables are just outside of Dunleavy's protective wards."

Duse's dark brows drew together in puzzlement at his brother's palpable rising tension.

"I don't specifically recall Fernanda Osconso," Bale said slowly, "but I think I understand Eleanor's point. It must have been one of the rare instances where I actually believed that the woman could have been haunted by a true spirit. Not a Watcher of course but... Oh what difference does it make? Eleanor said there were exceptions to every rule and she was right. Not all poltergeist phenomena are what they seem. On rare occasions, when the circumstances are just right...a discarnate spirit *can* haunt and torment a human being."

"Asmoday?" Duse asked in disbelief.

"I had thought it was a clear-cut case of a poltergeist. Those phenomena usually start occurring in adolescence just like they did in Helen's case. But consider what else happened around that same time in Helen's development."

Duse blanched. "I turned that coarse energy fire back on Asmoday and he was banished solely to the subtle realms."

"And what other discarnate spirit would have such an unholy connection to Helen?" Bale breathed out tensely. "I have to believe that it was the Goddess and not Asmoday who inspired Helen through her dreams to break our mating bond for some healing purpose. But there's one thing that I know for sure though. The mating bond protects a woman from harmful elementals, sylphs and malignant spirits just like the



ozone automatically protects the earth from harmful rays. If it's true that Helen isn't creating these physical manifestations from her unconscious turmoil and guilt then whatever haunts her just became exponentially more powerful in its ability to harm her."

Duse's mouth fell open in surprise when Bale abruptly identified with his ethereal body and vanished from the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Over here!" Charlie called out, his voice muffled by the rising wind. "There's a small cave in the mountainside that will protect us!"

Helen shielded her eyes with her hand against all the debris that swatted and stung exposed skin.

"Come on, Skylar," she said gently, wincing slightly at the sight of blood that was now seeping down onto Skylar's neck and soaking into her blouse. "We've got to get out of this wind so I can take a look at your head."

"It's all right," Skylar insisted woozily as she forced herself to stand with Helen and Charlie's assistance. Where the branch had clobbered her didn't really pain her but she was finding it extremely difficult to maintain consciousness. Standing up helped a little, or at least it did once the wave of dizziness and nausea passed. She called out in her mind without even being aware that she did it.

*Duse!*

She said it in her mind both as a plea for his presence and a surprised acknowledgement of the fact that he was there. She blinked in disorientation when Helen lunged forward into the arms of the tall dark man who had suddenly appeared several feet in front of them. When her eyes cleared Skylar realized that the Ammadon in front of her wasn't her mate, but Bale. She sagged in relief at the reassuring sight although she was disappointed that it wasn't Duse.

"Skylar's been hurt by Night," Helen said rapidly when she flew into Bale's arms. She winced when the edges of several sharp leaves whipped against her eyes. She was vaguely aware of Bale making a motion with his hand and suddenly all around them was quiet.

"Thank you," Helen whispered sincerely at the same time that she started to pull on Bale's wrist. "I don't know how to heal things like you and Skylar can. Night hurt her, Bale. Please help her," Helen begged, blue eyes wide with panicked entreaty.

Bale said the first thing that came to his mind. "Who in Hades is *Night*?"

"I would think that was be as obvious as *Day*, King."

Bale reacted instinctively when he felt a blade bite into his back. He identified with his ethereal body at the same time as he shoved Helen away from the threat that came from behind him. His hammerlike fist struck over his shoulder before he even turned. It made contact with the gratifying thwacking sound of bone against meat.

Helen spun around from where Bale had thrust her ahead of him to see Charlie Vandy flailing for balance on the unsteady footing of the incline and then falling backward. He held a long knife in his hand. The blade had already been dipped in blood. When Helen realized whose blood it was she made a panicked sound and surged toward Bale. It was like running into a mattress made of air. She sprang back and fell to the ground.

Bale had erected some kind of shield to keep her at a distance.

Helen watched in horror from where she sat sprawled on the ground as Bale's attacker abruptly changed trajectories mid-air, falling forward instead of back, as if the spirit that gleamed in Charlie's brown eyes suddenly realized that its hate for Bale was stronger than the force of gravity. His gaze remained focused malevolently upon Bale. Orange and black flames smoked in his eye sockets. Helen realized with an unpleasant shock that while those eyes were definitely those of the Dunleavy's stableboy, what looked out of them was not.

She saw a bright flash and her attention was drawn to Bale. Her eyes widened in amazement when she saw his chosen weapon, a lethal curved sword that for some reason Helen knew was called a *kopice*, was sheathed on his back. His hand rose to his shoulder and grasped the hilt. He was entirely still and focused as he waited for the right moment, poised to administer a cleaving blow to the man who rose up the small hill whose glittering eyes never left Bale's face.

"No Bale! Charlie is innocent!"

Asmoday saw Bale's attention flicker slightly at Helen's exclamation. In the next second though, a tense resolve fell over the mighty warrior that Asmoday had frequently feared during his physical existence. A fresh wave of terror swept through him as he locked gazes with Bale Ammadon. Helen's entreaty hadn't fazed him. The King of the Watchers was braced to kill. Asmoday didn't fear for the mortal's flesh which he currently wore like a garment but he knew from experience that every time one of these cocky Ammadons vanquished him it became more and more difficult for him to manifest himself in the physical world.

When Duse Ammadon suddenly came into full corporeality several feet away from Bale, Asmoday saw the tiny flicker of opportunity. Duse's diamondlike gaze swiftly surveyed the situation. His sword was already in his hand. He must have sensed that his mate was in danger. Just as Asmoday knew that he would he located Skylar immediately. His eyes lingered for a microsecond too long on the sight of his pale, bleeding mate.

His knife flew through the air quick as a thought. Skylar screamed at the precise moment the hilt left his hand. The blade sank between bones as if flesh were jelly. Asmoday's eyes widened in stunned triumph.

It had been a once-in-a-lifetime, inspired strike of genius on his part, Day thought with manic glee.

Skylar continued to scream like he'd just stabbed her instead of her mate, Asmoday thought humorously even as Bale reached down the hillside like a god sending his fist down from the heavens, grabbed the hair of the human that he possessed and dragged him up the incline.

Duse sagged to his knees, the hilt of his knife protruding from his chest. Che may have robbed him of his chosen weapon nine years ago but Asmoday still enjoyed the sight of a blade buried in an Ammadon so greatly that he didn't miss his dagger at the moment.

He laughed gleefully, not even caring at this point that Bale held the gullible young man who was so ridiculously in lust with Helen in an unbreakable hold. He didn't know why his power to reach Helen had increased so greatly on this day or why his efforts at possessing the boy fully had finally succeeded. But they had. He may not have gotten to Bale but he hadn't wasted his rare, wonderful opportunity. He hated Duse almost as much as he did the King of the Watchers.

It was well worth it to blow his cover in order to see the look of surprise on the mighty Duse Ammadon's face as the knife speared his all too corporeal heart.

"I'll bet you're wishing you didn't celebrate the Issian Festival so well now eh Duse? Dashia thought the same thing before I killed him, no doubt!" Asmoday jeered. "Just as well it was you instead of your brother. You deserved it and more after the hell you've put me through these past years!" Charlie's eyes glittered with the fire of the possessing spirit's excitement.

"Skylar, stop!" Bale called out in alarm at the same time that he shook Asmoday/Charlie roughly, causing him to stop his taunting. His sister-in-law was trying desperately to get to Duse who had just crumpled over in the grass. She was so dizzy and disabled from her head wound that she fell and slithered partway down the incline. Bale hissed in fury and rising frustration when Asmoday began to struggle in his hold.

"Bale, *no!*" Helen shrieked. She tried to rise when she watched him grab Charlie's hair tightly once again and draw back his tensed weapon arm. Bale met her alarmed gaze briefly. He made some subtle alteration that Helen could perceive but couldn't fully comprehend. He swung the *kopice* in a wide slicing arc that Helen had no doubt, given Bale's extraordinary strength, would cleave Charlie's body clean in half.

She stared when Bale released his hand and Charlie did indeed fall in a heap to the grass and roll partway down the hill. He certainly had been disabled but his body appeared to be whole and unscathed.

The demon wind outside of Bale's protective bubble suddenly stilled.

Helen cringed at the soul-wrenching sound that took the howling wind's place. Skylar had finally reached her mate, unaware of her cuts and bruises and the blood that soaked her hair, neck and blouse. She held Duse's head in her lap and keened in disbelieving horror.

Helen didn't require the knowledge of subtle matter or the look of dawning grief on Bale's face to know that Duse Ammadon was dead.

## **Chapter Sixteen**

Helen went completely still when she left Skylar and Duse's suite nearly twenty-four hours after Duse had been murdered by Asmoday. Bale stood in the shadowed hallway watching her. Helen hadn't seen him since Duse's body had been brought back to Dunleavy and what had been the joyous rites of the Issian Festival had turned into the mournful ceremony of grief for Duse Ammadon, one of the Watchers' most powerful and revered members.

Bale looked tired, which Helen knew by now, was a rarity for him. His vibrant energies had always seemed potent and limitless. His short thick hair had fallen down on his forehead. The dark hair that shadowed his hard jaw was a testament to how much of the past day and night he had spent fully corporeal. Despite his obvious weariness Helen still drank in the sight of him thirstily. She knew it wasn't right to depend on him in such a flagrant way but she wanted nothing more in that moment than to be held by him and absorb some of his masculine strength.

But something stilled her impetus to move toward him. She had purposefully broken their mating bond, something that had never before been done in known Watcher history. Helen hadn't understood her obsession with the Dionytion Stone fully until last night when she was the focused target of the immense desire and love that Bale felt exclusively for her.

But now she understood why it had been required that she break the mating bond in order to heal. What she'd done had been as necessary as pulling a spear from a wound. She could have gone on living for a short while perhaps by hacking off the spear handle and forcing her body to accustom itself to the embedded blade. Something had told her again and again throughout her life though that if she wanted to be fully healed the weapon would have to be removed completely from her body.

But would Bale understand when she explained to him her reasoning?

If she hadn't done what she did she wouldn't have become upset when Bale confronted her the next day about inserting his face into her memories because of her guilt. She wouldn't have run off by herself. She wouldn't have given Asmoday the extra edge that he needed to possess a human being again and manifest fully in the physical world versus solely being the incorporeal spirit that had made her life a living hell since she was an adolescent.

Helen still couldn't get over the fact that Night was Day and Day was Night. She'd spent her entire adolescence and adulthood stiffening her Will sufficiently to stave off the malignant spirit. But Night was always back to test her again after each of her hard-won battles until Helen was sure that she couldn't go on living with his endless malicious tricks and equally cruel sexual temptations any longer.

That was why she had named the spirit in her mind as she had when she was still just a girl. He always returned, no matter what she did, just like the Earth turned and the world inevitably darkened to night.

"How is she?"

Bale's voice sounded hoarse, probably from overuse in his meetings with the Grigori Council which had gone on all night.

Helen hesitated. She didn't want to give Bale more bad news on top of that of his brother's death but Skylar wasn't doing well at all. She hadn't spoken a word since Maerda and Jax had eventually pried her away from Duse's body yesterday afternoon so that Maerda could tend to her wound. Helen felt like she could reach out and touch the misery that clung around Duse's mate and dampened her quick ethereal spirit like a dense toxic cloud.

"She's sleeping right now," Helen whispered evasively.

"It's that bad?"

Bale felt his heart leaden when Helen just looked at him with hopeless, weary eyes. He abruptly reached for her hand and silently led her to the king's suite.

"Sit down, Helen," he said gruffly when they entered the outer chamber. He watched as she followed his order, head bowed. Just a week ago her reaction to his simple request would have been a stiffening spine and the hiss of a cornered alley cat.

His grief pressed down on him heavily. The loss of Helen's fighting spirit felt even more unbearable to him at that moment than Duse's death or Skylar's impending one. He spoke in a low voice that vibrated with emotion.

"So you're giving up? You're finally going to let Asmoday win?"

Helen glanced up in surprise. She had expected that he might be furious with her but she hadn't expected this direction for his anger.

"What do you mean? I doubt that much of Asmoday *or* Night could have survived that subtle blow you dealt him."

Bale looked grim as he came toward where she sat. "He's still here, Helen."

"I heard you tell Jax and Batos that Night couldn't enter Dunleavy's wards! That's why I was left in peace while I was here," Helen exclaimed fretfully. Her eyes widened in amazement when Bale came down next to her and spread his hands at her upper arms. He lifted her off the couch in his intensity.

"He's here! Right here!" he thundered. "You allow him to take refuge in you every time you take the blame for his foul spirit and senseless hatred. Your guilt and your shame and your fear are the food that he sustains himself on. You harbor that criminal in your heart, Helen!"

Fury flickered in her awareness.

"Well you might carry him around with you too if he'd done to you what he did to me!" she shouted.

"What? What did he do to you?"

The edge of challenge in his deep voice made her twist her shoulders to get free of his hold but she gained not the slightest ground.

"He held me hostage for ten years of my life, that's what!" she spat. "He kept me as a prisoner without bars since I was thirteen years old but he wasn't satisfied with that. He took my mother's love from me and my father's! If there was anything that I wanted he found a way of sabotaging it. Any friend that I had he alienated against me. My mum gave up trying to understand how I could be so willfully cruel in my pranks against her! I tried to tell her again and again that it wasn't me who sliced up her mattress while she slept. It wasn't me who ripped up my homework every night after I went to bed because I was trying to get back at her for not spending enough time at home! It wasn't me who stole the locket that her boyfriend gave her or the hundreds of other things she would find hidden in my drawer or my backpack or under my pillow!"

"It wasn't me who spooked all the horses where I took riding lessons whenever I opened the door to the stables or who made my closest companion of all, Gilda, the mare I got for my eleventh birthday, go stark raving mad whenever I came within a hundred feet of her. It wasn't true that I hated Mrs. Phillips, my history teacher, so much that I filled her desk drawer with live rats or that I was so jealous of Mimi Abernathy who was my competition for the lead in the school play that I pulled the stage curtain down during her audition and set off the fire alarm. None of those things or a thousand others just like them was true but do you think that mattered? Not bloody likely, because Night made sure of that as well."

"After awhile people just stopped listening to my denials so I just gave up giving 'em. Let them think what they wanted. I had to conserve all my energies into fighting off Night because he never stopped. *Never!*"

"And so what if after awhile I gave in and *really* stole from me mum's liquor cabinet after Night had done it repeatedly while I took the blame? You'd a done it too, you know why, *King?*" she asked viciously. "Because after I hit the bottle I found out that I could escape from that bastard just a bit more easily when he came to taunt me at night with his seductions."

"That's right!" she shouted aggressively when she saw the tightening of his expression. Tears streamed down her face but she was oblivious to them in her fury. "Almost every night without fail since I was a girl. What, ya surprised, Bale? Surprised that your whore of a mate had the ability to resist at all? Shocked that I would be a good girl and say 'no' when I'd done the same as spread my legs and put out the welcome sign before?"

"Stop it, Helen," Bale said, but Helen was oblivious to his taut command.

"Well I'll tell you a little something that'll make you even smugger, *King*. I was about ready to give into him. You have no idea what it's like to not only be alienated from every relationship you've either had or *should* have had but also to be deprived of human touch altogether. So I made sure that I was the one who touched when it came to men. I made sure I was the one who was in control."

Helen laughed shrilly as she stared up into his rigid face. "In some of my darker moments Night felt *brilliant*. He looked pretty damned good too. On some of my blackest nights he looked and sounded exactly like you, Bale."

Helen took a several breaths, bringing herself slowly under control.

She stared up into the face of the being who she now knew loved her without qualification. She still felt furious but her target shifted. Tears flowed from her eyes.

"Skylar had it right. That Asmoday really is a disgusting, foul fungus. He used my love for you against me," she breathed out in dawning amazement. There really was no lower thing in the realms of consciousness. There truly was no excuse and no possible apology for doing something so sacrilegious.

"Strike your enemy to kill but if you haven't the strength to do that then land your blow where it will fester and cause suffering the longest," Bale repeated an ancient, particularly nasty, human soldiers' motto. Their gazes held for a long tense moment.

Helen abruptly struck at him but it wasn't with the dagger that he'd begun to suspect that she might pull on him at any given moment.

She hugged him fiercely. The realization that she couldn't get his long hard body any closer to her was highly dismaying. She couldn't wait to meld their essences right here and now.

Bale's eyelids pinched together in profound relief as his arms surrounded her just as tightly. "So you haven't given up, I see," he muttered gruffly into her shoulder.

"No. It'll take a sight more than that twisted tosser Asmoday to get me to give up on us," Helen said between fierce kisses on his chest and neck. She paused after a frenetic moment and stared up at him wide-eyed.

"I know it's not Watcher custom but..."

"No one has ever dared to call you customary, Helen," Bale replied wryly.

"I suppose you're dead set against being my mate after what I've done?" she asked tremulously without pause. She watched him in trepidation as he raised one raven-black brow.

"Are you ready for that? Watchers are very demanding partners," Bale said blandly.

Her tilted golden brow mimicked his gesture almost perfectly. "Don't you mean demanding lovers?"

"Only if their mate demands it of them."

Helen rolled her eyes at that. She might not have specific memories to back it up but her overall impression was that Bale Ammadon, despite his powerful, regal, calm bearing was the most demanding, focused, exhaustive and, yes, *raunchy* lover on the planet.

Now that she thought about it, what other kind of leader would this unusual race have?



"That's right," he said when he saw her expression. He kissed her lips briefly but with his customary focused intensity. Helen felt a shiver of excitement race down her spine, turning to warm, seeping syrup at her sex. "I've been going very easy on you. I'm tired of restraining myself. You have always been more than a match for me when it came to lovemaking, Helen. So you decide—are you Asmoday's victim in our bedroom? Or my mate?"

"I'm Helen," she said proudly.

He smiled.

"But I'm yours as well if you'll consider taking me back," she whispered, more uncertain under the spell of his lethal grin.

"I can consider nothing else," he said roughly as he swept her into his arms.

\* \* \* \* \*

Helen tried to help him take off her clothes once he'd entered the inner chamber and sat her on the edge of the bed. But he just shook his head once and returned her hands to her sides.

"Let me do this," he said in a low voice as he removed her sandals and caressed her elegant arches and curled his large palm around her heels, one at a time. Helen sighed with pleasure. His touch gave her so much pleasure.

"It's always been one of my favorite things to undress you, to unwrap you like the rare gift that you are." He felt her start beneath him as he unbuttoned her snug white cotton shirt. His exotic, slanting, royal blue eyes arrowed up to her face. "There were some small things from your nightmares about that night with Asmoday that were actually true details of us. Your unconscious mind mixed together your primal fears with your primal desires."

He whipped aside her shirt. Bless her, she was bare underneath. Her flawless skin looked luminescent. Her breasts were succulent fleshy fruits, the fat pink nipples daring him not to taste of their sweetness. But he withheld that temptation while he drew her shirt down over her pale arms and slid his fingers into the waistband of her jeans, caressing the smooth erotic expanse of her belly in the process.

Helen's hands came up to grip his wide shoulders. She moaned at the sensation of his strong yet supple fingers moving so lightly over her sex as he unbuttoned her jeans. Remembered sensations of what it had felt like to have those fingers stroke so knowingly in her damp folds swamped her. When he had unfastened her fly he ever-so-briefly cupped his hand over her sex and flexed.

"Ahh," Helen cried out in anguish when she raised her hips feverishly to meet him and his hand was already gone, joining the other in pulling her jeans and then her panties off her until she sat before him completely naked. She alternated her gaze between the erotic image of his large dark hands moving over her pale skin and the equally compelling image of his fiery eyes as he followed their movement on her body.

He encircled her sides, pushing up her firm breasts and then sweeping down over her waist and belly to cradle her hips.

Helen wiggled in arousal in his firm grip when she saw how he stared fixedly between her legs.

"Bale," she muttered in growing desperation. She reached for his neck and tried to pull his mouth down to hers.

"A moment," Bale resisted gruffly. "Let me savor the sight and sensations of you. It's been so long, Helen."

She cried out in surprise when abruptly flipped her over on the bed, her bottom at the edge and her legs falling to the floor. He began to run his hands everywhere. He gripped her sides lightly, made her shiver by grazing the tip of his forefinger down her spine then completely encircled her waist, fingers meeting each other at her belly. His fingertips re-familiarized themselves with her slender calves and the sensitive skin behind her knees. Without asking for permission he spread her thighs and ran his palms along her silky flanks.

Helen pressed her flushed cheek into the soft duvet and moaned when his curious fingers prowled along the very edges of her pussy through the damp, soft pubic hair. She couldn't help but think of all the times that Asmoday had tortured her in a similar fashion.

"It isn't the same, Helen," Bale abruptly said from behind her, correctly intuiting her thoughts.

"I know it. He was torturing me with cruelty, using sex as his weapon. You're tormenting me too, but with love," she whispered into the bed with a small smile.

He rose up over her where she lay bent over the bed. "There's one other major difference, Helen."

"What?" she asked, twisting her head around to see him.

He almost entirely covered a plump buttock when he spread his hand over it. He began to mold and shape her firm flesh into his palm as he speared her with his stare.

"You used all your considerable strength and vast courage to deny him." He slid two long fingers between her thighs and pressed up on her on her tender, humid folds, indirectly applying pressure to her clit. "But you will give yourself completely to me now won't you?"

"Yes," she responded shakily to his taut challenge.

His fingers pressed and massaged her slick outer lips in a subtle yet infinitely potent movement.

"Good," he replied in a soft growl. "We understand each other. I only take what is given to me, Helen."

Helen cried out in shocked pleasure when she felt his other hand push up and cup her other ass cheek. It left her feeling terribly exposed, knowing that he could likely not only see the slick, delicate tissues of her outer sex but also her asshole. But she didn't

have time to be embarrassed and only a split second to be surprised at the evidence of his third hand, because he abruptly inserted two fingers into her slit while another burrowed between her flushed lips, making tiny whipping motions against her clit, sometimes at a sensual slow rate that had the soles of her feet burning and yearning cries vibrating her throat and sometimes at a brisk pace that had her crying out desperately, begging him for release.

Her eyes widened when she felt the tapered but nevertheless very thick head of his penis at her slick gate. He pushed just the tip into her and used his hand to vibrate it in her until she cried out and vibrated into him in turn.

Bale's eyes clamped shut at the exquisite sensation. Her Rush energies poured into him, nearly bringing him to his knees. Gods *yes*. It must have been her suffering and emotional anguish but he had never felt her so powerful. A few more times like that and they would be ready to cement the bond.

A whole new, undamaged, precise fitting together of their subtle matter.

The thought made him admittedly impatient. He let her sag into the mattress panting for a half a minute before he firmed his hold on her hips and ass, pushing her knees beneath her into a squatting position at the edge of the bed. Helen sputtered sluggishly in protest but that lasted for about a second flat when he began to run his limber, long tongue over her clit. His manner was so focused that it was almost businesslike. But Bale was extremely good at his business. His determined manner combined with his skill had her flesh melting into sex syrup after she merely muttered *Bale* in stunned disbelief.

He pulled his mouth from her ever so briefly and whispered intimately to her flesh. "We will finalize the bond tonight, Helen, but you must come for me several more times in order to ready us. Do you understand?"

But the only thing Helen was thinking about was getting his divine mouth and tongue back on her cunt.

He worked her into a frenzied climax with his lashing tongue and sweet suck. While air still roughly scored her throat as she recovered from that explosive climax he slipped a finger lubricated by his subtle essences into her ass and sensually finger-fucked her. At the same time he ate her again, this time his jaws munching and manipulating his mouth and tongue with an inhuman rapidity that had Helen staring glazed-eyed in stark disbelief before she tipped over another crashing wave of orgasm.

What sort of a creature had she been mated to all of these centuries?

How could she possibly endure ever leaving him when she died?

But she didn't belabor that for long. She was twenty-three years old after all, when thoughts of dying of old age are never quite believable and are quickly dismissed, like bad animation at the movies.

Her divine lover rolled her over as she groaned and panted, still in the aftershocks of her most recent orgasm. His bold, starkly powerful manner as he gazed down at her, naked and one hundred percent confident of his rightful place in the universe—of his

rightful place between her thighs as well – left Helen breathless despite her mild oxygen deprivation.

“Well done, Bale,” she muttered in amused awe.

It was the only thing she could get out for a moment but she could tell by his glistening, small smile that he’d understood completely. She felt his subtle bodies interpenetrating and mingling with hers with an almost playful seductiveness. The sensation electrified her, perking her body up rapidly into reawakening lust.

“I think the bond is complete already,” Helen whispered in amazement. Although her expression was almost sacred with the realization her gaze traveled down his big muscular body and, with carnal hunger, finally fixed on his turgid, magnificent cock.

Bale shook his head slowly. “Not yet, lovely,” he said in a desire-hoarsened voice. He felt like falling on her and fastening his mouth on a tender, pointed breast. He wanted to thrust in her receiving warmth while he nursed the potent, sweet, ethereal intoxicant that always flowed from her nipples, a subtler, invisible form of the physical substance that had allowed Bale to impregnate Helen in past incarnations.

“Then when?” Helen asked, her misery growing at their separateness. She flexed her stomach muscles and reached for him.

Bale stopped her with his hands on both of her wrists. Helen’s eyes fired with irritation but her words stilled on her tongue when she read the message in his royal blue eyes. Their abilities for mutual telepathic communication had strengthened exponentially as she released her essence to him repeatedly.

*Every bond is different, lovely. Perhaps this is what you had understood before you broke our old one. You have grown stronger in your fires of torment. I believe for this one to be complete you must offer yourself to me in a way that leaves you feeling vulnerable. Only then will your trust in me be justified. Can you do this?*

Helen licked nervously at the salty sweat that had accumulated on her upper lip. She had allowed him to take her last night but now she must give herself without reservation.

Confidence swelled in her chest even as a fresh surge of arousal heated her loins.

“Yes,” she answered out loud, chin held high. “Come lay back on the bed, Bale,” she whispered. She nimbly followed him, straddling his belly once he had reclined on the pillows. Her hands and fingertips skimmed and caressed his chest, shoulders and belly, worshipping his solid male strength with the same avidity that he had her smooth soft femininity. He kept his hands by his sides, merely watching her with fiery eyes.

His passivity suddenly made her feel self-conscious. In a purely human way of understanding she was only a twenty-three-year-old girl-woman who had been an innocent to true lovemaking and passion until two nights ago. Her eyes widened when she looked into Bale’s starkly handsome face and then glanced quickly down at his penis, which was enormous with need.

He was ancient in comparison to her, a being who had so much experience in the ways of pleasuring the flesh that it made her own look like a second to his eternity. Her hands paused in the gesture of molding dense pectoral muscles gloved in thick, smooth skin.

"What do I do?" she asked shakily.

"You're doing it," he said gruffly. His exotic eyes seemed to glow as he watched her.

Helen stared, reading subtle essences that were becoming more and more apparent to her with each rising second that she touched him.

"No. I want to give you something that you really desire."

Bale opened his lips to tell her that she was the definition of his desire no matter what she did as long as she did so willingly.

But then she scooted her knees down the bed and began to tongue the head of his cock and the power of speech left him. He watched through narrowed eyelids as she gripped the base of his penis. Her hand looked small and delicate on his dark blood-engorged flesh. She met his gaze before she began to lick him avidly, like a cat lapping at its cream. She curled herself around him lovingly. She fluttered and teased.

Helen liked the tense expression that overcame Bale's usually impassive face. He had just lost so much. There was no way that she would ever be able to fully understand the depth of his and Duse's relationship. As her mate and as the leader of his people Asmoday's crimes had surely plagued him just as much as they had her.

The need to give him some small measure of relief in the midst of his grief and sorrows felt like a physical ache.

Once she had licked and wetted every inch of his erection she switched her knees to one side of his body and leaned down over him. It felt exciting to slide his moist cock between her breasts. He felt so hard and so alive throbbing against her skin. Her breasts were small but he was very thick. She pushed her flesh around him and began to move up and down, fucking his cock with her breasts. She liked the tight, rigid expression on his face as he watched her.

Bale gritted his teeth to restrain his passion. Helen's breasts were so firm and so shapely that even when she squeezed them against his cock the nipples remained forward-facing like juicy, pink, fleshy flowers. The sight of them moving up and down the pillar of his cock turned him on more than he could put into words.

"Use your fingers to play with your nipples," he demanded hoarsely.

Helen rubbed her forefingers over the sensitive crowns. It felt good. She became more enthusiastic. Bale growled deep in his throat when her nipples darkened and became even more distended. She watched his reaction intently when she ducked up and down over him even more rapidly, increasing the rate that her squeezing flesh pistoned over his cock. When she saw him grit his teeth and give a small snarl, an expression that she had come to relearn meant he was about to take control of the situation, she sat up.

"Helen..." Bale protested through a rigid mouth.

She turned and positioned herself quickly, one knee between his spread thighs and one knee outside of the left one so that she stared down the line of his impossibly long left leg. She twisted around and grabbed his cock, spread an ass cheek with her right hand and guided him into the tight crevice of her bottom.

"Helen!" he repeated, this time with barely restrained excitement instead of protest. Was she intentionally loving him in the same manner that he'd requested the faerie nymphs stimulate him the other night when he longed for Helen so greatly? The elemental thought forms were the embodiments of Eleanor's lustful desires after all, and Eleanor and Helen were different manifestations of the same spirit.

He noticed Helen's naughty smile as she molded her right ass cheek around his cock and began to massage him.

She knew alright, whether it was conscious knowledge or not.

"Lift up a moment," Bale instructed tersely. Her plump cheeks felt delicious against his cock but her saliva was drying, making a smooth, friction-free glide impossible.

Helen's eyes widened slightly when she heard the tension in his voice and turned around to see him. Her gaze fixated on his right hand. He was rubbing his fingers together in a manner that for some unknown reason caused her clit to pinch with arousal and her rectum to squeeze tight. Her lips dropped open when she realized that those fingers that had recently become so prominent in her sexual fantasies and daydreams were moist and glossy.

"You know what I want, Helen."

She blinked. To her slight surprise, she did.

She placed her knees on either side of his belly and came down on her hands next to his thighs. She made a high-pitched moan of anticipation when she felt him part her cheeks and begin to move his fingers deeply within the furrow of her ass, lubricating the sensitive, nerve-packed tissues from her pussy to her asshole and up the deep cleft of flesh. Her body tensed with excitement when he paused on the way back down at her rectum and gently pressed as though he were trying to imprint the shape of the small ring on his fingertip. She thought he would penetrate her but he didn't. A small cry of disappointment skipped past her lips when he withdrew instead.

"Go on then," he muttered.

Helen understood him. She went back to her former position. He held his cock up for her like a pillared monument made of flesh. This time when he speared his cock through the tight furrow of her ass he glided smoothly. She rode him fluidly while he spread his hands on her cheeks and squeezed her around him until his cock was sandwiched in her pale pillows of flesh. For a minute or two the only sounds that broke the silence were Bale's tense grunts of pleasure and Helen's cries of excitement.

He jerked his cock out of the sweetest, softest, tautest furrow of flesh that he could ever imagine.

"No more. I'll come if you keep it up. Stand up next to the bed. Please," he added when he realized how harsh he sounded. He followed her to the edge of the bed. He froze with his feet on the floor when he glanced up. Without uttering a word his beautiful Helen had positioned herself bent over, ass in the air, holding her ankles... Offering herself wholly.

He couldn't help but think of the first time when she'd bent over and exposed her bottom to him when he paddled her, how defiant and furious she'd been, how vulnerable and volatile. Now her movements were supple and sure as she pulled back one cheek, slid her finger through the slick crevice and slowly pressed it into the tiny closed bud of her pink asshole.

"Helen," Bale hissed. He sounded almost angry he was so aroused. He wanted to stand up and take what she offered but he was held immobile by the sight of her sensuously piercing her own finger into her tight, hungry hole.

After a moment he stood.

Helen craned her neck over her shoulder. She'd never come close to feeling like this in her life. Something about knowing that Bale watched her with such a tight, almost tangible focus while she did something so illicit to herself was extremely exciting.

Bale tore his eyes from the stimulating sight when he sensed her stare. He stilled for a moment. He'd never, *never* seen her so aroused. Or so beautiful. Her cheeks were stained a dark pink. Her lips were so red that they looked like a sex organ, a lush blossom fully prepared by her body to be penetrated. Her soul shone in her wide eyes.

His desire became fused with the need to acknowledge her courage for giving herself to him so trustingly.

Helen watched with feelings of trepidation and wild lust as he stepped behind her at the same time as he slid his hand down his heavy member to the root. He was huge. And he was so fierce and strong.

He was either going to kill her with that cock or master her with it.

Her finger began to fuck her ass even more avidly. But she went abruptly still when he spoke.

"Face the wall, Helen."

The lush bud of her red lips opened as she met his eyes.

Her anxiety notched up another step as she stared blindly at the original Van Dyke painting hung on the wall but so did her anticipation. She felt him use his hand to spread back her left ass cheek, exposing her vulnerable valley.

She started to pant so heavily she wondered dimly if she was hyperventilating.

He opened his big hand and gripped her ass cheek and hip tightly.

"Ahhhh! *Bale!*" she shrieked.

For a second her sensually assaulted brain was too overwhelmed to comprehend what she was experiencing. Something was vibrating against her swollen clit as rapidly as a hummingbird's wings but with an astonishingly precise friction. For several

seconds she stared blindly into space, seeing nothing, mouth gaping wide open. When a flicker of rational thought kicked in and she realized what Bale was doing to her she groaned gutturally as an enormous climax reared over her.

He was beating his big cock against her slick outer sex but so fast and with such a divine pressure that she dizzily thought to herself that there couldn't be any woman alive who could have tolerated the sublime pleasure for any more than half a minute.

Bale's legs trembled as her enormously powerful Rush smacked into his subtle bodies, shearing deep into his spirit. Pleasure swamped his awareness. He dipped his penis into her pussy, unable to resist the lure of being buried in her juicy, convulsing walls.

Helen was still in the midst of orgasm when she felt the tapered head of his cock press to her asshole.

*I know what I ask of you, lovely... More than you may realize. But I demand it nonetheless. You're too young and untried to do this unless you allow me into your mind. I will make the passage easy for you.*

"But you must trust me, Helen," she heard him say, his telepathic communication segueing to his low, rumbling voice smoothly in her mind.

*I do trust you. But can't you fuck my ass without stimulating my brain?*

His answer came back to her, terse and abrupt.

*This is about a lot more than fucking your ass.*

He watched tensely as her breathing caused her rib cage to become starkly delineated as she inhaled anxiously.

Helen longed to turn around and take assurance from his lightninglike, loving eyes. Instead she closed her eyes and imagined them piercing into her...cherishing her.

"Yes."

Almost before she had clenched her teeth to form the hiss of the 'y' sound she felt not just her anus but the entire tail end of her spinal cord begin to tingle with electrical energy.

She groaned gutturally. The need for friction became unbearable.

Bale supplied it almost immediately. Her breath tore at her throat when he slipped the wide fleshy circumference of the crown of his cock into her ass. And yes it did slip despite the fact that Helen felt stretched. He'd done something to relax her muscles, to prevent her body's natural resistance by stimulating her sacral nerves.

But he also enlivened them.

*The bond is complete, Helen,* Bale said. She heard him as if he were a universe away.

She made an animal sound of fierce arousal and sank her ass back on his rigid member.



They began to move against each other, at first shallowly and slowly but then with increasing depth and strength. Helen became distantly aware that her entire body had begun to vibrate at an alarmingly increasing rate.

It wasn't entirely dissimilar to the feeling Asmoday had given her before he'd plunged her over into the abyss of death.

"I am here, Helen," Bale said, his voice surprising gentle given the violence of their act.

Helen opened her lips and let out a disbelieving keen of pleasure. It didn't stop. Even as he began to thump against her ass like a ram at the rut, his balls slapping against her pussy, she screamed.

And she screamed, and screamed.

She was just returning from the outer realms of consciousness when Bale held her ass steady between both hands and sank himself in her to the hilt.

Helen turned and glanced over her shoulder. Every muscle in his body was clenched impossibly tight. He abruptly roared with the released pressure of an erupting volcano. The image was primitive and carnal. But even as Helen thought it her eyes widened in wonder. She stared upon his Truest Self. He regarded her through eye sockets that flamed with a pure, silvery-white fire. His gaze was paradoxically cold and distant and yet infinitely loving and intimate.

And then the second passed and Bale was back, his image in the midst of release just as haloed to Helen as that of his most divine.

## Epilogue

"I should go check on Skylar," Helen said softly, awhile after the storm had abated and all was silence and peace.

Bale's nipple hardened at the impact of her warm breath against it. He pressed his fingers to the back of her skull and Helen responded, pursing her red lips and inserting the center of his sensitive flesh between them. She sucked sweetly. His cock stirred to life.

He didn't want to have to think about Skylar lying near death, the murder of his knight Dashia or the painful wound that had been carved into his spirit by Duse's abrupt, unexpected absence from his life.

He just wanted to glory in the fact that Helen had returned to him whole at last. Bale didn't know if he could stand to face his losses if Helen was part of what he grieved.

She closed her eyes, feeling completely at peace as she tongued and harried Bale's pebbled nipple lazily. Her senses had been opened to a whole new world since the new bond with Bale had been sealed. Colors were more vibrant, objects more present and precise and her subtle awareness infinitely more sensitive. Another amazing thing had happened that she would wait to tell Bale some other time. Her memories of her past lives had become exponentially more vivid. This had caused a deep well of longing for her sons to swell within her breast. But it was a sweet, wonderful pain. There would be a time soon enough to be reunited with Aga and Ari.

This precious moment was for her and Bale alone.

"You're wondering why I needed to break our former bond?" Helen murmured, her damp lips just inches above his nipple.

"I think I know, Helen."

She kissed him one last time before she slid sinuously upward against his hard, warm body, bringing their faces closer together. She watched him as he softly, reverently touched the intricate design of his sigil which had been emblazoned above her left breast.

"I didn't really understand it at the time, Bale. I just had the dreams and the resulting obsession to get the Stone."

"Your intuition must have been telling you that your salvation was somehow tied up with the Dionytion Stone," he said gruffly.

Her eyes shone. "And it was," she whispered. She touched his sculpted lips reverently.

"When I was younger I didn't know what I was supposed to do with the Stone from my dreams," she continued in a hushed voice. "I just wanted it desperately and without reason. My mum had never taken me to Dunleavy but I had seen pictures. I became convinced that the Stone was here. I should have been suspicious when Night didn't alienate a boy that I fancied and didn't interfere when I convinced him to run off with me to Scotland."

"He must have divined that you and you alone could steal the Stone from me."

Her brows arched. "Do you believe that Asmoday inspired my dreams about the Stone?"

Bale shook his head. "At one time I considered it. I'll admit that I even suspected that you had conspired with him to steal the Dionytion Stone. And in truth your obsession with the Stone undoubtedly gave Asmoday certain advantages. But no. The Goddess sent you the dreams, Helen," he said confidently.

He would tell her another time about the Goddess's divine intervention.

"Asmoday must have stolen the Stone from you almost immediately after you took it from me," Bale said.

"He did all right," Helen said bitterly. "He snatched it from me before Alex and I ever reached the other side of the Isle."

Bale shook his head grimly.

"What?" Helen asked.

"I believe the Stone empowered Asmoday greatly while he possessed it. Remind me to tell you sometime what he evil use he made of it. I'm sorry for the danger he put Che's mate, Sophia, in while he had it but I'm thankful that he didn't use his new power to bring you to more harm than he already had and that Che recovered the Stone from him so quickly."

"Bale," Helen began hesitantly, "I think that what Asmoday did during my last lifetime damaged not only me but our bond. I think I somehow understood that it needed to be rewoven, made whole and clean again."

Bale sighed as he palmed the back of her head tenderly. "I don't like to think of him having so much power that he could have damaged such a sacred thing, but...yes. I believe you're right, Helen."

"Do you know what else I think?" Helen asked, her tone as soft as her glistening eyes.

Bale stared at her luminous countenance. "What, lovely?"

"I think that the Goddess knew that my dreams would lead me to the Stone but I think she was mostly sending me to you. She knew that the most powerful being on the planet would alleviate my suffering." She placed her hand along his hard jaw. "Thank you for saving me, Bale."

"You saved yourself, Helen. Your strength astounds me," he said.

"I don't know about that so much. But it was certainly helpful to have someone who loves me without condition remind me of my courage, even if those reminders did entail kicking me in the arse a few too many times for comfort," Helen said with a saucy grin that was pure Nell.

Bale abruptly pushed her head down and sealed their lips to his in a demanding kiss. He needed to fully submerge himself in her intoxicating sweetness, lose himself in her just once more...assure himself that he wasn't deluding himself about her presence.

Then he would be prepared to go and face the harsh realities of the day.

Then he would be prepared for anything, because the light of the universe was by his side once again.

## About the Author

Beth Kery grew up in a huge house built in the nineteenth century, where she cultivated her love of mystery and the paranormal. When she wasn't hunting for secret passageways and ghosts with her friends, she was gobbling up fantasy novels and any other books she could get her hands on. As an adult she learned about the vast mysteries of romance and sex and started to investigate that phenomenon thoroughly, as well. Her writing today reflects her passion for all of the above.

Beth welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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