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Dragon Lust*

*A Little Elf
A Little Dragon
A Touch Of Demon
Is A Lot Of Trouble*



DRAGON RAGE

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Chapter 1

I wanted to kill someone. Not just anyone but a certain specific someone. Unfortunately I was in no position to do so at the moment, and was in fact, trying to patiently bide my time. Flicking my eyes down the table I caught sight of my Red staring at me through his lashes. He'd been caught doing it twice already and the person holding the other end of his leash had not been happy. But then Belinda was a sadistic idiot so it didn't take much to set her off. I just knew it was killing me to sit in my chair as if nothing was wrong while I had to watch one of the ten men bioengineered specifically for me being abused. At least she'd allowed him to sit in a chair.

Have you ever been in a meeting where you were so angry you felt your head might explode? Well that's how I felt, had in fact been feeling that way for at least the past hour. Ever since our last guests had arrived and I'd received a nasty shock. It's so hard to act normal when what you really want to do is shift to Dragon and rip

someone's head off their shoulders! The group at the table had each taken turns whining and complaining because someone had been systematically getting rid of their hired help. It didn't matter that they were thugs, rapists, and murderers! But then what do you expect from a bunch of criminals?

My head was pounding, but then that might not all be from rage. Gareth and Jace had had several short floral arrangements done up for the meeting tonight and there were three of them spread up and down the conference table. Between the hors d'oeuvres set out over on the counter and the flowers the room smelled like a cross between a funeral parlor and a wake. In the corners of the room were several taller floral arrangements. I think their plan was to overwhelm the delicate senses of those present in an attempt to hide my true nature. I'm not sure if they were working on the others, but they had managed to give me a headache. I couldn't begin to imagine what it was doing to the other more sensitive noses present.

Perhaps I should back up a bit. My name is Lexi Helyanwe and I am a Dragon, well actually I'm part Dragon part Elf with twist of Lust Demon thrown in. I too was bioengineered by my parents whose goal is to save the Dragon race and maybe the Elves too. Of course if that secret gets out it's likely I'll end up sliced and diced on a stainless steel table in some underground lab. My Father somehow managed to break the DNA code and engineer ten male Dragons and little ol' me. Not great odds when your goal is to save an entire race, but someone had killed his partners and trashed his lab so he'd had no choice but to go into hiding which ultimately prevented any more experimentation. Lucky for me no one knew that Mom had been inseminated and I was already on the path that would lead me to this room some twenty five years later.

Up until recently I'd managed to live a quiet life in which I was a mild mannered manual writer during the day. However, my nights were a different matter entirely. During the wee hours of the night I liked to skip through the highways and byways of the seedy part of town working to ensure decent folk are safe from the local non-human underbelly inhabiting San Francisco. This just happened to be one of the reasons why at this exact moment I was sitting in the conference room surrounded by

the heads of the most prominent non-human crime organizations. Of course none of them know I'm the one they're looking for, except of course Jace and Gareth. It was their conference room and their meeting.

Less than a week ago I'd been a nice girl just out looking for a little fun. Fortune had smiled on me and I'd discovered Gareth Blue and Jace Green, my sweeties, both Dragons. Since then my life has turned upside down, I've lost my innocence, and my job, took up cohabitation with Gareth and Jace, been to Hell and back...literally, and acquired an Elf, a half Goblin, a Minor God, and my very own Demon. Not a bad week all in all. I'd also slipped up and made the papers when my status as a Princess of Faerie was exposed. I can tell you that hadn't made Mom happy! She yelled at me, I yelled at her and she'd gone off to see about getting her Mom, the Queen, to reopen the Sidhe doors. Something that hadn't happened since they'd slammed closed more than fifty years earlier when a virus had spread killing a good portion of the US population and bringing the non-humans out of the closet so to speak.

You would think with all the excitement in my life recently, did I mention just this afternoon someone had opened a portal to another dimension and nearly overrun our den with little furry beasties with no legs or arms and really sharp teeth! Anyway with all this excitement, I might have caught a break and things wouldn't have turned complicated during this very important meeting. Sometimes though, luck just doesn't work out that way.

So here I sit trying to pretend I'm Elven Royalty, which of course I actually am, though it isn't like I've ever seen the inside of a Sidhe or anything. I'm breathing through my nose with both my mental shields fully raised and trying not to use one of my new powers on the crazy red Dragon bitch holding the leash on my man down the table.

"What's a redhead's dating motto...the fastest way to a man's heart is through his ribcage. What's safer a red head or a piranha...a piranha they only attack in schools." Whispered Kit my sexy Demon who was currently balanced on my shoulder perfectly disguised as a miniature black and silver dragon. He was doing his best to

distract me but it didn't seem to be helping. He'd started out with Little Johnny jokes but had finally given up and moved on to red heads. I didn't think it was very funny, partially because I have reddish-gold hair, and partially because it was not the time for joke telling. But then that wouldn't have been a deterrent for Kit. He seemed to thrive on elevated passions...probably because he's a fully fleshed Lust Demon.

Beside me on the floor, Owen in his wolf disguise yawned, flashing his three inch canines. His white tipped ears swiveled back and forth as one of the Dwarves across the table rambled on and on about the trouble they'd been having. I wasn't in the least bit interested in their lost revenues. In fact I would have preferred to get rid of the lot of them, but Gareth and Jace had reminded me that it was easier to deal with the devil you knew versus the one that might take their place. Though they both agreed it was a nice daydream. Gareth and Jace ran a club called The Salty Dog which was really just a front for a training ground of government elite Hunters. As the official government representatives it was their job to ensure no race wars broke out in their domain. Dragons are very territorial and they take their job seriously.

I myself am a Hunter, have been for several years. Thanks to Mom and Mi, my lifelong friend, nanny, tutor, and Merecat Keeper of Knowledge extraordinaire, I was a Hunter with full privileges as well as being off the government's grid.

Down the table Belinda must have noticed Marcus looking in my direction again because she yanked the leash so hard he slammed his cheek into the top of the black lacquer conference table. I tensed and fought to remain calm. My eyes narrowed slightly as I dropped my upper shield, waited five seconds then slammed it closed again. Beside me Jace increased the pressure on the arms of his leather chair but didn't make a sound. Down at the other end of the table Belinda grabbed her head with both hands, giving Marcus the opportunity to slowly sit back up in his chair. His eyes slipped down the table again in my direction while Belinda moaned slightly and shook her head.

I was sitting there going through all the things I'd like to do to Belinda when Jace leaned over and gently ran his fingers up my arm. On the other side of me Owen's

large pink tongue licked my fingers bringing my attention back to the room so that I realized everyone had gone quiet and were staring at me. “Are you well?” Jace asked softly.

Turning my head I glanced at him, raising an eyebrow in question.

“You are...smoking.” He informed me.

I fought to keep my expression from showing surprise. What exactly did he mean by saying I was smoking? Kit leaned in to whisper in my ear. “You’ve got smoke coming out your nostrils.” Then he twisted his neck and blew out a perfect smoke ring in the shape of a heart down the table.

“I beg your pardon.” I told the room at large, my lips lifting slightly. “I didn’t mean to distract you.” Then I reached up to stroke Kit’s side wondering when I’d developed that ability! Maybe it was a hold over from earlier in the day when I’d breathed fire thanks to Kit. Whatever the source, I needed to get a hold of myself before I did something even worse.

Milos the Wizard leaned forward and glanced at me from the chair on the other side of Jace. His greedy eyes watching Kit. “I didn’t realize Elves could do that.” He commented.

Running my fingers over the double set of horns on Kit’s head I stared back at him. Kit bumped my hand and nipped a finger then blew out another smoke ring, this one star shaped.

“Where ever did you get such a perfect specimen?” Milos muttered and I was forced to smooth Kit’s sides as he turned his head and flicked his little red tongue growling low in his throat at the Wizard.

“He was contracted for at my birth.” I told him, Elves mustn’t lie and technically I hadn’t. “I’m not aware of the details.” My response seemed to irritate him probably because he’d like a mini-sized Dragon for a pet too. Of course he’d have to go to Hell to get one. That is, after all, where Demons reside. On my shoulder Kit rumbled again and I didn’t know if Kit was sensing something I couldn’t with my shields in place. Hell I didn’t even know if there was anything to sense, since Milos

was merely human. As it was his aura was very pale and hadn't changed color since he'd stepped into the conference room.

"Enough with the Dragon runt, can we get back to the problem at hand?" Eldal the Dwarf demanded his hand pounding the table with irritation. Next to him Dten the other Dwarf nodded, his dark eyes dismissing me. Apparently not all Dwarfs got along with Elves. Or maybe it was just that I'm female and Dwarfs are extremely sexist.

At the sound of his hand hitting the table, Kit jumped and his back foot slipped off my shoulder his little nails digging into the tender flesh of my upper chest. Down the table Valentine leaned forward sharply his nostrils flaring. "Ahhh." He breathed his light eyes intent upon the small drops of blood pooling on the golden skin just below my collarbone. Across from me both Bodark and Alan seemed to delicately sniff the air. Bodark went so far as to lick his lips in true Werewolf fashion.

Leaning forward slightly, I allowed the movement to cover the fact that I shifted and quickly healed myself. Sitting back I glanced down as if just noticing the blood on me.

Gareth leaned forward and our eyes met. "I think he's torn a nail." I muttered just loud enough for everyone to hear. Kit looked contrite and obligingly held out his back foot, one of the nails looking bent at an odd angle. Plucking him off my shoulder I set him on the table in front of me where he licked gingerly at his foot. He'd made it look like it had actually been torn and I breathed a sigh of relief. The last thing we needed was to have Valentine recognize me for a Dragon when we were working so hard to keep that a secret.

Gareth reached into his pocket then handed Amras a handkerchief. Behind me a door opened then distantly I heard the sound of running water. A moment later he was back and Owen scooted out of his way.

Amras went to one knee next to my chair his violet eyes searching my face. "May I?" He asked softly, then dabbed the blood off me when I nodded. When he was done his efforts revealed my perfectly unblemished skin and he stood back up and returned to his guard position behind me. At the other end of the table Valentine

slumped back into his chair but not before he smiled and flashed the tips of his vampire fangs while Bodark glanced at Alan who raised an eyebrow and shrugged a shoulder.

When Eldal and Dten were finally done with their long winded list of complaints, Angel the overly large Werehyena seated to Valentine's right, leaned forward. Her beady deep set eyes narrowed on Gareth then moved to Jace. "I don't want to be here and I didn't appreciate having to wade through that forest of reporters outside your club. Unlike the others I couldn't care less about your new plaything and whether or not she's really a Princess. I just want it to stop."

"Or what?" Gareth asked, his voice calm but chilling. That he chose to ignore Angel's rude comment about me didn't go unnoticed. Perhaps it was because this meeting was being governed by a strict set of rules made to prevent a full out blood bath amongst the respective heads of crime. In any event I fought the urge to rub my arms and was grateful once again for the long sleeves Areth had provided me with.

Angel growled low and slumped back into her chair her yellow eyes dropping to the table. I've never particularly cared for hyenas all their slumping and slinking around tended to irritate me.

Across from Jace, Alan the head of the local Werejaguar pack steepled his fingers together and spoke, his warm sexy voice filling the room. "The activity seems to have stopped over the past week. Have you found the culprit and dealt with him?" Good God the man's voice was lethal and I nearly swayed in my chair the sound affected me so. What was it about this man that set my Lust Demon parts on point? Even in the midst of my rage I couldn't seem to ignore his sex appeal. I'd been told he and his people could procure nearly anything for a price and that his operation was responsible for the movement of all types of exotic artifacts, not all of which were necessarily inanimate. On the table, Kit stood up abruptly taking several stiff steps in Alan's direction before arching his back and hissing softly.

Jace chuckled and moved his foot under the table so that it touched my leg in warning. I gave him a sidelong glance and dropped my upper shield. His eyes widened and his lips lifted slightly. Down the table Belinda slapped her palms to the table a

curse escaping her as she glared angrily around the room. Up till then she'd been so busy dealing with the static my upper shield put out, she hadn't participated much in the conversations. Too bad she hadn't been so distracted she forgot to torment Marcus.

"I do not think the little one likes you." Bodark remarked with an amused look on his face. He was a clean cut attractive man easily as tall as Owen somewhere in the range of six and a half feet. He had short hair and a very wide set of shoulders covered in black leather which looked like it might groan if it could speak, it was so tightly molded to his well developed chest and arms. His voice carried a hint of his Russian ancestry. From what Gareth had told me yesterday, the man was in the business of protection. His operation provided muscle for half the city. He looked fairly young to be in a position of such power but then I really had no way of knowing just how old he really was. He looked like he might be in his mid thirties? Though with immortals it was hard to judge, he could easily have been one hundred and thirty for all I knew.

Alan glanced at Kit and then me as he raised an eyebrow and stated. "Yes he looks quite...distraught. Perhaps he senses that where I come from we eat little lizards."

For once it wasn't me causing the problem or maybe it was since Kit was only trying to protect me from myself and the strange fascination I'd had for Alan since he'd first entered the room. In any event Kit spread his wings and little licks of flames shot out his mouth. I was suddenly worried he might launch himself at Alan and did the only thing I could think to prevent him. "Kit." I whispered, my voice going soft and seductive as I leaned forward and carefully cracked open the little red door in my mind then breathed just a hint of desire at him. Gone in an instant was the haughty Elf, replaced by a woman secure in my ability to pleasure a man.

Kit's wings hesitated and his head rotated slowly toward me. When I crooked my finger at him his little red eyes whirled sending sparkles across the table top. "Come let me hold you." I urged him. He covered the distance between us in an instant and I plucked him from the table and gently placed him in my lap where he rubbed his head and neck along my stomach nearly purring his satisfaction. I took a

second or two to stroke his sides and back. Behind me Cursed and Amras both shifted and I raised my head discovering I was suddenly glad there was at least six feet of table separating me from the men on the other side.

Alan dragged his slightly glazed eyes from my face and turned to Gareth. “My compliments, I begin to understand your need for guards.” Bodark didn’t seem capable of speech and just stared at me for several seconds before his eyelids dropped to half mast and his lips turned up. The look on his face would have made me nervous if I hadn’t been surrounded by my men. And he was so large, even with the table separating us it seemed he could nearly reach me if he lost control.

I glanced at Gareth and found his smile was slightly smug. His beautiful blue eyes caught and held mine for a brief moment. It was enough to send the color into my cheeks and I dropped my eyes again to Kit’s body curled contentedly against me. At my side Owen moved closer resting his head on my thigh. Kit grumbled softly but shifted his body giving him more room in my lap.

Adara’s voice was like chalk on a blackboard as she demanded in a high pitched whine. “Enough!”

Gareth sighed and in the chair next to me Jace leaned forward and glanced down the table at the Asian beauty who looked like she’d enjoy scratching someone’s eyes out. I thought about it for a moment and realized that someone was probably me. With her long blood red nails it looked to me like she could really give it a go too. Note to self, stay out of claw range. Hey I could sympathize. It wasn’t all that long ago I’d been virginal and frustrated. But was it my fault she thought her powers came from her virginal status while mine came from having sex...often?

I tried not to sigh thinking I should have just grabbed Kit instead of pushing lust in his direction. I was pretty sure it hadn’t spread that far down the table but given the looks on Alan and Bodark’s faces they must have at least caught the tail end. Dten and Eldal didn’t look affected so either they weren’t interested or the two of them had been out of my range. Actually that was great news! The last time I’d tried that it had leveled an entire roomful of men! Of course I’d been angry at the time.

Gareth sighed softly and answered Alan's question. "The problem has been dealt with." Murmurs erupted around the table and out of the corner of my eye I watched Belinda lean in and whisper something in Valentine's ear. I slammed my shield shut realizing it was still down, and watched in satisfaction as she nearly fell to the floor from the pain. Marcus was watching me closely and I noticed his eyes widen slightly and the small smile that lifted his lips before he carefully wiped his face of emotion. I wondered if he could learn to shield like I did. Then I wondered how Belinda would enjoy that.

She wouldn't. A strange voice whispered across my mind and I jerked causing Owen to growl slightly. Kit tilted his head and focused one eye on me as if to say, 'what was that for?'. Heads turned in my direction but I ignored them. Jace reached for my hand and slipped his fingers through mine his dark green eyes curious.

Down the table Belinda turned and glared at Marcus her eyes narrowed. I realized Marcus wasn't shielded and she must have heard his comment. I wanted to ask Jace but was afraid given the company we were in that someone likely several someones might hear me. In company like this you needed to speak a separate language. The thought hadn't left my mind but I turned to Amras and asked him in perfect Elvish. "Did you just hear someone say 'She wouldn't?'" I asked softly.

He seemed shocked, probably because he didn't know I could speak my native tongue. I could actually, but only because Mi had taught it to me, not my Mother. I figured we should be safe enough. Elvish was not an easy language and Mi had told me that Elves were not in the habit of sharing their knowledge with just any outsider. Amras responded with a pleased smile. "I assume you do not mean out loud?"

I nodded and he frowned shaking his head as he glanced at Cursed who didn't look at all happy. "No My Lady," He replied tightly. "I did not hear anything. In fact with you shielded it is as if you are not here." Cursed did not seem to appreciate the notion that I might be 'hearing' things he couldn't. But then as a previous royal guard of Faerie and now my guard, he tended to have little humor over things he couldn't defend against.

“Can you ask Jace if he heard anything? If I drop my shield I’m worried they will hear me down the table. I think you should be able to ask him without their notice.”

Behind us Gareth was listening to Adara and Milos who were discussing imports and human to non-human cargo ratios. I wasn’t really listening and I suspected Gareth and Jace were more curious about my conversation than who was smuggling whom or what into the country.

Amras nodded and stepped back. He didn’t need to look at Jace to speak with him. Beside me Jace tilted his head slightly, listening I suspected. His lips narrowed and he glanced at me under his brows finally nodding.

“Ask him if he can speak to Marcus without Belinda hearing him please.” I replied to Amras. Behind me I heard him draw in air then Jace’s fingers were clenching the chair arm, his knuckles slowly turning white.

“I’m not sure how to interpret that.” I told Amras. This three way conversation was tedious. It would be so much easier if Gareth and Jace would just let me kill Belinda! Valentine didn’t seem to bother me all that much, which was surprising since I had despised Vampires for so long.

Down the table Marcus made a strangled sound followed immediately by coughing. My eyes flicked down the table expecting to find Belinda had yanked his leash again. Instead I found her frowning and looking at him strangely. The frown lines between her brows likely caused by my shields. Too bad I couldn’t figure out a way to make them louder.

“He said absolutely not.” Amras replied.

“My Lady.” Cursed added. “Be very careful. These are not all humans we are dealing with here. If you must have him,” He told me and his voice sounded angry. I didn’t need to turn around to tell his aura was probably a sickly yellow-green. “Kit or Owen can fetch him later, once they have left this place.”

Owen whined softly so that I glanced at him in surprise. “You speak Elvish?” I asked and had to smile when he rolled his dark brown eyes up at me and stuck out his pink tongue. “Hmmm.”

Cursed was probably right even though it nearly made me weep to do so, I’d have to let him go or risk causing an all out war with the vampires. I couldn’t do that to Gareth and Jace. I leaned back in my chair and lowered my eyes watching the three at the other end of the table. When Belinda turned back to Valentine I looked directly at Marcus waiting till I knew his eyes met mine and let the one question I had whisper across my mind. Do you wish to be rescued? If so you must give me a sign.

Chapter 2

Marcus light brown eyes held mine as his hands reached for the leather strap around his neck. He grasped the collar in his fingers and yanked it free with a loud popping noise as the snaps gave at the back. My eyes widened in horror as I caught sight of the torn flesh that had been hidden beneath the wide band. Belinda turned to him but he was already on his feet his chair tipping over behind him as he lunged for her, his fingers going round her neck while she screamed. Their motions flipped her out of her chair and Eldal and Dten tried to shove back their own cursing as they struggled to get their short legs down to the floor so they could push themselves away.

The rest of the room watched in shock as Marcus slammed her head against the floor repeatedly while she clawed at him and tried to get him off her. At the other end of the table Valentine pushed his chair back then leaned forward, his arms resting on his thighs as he watched the pair avidly. Jace and Gareth both rose to their feet but instead of moving to intercede, Gareth slid his arm along the top of my chair and Jace moved so close his coat brushed my arm.

Across the table from us Bodark and Alan glanced between the pair rolling around on the floor and myself. Perhaps they had seen the look I'd given him just before his outburst. Or perhaps they were still recovering from the desire I'd sent their way and just couldn't bare to take their eyes off me.

Marcus was obviously the stronger of the two but not by much and it appeared his strength was waning fast, likely due to his unhealthy appearance. He must have realized he was losing the struggle because he redoubled his efforts and slammed his knee into her ribs. Across the room I heard bones snap and Belinda scream again which turned into a muffled roar as she began shifting beneath him.

Aside from Gareth and Jace I'd never seen another dragon shift. Unlike the three of us Belinda's shift was neither graceful nor fast. Where we could go from human to dragon and back again in a blink of an eye, it took Belinda nearly a minute to shift into something that was so misshapen it was almost unrecognizable. Her head was wide and lumpy with horns sticking almost straight out to the sides. Her scales were twisted and so red they almost looked black. Kit jumped onto the table from my lap and stared at the thing in mute horror. I wasn't feeling too good about it myself.

Gareth cursed under his breath then nearly yanked me out of the chair and into his arms when Marcus shifted. His shift was every bit as smooth as my own, and he slipped from human to fire engine red Dragon just like that. Inside me Goldy sat up and blinked, her golden eyes whirling slowly as she took in his delicately veined wings, long pointed snout and the sharp spikes and ridges running down his spine. His back legs were thickly muscled, his second set of horns nice and straight and very sharp. On either side of his head were several blood red protuberances, which stood up nearly a foot and looked like feathers, or maybe sails on a swordfish. The two of them rolled around on the floor snapping and clawing at each other while the rest of us looked on neither interfering nor commenting.

Gareth wrapped his arms around me and I responded in kind, feeling my heart beat against his ribs. Jace slipped up to my other side and leaned down to ask. "Your doing?"

I bit my lip and shrugged while he rolled his eyes and kissed my cheek. Across the table Alan raised an eyebrow and gave me a look that made me squirm in Gareth's arms. Bodark just grinned and then chuckled softly as he turned back to watch the fight. I fear I was no longer looking like the unaffected Elf I was supposed to be.

On our side of the table Angel gave a high pitched yip and pushed back from the table while her two guards flanked her to either side, their eyes hungrily watching the fight. I had to wonder if they were hoping for leftovers, then nearly gagged at the image.

Adara and Miles looked worried but neither moved from their chairs nor pushed back from the table. Perhaps they believed their power would protect them if necessary.

"That is enough." Valentine called softly then made a motion with his hand and reached for something hanging around his neck. There was blood on the wall and carpet the sharp musky scent of it filling the room. With a snap of his fingers both Belinda and Marcus were suddenly back in human form. I stilled in Gareth's arms, my breath catching in my throat. What was this?

On the table Kit hissed. Next to my ear Jace swore, and Gareth's arms tightened around my body in surprise.

Valentine watched the pair avidly, waiting I think, to see who would crawl to their feet first. Marcus just barely made it and I was horrified to see the welts and cuts upon him. He should have healed when he shifted and I made a surprised sound low in my throat which caused him to glance sharply at me. *She isn't the problem you fool!* His mind blazed through mine and I felt both Jace and Gareth stiffen next to me.

Apparently Valentine either didn't hear him or chose to ignore him as he let out a high pitched laugh. "Put it on." He told Belinda sharply indicating the collar lying on the floor near the overturned chairs. The three of us watched in disbelief as Belinda made no protest, just simply snapped the collar around her throat and handed the end of the leash to Marcus who took it with a grimace, righted his chair, and then pulled it back to the table so he could sit.

“Marcus...” Valentine growled and Marcus bared his teeth but gave Belinda a sharp yank which caused her to fall back to her hands and knees. His eyes dropped to the table as we all waited for Belinda to crawl to her chair and climb onto it.

I felt the blood drain from my face and pressed my hand to my stomach while Goldy circled in her cave and curled into a very tight ball her gold eyes whirling in agitation and looking as worried and sick as I suddenly felt.

Nick and several of our men slipped into the room and spread out around us. Owen moved farther away from the table and directly into the path between me and Valentine. The hair on his ruff and back standing straight up on either side of his bejeweled collar which shifted so the jewels were no longer in random patterns. I blinked and Owen wasn't wearing a jeweled collar at all, but one that was surrounded in tiny silver crosses. His growl was one low continuous rumble as he fastened his dark brown eyes on Valentine watching his every move. His posture fairly screamed stay back and there was no way he was letting Valentine near the three of us. Whatever he'd done to Belinda and Marcus to control them was not going to happen to us.

“Kids will be kids.” Valentine told us in an amused voice as he turned back to the table and stretched his legs under it. His eyes flicked to Owen and narrowed slightly but he continued to smile and glanced down the table at us. I couldn't help thinking he looked very much at home at the head of our table and that I needed to take back my earlier thought. Valentine bothered me a lot!

On the table Kit's head swung back and forth between Marcus and Valentine, his little tongue flicking out. I could see he was highly agitated but was shocked when he launched himself into the air and straight at Valentine's head.

“Kit!” I cried sharply.

“Hush.” Gareth whispered next to my ear when I would have called him back. I took a breath realizing he was right. We needed to know what we were dealing with here and Kit had the best chance of getting answers for us. I won't say I was calm, but I managed to not say anything more as Kit flapped the twenty feet or so to the other end

of the table then nearly stood on his wing tip as he circled Valentine who watched him through narrowed eyes.

An ugly look tightened Valentine's delicate features and his arm was suddenly over his head his fingers clenching empty air as Kit first evaded then hissed at him, flicking his tail as if in insult. Valentine lowered his hand as he glared angrily at Kit already winging toward Marcus. Judging by Kit's flight pattern, I could tell it was more than a fly by he was interested in.

Put out your arm, put out your arm, put out your arm! I chanted in my mind then sighed when Marcus held out his forearm above the table at shoulder height. Kit took the hint and came in fast his little claws puncturing Marcus who winced but took both the blow of his weight and the scratches without comment. In her chair next to them Belinda leaned forward a strange look on her face. Marcus growled at her and she eased back into the chair her fingers digging into the arms. She sat there favoring her side and I had to wonder if she too hadn't healed during shift.

Milos muttered and leaned forward while Kit dipped his head and ran his tongue over the tiny cuts he'd just inflicted on Marcus. When he raised his snout I could see traces of blood on him. His head turned round and he caught my eye just before he launched himself back into the air and sailed to our end of the table. Beside me Jace presented his forearm and Kit wasted no time in landing. Once on his arm, Jace brushed back my waist length red-gold hair with his other hand and lowered Kit so he could make the short hop back to my shoulder. Seconds later he had his head buried at my nape his warm body pressed into the side of my neck. I expected him to speak but surprisingly he remained quiet. I had to wonder just how bad it was if it had managed to silence Kit.

While I was sitting there worrying, Nick, who is Gareth and Jace's second in command, moved to Jace and whispered something in his ear. "Bring him in." Jace growled then turned his green eyes to Gareth. Gareth looked at him curiously but released me when Jace held my chair so I could be reseated. Whispers broke out around the room when a short dark haired man was dragged into the room by two of

our guards. Angel's men moved out of the way as they pulled him into the room and stopped just behind Adara's chair.

The man's face was battered and bleeding. One of his eyes was swollen. He turned the other one on me and spat on the floor in my direction. To the right of me Cursed took a step forward and growled low. Owen, still halfway between Valentine and me, flicked his eyes but didn't budge. Kit poked his head out from under my hair but made no other move. Gareth sat back down in his chair at the head of the table content for the moment to allow Jace to deal with this newest problem.

"Ricky, I must admit I'm surprised to see you again. Though not I suspect, as surprised as you are to be standing here. You must tell us how you managed to regain your memory and find your way back to us so quickly." Jace spoke softly his voice like velvet covered steel. He'd turned his chair around and was leaning on the back of the leather and he appeared calm enough for the moment. Around the room people shifted in their seats and low comments filled the air.

Ricky's eyes swept the room hesitating briefly just down the table on my side. I'm fairly certain no one in the room missed the fact that his eyes widened slightly. "Go to hell." He told Jace abruptly and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Hmm I thought you might say something like that." Jace responded with a smile. It wasn't a happy smile or even a tolerant smile but something much darker. Jace made a high pitched grating noise that sent a shiver up my spine and caused all of the Were folks around the table to curse under their breaths. Ricky dropped his arms and actually struggled while two of Nick's men held him between them. His struggles must have caused him to sweat because the scent of hyena wafted toward me across the ten or so feet separating us.

A muscular little man just over two feet tall appeared in the air in front of Jace. His name is Snick and he is an elemental, a lower Demon or gnome if you prefer. He's got dark brown hair, was wearing a black one piece that covered him from neck to ankles and had his arms crossed over his chest. He glanced around the room and tilted

his head up at Jace patiently waiting for instructions. Snick's job was to take care of things, something he was very good at.

Jace spoke to him in a strange language while Milos leaned around Jace's chair. "You have the most interesting associates." He told Gareth his eyes gleaming as he first glanced at Kit's tail draped around my throat and then over to Snick still floating in the air in front of Jace.

The more Jace talked the more agitated Snick became until the little man winked out only to reappear in front of Ricky who reared back and yelled while he struggled to get free. His reaction didn't really surprise me, given the last time Snick had touched him just a few days ago, he'd wiped his memories. Obviously Jace had been too kind in having Ricky placed unharmed on a park bench across town. Without any memories of who he was, you would have thought it would be the last we would have seen of him. Unfortunately for us, someone had retrieved Ricky and somehow returned his memories. That he had seen me shift and knew what I was was worrisome. That he had shared that information with whomever he was working with was downright alarming. Even worse, we didn't know who that someone might be. This had all happened before I'd called my four to me, so none of them knew anything about any of it.

"Do you know what they are saying?" I asked out loud in Elvish. My question aimed at the men behind me or Owen.

"I'm sorry Princess, I don't speak Gnome." Amras replied from behind my chair. Owen's ears flickered and he shook his head but didn't turn.

"He asks the little one to tell him who returned the memories. What memories does he speak of My Lady?" Cursed asked.

"The man's a spy and Jace had Snick erase his memories several days ago. Jace had him removed from here. Someone must have found him and done something to restore them. We suspect we have him to thank as tour guide for the problem we had earlier in the tunnels."

"He appears to dislike you Princess."

I sighed and nodded. “I killed his lover.” Apparently Amras didn’t know what to say to that. Actually she was on her way to attacking me first and let’s face it Dragon and Trolls just don’t get along.

Down the table Marcus coughed and I lifted my eyes to him. He had swiveled his chair so that Belinda was slightly behind him and could not see his expression. Of course with her leash firmly in his grip it seemed the tables had turned. Valentine was too busy watching Ricky to notice. The look he gave me was...well it nearly made me blush. Apparently I’d impressed him. On my shoulder Kit hissed and his little teeth pulled the hair at my nape, his way of telling me to stop paying attention to Marcus. I winced and reached for Kit but he grabbed another mouthful letting me know he wasn’t about to be removed from his perch. “Would you quit?” I muttered then dropped my hands back to my lap as Gareth cleared his throat. When my gaze turned his way he was leaning his chin in his palm and his eyes caressed my face the look he gave me reminding me just who’s bed I’d be occupying later. My mouth went dry as I swallowed and felt heat invade my body from the anticipation.

Bodark leaned forward sharply his nostrils flaring. Beside him Alan made a low purring noise in his throat. Gareth lowered his lashes the only sign he made that their attention irritated him.

“May I ask why Princess?” Amras asked. His voice hesitant as if he knew something had just happened but he wasn’t sure what it was.

Why what, I thought for a second then gave myself a mental shake. “It was me or her.” I replied. “I don’t like Trolls.” Plus at the time I’ thought she was sleeping with Gareth. At least that’s what Jace had led me to believe. Though if she hadn’t been Troll, it’s possible I wouldn’t have actually eliminated the competition so to speak. Or maybe I would have. I’d recently discovered I didn’t much like sharing. I know, I know, it doesn’t make sense to be jealous especially given the fact that I currently have six lovers all my own. But there it is.

I really needed to pay attention here I thought sourly as coughing erupted down the table again. And something was going to have to be done about the fact that my upper shield wasn't as secure in mixed company as I thought.

Behind me I heard Cursed whisper his voice sounding shocked. "Did she say Troll?" I didn't hear Amras answer so he must have just nodded. Trolls and Elves don't like each other much either. In fact the only one around here that seemed to like Troll was hanging between Nick's men and whimpering. Obviously whatever Snick was doing was extremely painful.

"Is this necessary?" Adara finally demanded. Her delicate Asian features screwed up in a frown as she leaned her arms on the table and glanced toward Gareth. If we were waiting to see who would break first, we might have just had a winner. Although it would have been logical to suspect Angel was the one involved with Ricky instead of Adara. Since they were, after all both Hyenas. But then a Werehyena didn't have the necessary skills to replace someone's memories whereas a Sorceress might. So what would Adara have to gain by infiltrating Gareth and Jace's operation?

Gareth's eyes went flat as he looked down the table at the Sorceress. "Someone sent our little friend back to us." He informed her coldly. "I'd like to know why."

Adara's glance slid to Angel's. "Aren't you going to do something?" She demanded.

Angel shrugged a shoulder and stared back at Adara her gaze flicking toward Gareth then back. "He's not mine." She replied abruptly then settled back in her chair and turned away from Adara who gave her a disgusted look then subsided back into her own chair. Out of the corner of my eye I couldn't help noticing her long pointed nails digging into the chair. At the rate she was going it was likely she'd puncture the buttery soft leather. Ricky had signed on to be a Hunter. Once a person did that, it made them Gareth and Jace's problem. The act of signing ultimately severed any ties to whatever local were pack a person originated from. To claim kinship to him would have broken this evening's treaty and Angel didn't appear interested enough in Ricky to risk that kind of repercussion.

“What has this to do with us?” Eldel asked gruffly. I blinked suddenly remembering the Dwarfs were still in the room. They’d been so quiet it was easy to forget they were here.

Jace said something to Snick and the Gnome nodded briefly then pulled his hands back from Ricky who appeared to be swaying on his feet. If not for the guards he might have slid to the floor. Jace crossed to Ricky and grabbed a handful of hair yanking Ricky’s head up. “Ricky’s been a very bad boy. A bit of an inconvenience you might say.” Jace commented angrily as Snick seated himself on Jace’s shoulder and spoke rapidly in his ear. You could see Jace tense and his hand tighten until Ricky pulled air in through his teeth. His dark eyes glared up at Jace from a face gone pale.

Cursed shifted at my side and I nearly jumped when he asked something in Gnomish, his tone sharp. Jace looked over his shoulder at my half Goblin half Elf and nodded curtly. His response caused Cursed to place his hand on his hilt and my eyes widened at the look that slid over Cursed’s face. It occurred to me that Ricky may not be getting out of the room alive.

Jace gave a nod to the two men holding Ricky and they released his arms stepping back but keeping their eyes on him just in case. “Is there anything you’d like to say for yourself?”

Ricky managed to pull himself upright and lock his knees while his eyes moved between Jace and myself. I could feel the hatred pouring off him. Beside me I sensed Cursed roll onto the balls of his feet. “You took something of mine.” He told me in a low voice that vibrated with anger.

About ten feet separated us from each other. He’d barely finished speaking when he launched himself toward me, his body shifting mid-air. I barely had time to blink before his head was neatly separated from his body and flopped to the floor nearly rolling under my chair. Beside me Cursed had slipped to one knee his blood stained sword held at shoulder level, an intense look of satisfaction lighting his large black eyes as he watched Ricky’s body shift back to human sans its head. His eyes swept the room, taking in the reactions of everyone there at a glance. Satisfied he

lowered his sword and wiped it on Ricky's shirt, careful to remove all trace of blood before he rose to his feet and slid it back into the scabbard on his hip.

When he'd returned to his position behind me, I reached down and gathered my dress away from my foot then gave Ricky's head a delicate shove. The force sent it skittering back toward the rest of his body. That he had gone for me was neither surprising nor particularly alarming. I suppose in his position I might have done something similar, though I hoped I'd have been more successful.

Shaking my head I looked up at Jace who still had his arms crossed over his chest and a pleased smile on his face. He glanced down at the lifeless pieces then looked at Nick before turning back to his chair. He hadn't even bothered to flinch when Ricky launched himself toward me, knowing that I was well protected. It made me wonder just what it was exactly that Cursed had asked him. The blood on the carpet was starting to stink and I turned back to the table, while Nick's men removed Ricky's remains from the room.

Stroking Kit I lifted a serene face to the room careful not to smile at the calculating glances aimed my way. I suppose given my attire and breeding it might have been more appropriate for me to scream or faint and act the helpless victim. That I did neither seemed to have surprised several of our guests, specifically the Dwarfs both of whom were eying me with speculation. It looked like my reaction had earned me some little measure of their respect.

The meeting portion of the evening was pretty much over at that point. Gareth had informed our concerned guests that the threat to their livelihoods had been dealt with and being who he was they had no reason to doubt him. In addition between Valentine and Ricky there had been more than enough entertainment for one evening.

Jace invited our guests to enjoy the refreshments and a couple of guards, turned waiter in black pants and white shirts, slipped into the room and began circulating with trays of food. One of them circled the table and took drink orders. Gareth rose from his chair and went to chat with Jace. Across the table from me Alan stood from his chair and moved to Gareth's which also happened to be right next to me.

Across from me Bodark leaned forward giving Alan a frustrated look. Apparently he'd had the same thought but hadn't been quick enough.

"So is it true?" Alan asked, his long fingers making circles on the arm of the chair while his dark eyes searched my face. Kit turned his head up and rolled his eyes at the lame pick up line. Kit had been watching out for me since I was a child, something I'd just recently discovered. Just hours ago he'd explained to me that only immortals would do for me and to ensure I hadn't taken any non-immortal lovers he'd actually turned my previous dates impotent! Imagine how fun that had been for me. Especially since I was unaware until a few days ago that Kit even existed. He literally was the chaperone from hell. Just thinking about it made me smile and helped to keep the desire I was experiencing under control. After all what good would it do me to get all worked up over the man since Kit could emasculate him with a snap of his fingers.

"I'm sorry is what true?" I asked, glancing at him through my lashes.

"He wants to know if you're actually a Faerie Princess and not just in appearance." Bodark added.

I glanced between the two of them while Kit sat calmly in my lap. He'd closed his little red eyes and was resting his head on his tail. He'd been excessively quiet since he'd returned from Marcus and it was just a little disturbing. Even Alan seating himself mere feet away from me hadn't caused him to hiss or growl. I dipped my head slightly and replied. "So the papers have reported."

To my left Milos pushed Jace's empty chair away from the table and scooted closer to me his eyes focused in the region of my lap. If I didn't know he was watching Kit I might have been offended. Judging by the look on his face, I might end up offended anyway. The man seemed to have a single minded obsession. When he reached out a finger toward Kit, Cursed was suddenly standing at his shoulder his arms crossed over his chest, black eyes narrowed in a disapproving frown. Milos blinked several times but got the message and pulled his hand back into his own lap.

"Damn guard" He mumbled.

“You should be thanking him.” I informed him calmly. “He just saved you from losing a finger. Kit does not like being touched by strangers. Consider yourself warned.”

Milos grumbled and turned his chair toward Adara the look on his face frustrated. Had Kit been an actual Dragon I might have been worried that Milos would attempt to steal him, but given the fact that Kit was a Demon and legally mine for all eternity, I had little to worry about.

Bodark chuckled and Alan joined him. Gareth went to talk to Nick but I could feel his eyes on me from across the room. Jace wandered over and inserted himself between Alan and myself by placing his hand on the back of my chair. When I looked up at him he ran a finger across the tip of my pointed ear. “Can I get you anything?” He asked lifting his face to glance down the table in Marcus’ direction. I turned my head slightly, following his line of sight and noticed Valentine was engaged in conversation with Adara and Milos while Belinda and Marcus appeared to be missing from their seats.

Chapter 3

Kit sat up in my lap and swung his head left then right twisting it nearly all the way around before he resettled himself and closed his eyes to angry red slits. I nearly did the same but managed to restrain myself and glanced back up at Jace, feeling the hair on my neck stand at attention as his eyes narrowed somewhere just over my left shoulder.

“Jace.” Belinda’s high pitched voice purred. “How nice to be seen by you.”

Jace lifted an eyebrow and brushed my ear again. “Belinda.” He replied his voice flat.

Behind me Cursed and Amras shifted moving to block Belinda from stepping between the back of my chair and their bodies. “Get the hell out of my way!” She snapped.

“Leave it Belinda, or did you wish to end up like the hyena?”

Her high pitched laugh cut across the room. “Ha, they carry nothing more than toothpicks!” She scoffed.

Alan leaned back in his chair and rested his hand across his waist, his dark eyes intent upon the interaction between Jace and Belinda.

Jace shrugged. “Elven steel leaves a nasty cut, and you don’t seem to be healing well these days.”

His comment must have convinced her because when next she spoke her voice came from behind and to the right of me. “It has been too long.” She told Jace, her voice dropping to something less annoying. It might possibly have passed for a sexy voice except it was still irritating. Or maybe that was just the subject matter. Though I knew Jace had slept with her once upon a nightmare, I wasn’t in the least worried it was something he was likely to repeat. Jace liked his women a lot less mean and a lot more intelligent than Belinda would ever be.

“I see you’ve managed to land on your feet, or knees as the case may be.” He replied stiffly. “Who is your friend? I don’t believe we’ve been introduced.”

Jace took a second to swivel my chair toward the door so that the back blocked me from Alan and Belinda. I nearly knocked my knee into Cursed who was standing so close he was forced to take a step back to avoid me.

Belinda grumbled something then nearly fell to the floor when the leash she was wearing was jerked sharply and Marcus growled in her direction. He was standing on the other side of Cursed with Amras between him and Belinda while the length of leash draped between them.

“Marcus Red meet Jace Green.” She replied sarcastically. Jace looked at Amras who slid farther to his left. Cursed hesitated a heartbeat then moved to my right so that we formed a circle, Jace, Amras, Marcus, Cursed and I.

“Marcus.” Jace replied his dark green eyes narrowing as he looked Marcus over. He held out his hand and the two of them shook.

“May I present Princess Lexi?” He purposefully left off my family name. None of us wanting to go there just yet.

Marcus pulled his hand back and went to a knee in front of me. At the other end of the leash Belinda sputtered angrily but managed to not say anything worth

repeating. "It is an honor." Marcus replied his light brown eyes nearly level with mine.

Jace turned toward Belinda drawing her attention as he remarked in a snide tone to her and those at the end of the table. "Interesting necklace, quite the step down for you isn't it?" I ignored Belinda's response grateful for the distraction Jace was providing.

Kit growled at me when I reached out my hand to Marcus but otherwise didn't move in my lap. He hesitated a second but slipped his fingers around mine and slowly bent over it laying a soft kiss across my knuckles. "The pleasure is mine." I replied. Between Jace's body blocking Belinda and the back of my chair taking care of Bodark and Alan, I was free to search his face while he held my hand.

When he would have stood I squeezed his fingers and closed my eyes thinking, 'if you can hear me blink,' and he blinked. 'Are we in danger?' I asked and he blinked again. 'From Valentine?' when he blinked again I bit my lip and thought, 'we need to speak can you get away?' When he dropped his eyes to the floor I nearly groaned realizing I didn't have much time, so I asked. 'Do you know who I am?' He glanced back up at me and tilted his head to the side neither confirming nor denying. 'Do you know who you are?' I asked and he again neither confirmed nor denied. 'Who did this to you?' I thought, at a loss of what else to ask. I wanted very much to drop my shield but with Belinda this close I dare not.

He didn't respond. He was so pale and the wounds on his neck looked so ragged that it pulled at my heart strings. My fingers slipped from his and I reached to tenderly brush the side of his neck and he froze at my touch. "You did not heal when you shifted?"

"No." He replied softly.

My eyes met his, so wide and wary, and with my fingers still resting on his abused skin I asked. "Would you like me to assist you?" I'm not sure he understood what I was asking but he nodded anyway. "You must say the words." I told him, conscious of our rules of engagement for this meeting. I dare not take the chance that

Valentine would use this against me and could imagine he might say I had forced my will upon Marcus.

Marcus frowned but he replied softly. “Will you assist me...please?”

I pressed my palm against his neck took a deep breath and closed my eyes. In my mind I formed a picture of what he looked like, what he should look like without wounds or pallor and when I had that image clearly before me I thought the word ‘heal’ and pushed it down my arm, out through my fingers and into his body. My will slammed into him and he lean forward to keep from being shoved backward. The healing power surged through his body rebounding right back at me as its significant backlash struck me. I swayed in my chair and felt fingers grasp my shoulder.

“My Lady?” Cursed inquired anxiously and I sensed his body leaning over mine. My fingers slid from Marcus’ suddenly smooth neck and I fought to open my eyes. There was a jackhammer pounding away inside my head, but I didn’t think I was in danger of passing out as I had when I’d healed Jace. Behind us Belinda and Jace were still making sniping comments at each other while I struggled to suck air into my lungs and contain the pain swirling through my brain. I needed to drop my upper shield so I could get rid of some of the ooze that healing Marcus had coated me with but to do it here with Belinda so close was not possible.

“Are you well?” Marcus asked, leaning forward causing Kit to growl again in my lap. Cursed hissed softly in warning and Marcus leaned back slowly. I nodded and nearly fell out of the chair as my eyes focused on Marcus kneeling before me.

From down the table Valentine’s voice echoed across the room as he demanded sharply. “What have you done to my servant?”

Around the room conversations ceased while everyone turned to stare at Marcus who gave me one last look then climbed to his feet. Shocked whispers and startled comments split the silence while I rubbed at my temples and tried not to grimace. Leaning back in my chair I stared up at my red and felt shocked. Apparently I’d fixed more than just his lacerated skin.

Gareth came to my rescue. “Healed him or so it would seem.”

“I did not ask her to.” Valentine responded angrily his fingers rising to the chain about his neck so that he might stroke it. I couldn’t tell if it was a medallion or a figurine hanging amongst his clothing and then his fingers were covering it, completely blocking it from view.

“I did.” Marcus replied as he stood straight and drew back his now fully fleshed out shoulders. His skin was completely unblemished and a healthy hue. He looked like he’d gained sixty or seventy pounds of solid muscle, the extra weight straining the seams of his shirt drawing attention to the well defined chest hidden underneath. His words or perhaps it was his defiance, seemed to annoy Valentine so that he flashed him a look I was unable to interpret. When Valentine stood from his chair everyone around me shifted.

I had to get out of there my head was about to explode and I must lower my shields in order to literally clear my mind. “I need to use the restroom.” I whispered in Elvish and was surprised when Jace reached down and held out his arm for Kit. Did they all speak the language I wondered? I breathed shallow and tried not to moan in pain while Kit climbed onto Jace’s arm without protest. Cursed’s eyes met Jace’s over my head and then his hand was on my arm assisting me from the chair.

“Excuse me.” I muttered and managed to walk without killing myself in my high heels to the door that led to the restrooms. Amras stepped around the length of leash still connecting Marcus to Belinda and fell in behind us. Cursed grabbed the handle and when we were in the hallway beyond he pulled it closed behind us leaning his back against it while I gulped air. Amras remained on the other side.

“Drop your upper shield My Lady and slow your lower one.” He whispered to me in Elvish.

I moaned and let go of the upper shield my fingers holding the sides of my head while Cursed grasped my forearms to keep me from listing sideways. And then I felt both Amras and Cursed slide into my mind their cool touch assisting to sweep out the ooze that coated me in pain.

“Thank you.” I replied when it siphoned off through my lower shield and I could stand up straight again.

Cursed continued to hold my arms and I thought he might pull me against his chest for a moment. Instead his fingers tightened almost painfully while his aura shifted from a jealous dark green to an angry dark red. “This is foolishness My Lady.” He growled at me. “You will get us all killed! What were you thinking?”

“We can not have this conversation now.” I told him, conscious that my upper shield was no longer in place and that the inch and a half of wood behind his back was not going to prevent those on the other side from being party to our discussion.

He made a disgusted sound and pressed his lips together while his eyes roamed my face. “My Lady, you cannot help.” He added. “Not here, not now.”

Biting my lip I nodded. “Not now.” I whispered while he struggled with his frustration.

“Can you hear what is happening?” I asked still speaking in Elvish. He pressed his lips together but nodded.

“The Vampire is angry that you have altered his plaything. His words not mine My Lady.” He replied when I narrowed my eyes at him.

“What of the rest of the room?” I asked.

“Most of them I cannot hear or read however the female Dragon is jealous. She speaks with the male who is ignoring her. He is...distracted.”

“And Gareth and Jace?” I asked, thinking by distracted he meant something entirely different.

He frowned and ignored my thought by telling me. “The green and blue are more concerned for your safety, as are we all My Lady.” He added with a grimace. “If you feel well enough to return?” He asked, his fingers suddenly softening on my arm until the pressure more resembled a caress. His quicksilver mood change surprised me as did the gentle pressure he exerted while tugging me toward him. I couldn't deny the sexual tension that swirled between us and allowed myself to be drawn a step closer.

“Cursed.” I whispered and took another step. “I don’t think this is the time for this.”

He smiled and his eyes turned smoky with desire. “A kiss.” He whispered. “From perfect lips that sweetly speak our language. Do not deny me My Lady.” He urged and my arms slid round his waist while he bent over me. His mouth whispered across mine. “I will not bleed you.” He promised and I groaned and clutched him tightly. His tongue slipped between my lips stealing my breath and igniting my blood. His mind brushed at mine no longer cool or impersonal while hands slid under my hair and held me to his chest.

We kissed for several moments and then he set me back on my feet and caressed my cheek. “My Lady.” He whispered. “We’re about to have company.” Then the door knob turned and I snapped my upper shield into place as Gareth stepped through the door closing it behind him. He jerked his head at the portal and Cursed gave me a look full of promise before he disappeared leaving me alone with Gareth.

I was afraid he might chastise me but his eyes were kind as he held out his arms. I wasted no time in pressing myself against him and the sound he made low in his throat made me shiver. Gareth ran his fingers through my hair and I pressed my cheek against his chest. I breathed deeply, pulling the familiar scent of him into my lungs and sighed. It felt so good to touch him and when I lifted my head he buried his palm against my neck tilting my face up for his kiss. “You are doing wonderfully.” He whispered against my mouth his lips nibbling at mine.

My eyes fluttered closed and I lifted my arms to wrap them around his neck. “I just want this to be over.” I whispered while he tucked my head under his chin.

“Not much longer.” He replied while his hand slid over the bare skin on my lower back sending a shiver through me.

“You keep that up and they will be finishing the meeting without us.” I teased.

His fingers stilled and he growled low and soft and I found myself backed against the wall while his lips devoured mine. His clever fingers lifted the material of my dress and slid up my thigh while I writhed and pressed myself against the front of

him wrapping a leg around his hip. My dress had not been designed for undergarments and his fingers found no obstacles as they slipped in to the hair at the juncture of my thighs.

“Oh God...I’ve missed you!” I moaned thinking it had nearly been twenty four hours since I’d felt his hands on my body. Since the first moment I’d met Gareth and Jace I found I couldn’t be alone with them without wanting them.

And then his fingers were working me and he was whispering. “Let me in.” Both my shields collapsed and there was only the feel of Gareth touching me, filling me with pleasure. His mind slid into mine and more distantly I could feel Jace’s caress cross my senses and knew that he was with us. My body tensed as a low throbbing pressure built spreading outward through my limbs in an explosion of ecstasy that robbed my strength and had me trembling in his arms. He splayed his hot fingers across my lower stomach sending mini-shocks through me while I leaned my head against his chest and tried to remember how to breathe.

“Ummm.” Gareth whispered while his lips brushed my temple and ear. “Very nice.” I wasn’t yet capable of speech so I just nodded and continued trying to fill my lungs with air. He drew little imaginary circles on my skin for a moment or two and then he leaned down and his teeth grazed my ear as he told me. “Just one more.” And then his fingers slid back into me and my eyes closed as my head dropped back against the wall.

This time he built the pressure quickly, bringing me to the edge then pulling me back only to repeat the process until I was panting and writhing in his arms. When my release finally came I cried out sharply and felt my legs buckle under me. Gareth chuckled softly and smoothed down my dress while he cradled my body and rained kisses across my cheek and chin. My eyelids were heavy as I looked up at him. He was wearing one of those pleased masculine smiles I found so endearing, usually because I was floating in a haze of pleasure whenever they appeared.

“I suppose you expect me to walk back out there like this?” I asked, my voice sounding a little hoarse.

He grinned then chuckled. "I could carry you." He replied then wiggled his eyebrows at me when I laughed. His face stilled for a brief second and I knew he must be listening to something. Then his dark blue eyes were shining and a mischievous smile stretched his lips. "We should go. Can you stand?"

Grumbling I forced my knees to lock and stepped back from him taking deep breaths. "I think so." I replied. "But you don't make it easy."

"That was never my intention." He chuckled. "Don't forget to." And he made a motion with his hand which reminded me I was completely unshielded. Nodding I lifted first my lower crystal shield, feeling it snap into place like a clear dome.

"Quickly...now the other." He whispered leaning forward to give me a quick kiss.

I didn't know what the rush was, but I complied as he slipped a loose hair over my ear and turned me toward the door. "Really, what exactly was your intention?" I joked as he opened the door and swept me back into the conference room. I took two steps into the room and my eyes widened in shock and I no longer needed to hear his answer. Owen was lying on the floor not five feet from the door. He blinked his dark eyes up at me then lifted his lips and ran his pink tongue over his teeth as if to say, yum yum. Amras made a sound to my left and I turned my head toward him. His face was flushed and his pupils were dilated so that the violet color was a mere sliver around the edges. Cursed didn't look much better and when I glanced at him he briefly swept back his coat leaving me no questions about the state of his thoughts. I winced to see his most tender parts pressed so firmly against the leather of his pants but he smiled and flashed his pointed teeth at me his dark eyes sparkling with humor and desire.

I turned back to the room in time to see Kit winging toward me his little red multi-faceted eyes sending miniature laser beams of light around the room. He landed on Gareth's forearm and quickly jumped to my shoulder then spent several seconds rubbing against my neck. "Ummm mmm, tasty." He whispered in my ear and I smiled and felt a blush stain my cheeks, suddenly remembering that I had a tendency to broadcast during pleasure. Apparently my men had reaped the benefits of Gareth's efforts and it looked as if they were all well pleased with me.

Jace was still standing next to Belinda and Marcus and Valentine had joined them. Nick and three of his guards had moved in close and his eyes flicked over me. He was huge and bald and the look in his eyes was tense but he gave me a smile letting me know that he too had felt the effects though for him and his men it was more along the lines of a warm sense of well being not the full blown nerve tingling dig your nails in the bedding while you scream out your pleasure type of feeling. Not exactly the same as it was for immortals and not just my men if the state of the others was anything to go by.

None of the Weres seemed overly affected with the exception of Alan who was still seated in Gareth's chair. My eyes caught his for a moment and I could see the fire burning within him. He looked consumed by desire. On my shoulder Kit rumbled. "Throwback." He growled and I frowned wondering what that was supposed to mean.

On the other side of the table Eldal and Dten looked shocked and amused in order. Eldal's face or what I could see of it behind his neatly trimmed beard was pale and his eyes were slightly glazed. Dten's dark eyes were bright and shiny and a smile lifted one corner of his lips when he caught me looking at him. "Well done." He mouthed then chuckled and dipped his head while I sucked air into my lungs and felt my cheeks burn just a little brighter.

Neither Adara nor Angel appeared affected and were in the midst of a conversation with Milos. My gaze flicked over Valentine who was busy watching Gareth beside me. Apparently he hadn't felt my sharing or if he had his face gave nothing away. Behind his back, Jace gave me a smile lifted an eyebrow and blew me a kiss.

I could practically feel the animosity aimed in my direction and dropped my gaze to the floor where Belinda was currently seated. She had either been ordered or knocked there, it was difficult to tell as she'd folded her legs to her side and was leaning on one arm still favoring her ribs. Her eyes were dark pits and the look on her face boded ill for me. "Elven bitch." She hissed then choked when the leash was snapped and her head jerked back. My eyes followed the length of leash up the hand

and arm that held it until I was looking into Marcus' eyes. The breath left my lungs as I stared at the dark green aura surrounding him and felt the weight of his rage smash into me like a fist.

My foot faltered and Gareth quickly slid his arm around my back pulling me in against his side. "Hmmm." He murmured and I could swear he sounded pleased with himself.

Meanwhile I watched as a slow flush crept over Marcus' face and his fists clenched and unclenched at his sides. Belinda's gaze shifted between the two of us and her eyes narrowed to angry little slits. A growling started deep in her throat and out of the corner of my eye I watched her tense. "Get away from my son!" She screamed and lunged from the floor toward me. Owen was on her in a second his large jaws sinking into her shoulder his weight bearing her to the floor while Marcus yelled and Valentine calmly stepped out of their way. Gareth removed his arm from me and stepped into my path his body effectively shielding me. Behind me I was suddenly flanked by both Amras and Cursed.

Jace slid the opposite direction of Valentine and across the table Bodark shoved back his chair, rose and leaned over the table to watch.

Owen tore a large chunk out of her upper arm and blood spilled across the floor once again. Marcus stood holding the leash but made no move to stop the fight. His eyes lifted to mine and I could see the rage simmering still in his depths. She's your mother? I thought and would have slipped to the floor in shock when he blinked if I hadn't grabbed for Gareth's coat. My God how could that be? Owen managed to get a good grip on her and was shaking her about like a rag doll while she screamed and clawed at him. After nearly a minute he finally dropped her and she lay on the carpet panting and whimpering in pain. Owen glanced at me where I peaked around Gareth, placed his huge paw on her chest and asked the ultimate question with his eyes.

I looked at Marcus who looked strained but gave no indication either way. She had slept with Jace and had tried to kill me. The decision was mine to make. But Marcus thought she was his mother and I wasn't certain how to deal with that. If I let

her live Valentine would surely use her against us. Indecision wracked me and I did what I normally do in these situations, I dropped my upper shield and screamed for Mi. Around the room several people jerked and Gareth tensed but didn't move.

She arrived with a small popping noise that caused Valentine and Marcus to jump. Her sleek tan and grey body wound around my legs while her large amber eyes took in the occupants of the room and widened slightly.

On the floor Belinda screamed and struggled under Owen's weight until he reached down and clamped his jaws around her neck and slowly squeezed. Mi flicked her tail in the air and walked toward the pair, her thirty five pound body rubbing up against Owen so that he made a pleased sound in his throat. The two of them had history and despite the current circumstances he was very grateful to her for having unblocked his memories.

"What is this?" Valentine demanded. "Cats and dogs and miniature Dragons?" His voice held a note of derision and he crossed his arms over his chest and gave Mi a disgusted look. The hair down her back stood up and she turned and hissed at Valentine.

"Bloodless one!" She growled then turned back to me while the room erupted in surprise. She ignored the commotion and seated herself on the carpet a few steps away from Owen. 'Lexi you keep the oddest hours and...company.' Her voice whispered across my mind. 'Be quick child you mother is entertaining the Queen.'

I sucked in air and my eyes widened. No time for that now I thought. Do you recognize anyone here? I asked, conscious that my upper shield was down. Her eyes flicked to Marcus and then down to Belinda.

Yes I recognize both Reds she replied then wrapped her tail around her feet.

He claims she's his mother. And she tried to attack me which means her life is mine to choose.

Mi seemed to mull that over for a moment her amber eyes intense. She glanced up at Marcus and his eyes widened. On the floor Belinda struggled and grabbed a handful of Owens hair pulling it sharply. Owen growled but didn't release his hold.

What would you like me to do child? Mi's voice whispered in my mind.

Getting rid of Valentine came to mind but I pushed that thought away.

Whatever our problems were with him Mi could not help us.

Are you sure? She asked giving me her kitty cat smile. The man means to have your Blue and Green just as he has these two Reds. She replied.

What has he done to them?

Mi tilted her head and gave me a sad smile. I think the question you need to ask child is what have they done to themselves?

Marcus sucked air in through his teeth at Mi's comments.

She claims to be his mother. I told Mi again.

That's because she is. Mi informed me calmly and again my knees nearly buckled and I had to clutch at Gareth to remain standing. Leave it for now. She told me. She does not wish the ultimate release and I cannot assist you without her consent. Some things are not meant to be Lexi. Let him go.

"No!" Marcus screamed causing everyone in the room to jump.

"Whatever is your problem?" Valentine demanded his eyes swinging between Mi, myself, and Marcus. "What the hell are you doing? Stop it this instant!"

Marcus ignored him and gazed at Mi then me. "Please." He begged and implored me with his eyes. Alan and Bodark both muttered something under their breaths. Clearly he didn't want me to take Mi's advice.

Valentine took a step toward Mi who flicked her tail and warned him. "Take one more step and I'll make you wish you were never infected." Valentine stopped abruptly and glared down at her.

"You wouldn't dare!" He demanded and leaned forward as if he would reach for her. His necklace swung free of his coat drawing Mi's glance.

"Ah I see." She replied and blinked her eyes at him. He screamed and ripped at his neck which was suddenly smoking. The chain gave with a snap and he dropped it to the floor where it lay revealing two miniature Red Dragons entwined around each other appearing to writhe amidst the little silver crosses next to them on the chain.

Behind Gareth's back I pulled at my sleeve making sure it covered the charm bracelet with twelve perfectly formed little Dragons of various colors, including my gold and Kit's silver and black. It was my mark of Demon favor, which I'd acquired along with the contract for Kit. It was supposed to have been a brand burned into my body, but Kit had found a loop hole and transformed it into a bracelet which could never be removed.

"Everyone seems to be smoking tonight." Bodark commented and shook his head with a grin. "This has been the most interesting meeting."

Seeing the necklace on the floor, Marcus bent to reach for it but Valentine moved so fast he was a blur and Marcus hit the floor next to Owen and Belinda.

"Let her go." I told Owen while we all watched Valentine wrap the necklace in a handkerchief and stow it in his pocket.

"Get up." Valentine growled at the pair of them. "We're leaving." He gave Gareth a look of pure hatred then turned while they struggled to their feet and followed him toward the door. Marcus reached for Belinda his light eyes locked to mine as he lifted her into his arms then left the room. Out in the hall the elevator dinged and the rest of the occupants breathed a collective sigh at the soft whooshing noise of the elevator moving.

Milos wandered over and glanced down at Mi with a nervous expression on his face. "You don't exist." He told her his voice sounding shaken.

Mi flashed her fangs and tilted her head. "Don't I?"

He sucked in air and ran his hand through his hair. "Your pardon." He told her and went to a knee. I wasn't certain if it was to be closer to her or in homage. "It is an honor to meet you."

With the others gone, I suddenly had a clear view of Bodark and Alan both looked amused at Milos and curious about Mi. Alan raised an eyebrow as I leaned out from behind Gareth but Bodark simply rolled his eyes and sighed.

"Gareth, Jace." Angel commented then with a nod she made her exit.

Adara stood from her chair and smoothed down her dress and with a nod she too escaped. She seemed eager to catch the same elevator as Angel. Milos seated himself on the floor in front of Mi and began asking her all manner of questions. Mi glanced at me with a sour expression then turned back to him when he complimented her. I nearly smiled as she seemed to puff up with pleasure then began speaking quietly. She had always been a sucker for compliments and she could more than take care of herself.

“Princess, did I hear her correctly, is your Mother actually entertaining the Queen?” Amras leaned in to ask, his voice sounding tense.

When I nodded, the two of them exchanged a look I could only describe as dismay. Apparently that wasn't good news but I'd have to deal with it later. Actually I would be dealing with it later...today. Because I'd promised my Mother I'd come up with a plan to handle the media. When I'd told her to take a vacation, I didn't think she would. In fact she must have gone straight from here to the Sidhe. Obviously Grandma had let her in, now whether or not she managed to get the doors opened permanently was another story.

Chapter 4

Now that the major threat in the room had disappeared, I eased out from behind Gareth. “I could use a drink.” I muttered under my breath and Gareth turned to look for one of our waiters.

“What can I get you?” Gareth asked.

“Something strong...and sweet.”

“How about sex on the beach?” He whispered in my ear then chuckled at my soft gasp. His hand caressed my skin under my hair, his fingers sliding beneath the material at the base of my spine before he turned to catch the waiter’s attention. And I pressed back slightly into his fingers, a pleased sound escaping my throat.

“I beg your pardon.” Bodark commented. While Gareth was busy ordering my drink he’d moved to our side of the table. Jace was chatting with Alan who seemed to be paying more attention to me than whatever it was he was saying. Bodark had a drink in his hand and he swirled it thoughtfully.

He was so tall I had to tip my head back to look up at him. “Whatever for?” I asked.

He smiled flashing even white teeth. “I was not aware I was supposed to bow to you.” He teased while I felt my cheeks turn pink. “Ah you blush so charmingly.”

Gareth turned back and glanced up at Bodark with an amused grin. “Doesn’t she?” Then he kissed my cheek and muttered. “I’ll be right back, behave while I’m gone.”

I rolled my eyes which caused Bodark to chuckle. “Now that we’re alone.” He told me then made a point of looking past me and grinned again. I assumed he was looking at Amras and Cursed who with my shield down I could sense behind me. My fingers rose to stroke Kit who was calmly chewing on my hair and muttering under his breath. At my feet Owen was laying with his head propped on his legs, one brown eye focused on Bodark.

“I enjoyed your Little Johnny jokes.” Bodark remarked with a sly grin. On my shoulder Kit spit out my hair and turned to glance up at him. Apparently the Werewolf’s hearing was much better than any of us had realized.

“I’ve got a million.” Kit replied.

Bodark chuckled and glanced down at Owen. “I have no idea what that is or that either.” He told me pointing toward Mi. “But I know exactly what they are not.”

“The wolf smells of Viking to me.” Dten commented in a deep voice from across the table. “The little one on the Princess’ shoulder isn’t something I’d want to tangle with in the dark.” He continued his eyes falling on Mi. “The cat is a fable.”

I glanced sharply at Milos, breathing a sigh when I realized he was so focused on Mi that he was completely oblivious to the rest of us in the room.

“I believe the Wizard is correct, you do have the most interesting associates. But then you yourself are rather interesting. I don’t suppose I could lure you away from your...current situation?”

Behind me Amras laughed sharply while I felt my cheeks turn pink again and I turned to glare at him. His beautiful eyes were sparkling and he crossed his arms over his chest with an amused smile.

“Why does your guard find that amusing?” Bodark demanded as he rolled his head on his shoulders and forced himself to relax.

“My guard is a High Lord of Faerie.” I informed him primly, not sure why it was important for me to point that out. “He has a unique sense of humor.” I assured him.

“And the other?” Bodark asked. “The dark one that’s handy with the sword? Is he a High Lord of Faerie too?”

I turned and looked at Cursed who had a blank look on his face. His fingers were caressing the hilt of his sword. A sure sign the topic was distressful to him. “They are both...handy.” I replied with an amused smile. “But to answer your question, he is formerly the Queen’s elite guard.”

“And now he guards you eh?” Bodark asked.

I smiled at Cursed my eyes meeting his and my voice nearly a purr as I replied. “Yes he is mine.” When I turned to Bodark he seemed disconcerted as his eyes slid first to Jace then across the room to Gareth. It was clear he was wondering just what the relationship might be so I glanced at Amras then back to Bodark while my fingers stroked Kit and added. “They are all mine.”

Bodark’s eyebrows rose significantly and it looked like he might say something, but Kit beat him to it. “He’s probably laughing because of the curse.” Kit offered helpfully.

“What curse?” Bodark asked sharply his eyebrows nearly disappearing into his hairline.

“Impotency....but it only affects humans or once humans.” Kit replied gravely and I nearly swallowed my tongue. Behind me Amras laughed again and Cursed muttered under his breath. On the floor Owen glanced up at me then shook his head and resettled his chin on his paws.

“If you do manage to somehow perform, you might find yourself...permanently smaller after the deed.” Jace jested and there was a merry twinkle in his eye. Apparently he’d been listening to the conversation and helpfully added his own two cents. Not that I’d ever done it to anyone, in fact I’d done just the opposite as Amras could well attest. Jace had been intrigued by the notion and poor Bodark couldn’t tell if he was serious or not.

“Well of course you would.” He replied then his eyes widened in shock when Jace gave him a meaningful look and shook his head. “Good God.” He breathed glancing at me. “You have got to be kidding! I saw you heal Valentine’s lucky, but...you can’t do that to a man, can you?”

Elves don’t lie I thought, then nodded while he stared at me in horror and actually took a step backward. Theoretically it was possible. “Perhaps...if the man displeased me.” I informed him then made a point of glancing at both Amras and Jace. Amras laughed again secure in the knowledge that I’d already increased his size twice, and for my own pleasure. The odds of me undoing that work were fairly slim. Jace of course wasn’t concerned in the least, knowing just how well he’d always pleased me.

Poor Bodark wasn’t sure what to think. My comment seemed to ease his concerns but the overall concept still horrified him. “And does that happen often?” He finally asked.

I had to stop myself from laughing at his earnest question. Elves couldn’t lie though and honestly I didn’t remember even once over the past week not being completely satisfied. “What do you think?” I finally replied.

Bodark smiled and held out his hands palm up. “I think...that any man, who didn’t give it his all, might well deserve his fate.”

Jace stepped over Owen and slid his arm around my waist. “Well said. But then our little Lexi is just full of surprises, and it can be difficult at times to know just what might please her.” He commented then grinned when I gave him a dirty look. “But she is certainly worth the danger.”

I snorted and couldn't help rolling my eyes. I know Princesses of Faerie aren't supposed to do that but his comments were just too much. "Really Jace, I think you're trying to frighten our guests." I told him with an annoyed smile.

"When her eyes flash golden like that it is tempting to overlook any danger." Alan commented and I stiffened against Jace as his voice rolled over me and sent my glands into overdrive.

"Something got into his family tree's wood pile." Kit growled and I suddenly realized what he'd meant earlier. No wonder I was having issues with Alan, the man must have a touch of Demon in him!

Bodark looked confused by Kit's comment and turned toward Alan as if to ask what the Dragon had meant. Jace grumbled and pulled me tighter against his side. "Your Dragon has a sharp tongue." Alan commented, and I wasn't too happy with the angry look in his eye.

"Yes indeed, it's not all I have that's sharp." Kit responded flicking out said tongue to show it was indeed sharp and forked. "It takes one to know one." He replied in a bored tone. "This one's taken, find your own."

Alan's fingers tightened on the chair's arm and it looked like he was struggling to remain calm. That must have been Kit's goal because his anger didn't appear to affect me in the least.

The waiter came to my rescue handing me something tall and cold with a cherry in it. I took a sip and closed my eyes sighing in satisfaction as I rolled the sweet concoction around on my tongue before it slipped down my parched throat. It felt so good I nearly purred. "Stop that." Jace growled next to my ear causing my eyes to pop open. He gently took my drink from my hand and set it on the table while Bodark looked around the group with a curious expression. In his chair Alan's eyes met mine with a look that told me he'd just felt that, and liked it very much, thank you.

"Stop what?" Bodark asked looking around before finally settling on me. He could tell something had happened he just didn't know what it was.

“Sorry.” I muttered while around me men shifted, probably trying to adjust themselves in their pants.

On my shoulder Kit made mmm mmm noises and nibbled playfully at my ear. “I love it when you do that.” He whispered. “Its so, delicious, makes me want to be Next!”

“It was nothing.” Jace commented running the back of his finger down my cheek then dropped it to my shoulder and giving Kit’s tail a tweak.

Kit lashed his tail grumbling under his breath while Bodark muttered. “Next?”

Eldal muttered and got up from his chair. “I’m too old for this, I need fresh air. Jace.” He muttered then headed toward Gareth who was speaking to Nick near the door.

Dten smiled and also pushed back from his chair but he hopped down and walked around to our side of the table. “Good work in dealing with the problem.” He told Jace, his dark eyes shifting to me so that I held my breath and thought ‘happy thought, happy thought’ which caused him to purse his lips thoughtfully and nod. “Now that that’s all settled, I believe I’ll go home and wake my mistress.” I heard him mutter, and then he too turned toward the door.

Mi jumped to the table in front of me. “I need to get back.” She told me her voice breaking the awkward silence. I pulled away from Jace and ran my fingers over her head and back, smiling when she purred for me. I leaned in and kissed her head. Be careful her mind whispered across mine. The bloodless one means to have your Drakes. He is not sane. She continued her eyes searching mine as she continued. I fear he will use you to get them.

I nodded, understanding her concern and said out loud. “Thank you for coming. We’ll talk soon? I haven’t forgotten my promise, first thing tomorrow, unless it isn’t necessary anymore?”

“The verdict is still out on that.” She replied. “I’ll have to get back to you.” She glanced around at my men, her amber eyes taking them all in then she sighed and winked out.

Milos wandered over, a rapt expression his face. “That was most informative.” He told us then shook Jace’s hand. “Thank you. Good job in getting rid of the problem.” Then his eyes skipped over me and he hesitated briefly but turned without saying anything and went to shake hands with Gareth at the door.

“He’s an odd man.” Bodark muttered then shook his head. “But not without his talents. As much as I hate to say it, I think it’s time for me to leave. If you ever have need of protection,” He offered. “Call me.” Then he reached into his leather jacket and withdrew a card. It had a picture of a wolf and a phone number. “That’s my private line.” He confided with a smile. “I always give it my all, and I think you’d be worth the risk.” Then he bowed and moved to the door while Jace watched him through narrowed eyes.

In his chair Alan signed. “I suppose a moment alone with the Princess is too much to ask?”

He just nodded when Jace turned his snapping green eyes on him. I bit my lip and tried not to smile when he sighed and heaved himself to his feet. He reached into the pocket of his well tailored black jacket and withdrew a card which he too held out to me. When Jace would have plucked it from his fingers he pulled it back and flicked it through the air straight at me. I caught it easily, causing Alan to narrow his eyes. “It seems we have something in common.” He added. “This is a small town and I’m certain we’ll run into each other again. In the meantime if your circumstances change here and you need... anything at all, please call.” I stared down at the card for a moment then slipped both into my bodice. My eyes followed him as he sauntered toward the door. He gave me a last sultry glance then he was gone.

Kit dipped his tail into the top of my dress no doubt trying to pry free the cards. “Would you stop that?” I groused at him.

“What?” He growled back at me. “You don’t want anything to do with either of those mongrels, especially not the short one!”

“You never know when you might need an ally.” I told him as the elevator dinged out in the hall and our last guest finally left. “Now if you don’t mind could you please come down from there you’re giving me a neck ache?”

He grumbled but shifted to smoke and was suddenly standing in front of me, a tall gorgeous black haired swarthy skinned red eyed Demon. He really was tall, dark, and handsome. Too bad the look he was giving me nearly ruined the finely chiseled planes of his cheeks. And the hand on his hip and disapproving look wasn’t all that pleasant either.

Amras flopped into a chair and ran his hand over his face while Cursed went for the bar. Kit glanced at him and stuck his tongue out at me before joining him. “Can I have my drink now?” I asked Jace who was also frowning but handed me back my glass without comment. I managed to get the rest of it down without being laid out across the table or causing anyone to embarrass themselves. Owen quietly shifted and I watched as his long yellow hair danced and swayed across his broad back and narrow hips while he joined the others at the wet bar.

Gareth’s fingers slipped onto my shoulders, gently massaging. Sighing I dropped my lower shield and rubbed at my temples. I must be the luckiest girl in the world I thought glancing around at the six men left in the room each of them more handsome than the next, so why was I thinking of red hair and sherry brown eyes?

“What do you think Gareth?” Jace asked.

“I think we should go to bed.”

“Is that going to fix this?”

“Not permanently. But I too like to give it my all.”

Jace grimaced as he lifted my hand his fingers pushing back my sleeve so he could look at my bracelet. “Valentine’s necklace looked a lot like this. Any reason you think that might be?” He asked Kit who had returned to the table with the rest of the men.

Kit glanced down at his drink then tossed it back, grimacing and closing his eyes. “What a foul concoction.” He muttered then continued with. “I really couldn’t

say. Professional courtesy and all that. But if I could...I might wonder if there wasn't a Thrones involved. He tasted...angry."

Jace nodded and flicked his finger over my wrist, turning the bracelet around so that each of the colors, blue, green, gold, black and silver, red, white, black, copper, silver, bronze, grey, and brown were revealed.

"How about we worry after some sleep?" Owen asked. "Lexi is tired and so am I."

Heads nodded but no one rushed from their chairs. Owen frowned then snapped his fingers and the lot of us found ourselves seated on couches and chairs in the middle of the living room downstairs.

"I guess that settles that." Gareth chuckled then reached for my hand and drew me to my feet. "Good night gentlemen." He told them and drew me down the hall. Behind us Jace pushed himself to his feet but was speaking to Owen as we made our way down the hall.

"I don't think you'll need these." Gareth commented just inside his room as he slid his fingers into my bodice and withdrew the cards I'd tucked out of sight. How had he seen me put them there?

"You thought I'd let that overgrown dog and cat in your vicinity without keeping an eye on you? That was really rather naughty of you to leave either of them with any kind of hope." He told me as he turned me around and started undoing the buttons at the top of my neck.

"Now Gareth, don't be jealous. Valentine wants both you and Jace as trophies like Belinda and Marcus. It never hurts to have allies. Besides with Kit around I'm sure they'd find themselves impotent anyway. You do know he's been taking care of that for years?"

Gareth made a low noise in his throat. "No and you'll have to explain that to me later."

I turned and gave him a hug. "Just be thankful he considered you and Jace worthy. Otherwise I might have left the club as frustrated as I was when I arrived."

“I definitely want to hear this story.” He replied giving me a squeeze.

Jace entered the room and closed the door behind him already pulling off the beautiful coat Areth had provided him for the evening and tossing it over a chair. “You get those damn cards?” He growled as he pulled off a shoe and tossed it to the floor.

Gareth chuckled as he slid my dress down my body then held it for me while I stepped out. I was completely naked beneath except for my four inch heels and the long wicked looking blade strapped to my calf. The ring on my finger and the nine inch blade had been a gift to me from Jace and Gareth earlier in the evening. I leaned over and removed the sheath then stood back up again. Jace sucked in air and Gareth murmured low in his throat as he turned me around and sat me on the bed. When I would have raised a foot to remove the heels he placed his hand on my knee. “Leave them for now.” He urged giving me a sexy smile and taking the blade from me. I nodded and crawled to the middle of the large bed. My eyes flicking between the two of them as their clothing fell away.

Easing onto the pillows I pulled my hip length hair out from behind me, spreading it out on the pillows while Jace drew air into his lungs. “I love it when you do that.” He told me. The buttons came free on his slacks and he edged them over his hips. I was happily reminded that none of my men wore underclothing. He stalked to the bed and climbed in. Gareth turned down the lights, leaving the one in the closet on so we could find our way in the pitch black.

Jace ran his hands up my ribs and over my breast while I arched against his palms. My hand slid down to cup him and he hummed for me. Gareth crawled onto the bed tucking his body against mine. His lips found my neck and his fingers slipped into the curls between my legs. “Now,” Gareth whispered thickly. “I think you know exactly what my intentions are.”

I’m soaring, golden wings stretched out to capture the currents as I ride the black velvety night air. Stars twinkle across the sky as the full moon edges over the

tops of the tall pines laid out below me and reflected off the ocean water lapping the shore. The moon is dark red.

The feeling of freedom is incredible, and I twist my body into a spiral looping several times, the tips of my wings just missing the tree tops. Below me I feel life everywhere. A family of squirrels stirs in their nest, as I pass. To my left a herd of deer freeze, nostrils flared to catch my scent, their hearts accelerating as I, the hunter pass over their heads. But I'm not interested in hunting. Tonight I need to fly, to throw myself across the sky and taste the scents on the damp night air.

And then, I am not alone. Looking up I see several dark shadows plummeting down from above. Fear clenches at my heart and I veer sharply. These shadows are closer now, dropping from the sky like stones straight at me. Black, red, and white wings filling the night air, their size eclipsing me. An anguished cry escapes my throat as I plummet to the ground.

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

I open my eyes and I'm in a cavern. I can feel the weight of the Earth pressing down, comforting. The clean smell of rich dirt fills my nostrils. I am surrounded by Dragon, cradled gently against the belly of a huge silver beast. I can feel its warmth pressing into my back. Turning my head I gaze into his huge silver eye and thoughts of love and caring overwhelm me.

And the dream shifts and I am seated Indian style on a dirt floor, I am clothed and facing the man I believe to be my father and he is speaking to me, his lips moving but I cannot hear the words he is saying. Leaning forward I strain to hear him anxiety filling me. *Raise your shield* his mind whispers across mine and I comply, raising my

golden shield of dragon scales which protects my mind and his voice asks *Lexi can you hear me?*

Yes, are you Roark? Are you my Father?

Silver eyes search my face as he nods and replies. *I don't have much time. Lexi I sense you are in danger, you must be careful...only Knight can protect you.* He assured me, his image fading around the edges. *Tell your Mother....I love her.*

No! I scream as he fades and my eyes snap open, sweat pouring off me making me feel both sticky and shaky.

“Lexi?”

Groaning I turned my head on the pillow to find Jace dressed and seated next to me. His dark green eyes concerned. Behind him standing next to the bed was Gareth also looking concerned. Both of them had their hands well away from me, Gareth no doubt remembering the way I'd unmanned him the last time he'd tried to wake me during a similar dream.

“You're shielded.” Jace informed me then breathed a sigh when I dropped my mental armor. “Are you well? You cried out and you've never shielded in your sleep before.”

I sat up in bed and pushed back my sweat damp tresses tucking several strands behind my ears. “I spoke to my father.” I told them then worried at my lip.

Gareth lifted his hip and sat on the edge of the bed. “We sensed your dream...it was different this time.”

“Not just Dane.” I nodded. “Marcus and a White were there too.”

“And then you were with the Silver?” Jace asked.

“Roark, my Father.” I told them then smiled. It was nice to have him confirm that even though my Mother had already done so. I was going to enjoy relaying his message to my Mother, I couldn't wait to see the look on her face and maybe that would help to get me out of the dog house.

“Lexi?”

“Oh, sorry.” I muttered pulling my thoughts back. “He thinks I am in danger and he said...only night could protect me.”

Jace looked at Gareth and replied. “Night can protect you? That is rather cryptic. Did you ask him what it means?”

“No he said he didn’t have long and he disappeared before he could tell me anything else.”

“What will you do?” Jace asked, his dark green eyes searching my face. The agreement we had was that I would stay for at least a year but that they would not prevent me from seeking out and meeting any of the ten men my Father and his partners had created. It was my duty and neither would stand in my way though they didn’t have to like it much.

I glanced down at my hands and shook my head. “I have no idea.”

“Time enough to decide later.” Gareth remarked. “How about I get you some coffee while you shower then we can discuss the media blockading the street upstairs?” When I nodded he added, “And I’ll let the others know no one attacked you in our bed. It alarms them when you shield if they can’t see you.” He told me with a sardonic smile. Then he moved to the door and into the hall.

“What time is it?”

“A little after ten.”

Not surprising since we hadn’t fallen asleep until the wee hours. I ran my fingers through my hair and looked at him. He was wearing his normal jeans and a T-shirt this one in a light green. He had his ankles crossed and had on loafers but no socks. He held out his arms to me and I pushed back the covers then crawled into them resting my cheek against his chest as I straddled his hips.

“So what shall we do?” He teased as his hands dropped to cup my naked bottom and snuggle me in against him. He uncrossed his ankles and kicked his loafers to the floor.

I slipped my fingers under the bottom of his T-shirt and tickled the skin just above his waistband rocking my hips across the front of his pants as I did so. “Mmmm, I think I’m supposed to be taking that shower.” I told him.

He lifted a handful of hair and asked. “Do you require assistance?”

I leaned back then told him. “Why yes, I believe I do.”

“Good because you were going to have it either way.” Then he scooted us toward the edge of the bed. “Hold on.”

He carried me to the bathroom and we somehow managed to get his clothing off with me still wrapped around his hips. We made it into the shower and I hugged his shoulders while he helped to wash my hair. When we were done soaping each other up and down, he leaned me back against the tiles and grasped my hips, guiding me onto the hard hot length of him. His mind opened to mine and his desire excited me, sending me over the edge and bringing me gasping and moaning my body clenching around him. I braced my feet against the wall and he dropped his head to my shoulder while he worked his erection deep inside me. My tongue found his ear and he moaned and shoved himself into me faster. “Come for me.” I whispered while I swirled my tongue across the shell of his ear.

“Lexi.” He rasped his mind flooding mine with the exquisite feel of his sensitive head sliding through my tight opening. I’d never felt anything like it and my mind shuddered, my body tightening as he shared with me the feel of his own oncoming orgasm. Our bodies exploded together, our minds so tightly woven that our release trapped us in a loop that brought me again and again the force sending us to the floor in a panting tangle of boneless arms and legs.

The shower door opened and Gareth stood there with a look of such intense need on his face that I shuddered. “Damn.” He muttered glancing down at us. “I don’t know if I should applaud or cry!” I gave him a shaky smile and pushed back my hair as the water continued to cascade over us.

“Applaud definitely.” Jace replied from where he sat slumped with his eyes closed and his head resting against the tile.

“Lexi?” Gareth asked, his dark blue eyes scorching me. I knew what he was asking and felt myself clench around Jace who moaned softly and jerked within me. Gareth must have sensed the movement because his nostrils flared and he reached for the hem of his shirt, pulling it over his head and flipping it behind him. My eyes watched him undo the button on his pants and I tightened again.

“Mmmm.” Jace muttered and raised his hips to me. Gareth’s pants slid to the floor and he stepped into the shower with us while I reached for him, my fingers wrapping around his shaft tugging him toward me. Jace cracked open an eye and smiled as I drew my tongue over the tip of Gareth’s head. I tasted myself on him and purred low. He closed the door and ran his hand across my hair his fingers sinking into the wet strands as his head dropped back. Beneath me Jace stirred and I rocked my hips while I sucked Gareth into my mouth stroking him with my tongue. I ran my hands up the back of his thighs and held him while I worked him in and out.

“Ummm wonderful.” Gareth muttered hoarsely. Beneath me Jace lifted his hips in time to our rhythm while his hand reached to cup my breast and roll my nipple. I breathed in deeply around Gareth’s length and made a pleased sound in my throat. Pleasure poured into me from both of them and I felt the muscles in my throat relax so that I was able to bring all of Gareth in. His hands cupped my cheeks holding me while he slid himself in and out and I timed my breathing to his thrusts. A slowly building heat wrapped itself around my insides, invading my core and spreading outward. Their thrusts became more forceful and I dug my fingers into Gareth’s cheeks while he played my mouth. Jace moaned softly and ground himself into me. Both men were breathing hard straining toward release. It was oh so naughty of me, but I reached into my mind and cracked open the shinny red door holding back the lust that flowed through me like a tornado and pushed it into them.

Gareth cried out and staggered reaching one hand to the wall while his hips pumped frantically. Jace lifted me off the tile with the force of his thrusts and moaned. I hesitated giving them a second to recover then pushed the door open wide and hit them with a stronger jolt. Gareth reared back and I felt his orgasm wash across his

mind while his body came for me and I held him, swallowed, and tried to remember to breathe. Jace moaned and dropped his head to my shoulder as he spilled his seed within me a second time.

“I’m going to need a minute before we try that again.” Jace muttered. His head was still resting against my shoulder and his breathing was ragged.

Gareth pulled himself out of me and leaned a forearm against the tile. “She isn’t even breathing hard.” He rasped

I smiled at the two of them and tilted my head back using the water to rinse out my mouth. It was true. I’d been too focused on their pleasure to worry about my own. Just the feel of them both in me had excited and satisfied.

“Have to do something about that.” Gareth replied. I reached up and patted him on the bottom, chuckling when he made an indignant noise. Jace lifted his head off my shoulder and cracked open an eye.

“Now she looks like a succubus!” He grumbled. I laughed and kissed his chin then lifted myself off him. He watched me stand through narrowed eyes. I had to admit I was feeling rather invigorated. I reached for the soap and lathered up again, then rubbed myself over the back of Gareth who took that for about half a minute before he grabbed me and shoved me up against the wall while his mouth tried to devour mine. He moved his lower body off me and I felt Jace’s hand slide over the outside of my thighs and then his tongue moved over my lips his fingers slipping inside me, forcing my legs farther apart while he worked me. Gareth braced his hands under my arms and held me pinned to the wall while their mouths worked magic on my body. It wasn’t long before Jace’s mouth brought me shuddering and gasping and Gareth chuckled while he nuzzled my neck.

When they finally finished with me Gareth lifted me into his arms and my head lolled against his shoulder like a rag doll. I had neither the strength nor the inclination to argue.

“Now that’s more like it.” Jace chuckled as he turned off the water and went for towels.

Chapter 5

When I could get my arms and hands to function properly Gareth handed me my coffee with a pleased grin. He'd taken the time to reheat it while I was recovering. I gave him a lopsided smile from the middle of the bed while he finished pulling his shirt over his head. Jace was just buttoning his jeans and had an extremely satisfied look on his face too.

We were going to talk. But first I needed to get some caffeine in me and then I'd think about getting dressed. In the meantime I was trying to remember how my body parts were supposed to work. My stomach growled loudly and Jace rolled his eyes slipping into his loafers as he headed toward the door. "Be right back." He told us. I heard voices out in the hall just before he pulled the door closed behind him.

Areth had provided me with a robe which was still draped across the foot of the bed. I was thinking about putting it on when Jace returned carrying a tray with an omelet and country potatoes. The smell caused my tummy to rumble again while Jace slid onto the bed and propped himself up on the pillows. The man loved to feed me and

I waited patiently not even bothering to reach for the silverware. I knew better having had my knuckles gently swatted on several occasions previously. Gareth took the empty mug from me and set it on the night stand. He leaned a hip against the bed, crossed his arms over his chest and watched us from blue eyes that appeared calm and content.

“The others are waiting in the front room for us.” Jace commented as he held up a forkful of ham, cheese, and egg to me. We think they should be part of this conversation he told me, his eyes flicking to Gareth who nodded.

I chewed and considered the problem. Two days ago we’d gone to run errands and ended up at the Courthouse where Jace and Gareth had applied for a sex license for their club. They’d also gone there to pay a hefty fine, compliments of yours truly. It was the unfortunate result of my playing my Faerie flute which had caused an orgy upstairs with the customers. It had also brought me Cursed, Amras, and Kit and ultimately freed Owen from the spell he’d been under. So I couldn’t really feel badly about that. Unfortunately while we’d been waiting for Gareth and Jace to wrap up the paperwork, one of the guards had approached us and Amras had claimed diplomatic immunity when challenged for carrying a sword in public. One thing had led to another and before we knew it our picture was pasted all over the front page of every paper in town. Cries of ‘Princess of Faerie spotted in San Francisco’ and ‘Has the Sidhe opened it’s doors?’ had brought a media storm down on our heads and caused a very unhappy visit from my Mother who was up until two days ago the only known Princess of Faerie living in America. We’d managed to keep that under wraps for some twenty five years then one nod from Amras and Cursed and all our hard work was undone. Not that I blamed either of them, they hadn’t known I’d been keeping my identity a secret and I had forgotten to warn them. I’d promised Mom I’d think of someday to minimize the damage but I wasn’t sure how to go about it.

I evaded the fork and held up my hand. “No more please.” I told Jace who frowned at the small amount I’d managed to consume. Between my liquid brunch of coffee and Gareth, I was already full. Jace’s face lost all expression as he picked up my

thought and the fork dropped back to the plate with a clunk. His cheeks turned dusky and he shook his head. "Okay then." He commented turning to place the tray on the table next to the bed. Gareth just rolled his eyes and grinned.

I pushed up off the bed and crawled to the edge. "Can I get some clothing?" I called and watched as a pale yellow crop top blouse and matching palazzo pants materialized next to me. The material was soft and stretchy and had long wide sleeves that matched the wide pants legs. Lavender flowers were embroidered around the edge of the sleeves, neck and at the waistband of the pants and down the front of one leg. I lifted the top and bottoms, sighing at the lack of undergarments. I was going to have to speak to Areth, this seemed like it was becoming a theme. I pulled the top on shaking my head at the way my nipples stood at attention and pressed against the clingy material. Sliding to the floor I pulled on the pants which ended at least two inches below my belly button leaving an expanse of skin showing between my top and bottoms. I had to wonder if Kit had had that conversation he's threatened with Areth. A pair of matching slip on sandals was sitting on the floor at the edge of the bed and I bent over to pull them on. My hair was a mess so I walked to the bathroom and retrieved a brush and the chopsticks which Areth had conjured for me. When I came back into the room Jace was gone, along with the tray and my empty coffee cup. Gareth took the brush from me and within a few minutes he'd managed to eliminate all of the tangles. I gathered up the hair around my face and twisted it at the back of my head using the chopsticks to hold it in place.

"Shall we?" He asked and then opened the door for me.

Owen had moved his chess board to the living room and he and Amras were in the midst of a game, both of them looked up and smiled their eyes telling me they liked the way I looked. Cursed was standing across the room facing the hall, apparently he had been watching for me and his eyes turned smoky as he gave me the once over. Kit was curled in a chair with another of Jace's Demon books in his lap. Beside him in the air a large feather pen looked to be taking notes on a roll of parchment. I'd have to introduce him to writing paper and Bic pens I thought, wincing as ink splashed off the

page and onto the carpet below. He lifted his head finally and made a pleased sound in his throat, which was just his way of saying hi! Jace came into the room from the kitchen and hesitated briefly his eyes sweeping over me from head to toe. “Lovely.” He commented as he took a seat on the couch and patted the cushion next to him.

“Good morning.” I called, stepping down to the sunken floor and crossing to the couch Jace had selected. Heads swiveled and eyes followed me as I smoothed the back of my pants and took a seat. With my shields down I could feel their keen interest.

“About time.” Kit complained his dark eyes flicking over me while he licked his lips. “Much more of that and we’d all be worthless.”

“Speak for yourself Demon.” Cursed corrected him.

Kit gave him a sidelong glance and made a scoffing noise in his throat. “This from the Goblin with the damp pants.” And rolled his eyes.

Cursed gave him a dirty look but held his tongue. I felt my cheeks turn pink and beside me Gareth cleared his throat.

Across the room Owen started out by saying. “I went up and spoke to Nick earlier. The camera crews and reporters are still camped outside. Though there doesn’t seem to be as many of them as there were two nights ago.” He then got up from his chair and went down the hall. When he returned he was carrying a huge bouquet of white roses. There must have been at least three dozen in the arrangement. Owen set them on the table in front of me and disappeared down the hall again. When he came back again he was carrying a second arrangement, this one done all in dark yellow and every bit as large as the first. He set the second bouquet on the table next to the other and stood, crossing his arms over his chest as he raised an eyebrow at me. Gareth and Jace both glanced at the flowers and frowned.

I licked my lips and glanced around the room realizing that no one seemed particularly pleased with me. “Ah...do you know who sent them?”

Owen shook his head and waved his hand at the flowers as if to say, look for yourself. “I have a fairly good idea.” He added.

“Did you check the cards?” I asked feeling somewhat guilty and not sure why.

Kit made a rude noise and waved his hand so that the book and writing materials disappeared. But it was Amras that spoke. “We were not able to remove them from their holders. We each received a nasty shock when we attempted to do so.” He told me, his voice sounding annoyed. I think it was the first time I’d ever heard that particular tone from him. This couldn’t be good, even Amras was angry at me.

He sighed and then replied. “Not at you Princess.”

I nodded and leaned forward. The white roses were closest and I winced when I plucked the card from the plastic holder afraid I might also be shocked. When the card easily slipped free at my tug, everyone but Jace and Gareth growled. I winced and pulled back the flap removing the little card within. It read *Give me one night to prove I am worthy.* Alan across the room Kit cursed and folded his arms over his chest his red eyes narrowing to little slits of pulsing fire. I wasn’t certain why he was so annoyed by Alan it wasn’t like I was planning on trading down. My thought brought Kit up sharply and his eyes widened as he stared at me across the room. I smiled at him and winked and he lifted an eyebrow as if to say...we’ll see. But he did manage to relax back into his chair and the stream of obscenities was silenced.

I tossed the card onto the table and reached for the other one. As I read the words my eyes widened and I felt my face flame. Jace grabbed the card from my nerveless fingers and read it out loud for the rest of them right before he ripped it in half with a growl that set the hair at my nape on end. Around the room teeth were bared and the tension ratcheted up about one hundred and fifty percent. If Bodark had been in the room I doubt he would have made it out alive. The card read. *The dress you wore last night was beautiful and would have looked perfect in a crumpled heap next to my bed this morning. Until then I’ll dream of you.* It was signed with the same picture of a wolf head that had been on the card Gareth had removed from me last night.

“Owen could you.” I asked motioning to the flowers with a helpless gesture. He snapped his fingers and the flowers disappeared. He was still frowning when he uncrossed his arms and went back to his chair.

“I sent them to the terminal ward at UCSF.” He remarked as he lowered himself to sit.

In spite of my shock I had to chuckle. The University had been specializing in treating non-human illnesses for more than thirty years. That he would send the arrangements to the terminal ward was actually very funny, and perhaps a bit of wishful thinking? “Thank you.” I told him then muttered. “Let’s hope that’s the last of that.” To which all of them simply grunted.

“Can we discuss the media now?” Gareth asked as he leaned back on the couch and placed his arm along the back behind my head.

“I think I we should talk to Mi first.” It told him, just as a ding sounded out in the hall. Jace rose from the couch at the knock on the hall door. Voices sounded in the hall and Jace came back carrying a flat black velvet box with a red bow wrapped around it. I noticed my name was printed across the card attached to the ribbon when he handed it to me without a word and sat back down on the couch. I placed it in my lap and stared down at it like it was a hissing snake.

“Open it.” Gareth growled.

I glanced at him but reached for the card. It read, *I hope you enjoyed the flowers. I see you slept late, wish I was to blame. I’m charmed.* And again it was signed with the wolf head. I stared at the card in shock. How had he known? I was almost afraid to open the box but Gareth wrapped a curl of my hair around his fingers and gave it a tug as if to say, hurry up and get it over with. I pulled the ribbon off the box and snapped it open. Inside was a solid gold key charm, it look real and had the words, *My heart* engraved on one side and *The door*, on the other.

“Clever, I suppose he meant that for your bracelet.” Jace muttered as I closed the box and tossed it onto the table. He no sooner said it than the elevator dinged again and I sat frozen waiting for the knock. This time Gareth went for the door, irritation

covering his face. Again there were voices and Gareth returned carrying a cream colored envelop which he tossed in my lap as he took his seat. Princess was scrolled across the front. I sighed and turned it over using my finger to pry it open. The card I withdrew simply said *Thank You* on one side and I stared down at it in confusion.

“Turn it over.” Gareth suggested.

I laughed sharply when I read it. “Dten sends his Mistress’ thanks.” I told them and grudging smiles broke out around the room. “Apparently she was most impressed with his efforts this morning.” Beside me Jace unbent enough to chuckle and Gareth teased another lock of my hair.

When the elevator dinged again they both sighed but it was Kit that beat them to the door. He returned carrying a large white envelop that he dropped in my lap on his way to his chair. “Careful.” He warned as he wiped his hand down his black pants. “I don’t like the way that one feels.”

I looked at the envelope which had, Princess Lexi embossed in black letters across the front, and slowly opened it. I drew out a card also on white card stock and flipped it open. This one I read out loud. “Princess Lexi is formerly invited by Mayor Claudius Courday to be the guest of honor at a welcoming reception presented by the city of San Francisco. The event is to be held at City Hall at nine in the evening on the sixteenth. Attire is formal. Please contact us to advise your acceptance and time of arrival.” There was a phone number to R.S.V.P. to and it looked to be signed by the Mayor himself. “What day is today?” I asked.

“The fifteenth.” Jace responded after having glanced at his watch.

“Oh....Mi!” I yelled then flipped the card onto the table with the rest of the stuff.

“Claudius is cronies with Valentine.” Gareth remarked. “They have a mutually beneficial relationship. He’s also a Vampire.”

“Just great.” I muttered and mentally yelled for Mi again.

“Hey!” Jace winced. “Give us some notice when you’re going to do that.”

“Sorry.” I told him and leaned over to kiss his cheek. “I’m just a little distracted.”

“What?” Mi demanded as her disembodied head appeared above the table in front of me. The rest of her slowly faded in until she was seated with her bottom resting on the invitation and thank you cards. “When I turned you over to these two I didn’t expect to be visiting daily!”

“What you don’t miss me?” I chided and smiled when she grumbled under her breath. “So how did it go?”

Mi avoided my gaze and glanced around the room, her large amber eyes hesitating when she caught sight of Amras. He noticed her glance and his eyes widened and he seemed to pale. “Let’s just say we’re still negotiating.” She replied, turning back to face me.

“I’m going to need a little more than that.” I told her, my eyes flicking between Amras and her. “I’ve been invited by the Mayor of San Francisco to a party tomorrow night.”

“So don’t go.” Mi replied.

“It’s being held in my honor.”

“Oh...well then hold on a minute I’ll be right back. By the way, I love that outfit.” And so saying she winked back out.

Mi was only gone for a few minutes and when she returned she had my Mother with her. Mi reappeared on the table only this time she wasn’t seated on the papers. My Mother was wearing a conservative pale blue business suit with silk blouse and high heels and she appeared in the chair to our left. Her eyebrows lifted and she pursed her lips when she caught sight of my get up. It made me squirm uncomfortably on the couch. Lucky for me she turned her gaze on Cursed and then Amras who also seemed to flinch. “Lord Amras.” She began with her voice in that ‘I’m really annoyed’ tone I still sometimes have nightmares about. “You are causing me considerable difficulties. The Queen is quite wroth with you Sir.”

Amras turned even more pale. “Princess.” He replied lowering his head while his eyes flicked to me. Next to him Cursed slipped to the floor on one knee with his head bowed. Apparently I wasn’t the only one in the room that recognized her ‘angry’ voice.

“Why is the Queen mad at Amras?” I asked frowning when Cursed remained kneeling.

“You must ask Lord Amras if you wish an answer.” She replied her eyes dismissing the pair across the room as she turned back to me. “Mi tells me you have been summoned by the Mayor of this city?”

“Yes, I’m not sure how to respond. Do you have news of the Sidhe?” She clasped her hands in her lap and looked at me thoughtfully. I knew better than to interrupt her while she was thinking and simply held my tongue.

“Nice to see you haven’t forgotten everything I taught you.” She muttered and I bit the inside of my cheek and tried to blank my mind. That got me a lifted eyebrow. “You will go, and I shall join you.” She told me, nearly bowling me over with her comment.

“What?”

“The Queen has agreed to acknowledge you as a royal heir. So I will go with you to support your position.”

“But...how will we explain...me?” I stuttered.

She sighed and unclasped her hands. Her eyes slipped to Amras again and she frowned. “I believe a little misdirection will suffice. It was no secret I’ve been engaged, and witnesses can be found to testify that my...Fiancée’ was seen some twenty something years ago.”

My eyes widened in horror as what she was saying sunk into my brain. “You want to infer that Amras is my...Father?” I whispered, my voice actually shaking with the horror I felt.

“I want to do no such thing!” She snapped as her cheeks turned pink and her lips compressed into tight angry lines. “However, the Queen has been informed and

understands the delicate nature of your...birth and merely offered it as an option. One I think we would be wise to support.”

“But we...I’ve...this won’t do at all!” I told her in a strangled voice. “I can’t have anyone thinking I’m having ongoing relations with my own Father!”

“I’m afraid that won’t be a problem.” She told me as she glanced at Amras again.

“How could it not be?”

“Because, my dear, Lord Amras has been called back to the Sidhe.”

“No! That’s not possible.” I whispered in horror.

Across the room Amras broke the silence. “Might I assume you have informed the Queen of the nature of our...relations?”

“The Queen has been informed of many things.”

Amras slumped back in his chair. His face was still pale and his eyes were filled with anguish. Beside him Cursed still knelt on the floor drawing my attention to his bent head. “Get up Cursed!” I snapped. It seemed I was always doing that when my Mother was around. He looked shaken when he lifted his head and eased onto the nearest chair. I turned back to my Mother but Amras spoke again.

“How soon?”

“I believe the exact word she used was ‘immediately’ however given the circumstances, it might be best to wait until after tomorrow night.”

I sucked in air and glanced between my Mother and Amras. This was intolerable. I couldn’t lose Amras not like this!

“And Lexi?” Amras asked his violet eyes focused on my Mother.

Mom looked at me and shook her head. “I’ve managed to distract her thus far. But it’s only a matter of time.”

“And the Sidhe doors? Will they be opened?” Amras continued his voice sounding shaky.

She nodded and glanced at me. “I believe so. But there will be conditions.”

“Lexi cannot be one of them.” Amras growled sharply pulling himself up straight in the chair. “I will return but you must not allow her to be used this way!”

She sucked in air and clenched her fingers in her lap. “Don’t you dare dictate to me! Lexi is my daughter and in spite of her mixed blood is being recognized as an heir to the throne. As such she is subject to the Queen as are we all! Had you stayed where you belonged this would not be a problem.”

Amras looked like he wanted to hit something I’d never seen him this angry. “I’m sorry to have disappointed you, yet again.” He replied tightly. “Can I assume the engagement is formerly off?”

She gave him a dirty look but shook her head. “No damn you!”

I gasped and swayed on the couch, stars dancing before my eyes as my vision swam in and out. I grabbed for my stomach, feeling sick. “Lexi!” Gareth cried out sharply as my body slumped against him. “Come on sweetheart, breathe.” He urged while my eyes fluttered and I moaned. This couldn’t be happening! She’d given him to me I thought, as I felt a cool cloth sooth my cheek and forehead.

“Father said to tell you he loves you.” I muttered while my head lolled against Gareth’s chest and I struggled to open my eyes. My mother sucked in air and I cracked open an eye in time to see the shocked look on her face. “He also told me he sensed I was in danger and that night would protect me. I need Amras, you can’t take him from me.”

Her lips twisted and she shook her head. “Other guards will replace him. The Queen will see to that. I’m afraid none of us has a choice in this matter.”

“The Queen might be interested to know that Lexi has vowed to stay with us here for a year. I refuse to release her from her promise, but will allow a short visit. However an absence from our den for say, more than five consecutive days, will be considered a breach of our trust, in which case she will be forsaken.” Gareth added in his deep voice.

“Is this true?” My mother demanded while Mi made her kitty cat laughing noises in her throat.

“It is.” I told her, pushing up from Gareth’s chest with a moan. “I gave my word, it is binding.”

My mother threw up her hands and looked at Mi who simply shook her head. “The Queen will not be pleased. And neither am I.” She told me flatly.

“Only because you will be expected to stay in her absence.” Mi chided. “You’ve had fifty years Shaylee, Lexi has only had one! It won’t kill you to spend some time with your mother.”

Mom grimaced and shot Mi a nasty look. And I nearly felt sorry for my Mother. Nearly I say, because I was too relieved knowing I’d dodged that bullet at least for another year. Mom turned her look on me and I sat just a little straighter in my chair. “Goddess I wish your Father was here!” She growled and Kit glanced at her and sat up straight in his chair.

“I could make that happen.” He offered with a sly smile, his black eyes dancing with mischief.

My mouth dropped open and I turned to him my face covered in shock. Not nearly as shocked as my Mother who looked as if she might faint. “Yes please!” I whispered urgently and he grinned and snapped his fingers.

A silver haze appeared in the middle of the room and everyone leaned forward as the man from the portrait in my bedroom appeared. He was taller than Jace and built not unlike Gareth with short silver hair and light silver eyes. He was wearing jeans and a grey button up shirt with the sleeves rolled back to his elbows. On his feet were loafers similar to those Jace had on. He glanced around in surprise which turned to something much more shocking when his eyes lit on my Mother. “Shaylee!” He groaned and I missed seeing his feet move but he was just suddenly there in front of her plucking her shocked figure from the chair and into his arms. Beside me Gareth and Jace both shifted uncomfortably on the couch as his mouth crashed down on hers passionately and they wrapped themselves around each other completely oblivious to the rest of us.

Mi sighed on the table and started purring while I felt my face go up in flames. Across the room Cursed and Amras both looked shocked. Owen's face merely showed polite interest.

Inside me Goldy jumped to her feet and looked around her nostrils flaring wide her eyes whirling in agitation until they lit on Roark. I placed my hand over my stomach and bent forward trying not to groan from her abrupt movements.

"Perhaps we should...give them a moment?" Jace muttered and glanced first at me in concern then at Owen who lifted an eyebrow and snapped his fingers and my parents were suddenly gone.

"Oh God you didn't put them in my room did you?" I demanded then groaned and sighed in relief when he laughed but shook his head. Goldy gave one last glance around the room then settled herself back in her cave with a mutter and a huff.

"I moved them to the sitting area in our rooms." He replied. "I did however provide them with appropriate atmosphere."

Appropriate atmosphere, for Owen that meant throw pillows, fur rugs, and a roaring fireplace. I think I'm going to gag. There's just something not right about knowing your parents are having sex in your home, right down the hall from you.

"I...I think I need to get out of here." I muttered and Cursed and Amras quickly stood and nodded. Mi flicked her tail at me and winked out. Kit leaned back in his chair and spread his legs out in front of him looking supremely pleased with himself. I gave him a sickly smile, while his head tilted to the side and a knowing look spread across his face. I raised my lower shield, not wanting to catch even a hint of what was going on down the hall. "I think maybe the training room? Owen would you?" And I motioned to my clothing which he quickly replaced with my normal exercise outfit. Pushing up from the couch, I nearly bolted for the elevator, the rest of them right behind me.

Chapter 6

“Well so much for your artificial insemination theory.” Kit muttered then laughed as I moaned and leaned my head back against the elevator wall.

“This isn’t going to change the Queen’s decision.” Amras added abruptly and I jerked and felt my eyes fill with tears. Jace placed his hand on Amras shoulder and nodded. When he shifted from my side Amras turned and I felt his arms slide around me. The elevator doors opened and everyone except us got out.

“Use the conference room...take your time.” Gareth muttered as he pushed the button to the first floor as he slipped out. When the elevator stopped again and the doors opened Amras lifted me into his arms and carried me through the lobby into the conference room. He shoved the door closed behind us with his foot then lowered us to a pile of furs. I’d have to thank Owen later I thought then couldn’t think at all as the pain of losing Amras flooded my mind.

He eased back onto the pillows holding me in his arms tightly while I sobbed against him my heart feeling like it was being crushed. My shield slid away as his

hands soothed my back and his lips brushed my temple all the while whispering words in Elvish which caused me to cry even harder. Why oh why was this happening?

“I am so sorry.” Amras moaned. “This is my punishment for leaving the Sidhe without permission. I did not realize...I never would have hurt you.” And his arms tightened and I felt the moisture from his own tears at my temple.

When my sobs turned to hiccups then sighs I reached for the buttons on his shirt. “Make love with me.” I urged as his lips found mine and our clothing disappeared under urgent fingers. He rolled me onto my back and slipped between my thighs, his erection pressing against my stomach while he slipped his hands in my hair and I opened my mouth for his kiss. I wrapped my foot around his leg and offered myself then shivered when he ground his hips against me and lifted himself into position. He was so thick and long just as I’d made him and I moaned as he stretched me to my limit while he gently eased himself within my body. When he was buried to his hilt my breathing quickened as his hips began riding me with sure even strokes.

“I will return with you and speak to the Queen.” I told him much later as we lay curled around each other. The loving had been bittersweet and my hands roamed his chest and stomach as if I was committing the feel of him to memory.

He stiffened and reached for my hand. “You must not, you put yourself at risk!”

I frowned and turned stubborn my decision already having been made. Gareth and Jace were not the only one’s I’d made a promise to. Amras let out the breath he was holding and ran his fingers over mine. “I don’t think that will work.” He replied. “But I’m willing to try.”

I glanced up at him and smiled. “You told me she was fair and just. Surely she will at least hear me?”

His eyes went distant and he pushed back a strand of hair behind my ear. “We shall see. To be allowed to stay at your side Princess....we will try.”

“If this does not work, then we will think of something. Perhaps I’ll try to free the King and demand you as payment.” I told him then smiled at the thought while he

gave me a surprised look that turned speculative. But first off I was going to have to go back downstairs and deal with my parents.

“Do you think he’ll kill me when he discovers I have been sleeping with his daughter while engaged to her Mother?” He asked with a grimace. I stiffened in his arms and gave that an unhappy thought.

“I didn’t realize the engagement wasn’t off.” I growled feeling an icy shiver cross over my skin at the ickyness of it all.

“Obviously we both were mistaken.”

“This is giving me a headache.” I muttered then pushed up out of his arms and reached for my clothing. “A few laps around the track should help to clear my head.”

“And delay the time of my death.” He grumbled. “I’ve seen Dragons in action. After the look on his face earlier, I harbor no delusions of survival should he decide to challenge me.”

“Don’t worry, Daddy’s little girl will protect you.” I teased as I laced up my shoes and crawled to my feet. He gave me a wan smile but yanked his shirt over his head and reached for his leather pants. I watched in interest as he shimmed them up his perfectly muscled legs and nearly sighed when he tucked all of himself in then closed the buttons.

“Hold that thought Princess.” He urged me. “It will help to remind you of why you want to keep me.”

I smiled down at him and replied. “I’m not likely to forget.”

The training room was its normal hive of activity as we stepped into the room. “I’d like to be alone.” I told Amras taking off at a slow jog when he nodded and moved to join Cursed who was busy directing one of the trainees in sword play. On my third lap Kit loped up next to me in wolf form and fell into step, his long legs carrying him along at a trot.

“Your Father’s got stamina.” He informed me then dodged to the side when I swung at him. “Just thought you’d like to know they are still going at it like ah...bunnies.”

“Arrughh!” I yelled at him. “Get away from me!” He laughed again but refused to leave me alone.

“Your Mother is more like you than you know.” He added and I stopped abruptly and bent over at the waist fighting not to gag at his comment.

“Why are you tormenting me?”

“I thought you wanted a little brother or sister.” He replied calmly. “Isn’t that what you told your Mother, someone to take the pressure off of you?”

I turned my head and glared at him. I’d been alone in my bedroom with my Mother and Mi at the time that conversation had taken place. Damn him he must have been ease dropping. “Yes I said that! But that is hardly a science experiment going on in your living room! Not a beaker in sight.” I hissed at him.

“True.” He replied as he sat and lolled his tongue at me. “But Owen is here...and I believe he might be of some small assistance, if you asked him nicely.”

I stood abruptly and glanced toward the middle of the floor where I could see Owen chatting with Jace. With my shields lowered I yelled for him and watched as he jumped and came down in a defensive position apparently thinking he was under attack. “Oh good lord.” I muttered and waved him over frantically. He glanced around and started walking toward me which caused me to add. *Hurry!* And that got him nearly running in my direction.

“What?” He demanded skidding to a halt and searching my face. Behind him Jace and Gareth were also coming at a jog.

“Quick can you make my Mother fertile?”

He looked like he was trying not to swallow his tongue and ended up nodding.

“Twins...can you give her twins or maybe triplets? All girls?” I demanded and he looked at me as if I’d grown a third set of horns. “Just answer the question!”

“Ah...yes with help.”

“Will you, now, do it I mean?” I urged him.

“Lexi are you sure this is a good idea?”

“No it’s a great idea. Can you please just snap your fingers and ah give her quadruplets?” Beside me Kit snickered then flopped onto his side on the floor and laughed till he shook.

Owen continued to look at me out of his big brown eyes. “Shouldn’t your parents decide if they want more children?”

“Oh my God!” I nearly screamed up at him. “What do you think they are doing right this moment?” Owen’s face went from concern to surprise to amusement in a split second and then he too was laughing so he had to bend at the waist to keep from falling over. He laughed so hard I was worried he’d forget what I needed him to do. Jace and Gareth pulled up and glanced between me and the other two. I gritted my teeth and growled. “Owen...please before it’s too late!”

He pulled himself upright and held out his hand for me. Frowning I glanced up at him. “I need your assistance Lexi.” He told me softly. Shrugging I reached for him and he closed his eyes and I felt a tug at my body that stole my breath. A ripple spread out from us brushing those standing near in passing then sunk into the floor, no doubt winging it’s way to my Mother some thirty or forty feet below.

“What the hell was that?” Jace muttered, rubbing his chest with a surprised expression as he stopped next to us.

“History being made.” I advised them then glanced at Owen who opened his eyes and had the most beautiful smile I’d ever seen covering his face.

“Life.” He whispered. “It’s begun.”

“How many?” I demanded and he grinned down at me and kissed the tip of my nose. “You asked for quadruplets. Your wish is my command.”

“All girls?” I breathed my excitement so intense I thought I might pass out from it. When he nodded I jumped into his arms and rained kisses all over his face. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!” I laughed. He rumbled and I felt his hands grasp me tightly.

“Careful.” He muttered. “Or you’ll be next.”

I hugged him then wiggled, asking to be let down onto the floor. He sighed and held me a moment more letting me feel the strength of him pressing in against my stomach so that I swallowed hard. On the floor at our feet Kit sat up and looked at us. “Excuse me but I believe we agreed that I’m next.” He remarked sarcastically.

Owen glanced down at him and sighed then let me slip from his arms. Gareth and Jace both gave me a look and I felt my cheeks go pink. “I don’t recall agreeing. How do you figure that Demon?” He asked calmly.

“Because I’m the only one around here that hasn’t had seconds yet!” He replied indignantly. Owen just lifted an eyebrow and crossed his arms. “Besides this was my idea to begin with so she should be thanking me!” He muttered and gave me an expectant look. He was right and I immediately sank to the floor and wrapped my arms around his neck burying my face in his ruff. He chuckled and shifted so that I found myself straddling him with my breasts pressed up against his chest his hand cupping my bottom in a tight grip.

“Now that’s more like it.” He whispered then laughed again when I yelped and tried to get off him. His waist length silky midnight hair brushed my face and I grabbed a handful and gave it a yank which made him growl sharply and swat my bottom. I ground my teeth and struggled to get off his lap. My movements caused him to groan and press himself against me in spite of our audience. I gave up and held still, knowing that my efforts only served to entice him.

“Will you please let me up?” I hissed at him. “You are embarrassing me.”

“You pulled my hair.” He informed me crossly. “One kiss to make it better.”

I sighed, not trusting him in the least. “One kiss on the cheek.” I negotiated.

“Done!” He replied then lifted me over his head and turned me so that his lips caressed my bottom, much to my dismay. Around me Owen and Amras chuckled. Apparently both he and Cursed had also joined us. I glanced at Gareth and Jace not surprised to find they both looked exasperated. Gareth rolled his eyes. Jace sighed and crossed his arms over his chest.

When Kit finally released me I felt like my face was going up in flames and scooted out of his reach as fast as I could. I managed to trip and found myself wrapped up within Cursed's arms my breath coming out in small pants I was so agitated. When his fingers splayed across my ribcage I dropped my head and muttered under my breath. My hair swung free nearly covering my face. I hadn't anything to tie it back with before starting this little debacle of a workout and discovered I was almost grateful as it served to hide my embarrassment.

Cursed's other hand reached for my hip using it to pull my bottom firmly against the front of him, leaving me no question as to his current state of mind as he rolled his hips and pressed himself into me. The feel of him against my bottom caused me to stiffen then relax. I figured he might as well take his due along with the others. Besides I couldn't deny he felt good pressed against me this way and if I was going to be man handled on the training room floor at least it was by someone I actually enjoyed.

Kit made a rude noise in his throat and stood up from the floor. "Just remember, I'm next." He growled at the others giving them a glare as he turned and wandered off.

"I didn't realize you were keeping a schedule." Jace muttered.

Behind me Cursed froze his breathing catching then restarting. Jace looked at Owen and Amras each of them having trouble meeting his eyes.

"Oh I see." He finally replied and glanced at Gareth with a grimace. I couldn't believe what I was hearing and shifted uncomfortably in Cursed's arms, my eyes going to Amras who shrugged and spread his hands.

"Let...me....go!" I enunciated each word angrily and felt Cursed flinch but hold me tighter. "Don't make me pull your hair too!" I growled at him and he sucked air into his lungs pressing himself against my bottom even tighter. He finally released me slowly his fingers teasing and caressing as they went.

“You cannot rape the willing.” He whispered. “I can smell your desire for me, and your pulling my hair only serves to excite me more.” He advised as his lips brushed the tip of my ear.

Oh yeah, how could I have forgotten that? Standing in the middle of them I bit my lip and glanced back at Owen. “Not a word of this to either of them.” Owen stared down at me for a moment then nodded. “Oh and Owen.” I joked. “Do you think you can teach me to do...that?”

He tilted his head and stared down at me with a lopsided smile. “Lexi,” He told me softly his eyes searching mine. “You already can.” And Gareth caught me as I slid to the floor.

“I’m okay, I’m okay, I’m okay.” I chanted from where my face was pressed between my knees. Breathing was just a little difficult with so many people pressing in around me. Someone handed me a bottle of water and I sat up and gratefully took a sip. This day just kept getting worse and worse.

Owen was kneeling beside me holding a hand and chaffing it gently. I wasn’t sure if he was trying to console himself or me. “I’m sorry that was rather abrupt of me.”

“No kidding.” I muttered and leaned back against Gareth’s body which was cupping mine from behind. Jace held out his hand for the water bottle and I took another drink before handing it back to him. I mulled over what he said and had a bad thought. “Not me..I mean...I’m not going to...” I trailed off suddenly feeling the blood leave my face.

He patted my hand and shook his head. “Only others. You still need me.” He replied his face breaking out in a pleased smile when I nodded and pulled large quantities of air into my lungs. I felt as if I’d been holding my breath far too long and could finally breathe.

“Do you have any idea what they are discussing?” Jace asked.

“Not a clue.” Gareth replied and hugged me tighter.

Don't ask, don't ask...don't ask. I thought abruptly my eyes widening as I glanced up at Owen in dismay. He shrugged and leaned back on his knees letting go of my hand.

"Hmmm." Jace muttered his head swinging between the two of us.

"Let it go for now." Gareth advised. "She's not ready to share and we don't need to press."

I slumped gratefully against him and turned to rest my cheek on his shoulder. "Thank you." I replied and closed my eyes.

Kit's voice reached me from behind Gareth. "They are finally done. In case you were at all interested. I must admit I am rather impressed with your Father's natural abilities." He muttered before continuing. "The two of them are rummaging around in the fridge at the moment. If you hurry we can catch them at it. I believe they are both quite naked."

"Oh Goddess protect us." Amras moaned and I joined him. Gareth laughed silently behind me his chest causing me to jerk against him. Jace muttered something about Snick under his breath and Owen chuckled. Apparently Cursed didn't think it was all that funny or he was laughing silently like Gareth. Either way I didn't feel much like opening my eyes to find out.

"Well Gentlemen shall we go meet Dad?" Gareth asked when he seemed to get himself under control. "I think now would be the best chance for all of us to do so and remain unscathed. And perhaps if we stick together our sheer number might overwhelm him."

I cracked open an eye and noticed that everyone seemed to be standing just a bit straighter. "It has been my pleasure to know you Princess." Amras muttered and leaned down his hand to assist me to stand. Cursed looked at him and shook his head in disgust. Kit looked a bit worried himself though he gave me a wicked smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

Back into the elevator we piled, none of us saying much. Halfway there Owen snapped his fingers and I found myself dressed in the clothing I'd had on earlier. I wasn't sure if I should thank him or kick him.

Jace slammed the door open, certain to make a lot of noise and I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing hysterically. Apparently our attempt at a loud entrance wasn't required because my parents were fully dressed and cuddling on the couch. Mom didn't even bother to sit up straight when we came in and I went from biting my cheek to my tongue.

"Hi." I gulped, not certain how to begin. Gareth came to my rescue and stepped forward. Brave man that he was, he actually made my heart beat faster at his show of courage.

"Gareth Ak Trirth." He admitted, holding out his hand. My Father unwound himself from my Mother and stood while his light eyes glanced over Gareth with a quiet reserve which seemed neither approving nor dismayed.

"Roark 'e Venth." He replied, shaking Gareth's hand. Ah so that was my Father's name. Good to know.

"My partner, Jace R Bok." Gareth replied, indicating Jace who stepped past me and held out his hand so that he too might shake with my Father. The three of them eyed each other thoughtfully a moment then Gareth turned to the others. "Cursed formerly of the Queen's Royal Guard." Cursed clenched his fist over his heart and leaned forward in a courtly bow. My Father nodded his head and moved on to Owen whom he was forced to look up at. "Owen..." Gareth hesitated and turned to look at the larger man his eyes questioning.

"Ve." He replied calmly and held out his hand to my Father who hesitated for a moment, his eyes widening in surprise before he grasped forearms in an older more traditional grip.

Gareth turned next to Kit and raised an eyebrow. "Kit, Second Level Chaos Demon of the Order of Limerence." He advised my Father who looked at Kit in horror.

At his look, Kit raised an eyebrow and flopped rudely into a chair. Crossing his arms and glaring back at him.

“Roark.” He muttered while my Father glanced between the two of us in apparent shock.

“A Lust Demon? Lexi...” He began then quickly shut his mouth as he turned to glance at Amras who had somehow managed to find a place to stand as far away as possible while still considered polite.

Gareth took a deep breath and continued. “May I present Lord Amras Lissesul?”

“My Fiancée’ and currently one of our daughters many lovers.” My Mother added with a touch of nastiness from the couch she was occupying. Everyone in the place held their breath while my Father’s eyebrows shot up and then lowered dangerously as he glanced around the room taking in each man’s face while he flushed an ugly shade of red.

“Lexi.” He finally rasped out.

“Yes Dad?” I squeaked then coughed as I tried to clear my suddenly tight throat.

“Is this all of them?”

I glanced around with a guilty look and nodded wondering if I should tell him who I’d met the previous evening.

“Who?” He demanded his voice nearly vibrating.

“Marcus.”

His mouth tightened and his nostrils flared while his pupils shifted to lighter silver. “And who do I have to thank for being here?” He asked softly.

“Me?” I squeaked again. Damn I was going to have to do something about that. I was twenty five years old. I shouldn’t be squeaking responses to my Dad!

“Who?” He growled and I edged closer to Gareth.

“Me.” Kit told him. “You can thank me, for this and many other things. Not the least of which is keeping Lexi safe from men while you were off doing who knows what all her life.”

Dad took a deep breath and turned on Kit, much to Amras’ relief. “Where is my Knight?” He growled his silver eyes starting to whirl dangerously.

I frowned and glanced between the two of them in confusion while Kit eased himself into a more upright position. “It’s still daylight outside Dad.” I replied, almost cringing when he turned to glare at me with a look that made me feel like I was five again and caught being naughty. Damn even Mom didn’t look that mean when I’d gotten into trouble. I suddenly had the urge to hide behind something but managed to lock my knees in position.

He took another breath and enunciated much like I had just done upstairs. “Where is the Demon Knight?”

Oh him...I thought with a gulp and glanced at Kit. “He never showed up. I think...he must have lost his paperwork.”

My Father looked stunned and ran his fingers through his short hair as he backed to the couch and lowered himself upon it. Across the room Amras breathed a grateful sigh and looked like he might actually collapse into a chair of his own. He took one step and my Father glanced up at him sharply narrowing his eyes in the most threatening of manners. “Don’t you move.” He growled and Amras froze like a deer in the headlights. Behind my father like a shadow in the air I could see the outline of a huge silver barbed tail actually flicking back and forth in agitation. I’d never seen either Gareth or Jace do that and I nearly stopped breathing. Beside me Jace pulled air through his teeth and also held still.

My Mother must have taken pity on us because she made a purring sound in her throat and placed her palm on his leg stroking it gently. My eyes watched in horrified disgust when she moved on to his forearm and swirled her fingers through his hair with her long graceful fingers. Oh no...yuck! Children should not be subjected to this I thought and had to fight down the bile that rose in the back of my throat.

She turned her satisfied smile on me and I couldn't help myself, I clasped my hand over my mouth and ran as fast as I could in my heels to the kitchen, it being the nearest room with a sink.

Amazingly enough it was Cursed that came to my rescue, holding my hair and passing me a napkin from the roll on the counter. I groaned and laid my cheek on the cool marble while he stood behind me and flipped on the water facet to wash my breakfast down the drain. "Oh God I can't go back out there."

"You must, My Lady." He replied his hands soothing over my back while his thoughts skittered around inside him in an alarming manner.

Chapter 7

Cursed was right, I had to go. But there was no guarantee I wouldn't end up right back in here again if I had to watch my Mother playing patty cake with my Father. That was just so wrong!

I grabbed a bottle of water out of the fridge and took several swallows. With the water off and the sounds of my own retching over, I could actually hear voices from the living room. I couldn't help thinking at least no one was screaming or yelling. Heaving a sigh I put down the water and pushed back my shoulders. Cursed had a distant look on his face and I figured he was getting the details from Amras. Or that was what I was guessing based on the look in his eyes. He glanced down at me and motioned to precede him which I did, albeit reluctantly.

Conversation ceased and everyone turned to look at me with various levels of intensity. "What?" I asked glancing around so nervous that Goldy actually blinked and sat up looking around in concern. My Father's eyes narrowed and he raised an eyebrow.

“What have you to say for yourself daughter?” He asked while pursing his lips and eyeing me.

“I ah...” I began. “It’s nice to finally meet you...in person.”

He sighed and glanced down at my Mother who lifted an eyebrow as if to say, see I told you so.

I took another breath and tried again. “I ah...gave Mom your message.” Of course that was right after she’d informed me she was still engaged to Amras, whom I’d already slept with. Across the room Amras jerked as if struck and closed his eyes.

Dad’s fists clenched but he didn’t say anything.

“Okay that’s enough.” I said, looking around at the worried looks on my men’s faces. I hadn’t done anything wrong and neither had they. If he wanted to blame someone he could start with Mom who’d made this all possible by bringing Amras to me. Hell she’d introduced us!

That finally got her sitting up straight as she glared at me.

“Well it’s true!” Ha she wasn’t pawing Dad in front of me now I thought. Dad turned his eyes on her and she shrugged but didn’t deny it. “Because of her actions Cursed is here too!”

“And you can thank yourself for Kit!” I nearly yelled, starting to get a little fired up at my audacity. Wow yelling at Dad was almost as liberating as it had been when I’d yelled at Mom. I’d already tossed my cookies so what more did I have to worry about?

“And Ve? I suppose I’m responsible for him too?” He asked watching me closely.

I looked at Owen and wasn’t sure how to answer. “Owen is...necessary to me if you want your experiment to succeed. So yeah I think you can say you are responsible for him too.”

“Experiment?” He breathed then shook his head before he glanced at Gareth and Jace I merely put my hands on my hips and leaned in. “These two...no these two

are all my doing.” I replied then smiled when Gareth winked at me and Jace ran his hand over his face covering the smile that flashed across his mouth.

“And Marcus?”

I took a deep breath and shook my head. “No...no I haven’t touched him...except to heal him. He is...”

“Damaged.” Kit interrupted. “And definitely not for Lexi!”

Dad glanced at the Demon and frowned as he leaned his forearms on his thighs. Behind him the pseudo tail faded away and several of us breathed deeper. “I was afraid of that.” He muttered as he reached to clasp my Mother’s fingers through his, pulling her hand onto his leg. I did my best to ignore them and glanced at Gareth who shrugged and indicated we should take a seat.

“Your Mother informs me you’ve allowed the press to discover your identity.”

“It was an accident. But yes they’ve been camped out upstairs for the last few days.”

“She also informs me that you made a promise to stay here with these two Drakes for a full year?”

“Yes.” I admitted as I slid onto the couch between Jace and Gareth. Both of them kept their hands in sight and off my person, and I had to smile at their unusual restraint.

“And the other’s?” He asked lifting his chin to indicate the rest of the men in the room.

“Well...I’m not sure what you mean.” I told him, leaning back against the cushions and glancing down at my hands which I’d laced together in my lap.

“Your intentions?” He prompted.

I sighed and looked up. “Owen stays. Kit is contracted to me for life. I’m apparently Cursed’s punishment because of Mom, and Amras...” I choked, my voice breaking as I stared into his beautiful eyes and felt the answering pain in them. I swallowed. “Amras has been ordered to return to the Sidhe...immediately. I plan to go

with him to speak to the Queen.” I finished quietly as both Gareth and Jace glanced at me in shock.

“No!” Cursed whispered his voice sounding harsh. “My Lady you mustn’t.” He told me sharply.

“It has already been decided.” I informed the group crossing my arms over my chest and staring at the coffee table mutinously. “Don’t try to talk me out of it. I would do the same for any of you!” That seemed to silence them though Cursed started pacing in agitation. Now there was something I’d never seen him do. My eyes tracked him back and forth for several minutes of blissful silence when I finally had enough and added. “What, you want the Queen sending more guards to share duty with you?”

Cursed stopped abruptly and turned to me with a startled look on his dark features. He grimaced and leaned his hands on the back of the nearest chair, his breath sounding overly harsh in the quiet room. “I fear that will occur in any event My Lady. The Queen will not give you up lightly. Not for a day, let alone a year.” His eyes looked hallow, as if he already mourned a great loss.

I felt my heart contract and told him softly. “Let them come then. They will not replace you in my affections.”

His eyes were blackest pits of despair as he assured me. “My Lady, they will try.”

Dad cleared his throat suddenly and my eyes were drawn to him though my thoughts were centered on Cursed and his declaration. “Lexi you have obligations.” He reminded me.

I gritted my teeth and tried to be calm as I replied. “I’m well aware of my obligations to the Dragon race and every other race present in this room. However I’m only twenty five and not yet ready to start a family. And besides....” I told him leaning forward on my chair suddenly. My eyes narrowed as they moved between my parents where they sat so close together you couldn’t see daylight between them.

“Beside what?” He prompted and he looked nearly worried at my intensity.

“Beside the fact, that you and Mom will have your hands full soon...with my sisters.”

Dad looked at me as if I was somehow crazy then his eyes slid to my Mother who raised her hands palm up as if to say, I have no idea what she’s talking about.

I smiled much like I imagine a shark might just before he eats you. “Congratulations, you’re expecting quadruplets...all girls.” I told them then sat back on the couch and ran my hands up both Jace and Gareth’s thighs while I watched my words sink in.

My Mom swayed on the couch and Dad obligingly wrapped his arms around her, his eyes turning to me in anger. “Young lady that is not funny!” He growled at me.

“No, not amused? I actually think it’s hysterical.” I laughed at him. “Better start thinking up names now, it won’t be long till she’s out to here and won’t have time to think of any. If I remember my anatomy lessons correctly, Elves only take twenty weeks to gestate.” He stared at me, not certain if I was joking or not and I turned to Kit and asked. “Can you get me a pregnancy test?” He grinned and snapped his fingers and four appeared on the table in front of me.

“One for each.” He chuckled then sat back in his chair again with a mischievous glint in his eye.

The look on Dad’s face slipped to one of disbelief and then a light came over his face as he turned and stared down at Mom. She looked like she might pass out at any moment but managed to smile weakly up at him when his eyes turned possessive and he pulled her more firmly into his arms just before he kissed her.

“Hey!” I yelled. “You two need to get a room...somewhere else! Somewhere far far away.” I mumbled when they pulled apart and Dad gave her another hug and murmured her name softly. “Do you mind? Your child is in the room! Well actually all five of us are.”

Dad laughed at me and snuggled my Mom in against his body. “And where exactly would you like us to go?” He asked me with his tongue in cheek. “You were the one that brought me here.”

Oh great and Mom needed to go with me tomorrow night so we could all pretend that Amras was my Father. This is just great. Dad stiffened and swung his silver eyes in my direction the smile on his face sliding away to be replaced by something dark and very dangerous. “I don’t think so.” He muttered then speared Amras who lifted both his hands as if to say, it wasn’t my idea!

“Roark.” Mom nudged him and he turned to look back at her his features rearranging themselves into something tender and possessive. “I have to go with Lexi...but maybe we can rethink Lord Amras. After all if I...am expecting.” And she blushed and slid her hand over her flat stomach. “The Queen will not argue.”

I glanced at Gareth with a grimace and squeezed my eyes closed. “Someone needs to R.S.V.P. for us.” I told the group then calmly called. “Areth?” Opening my eyes to find the beautiful woman seated on the air in front of me. I jerked my chin toward my Mom and she turned and drifted to the table so she could stand and bow. “Princess Shaylee, it is always an honor to be seen by you.”

“Areth.” My mother acknowledge then glanced at my Dad. “This is Roark, Lexi’s Father.”

“Greetings Roark ‘e Venth Silver and Father of our most cherished Lexi.”

Roark seemed charmed by the beautiful little Gnome and smiled at her. “I offer my thanks Areth, for your care of our daughter.”

“Areth...” I began, pulling her gaze away from my parents. “We need...another suite of rooms. Can you make it self contained and preferable as far from ours as possible, maybe that way.” I told her pointing toward the elevator. “On the other side of the foyer and down a very long hall, I’m sure my parents would appreciate their privacy.” I know I certainly would! Beside me Jace laughed and I glared at him my eyes flashing gold. His amusement died in his throat as he bit his lip and tried to look innocent.

Areth nodded and smiled. "I will send my son immediately." She replied then turned back to my Mother. "Congratulations Princess on your upcoming births." She closed her eyes for a moment then opened them with a bright smile. "I sense the five of you will come though the delivery in good health." Mom actually paled but nodded her head as Areth glanced over at me, winked then disappeared.

"Goddess...the five of us." Mom whispered her face turning pale. "I thought she was joking."

I couldn't help it, I threw back my head and laughed till Gareth poked me in the ribs and frowned down at me. I thought of something and looked around. "Hey Mom." I asked. "Where is Mi?"

Mom glanced around with a worried look as if suddenly remembering where she was and what she was supposed to be doing. "She must be entertaining the Queen." She muttered and glanced up at Roark who shook his head and frowned.

"No Shaylee I haven't seen you in nearly twenty six years. Your Mother came between us once already! Forget it. You my love, are not going anywhere!" He growled.

On the chair across the room Owen snapped his fingers and tossed two card keys onto the table. He tilted his head and informed the group. "Your suite is prepared."

"Perfect." Dad replied his eyes focused on my Mother as he stood and gently pulled her to her feet.

"I'll just show them to their rooms." Jace said as he also stood and crossed to the hall.

"Well he didn't seem all that broken up over Marcus." Kit remarked when Jace rejoined us and flopped onto the couch.

"He was a little distracted." Gareth replied his voice sounding distressed. "It isn't every day a Dragon finds out he's just impregnated the love of his life." Then he stood and disappeared down the hall without saying another word.

When I turned to Jace he shook his head. “Leave it.” He whispered then he too disappeared down the hall and I heard the elevator ding out in the lobby.

I glanced at the table and noticed the cards and gift still sitting there. When I reached for the black box Kit snapped his fingers and it slid out of my reach. I frowned and stared at it, my gaze focused while I thought, *here* at a spot on my side of the table. I jumped and Kit hissed when the box skidded across the table like a drunk on a Friday night binge.

“Did you do that?” Amras asked, his eyes turning to Kit who frowned and shook his head. “Owen?” The big man also gave a negative sign and they all looked at me.

I picked up the box with a grin and then the cards and wandered down the hall to my room. I hadn’t finished my work out earlier but didn’t feel much like it anymore. Instead I slipped into my room, dropped my goodies in the nightstand drawer then pulled off shirt and pants and kicked off my shoes. Maybe a vigorous swim with Spot would make me feel more human and less unsettled.

I was stretched out lying naked on my stomach drowsing when the four of them entered the sauna. Beside me on the towel Spot raised his four foot long head and let out a cuff cuff noise deep in his throat. I reached over and scratched his eye ridge letting our resident Wyrms know it was okay and they weren’t going to hurt me, at least not intentionally.

“I’d never hurt you unless you asked me to.” Kit told me. “Sometimes pleasure can be painful.”

The four of them set to humming in their minds and with my shields down it was like mini electrical fields racing across my body. Sparking and shocking as their focus jumped from nerve to nerve.

“Can I help you boys?” I asked, not even bothering to open my eyes when they stopped a few feet from my towel.

“May we join you?” Owen asked and I cracked open an eye and glanced up at him. They were all in the process of pulling off their clothing and I sighed and put my cheek back on the towel.

“Sure why not. The water’s that way.” I told them jerking my thumb in the general direction of the huge underground heated pond. Heated because Spot breathed fire and didn’t like it cold. “I think we’re going to need more towels.” I called out loud and a pile appeared near the edge of mine. The sound of splashing drew Spot who abandoned me so he could play in the water with the others. He was probably hoping for a nice game of catch. I paid no attention to them, too busy worrying over last night and everything that had happened since to be concerned about a little skinny dipping or that I was myself already undressed amidst the four of them. After all they had each seen everything I had to offer.

Areth had stopped by earlier and we’d had an educational chat about fifth level Demons and I had learned quite a lot about wrath and anger. Apparently the fifth level is dedicated to those that live vindictive and hateful lives. The beings are ruled by Verrine who is a second level Thrones. He is said to rule over thirty legions in Hell. Unlike the sixth level, wrath was usually caused by harm or a perceived harm. That might explain Marcus’ behavior last night after Gareth and I had returned from the hall to the restrooms. If he had somehow gotten mixed up with a fifth level Demon, he might be struggling with anger. Anger being a response to the perception of threat and not just physical. According to Areth it was also brought on from an imagined injustice, or negligence, humiliation, or betrayal. Marcus might consider my tryst with Gareth as a betrayal given that I’d called him mine and indicated he was made for me personally.

I suspected it might be something more than that though. Something along the lines of Valentine somehow getting control or breaking the contract with a fifth level and using him to control not just Marcus, but Belinda too. I’d have to ask Dad about that...later. In the meantime I was trying to come up with ways to help Marcus. I know everyone thought he was a lost cause, but he had asked for my help. I couldn’t

just let it go without at least trying. Besides I suspected getting Marcus free of Valentine was somehow the key to neutralizing the threat to Jace and Gareth, something I was very interested in.

This business of being me was getting complicated. Between juggling the men, dealing with my parents, convincing the Queen to let me keep Amras, figuring out what to do about Valentine so that Jace and Gareth were safe, getting through yet another party and trying not to go completely round the bend...lets see did I forget anything? Oh yeah learning to handle the new and exciting talents that just kept popping up in my life...well my dance card was just a little full at the moment.

Drops of water sprayed me as Kit flopped onto his back on my oversized towel where Spot had been lying. "Talents are a good thing." He told me. "It keeps it interesting around here."

"Can we talk about Alan for a moment?" I asked.

"Why?" He demanded.

"Because I'm curious about him, that's why. Come on! Just tell me about his abilities so we can all move on. Otherwise...." I warned him. "I swear I'll take my questions directly to him. You think he'd deny me answers if I cracked open my red door?"

"He's already had a taste of that. Or didn't you know you leaked all over the table last night?"

"Well if you hadn't been trying to attack him I wouldn't have had to."

He draped his arm over his eyes and muttered. "And that was before your little episode in the hall with Cursed and Gareth. He got a big heaping helping of taste!"

"Well so did Dten and Eldel and you aren't complaining about either of them? What makes Alan any different?"

"You are my first Lexi. I'm not likely to share you and I'm a little sensitive around other's with similar talents."

I pushed up off the blanket and stared at him in surprise. "I'm your first...ever? You'd never had sex with anyone?" I whispered in shock.

The arm slipped off his face and he slowly turned to face me. “My first...human woman. My first woman ever.” He corrected. My face must have looked as confused as my mind was because I simply didn’t know how to respond to that. Either he’d had sex or he hadn’t.

Kit pushed up on one elbow and turned toward me. His fingers ran over my shoulder and his face had a look I couldn’t place. “I thought you understood... when I told you there were no females of the second level.” He explained his voice having gone cautious. “It’s only men.”

“So you...you...” I stuttered, not knowing what to say to that.

“Waited very patiently for you.” He completed my sentence. “But I’m thousands of years old Lexi. And even Demons have needs, especially those of the second level.” And he flopped back onto the blanket and closed his eyes. “And sometimes Demons of the sixth level.” He added with a grimace.

My mind stumbled over his last sentence and...could it be? “Kit you...didn’t steal my papers from work...you didn’t steal them at all, did you?” I asked, my voice having gone soft with amazement.

He grunted and ran his hand over his chest and down his stomach. My fingers followed the trail he made down his body and I felt myself tighten when his fingers brushed over the silver tipped curls at the juncture of his thighs and he casually stroked himself. “You wouldn’t have enjoyed Knight. I promise you that, rage and sex is not a good combination.” He replied. “So maybe you’ll understand why I don’t want to hand you over to another. I earned you he didn’t.”

I put my cheek back on the towel and tried to comprehend everything he’d just told me. What about the others? Did he resent them too?

Kit sighed next to me. “I’m a Lust Demon Mistress. Why would I deny my very nature?”

“So it’s only Alan you have issues with?”

“If you hadn’t noticed...we have an interesting situation here. It seems to be working. I don’t think anyone is eager to...add to the mix.”

I thought about that too and finally asked. “It’s not Alan I’m really concerned with. It’s that when he spoke...it did things to me. I wasn’t prepared for that.”

He cracked open an eye and his fingers stilled. “Lust like rage or anger can be used as a weapon. What he did was nothing more than that. He simply used his voice instead of his body. You Mistress could do the same if you chose.”

I could...I hadn’t realized! I’d only ever thought lust or desire at someone like I’d done in training room. And I’d never been on the receiving end before. “You’ve never done that to me. Used your voice on me I mean.”

His red eye speared me in place while his hand moved in his lap and I felt my mouth go dry and had to lick my lips. He grinned suddenly and chuckled. “Why would I need to when it’s so much more fun to tempt you in other ways?”

I suppose he had a point. It wasn’t as if Alan could have dropped his pants in the middle of the meeting and touched himself for my pleasure.

Kit raised an eyebrow at me. “Not really his style.”

“Could you please stop doing that?” I muttered it was very distracting. “We’re having a conversation here.”

“But it feels good.” He teased, his voice having gone soft and sexy. “Not nearly as good as when you touch me, but satisfying all the same.”

I had to close my eyes for a moment and push down the desire rising in me. I licked my lips again and felt a tightening down below.

“Mmmm.” He whispered having gone up on one elbow again. His body cupped toward mine, his knee bushing my thigh. “Do you remember how I felt buried inside you? How it felt as I grew to fill you completely while you writhed beneath me?” He asked his voice pressing in against me causing pleasant sensations to explode across my body. I watched him through silted eyes as his hand wrapped around his erection sliding down his turgid length. Liquid heat invaded me and I felt the pressure building within. “Would you like to touch me?” He tempted glancing down at himself, drawing my eyes while he stroked slow and steady. “To feel the smooth heat of me

filling your palm while your fingers caress me.” My hand twitched and my palms tingled at his words.

“Kit.” I warned and he smiled.

“Mistress, use me.” He whispered leaning in closer so that his breath feathered over the skin on my shoulder. “Let me pleasure you.”

When I made no objection, he slid his leg between mine and eased his body over me pressing against my hip and bottom, teasing me with the long hard length of him. His long black hair spilled across my back the damp strands sending a chill through me. His chest pressed me into the sand as he rubbed himself across my skin like a cat might. His lips found my ear and he began whispering all manner of things he’d like to do with me, to me. Things that made my blood flow faster and fevered my mind until I was gripping the towel and nearly moaning. When he slid his other leg between mine I was already hot and wet and oh so ready for him. He entered me, and as he had the one other time we’d made love, he paused to hold himself still above me.

“Is it enough?” He asked as the weight of his chest pinned me to the towel.

I lifted my hips against him and knew that there was more and that I wanted it all. “No!” I breathed and moaned again as I felt him grow larger inside of me.

“Mistress you must tell me what you desire.” He urged still holding himself still. And I felt him jerk inside.

“Kit...damn you! More.” I growled and held on tightly while he stretched me wide with the size of him. “Yes...yes.” I whispered as I closed my eyes savoring the feel. Only then did he begin to move, his hips slowing sliding out of me until I whimpered and arched myself back toward him, my body begging for more. He kept up this torture for several minutes, his tempo steady.

“You know what I want.” He whispered. “Let it go.”

I bit my lip and shook my head.

He wrapped his foot around my thigh and his arm around my waist and flipped us over. With my back pressed to his front he slid his hands down my body and into the fold between my legs. I turned my face into his neck as he quickly brought me

shuddering and clutching at his hips beneath me. “Open the door.” He urged. “Give it to me.”

Again I denied him, my teeth biting down on the skin at his neck. He growled and thrust into me using his feet and thighs to shove deeper so that he bumped up against my cervix and I gasped. His hand worked me again while the other ran over my body finding my breast and rolling my nipple. This time when I came his voice was low and urgent his own excitement growing as I inhaled and pressed my heels into the sand finding my balance to ride him. “Why must you fight me?” He growled next to my ear then he hesitated and added. “Please..oh please Mistress.”

I bit my lip and slid myself down his length while mentally I reached for my little red door and cracked it open. Within my mind I gathered the desire that bubbled and whirled behind that door and shoved it outwards. Kit bucked and grasped in my arms forcing me down onto him as he lifted his hips and pierced me over and over. His breathing increased as I rode him. “Again.” He begged and I fanned the desire at him, coating us both with a thick blanket. His fingers tightened on me and he leaned up onto his elbows pushing me onto him as he rose to meet my downward thrusts.

I heard several growls and opened my eyes to find Owen leaning on one elbow on a towel next to ours. He had one leg raised and I could see the excitement in his dark brown eyes. Behind him Amras stood with his own legs spread as if to brace himself from falling to the ground. His hands were clenched at his sides, his eyes wild. Kit went still beneath me and looked down my body.

On our towel down between our legs, Cursed was kneeling. His face looked hungry his dark eyes burning. “Say yes.” Kit urged and I felt myself fall into Cursed eyes and nodded, not sure what I was saying yes to. Of all my men Cursed is the most fragile. He had been my Mother’s head guard and when she’d tricked him and escaped the Sidhe to help the humans he had been blamed then thrown into a prison cell by the Queen. All had suspected he’d been seduced by my Mother and allowed her to escape. As punishment he’d been denied sexual gratification of any kind. Then he’d been regularly forced to watch others have intercourse in front of him while he was chained

to the wall. It was a lesson designed to instill in him that he was of mixed blood and therefore not entitled to touch one of the pure fey. A unfair lesson given that he'd never touched my Mother.

Cursed's torture went on for more than a quarter century, until nearly twenty three years ago when I'd first played my golden flute and freed him from his cell. Since then he'd been left to wander the Sidhe unmolested but had been stripped of his office and shunned by all. He'd been further punished by being given over to me, a half breed mongrel whom all Faerie suspected as being part human. The stipulation had been that he could not come to me until I called for him. Difficult to do since I had no idea he even existed, let alone that he was mine. It wasn't until a few days ago that I had inadvertently freed him from the Sidhe and brought him into my presence. As you might well imagine, he had not been pleased with me. It was hard to say if that was because I'd taken so long to call him forth, or because he was now in my service. At the time he'd still thought I was half human. Things changed drastically when he discovered I was not. However, seeing me with any of the others was still quite difficult on him for all the obvious reasons. Right then he looked like he needed something badly and I couldn't find it in my heart to deny him.

At my nod he slid his hands up my thighs and leaned forward. Kit pushed our legs farther apart to give him more room and he eased forward leaning over me. When he lowered his mouth to me the heat from his tongue drew a moan as I lifted myself to him. Kit made a pleased noise and covered my breasts with his hands using his fingers to squeeze my nipples while he rolled his hips. Cursed brought me, shuddering and clenching round Kit twice before he lifted his head and placed his hand on my stomach, waiting until I opened my eyes and glanced down at him. His face was flushed his eyes burning with a need so intense I shivered and felt Kit also lift his head to glance down our bodies. When their eyes met I felt the unspoken request. Kit made a pleased noise next to my cheek and whispered. "Trust us."

"I don't understand..."

“Let us show you.” He breathed his words soft and seductive. I hesitated for a moment while they both held their breaths then nodded and lay back on Kit’s chest while my eyes widened as Cursed slid a leg over ours positioning himself above me. I felt Kit grow smaller while Cursed pressed his head into me.

I pulled air into my lungs and held onto Cursed’s shoulders while he gently forced himself in until I held them both. I could barely breathe from the exquisite fullness. And then they moved and my mind stuttered and my lids flickered closed. Above me Cursed made a rumbling noise in his throat as he rolled his hips and worked himself in me. I opened my eyes and wrapped my arms around his shoulders, pulling him down for a kiss as I fanned the doorway and coated them all with the lust I created. Cursed dipped his tongue into my mouth and groaned his hips pumping faster and I hit them again. This time Kit bucked beneath me his fingers digging into my hips as he lifted us all off the sand. Cursed pulled his mouth from mine and gasped.

“Now...” Kit gritted out between his teeth and I cried out and spasmed around them my body gripping tightly. Cursed’s neck muscles flexed and he shoved his hips against us driving us back to the sand and crushing me between their bodies. “Again!” Kit gasped and my body jerked as I came for them again. Cursed threw back his head and yelled and I felt his release flood me. Kit’s breathing changed and his fingers dug into my hips while he raised us up off the floor. “Once more.” He rasped and I moaned and arched off Kit my body actually lifting Cursed. Inside I felt Kit grow larger and both Cursed and I sucked air as he shoved me down while Kit lifted his hips one last time and reached his own orgasm.

Cursed collapsed upon my chest his hair shrouding us in its inky blackness while we all struggled to breathe. Beneath me Kit made a pleased sound and ran his fingers up my arms while I felt him shift and jerk inside me. Cursed moaned and pressed his hips against us once more. I turned my head and looked at Owen who had propped his cheek in his palm and was smiling. He looked like he was more than ready to take over for the two I was currently sandwiched between and I gave him a lopsided smile.

He winked then reached out to run his finger down my cheek slipping a lock of hair behind my ear. “Mmmm.” I murmured. “You’ll have to give me a moment.”

Owen chuckled and replied. “Take your time. I’m not going anywhere.” Then he leaned over and kissed my cheek. I narrowed my eyes and rubbed my jaw across Kit’s springy black and silver tipped chest hair. My tongue reached out to lathe his nipple and he muttered and tightened his hands on my arms.

Behind Owen, Amras had dropped to his knees in the sand and there was such a look of longing on his face I caught my breath. Cursed lifted his head and glanced toward Amras in concern.

“Amras?” I asked softly then watched in dismay as his violet eyes filled with pain. Cursed kissed my chest just over my heart and carefully pulled out of me then stretched out on his hip and elbow on the towel to the other side of us. Kit gave me a hug and a kiss on the brow before he lifted me to the towel between himself and Owen. “What is it?”

Amras closed his eyes and breathed deeply. “I do not want to leave you.”

We all scooted back and made room for him. I called to him holding out my hand when he opened his eyes. He rose gracefully from the sand and came to us. Letting us hold him, touch him gently. “Somehow we will find a way.” I promised stroking his pale hair and clasping him to my breast as I leaned back against Kit’s chest.

“If not Princess, I need only remember this day and I will be sustained.” He replied while my eyes met Owen’s over Amras’ back and silent tears flowed down my cheeks. Cursed’s face was pale his lips pressed in a tight line as he rested his hand on Amras’ shoulder and stared down at the sand quietly.

Chapter 8

“Amras?”

“Yes Princess.”

“Say something to me in Elvish.” I asked while my fingers stroked his back.

“Cormamin niuve tenna' ta elea lle au” He replied.

I repeated it softly. “My heart shall... until it sees me again?”

He sighed and ran his fingers over my side. “My heart shall weep until it sees thee again.” He replied. I caught my breath and held him tighter.

“Another please.” I choked out and he took a breath and replied.

“Amin naa lle nai. Amin khiluva lle a' gurtha ar' thar.”

“I am you..no yours to... What is the last word?”

“Command.” He replied. “I am yours to command.”

I pulled a breath into my lungs but worked on the rest of the phrase, though his words caused a pain in my heart. “I am yours to command.” I repeated. “I will..what is the word?”

“Follow.”

I nodded. “Follow you to the ends of the Earth?” I asked and both Owen and Cursed nodded. “And past?”

“Beyond My Lady.” Cursed corrected. “To the ends of the Earth and beyond.”

“Another.” I demanded and Amras shifted and turned over in my arms so that he could tilt back his head and look up at me.

“What is this?” He asked his eyes curious. “You’re speech was perfect last night.”

“Yes, yes...fine.” I told him. “Tell me of life at court. And do it like this.” I told him and closed my eyes, snuggling back into Kit’s arms while I held Amras to me. I took a moment and formed a picture in my mind of a green pickup truck and passed it to Amras, letting his mind see the picture while I spoke the word. “Truck.”

Next I thought of an escalator at the local mall and inserted Cursed and Owen riding it to the second floor and again I passed it to him directly into his mind while I said the word, “escalator.”

Cursed leaned up on an elbow in surprise, apparently he was picking up the images from Amras’ mind. “Stairs that move, what magic is this?” He whispered a disconcerted look on his face. Owen smiled but said nothing. Amras shook his head as if to dislodge the strange vision and frowned up at me.

“If I am to go with you to court Amras I must...be prepared. Can you teach me names to go with faces? I do not wish to embarrass my family. And if I hope to have any chance to sway the Queen I must...” I halted holding out my hands. “Help me.”

Nodding thoughtfully he leaned back in my arms and we began. At some point Owen went to get food and Kit rearranged us so that I found myself being used as everyone’s pillow. When Owen returned he chuckled over the situation and slid his own body in under mine then proceeded to feed me while Amras poured images of people and places into my mind. He was assisted by Cursed who helped to keep the list flowing by offering suggestions. Kit napped and played with my hair in equal intervals. He seemed happy just being there and that in turn pleased me.

“Tell me of the races.” I asked him when we’d reached a lull. “I know that Elves and Goblins are not the only creatures that inhabit the Sidhe.”

Cursed glanced at Amras and raised an eyebrow, his look questioning.

Amras took a breath and began by saying. “The races are divided into four major categories: The Sidhe’s main residents are the two courts. The Seelie Court is primarily dominated by the high ranking Elven families. This court also includes the brownies, pixies, and sprites, however only those of purest blood can hold official office. The Unseelie Courts include goblins and all clans of The Wild Host, which includes Ogres, Red Caps, Hafplings, Spriggins, Pookahs, Seklies, Throws, Twlwwyth Tegs, among many others named and unnamed. It is the court which takes in all not pure Seelie. The Tree Spirits include faeries associated with woodlands. And last of all are the Water Faeries or merfolk and naiads.

“My mother is a Twlwwyth Tegs a mixing of Elf and goblin. She is very beautiful, very fair. I do not know who my father is, only that he is Seelie.” Cursed offered, surprising me by his candidness.

“What is a Twlwwyth Tegs?” I asked and Cursed formed an image in his mind of a beautiful Elven woman with long golden hair and light skin. She was tall and willowy with large black eyes.

“She is Daoine Sidhe.”

And what did that mean I wondered.

“The Daoine Sidhe are a warrior fighting class of the Sidhe. Ancestors of the Tuatha De Dannan. They were once Royal Guard in Annwn.”

I wasn’t sure who the Tuatha De Dannan were so this wasn’t making much sense to me.

“The Daoine Sidhe are ancestors of the Tuatha De Dannan. The Tuatha De Dannan came to this world from the West.” Amras sighed and added. “To the Fey the West means...the Otherworld. The Otherworld exists next to this plane but cannot be seen. It is the land of the Goddess Danu who created us and where we go when our bodies leave this world. There was once a doorway between our worlds and once a

year it would open and we welcomed the children of this land for that night on the condition that nothing would be taken from Annwn when they returned in the morning.”

“Let me guess...someone got greedy?”

“A flower in a pocket and all are locked away from Annwn forever except for those that the Goddess deems worthy and to whom she speaks across the veil.”

Amras shook his head and Cursed murmured. He took a breath and continued. “The Tuatha De Dannan came through the door to this world to live. And when the humans over ran their lands the God Dagda or, The Good God, led them underground into the first Sidhe. The Tuatha split into four groups of which the Fennians were one. The others are the Gorias, the Finias, and The Tegs.”

Your Grandmother the Queen of Light is of the Finias the Ljosalfar or Light Elves also know as the High Elves, and she rules over the Seelie Court. I too am Finias which is why the Queen was for our union.” He admitted, then continued. “When the plague hit, she called the Water and Tree spirits to the Sidhe. The UnSeelie did not care either way and therefore did not argue the closing of the doors. It has been... difficult with them in residence. Should your Mother succeed in opening the doors, all will be in her debt.”

“And what of the Unseelie Court?” I asked my hand brushing over Cursed’s brow. “Who rules this court?”

“The Slaug’s King is Tdem Stoneshadow he is...like Cursed.” Amras added hesitantly. By that I took it to mean that he was part Elf and part Goblin. “He commands the Cwn Annwn . He is quite intelligent and rules his subjects without mercy or prejudice. I fear...he will be most interested in you Princess.”

“What does Cwn Annwn mean?”

“I am not certain how to describe it to you. They are called the Raging Host. They are Huntsmen some believe to be the souls of the dead and they serve the God Mensha who is worshiped for enhancing the war-like side of all Elven peoples. To the Dark Elves he is seen as the God of murder, death, and blood. But to the High Elves he

embodies that side of our nature which makes us strong but that we must strive to control in times of peace. Some believe the Raging Host are lost Fey who did not make their way to the shores of Annwn. They hunt, usually for a woman who may be killed or kidnapped. Mortals that get in the way of the hunt are taken to the land of the dead. All about the Host is black, from the Hunters which are large and powerful, to their yeth hounds and the horses and goats that they ride. To command the Sluagh is to command the Raging Host. They hunt together, and the Sluagh can be fearsome creatures of which no Fey speaks lightly. They are, to put it simply, terrifying.”

“And is the King the only one that can control the Raging Host? Does it come with being King or is it a...gift or talent?”

“Only the King may call up the Huntsmen and only the King may send them back. They are a very powerful weapon and a King must have the gift and the strength to control the Host or they will turn on him and tear him to shreds. As long as a King is strong, Mensha will heed his request and release the Host into his keeping.”

Interesting I thought. “And why will the King be interested in me?”

“The courts recognize each other and are generally on speaking terms. However liaisons across classes can be punishable by death.” Cursed added softly. “You are not full Elf and will therefore be looked upon by the Lord of Air and Darkness as fair game. He has not yet chosen a new Queen...not since he fed his last one to the Cwn Annwn...the Raging Host.

“Why did he do that?” I demanded a shiver going down my spine.

“She was accused of...infidelity Princess. No witnesses came forward to support her denials. And after several hundred years, she had not provided him with an heir. That was...nearly twenty three years ago now.” He added softly. I shivered again and ran my fingers through Amras’ hair as if to sooth myself.

Twenty three years? Was that significant I wondered. Cursed made a low sound in his throat but refused to meet my eyes. Surely they didn’t believe this had anything to do with me! “I hardly think I’ll be there long enough to come to his attention.” I remarked.

“My Lady...” Cursed replied softly. “You already have.”

“How could you possibly know that?”

The two of them looked at each other across my body in one of those looks I was starting to dread then Amras replied. “Princess....your music fills the halls of the Sidhe, not only within the Seelie Court, but the Unseelie as well. Perhaps you do not know this, but there are few of sufficient power to play your flute. You were not yet three years old when you began forcing your will upon the Sidhe. It did not go unnoticed.”

“That may be, but I hardly think the King would have killed his Queen because I played the flute! Why would he care, I was just a baby at the time! As far as I know that was the only time anyone trapped in the Sidhe has seen me till you two showed up again just days ago. And there were only four of you back then, the two of you, my Great Aunt, and that other guard. All of you from the Seelie court, so how could he know unless one of you rushed right back and told him?”

Amras shifted where he lay but remained silent. Cursed took a deep breath and replied. “Because I am not of the Seelie Court, though I was given over to it. The King is Lord of Air and Darkness and he is...my Uncle, my Mother’s twin.”

I sucked air into my lungs, my body going rigid from shock as his words sunk in. “And that would make you?”

“His heir.”

“Excuse me.” I muttered in a shaky voice then pushed up from the pile and headed for the water. I was agitated and needed some alone time. I swam for over a minute beneath the surface then felt Spot brush against me. My hands reached for him and he pulled me deeper while I clung to him and tried not to think at all.

My legs where shaking, my breath coming in ragged gasps when I finally pulled myself from the water. I’d been at it long enough to exhaust myself. All of my men had fled I just wasn’t sure if it was before or after my Father arrived. He was seated on my towel and scratching Spot. So that was where he’d gone too. I sighed, grabbing a

handful of hair and twisting it to get out the excess water as I walked toward him. I had a bad moment realizing I was naked, not because I was naked, but because I wasn't sure if he knew I'd been naked amongst my naked men.

He grimaced and shook his head while I reached for one of the spare towels and wrapped it around me tightly. "You have a way of making your actions known." He replied.

Uh oh, I thought my cheeks going up in flames. "You didn't...I mean you and Mom...please tell me you didn't sense us." I whispered wanting to bury myself under the sand when he raised an eyebrow at me and nodded.

"It was....enlightening. I wasn't aware that was possible. But then I've never been into sharing. I believe you shocked your Mother. You seem to lack all sense of....proprietorship." He added.

I groaned but managed to look him in the chin...it was about as high as I could force my gaze at the moment. "You're dead wrong on that. But apparently it's a one way street. I need to share, but my men are under no delusions of what will occur if they do."

"Ah." He said then his lips twitched upwards. "Banishment?"

"Impotency, a sudden decrease in...reproductive organ size...you know pretty much the standard stuff."

"Hmmm." He replied not sure if he should take me serious or not.

I couldn't help smiling at his look. "So, where's Mom?" I asked as I seated myself on the sand near him.

His grimace slid to a frown. "She's discussing things with Mi. They will likely be at it for hours." He grumbled. "So I thought it might be the right time for us to talk. Your...ah... friends just left."

"Oh." I said and rested my cheek on my upraised knees. I was tired from my swim having pushed myself past any reasonable limit about a mile and a half ago. When I didn't say anything else he leaned back on his elbows and crossed his ankles his light eyes searching my face.

“You are quite beautiful child. You’re Mother has done a fine job.” He told me.

I couldn’t help smiling. “You should include Mi in that compliment. She did more than her own fair share.”

He nodded but didn’t add anything to the comment.

“So what’s the deal with you and Mom?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well she’s already had one child and is going to have four more. Did you think you might marry her and make the lot of us legitimate?” I asked. I knew it was rather rude of me, but seeing as how she was still engaged to Amras, I had a vested interest for several reasons.

“Amras, Amras...I am sick to death of that name.” He muttered. “What were you thinking child?”

I raised my head and looked at him. “Well sorry Dad I didn’t realize when she handed him over to me that it was going to be a problem. It’s not like the two of them ever had sex or anything!” I replied with a huff.

His silver eyes widened then narrowed abruptly. “And how would you know that?” He nearly growled at me.

I did my own eye widening and nearly snapped at him. “I may have been born at night Dad, but it wasn’t *last* night! Do you honestly think I wouldn’t have asked? Or slept with him if he and Mom...no way that’s just...sick! I think I’m offended.” I replied my hair standing up on my arms. “Thanks a lot. It’s true I’m new at this but I don’t need sex that badly.”

He looked like he might have swallowed something sour and finally nodded. Cripes you’d think that would have made him happy! “It does actually.” He sighed, his grimace being replaced by something less unhappy. “Do you honestly think she gave him to you to sleep with?” He asked.

I blushed, I couldn’t help it.

His eyebrows shot up and he stared at me intently. "I'm almost afraid to ask what that was about." He muttered more to himself than me.

I swallowed and shrugged my shoulders. "I think...she didn't think of him as a man. I think...she doesn't think much of any man. Except you and if I hadn't seen you two together earlier." And I actually shuddered. "I might have questioned even that."

He seemed surprised by my comments and dropped his eyes to the sand while he thought them over. "So she hasn't..." I think he actually blushed and my eyebrows shot up to my hairline.

"Wow!" I whispered in shock. "No way, in fact up until about four hours ago I was pretty certain my birth was an Immaculate Conception." I assured him.

He scoffed and gave me a look. "Not likely." He growled. "And you're illegitimate not from any lack of my asking her to marry me. But now..." He replied with a sly smile. "I only stayed away so long because I thought...well I thought she would have returned to the Sidhe and married Amras as her Mother wanted."

"Wait a minute!" I told him sitting up straight in my towel and glaring at him. "You're telling me that you've been off doing whatever because you thought the woman you loved was going to eventually get around to marrying someone she clearly didn't love and whom she's kept on a leash for several hundred years? Are you aware he was celibate all that time?" I demanded harshly. "I'd like to tear her hair out myself!"

"You'll do no such thing!" He told me sharply and I actually jumped at his tone.

"Fine but you better do something about her. She's worse than a freaking Siren!"

"Tell me about it." He grumped.

"Well if having quadruplets doesn't do the trick...come back and see me when she's recovered from giving birth. I'm sure we could arrange sextuplets next time!"

"What?" He replied his voice sounding shocked.

I looked up and quickly rearranged my features to bland. “Ah nothing Dad, just talking to myself.”

“Yes you do that a lot.” He replied more calmly.

“So where have you been? Obviously it’s someplace where they don’t have mail delivery or I might have got a Christmas card or even a postcard would have been nice.” I told him a touch of sarcasm in my voice.

“Its obvious you get your wit and charm from Mi and not your Mother.” He complained.

I shrugged and reminded him. “Well I’m still young. I could grow out of it.” He actually laughed at that and then shook his head.

“It doesn’t matter where I’ve been.” He told me. “And it wasn’t like we were never in contact.”

“Yeah well catching me as I fall night, after night, after night, seems just a little redundant.” I told him, tongue in cheek. “It might have been nice to actually chat once in a while.”

“I would have loved to Lexi, but it was your dreams that reached me. Not the other way around.”

“Huh?” I demanded surprised by his comment.

“You pulled me into your dreams not the other way around.”

“Oh.” I breathed then lifted my hand to my head and rubbed my temple.

“Sorry about that.” I thought about it for a moment and asked. “What about this morning?”

He sighed and crossed his ankles again so the other one was on top. “I’ve been working on it. I thought with your Dragonsward in place you might be able to hear me. But with your Drakes in the room I knew I hadn’t much time.”

Dragonsward, what in the world was that? My shield? And he could sense Jace and Gareth with me?

“Yes your shield as you call it. It is quite rare and I am amazed that you were able to develop one at such a young age.” He nodded and agreed. “The Drakes are

quite powerful. I am pleased with your selection.” He added with a smile. “It is strange though to have two so...willing to share.” He hesitated, his eyes concerned a question in them. “Did they say why they would do such a thing?”

I smiled and shook my head. “I guess I’m just a lucky girl. It has been like this since they first discovered...I didn’t have...ah dangly parts. It didn’t hurt that you mixed a mean cocktail. I think they especially enjoy the bits and pieces you got from Knight.”

“What are dangly parts? And I’m not certain what you mean by your other comments?” He told me, a confused look on his face.

I waved my hand and said. “Dangly parts...the extra appendages all of the female Dragons seem to have.”

“I see.” He winced then nodded and looked at me clearly waiting for the rest of my explanation.

“The bits and pieces...you know when you stirred me up in the beaker before sticking me in Mom.”

He looked at me like I’d grown a third set or maybe fourth set of horns. I think he might have been too surprised to say anything because his jaw dropped open and his eyes widened. “What?” He demanded.

“It’s okay Dad I don’t mind that you threw in the kitchen sink when you were building my DNA. Since I started having sex it’s been one new talent after another. The guys all think it’s amusing. Heck Kit says it keeps things interesting. I have to say though, some of the things I can do are just a wee bit alarming. I don’t know what Knight did but my Lust Demon parts are particularly...impressive.”

“Oh my God!” He groaned. “Lexi where did you ever get the idea you were...what did you say? Created in a beaker?” He demanded. “Or that I built your DNA?”

“Well...from Mom or maybe Mi...are you saying I wasn’t?” I couldn’t believe this. “Are you sure?”

“Am I sure....?” He laughed his voice sounding so not funny. “Lexi, you’re Mother and I had sex! She was a Princess and engaged. I was in love with her from the moment I first laid eyes on her but she adamantly refused me for more than two decades! After nearly a quarter of a century of me trying to seduce her she finally gave in and....and you were conceived! I didn’t even know she was pregnant with you until after the lab was destroyed and my partners killed! By then she’d gone into hiding. My God Lexi, she is the Royal Princess of Faerie and she was having a Drake’s child!”

“So Knight? He must have had something to do with me. Dad I’ve been to Hell! I’m part Demon, part Lust Demon...ask Kit if you don’t believe me. And what of the others you created? What happened with them? Are they my brothers or...or what?” I cried, as my whole world turned topsy turvy. No wonder Mom would never speak of Dad! How could she have let me go on thinking I’d been a test tube baby! I was so going to yell at her the next time I saw her.

He groaned and ran his hand over his face then flopped back on the towel as if in pain. “Knight was my familiar. I conjured him.” He replied his voice sounding slightly shell shocked. “The deal was...the first female we created was to be given over to him and in exchange he would protect her and be freed from Hell permanently. I choose him because I knew you would be safe with him. He...he preferred men. But all the females turned to males and we had stopped trying...had gone back to the basics and were attempting to discover the enzyme or chromosome that was causing the shift to male. I never imagined. Oh God, Lust Demon! And your Demon is a Lust Demon...he must have bartered you away.” And his face took on a horrified expression and he swallowed then added more softly. “Your Demon...he must care a great deal for you. Earlier he said he’d watched over you all your life, kept men away from you...?”

“He said I wouldn’t have enjoyed Knight. That he’d earned me. And once he said..he wondered who the donor had been. I assumed he meant the Lust Demon donor.” I told him watching as he closed his eyes and pressed the palms of his hands into them.

“As you said, Knight must have done something to you in your Mother’s womb. But I swear to you Lexi I did not know.”

“So maybe all these interesting things I can do are merely a side affect of being half Elf and half Dragon?”

He nodded and pushed up to one elbow. “With a twist of Lust Demon and...who knows what else. Knight had access to everything in the lab and more. We had samples of nearly every non-human species. My God your powers could be...” And he trailed off with a look I’d seen on Mom’s face when pondering a medical conundrum.

“Yeah....did I mention they seem to be getting stronger each time I...have intercourse?” That seemed to surprise him even more and I was thinking he might start muttering to himself any moment...that’s what Mom usually did. “So what of the others...the ten Drakes? What are they exactly?”

“We found women...fey women interested in having children. They were inseminated. My partners...were their fathers. I couldn’t, not loving your Mother and desperate to have her. She would never have forgiven me.” Well that made sense.

“Marcus told me his mother is Belinda. She is not a woman, she is a Dragon. A seriously deranged Dragon that I could have killed last night had I not shown mercy for Marcus’ sake.” I warned him, my words a challenge and a demand for answers.

“Belinda was...one of my partners knew her before she crossed over. I don’t know how she found us, but she did and she begged us for our help. Marcus is only a few years older than you, he was our last attempt before we stopped trying. We thought if we could place the egg inside her that maybe it wouldn’t turn.”

“But Gareth and Jace told me that none of the females that crossed over are fertile. So how could she be his mother?”

“She isn’t. She’s only his surrogate. He is as much fey as you! As all of them are. Understand these were women that wanted very much to have children. It is no secret that no children have been born to the Sidhe in a very long time, none except you and the others. But the women who came to us over the years, all of them were

originally from the Seelie Court. They simply chose to live outside the Sidhe amongst the humans for various reasons. Likely it was that or banishment to the Unseelie Court. And once there, you cannot come back. So they fled the Sidhe and eventually made their way to us and we helped each other. They didn't say and we never asked. I do know though, that your Mother is the only one of royal blood. That she conceived is a miracle." He finished.

A miracle? More like a cruel joke given that she was still engaged to a full blooded Lord of the Seelie Faerie and found herself suddenly pregnant from her one fall from grace with a Dragon no less.

"I won't apologize for her." He warned me. "She was wrong and so was I. I should not have given up on her so easily. I should have realized the effect the shame would have on her and tracked her down. But I thought I had already ruined her life and she was still engaged..."

I thought about it for a moment and realized I was a miracle...and why was I a miracle? I mulled it over in my mind going over everything we'd discussed. "I'm very unique. And Kit is here he's a full blooded Lust Demon and...my sisters..." I trailed off, golden eyes meeting silver. "The strength and number of my abilities seem to be linked through...sex. And Kit is very good to me. I'm sure we could find each of them their own guardians. He did keep men away from me until just last week. He claims that none of them up till then... were worthy."

My Father pushed himself into a sitting position and thought about it for a moment. "I will discuss it with your Mother."

"And Dad, one last thing?" I asked as he pushed himself to his feet. "I suppose this means that no one is actually after me to...ah...slice me into sushi and study my bioengineered DNA?"

His eyes looked tormented by my comment and he shook his head. "By God, what was she thinking!" He muttered then turned and strode purposefully toward the door.

On a good note, it seemed no one was coming in their lab coat to cart me away anytime soon. And when I got over being happy about that I might just be so pissed at having spent my entire life as Plain Jane that my head exploded. I couldn't stop to think about that at the moment though...I wanted to savor the thought that Mom was about to get an earful from Dad. Damn her! I just wished I was there to hear it.

Chapter 9

Someone was stroking me, someone who was thinking lusty thoughts while enjoying the feel of my hair sliding through his fingers. The same someone who wanted very much to roll me over, peel back my towel then make love with me right there on the sand. And when he leaned over me and whispered something against my skin, something too low to hear, I moaned and tried to open my eyes. Cool fingers brushed my ear, sliding over the tip and down the other side moving on to my cheek then across my lips. I inhaled the scent of him, an unfamiliar mixture of something wild with a very faint hint of cloves, and shuddered.

My eyes popped open in horror and the dream was broken. I hissed and rolled to my knees grateful when my towel came with me. My eyes swept the room and I realized I was alone and must have fallen asleep. Spot was missing, probably sleeping on his bed at the other end of the cavern. That was odd. He usually kept me company when I napped. There was nothing or no one else in the chamber with me. I glanced around again and headed to the door while a strange sense of unease filled me.

In my bath I filled the tub with hot water and poured some of the lilac scented bubbles in with me. Sinking into the water I closed my eyes and leaned my head back...realizing I wasn't alone in the room. Someone or something was there with me. I slipped lower into the water and did something I hoped I wouldn't regret. I reached into my mind and cracked open my red door and breathed desire out of me spreading it about like a silken cloak across the room.

The tension around me ratcheted up a few notches and I smiled and cracked the door open just a bit farther and this time it was less of a breath and more of a breeze that I sent skittering into the corners so that it rebounded off the walls.

"I know you're there Alan." I told him calmly. "If Kit finds you in here you'll wish you'd never met me."

He appeared sitting on the edge of the tub wearing a tailored black silk shirt and crisp black slacks. His eyes were dark and very intense his dusky skin flushed. He dipped his fingers in the water and swirled his hand around sending waves across the tub that shifted the bubbles and played peek-a-boo with the water beneath.

"And what have I to fear from your little familiar?" He asked raising an eyebrow as his eyes caressed my face.

I smiled and looked back at him tilting my head to the side. "Ever visited Hell?" I asked softly.

"About two minutes ago, when you tempted me."

"Hmmm." I replied, letting that comment go. "Thank you for the flowers by the way. You really shouldn't have."

He flashed a smile and stroked the water again. "You are a difficult woman to find alone. A very busy woman."

I bit the inside of my cheek and stared back at him. "I am difficult period." I warned.

He chuckled and nodded his head. "Any woman of interest usually is." He agreed. Then he gave me a curious look. "I am not certain how to address you." He told me. "The others call you, Mistress, My Lady, Princess...what shall I call you?"

I frowned at the question. While it was true that the titles my men used for me were a show of respect. I'd come to think of them more as endearments than strictly titles and the thought of Alan calling me any of them was disconcerting. "Just call me Lexi."

"And so I shall, Lexi...it is a beautiful name for a beautiful woman." He replied.

"So what can I do for you Alan? While I'm naturally flattered to have you visit, I'd hate to have your untimely death on my conscious due to a misplaced sense of adventure."

"Sense of Adventure? Oh no, I think it's something much more than that." He assured me.

"Well whatever it is or isn't, and whatever you may think of me, I'm not in the habit of entertaining strange men in my bathtub. Do you think you might get to the point soon?" I asked. It wasn't that I actually cared. It was more that the bubbles were evaporating and I didn't know him well enough to be giving him a free show. Besides I didn't normally reward bad behavior and entering my bedroom uninvited was very bad indeed.

"That's an interesting talent you have."

"Thank you. Would you like to schedule an appointment to compare notes?" I asked sweetly.

"Most definitely." He whispered and smiled and I wondered if I was going to be in trouble here soon. He hadn't used his voice on me yet for which I was grateful. But naked and alone wasn't really going to be a good combination if he started in on me. "And if I asked to join you?" He offered his fingers dipping into the water so that there was no confusing his intent.

"I would have to respectfully decline. Not that you aren't an attractive man or posses your own interesting talents. It's more that my current lovers would be hurt by my willy nilly adding to their ranks. And I care too much for them to want to cause unnecessary pain."

“And yet...there is the matter of the Red Dragon. If I’m not mistaken you’ve already claimed him.” He remarked his eyes watching my face as he added. “He is very young. I suspect it will be like dropping a small child into a pond filled with piranhas.”

I sighed and replied. “You are undoubtedly correct.”

“And yet...” He added, one corner of his mouth lifting slightly.

I gave him a nod. “And yet...one has little choice. It is some small matter of honor. One I’m afraid I can not ignore.”

“Then if I cannot tempt you to me. Perhaps I can interest you in a bargain?”

Never cut off your whiskers to spite your face. That was what Mi used to tell me. “And what do you offer to bargain with?” I asked forcing myself to remain still in the water.

“Normally I would say myself. But since you have already turned me down,” He replied with a lopsided smile. “Perhaps it is information you would trade for.”

“For what?” I asked wanting to be clear.

“A night.”

“And what information do you have that might cause me to change the course of my life?” I asked knowing full well that one night with this man would change either or both of us in some small way and not wanting to minimize the damage that could do.

His eyes told me he caught my odd phrasing and understood my meaning. He seemed pleased. “Valentine’s hold over him.”

I lifted a knee and placed my elbow on it while I looked at him and considered his offer. “And what makes you think I don’t already know?”

He smiled at me and if he had fangs they would have been showing. “I think if you knew you would have done something about it last night. Or wasn’t that the reason you...healed him?” He asked.

I pressed my lips together and captured some bubbles in my palm and watched as they burst. “That was different.” I informed him. “He should have been able to heal himself during shift. It...bothered me.”

“Hmmm.” He replied. “And yet the female you let bleed all over the carpet.”

I pulled air into my lungs and narrowed my eyes at him. “Belinda’s life was mine to choose. I let her live, I believe I was more than gracious.”

“Yes you were gracious. Let us hope it doesn’t get us all killed.” He replied and swirled his fingers in the water again. “Dragons aren’t the only beings Valentine has been collecting.” He informed me tightly. “There is some small concern that he will turn his eyes to...the rest of us when he has gathered....your associates.”

“And do you speak for the others?” I asked, tilting my head to the side considering his words.

“Let me just say I won the coin toss.” He told me with a smile.

“Hmmm. And you tell me this because you hope to...what?”

He sighed and his dark eyes lifted to mine. “Save us all.” He informed me. “Within these walls are men that were once mine to call. Giving oath does not sever all bonds. There have been whispers...”

“Define a night?” I hedged changing the subject abruptly as my heart skipped a beat at his words. I could only imagine what he’d heard and struggled to remain calm. He smiled and my eyes were drawn to the small cleft in his chin. Never trust a thief, Mi had also taught me that.

“Shall I spell it out for you?” He asked his dark eyes dancing.

“Actually I’d prefer it in writing if you don’t mind so that I might consider it in exact detail.”

He sighed and dipped his finger into the water again. “That is hardly the romantic answer I was hoping for.”

“I did warn you I was difficult. And apparently you failed to do your homework on me.” I told him crisply. “Harvard Business Degree.” I offered when he raised an eyebrow inquiringly.

“Hmmm...I suppose it could be worse, you might have said Law Degree.” He teased with a smile. “Lawyers are so tedious. But suddenly I’m extremely happy I keep several on retainer.”

“Yes well, I imagine in your line of work...”

He purred deep in his throat and gave me a look that set the hair on my nape to waving in the wind. “In my line of work...I’ve never accepted an offer I couldn’t deliver on.”

“I’ve heard that about you.” I told him then watched him for several seconds while I decided. “Have the contract delivered to me and I will review it then give you my decision. I should warn you that I have obligations and may be...away for a few days.”

He straightened slightly and his eyes were curious. “I’ll have the papers drafted and in your hands by tomorrow night. I assume you will be attending your own party thrown by our illustrious Mayor?” He asked.

I winced but nodded. “You may assume so.”

“Lexi, be very careful.” He warned me. “I don’t think this party was his idea. And know this,” He added. “For what it is worth, you have my protection.”

I pulled air into my lungs and stared at him in surprise. “And why would you do that for me?” I breathed.

“For the Hell you put me through this day, and the promise of more to come.” He replied with a sexy smile. “For a chance at us, I would offer nearly anything.”

“Then perhaps I should reconsider our bargain and ask for more.” I told him and smiled when his look turned to one of mock dismay.

“Yes I can see that you will be difficult.” He teased. “I will try to think of something else to sweeten...the kitty.”

“Alan.” I told him seriously. “Time to go.”

He sighed and ran his finger through the water once more. “One could wish your bubbles were not so long lasting.” He groused. “May I have a kiss to seal our agreement?”

“We have no agreement and I don’t think it’s any surprise that I don’t trust you.” I told him baldly.

“On the hand Lexi?” He urged still refraining from using his voice on me.

“If I give you my hand will you try to take my arm?” Suddenly remembering what Kit had done to me earlier in the day.

“If I promise to restrain myself to just your hand and wrist?”

Perhaps it was foolish of me but I finally nodded and eased toward him keeping myself below the water. My hair fanned out behind me and drew his eyes. “Your hair is like spun gold shot through with flames. I have never seen anything like it. The length is...” He drew a breath and shook his head reaching for my hand and sliding off the edge of the tub so he could get lower. His fingers caressed the back of my hand sliding down over my wrist and fingering the chain of miniature dragons. I knelt at the edge of the tub while he turned the links around and glanced curiously at each. He made an ah ha noise over the green and blue but when he reached Marcus he hesitated turning him over slowly. He had a similar reaction to Kit and his brows drew together in a frown. When he came to Goldy, he ran his finger down the spine and over the tail. Then his hand closed over my wrist and his eyes met mine. He looked into my eyes for several seconds while I wondered if I was going to regret my decision.

“May I have your other hand?” He asked and I frowned up at him and dropped the one he was holding back into the water, offering him my other so he could slide his fingers around it. He smiled tightly as his eyes were drawn to the ring Jace and Gareth had given me the previous night. It was gold and had miniature replicas of them in dragon form encircling a large red-orange multi-faceted cut stone. Their eyes were emerald and sapphire. “An interesting ring, very fine craftsmanship. This green and blue are different than the others.” He informed me.

“Yes they are. And thank you.”

His brow cleared and he leaned forward his lips brushing the back of my knuckles. When I would have pulled away he made a sound in his throat and placed his lips against my wrist. “Till tomorrow night.” He whispered and then he was gone.

“Remind me to kill him tomorrow.”

“You’ll have to stand in line.” Gareth replied.

I bit my lip and eased back across the tub and onto the seat.

“What was he doing here?” Jace demanded.

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“No I mean, how did he get in?”

They were leaning against the doorway with their arms crossed over their chests and neither looked happy. “Hey I didn’t invite him.” I told them, and then squirmed where I sat as they continued to look at me like I’d been at the cookie jar.

“And I suppose that little show you gave him wasn’t an invitation?”

“Oh you felt that?” I asked. That wasn’t good I was pretty sure I’d kept it confined to the bathroom. “I was trying to flush him out.” I offered.

“We know. You weren’t shielded.” Gareth supplied.

Oh well so that meant they’d heard the entire conversation. Had everyone?

“What do you think?”

“Where’s Kit?” I asked my voice sounding tense.

“I believe Owen is restraining him in the other room. Don’t ask me how.”

I stood up abruptly and reached for a towel. This was not good.

Gareth shook his head and glanced at Jace. “If I was her I might be little less concerned about the Demon and a little more concerned about the Dragons.”

I paused, halfway out of the bathtub and felt my face go pale as I looked at the two of them and realized they weren’t just unhappy, they were very angry. “I didn’t do anything.” I told them.

“Which is the only reason he’s still breathing.” Jace assured me tightly. “A decision we were seriously rethinking as he was slobbering all over your hands.”

“You can’t kill him, he has information we may need.”

“He invaded our den and is attempting to seduce our woman. I think he’s made his intentions fairly clear. It’s yours we are concerned with.”

I took a breath and eased all the way out of the tub, flipped the stopper and wrapped a towel around me. “I intend to keep both of you from becoming Valentine’s new play toys.” I told them calmly.

“I believe I’m offended.” Jace replied sarcastically.

“The vanity of youth.” Gareth added his voice barely above a growl.

Jace narrowed his eyes while I frowned at the two of them. “So what I’m supposed to ignore the problem and hope it will go away? You do realize I’ve now been warned by at least four different people that I’m in danger because of this? And you expect me to bury my head in the sand and pretend nothing is wrong?”

“I didn’t realize she knew that many fortune tellers.” Jace muttered.

“I don’t know why she doesn’t trust us.”

“It’s emasculating.”

“It’s damn irritating is what it is!” Gareth hissed.

“I think we need to do something about this.”

“I still can’t believe he waltzed right into our den.”

“Almost like he wanted to get caught.”

“He must be desperate.”

I stiffened and stood straighter. Well thanks a lot! I thought and frowned at the two of them when they both glared back at me.

“Did you know he could move around like that?” Jace asked, his eyes pinning me to the floor.

“No I did not know. But it doesn’t really surprise me since he’s got Demon in him and it might explain why he’s so good at what he does.”

“Ah is that what this is all about?” Gareth muttered his eyes narrowing and if he had hackles on his neck they would have been standing at attention.

“That wasn’t in his dossier!”

“Like I said, he must be desperate. Why else would he tip his hand? He has to know she’d tell us.”

“Probably counting on it...”

“He won the coin toss, and we...need to go out.”

Jace just nodded and the irritation on his face faded as he became more thoughtful. “Think we should take Owen?”

“No I think he should stay here...” Gareth replied his eyes sliding over me. “The others are...distressed. He’s a calming influence. Besides if we take him they will all expect to go.”

“We could leave her here with her Father...and that cat.”

Gareth nodded thoughtfully while my gaze swung between the two of them. “Maybe it would be best. Give them time to calm down.” I wasn’t certain if I should be annoyed or offended that they thought I needed protection. And where did they get off leaving me here anyway? If they were going out to gather information I was going too.

“No.”

“Absolutely not.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and glared back at them.

“Don’t look at us like that. You stay here or your new little friend’s next visit from his solicitor will be to read his last will and testament over his closed casket.”

“Fine.” I muttered. “Areth I need clothing.” I yelled as I pushed past them where they still stood in the doorway. Neither had come farther into the room and I suspected it was to keep them from doing bodily harm to my person.

I marched to the bed then nearly cried when an old pair of sweats and oversized raggedy t-shirt from my apartment appeared. Obviously Areth agreed with Jace and Gareth and I didn’t think I should be going anywhere. I picked up the sweatpants noticing the unattractive underwear lying beneath them on the bed and nearly screamed out loud from frustration. Ignoring the granny panties I yanked on the sweats but wrapped the bra around me and snapped it on before shoving my t-shirt down over my head.

I bent over to pull on the ugly mismatched fuzzy slippers and when I stood up again Jace wrapped his arms around me and bent me backwards over the bed while his

lips crashed down on mine. I had to remind myself I was angry at him for leaving me here but it didn't seem to help and it wasn't long before I was soft and pliable in his arms. When my pulse was racing to his satisfaction he pulled back and kissed my temple. "That's for sending him away." He growled then he was gone and I was blinking up into Gareth's face.

"And this is for wanting to protect us." And he pulled me gently into his arms and scattered my thoughts like so many petals on the wind with his kisses. When he left me I flopped backwards and tried to remember how my body parts were supposed to work.

Chapter 10

The rooms were all empty when I pulled myself off the bed and wandered down the hall. It had been nearly a week since I'd been completely alone and it felt odd. I rambled around a while and finally found myself in the library poking through Jace's collection of Demon books. Most of them looked like they contained conjuring spells and all manner of rites. I put the tomb I was glancing through back on the shelf and backed carefully away. It was not a good idea to be dabbling with something so potentially dangerous without either Kit or Jace there. I wasn't quite that mad at them for leaving me here alone.

I was hungry but didn't feel like eating. I suppose I could have gone up to the training room but didn't feel like that either. I wandered into the kitchen and read the clock on the stove. It wasn't even eight yet. With everyone gone, my parents obviously busy, and Nick left to open the club, there wasn't much to do. I'd already spent more time in the water than normal so that wasn't an option. I was restless and bored and had a sudden urge to get out and do something, smell the fresh air, see the

sky, maybe go shopping although there wasn't anything I needed. My purse was back in my room on the floor in the closet where I'd put it days ago. I went to check to make sure before I called for Areth. It took some convincing but in the end she provided me with a long Chinese style dress with matching short jacket. The dress was strapless and black and had little dragons in various colors embroidered down the front. The jacket had a stand up mandarin collar and the sleeves were bell shaped to match the dress' hemline. It hugged my body to my knees where it flared to the floor to allow me room to walk. I'd have to be careful not to eat too much. The dress didn't leave a lot of room for anything besides breathing and showing off my curves.

I requested Areth provide clothing to my parents of a similar nature and with Areth's assistance I piled my hair on my head and held it all in place with four black lacquer chopsticks which she provided. A little eye makeup and I closed my eyes and sent out a call for Nick. This time I tried to gauge the strength, hoping I didn't knock him off his chair as I'd done the last time.

Smoothing the silk across my hips I gathered up the black fur wrap and went to wait for everyone in the front room.

I was sitting on the couch staring at one of the pictures on the wall when my parents came in. I was still angry with Mom but decided to put that aside for the moment. They were my ticket out of there and I wasn't about to do anything to risk a night out on the town.

Dad looked handsome in his tailored suit and Mom was her normal elegant self dressed in pale blue which showed off her delicate figure and flawless complexion perfectly.

"I assume we're supposed to be going somewhere?" Dad asked as he motioned to his clothing and looked at me.

"I thought it might be nice if we had dinner together, sort of a welcome home?" I told him, biting the inside of my cheek and trying to look innocent.

"Do you think that's a good idea?" Mom asked.

“It’s not like the media doesn’t know I’m here.” I replied. “If Nick can get us out undetected, dinner across town might actually throw them off the scent and it make it easier for us tomorrow night.” I added.

Out in the hall the elevator dinged and I held my breath waiting for one of them to respond.

Dad turned to Mom. “Shaylee?” He asked. And when she nodded I let out the breath I’d been holding, just as the door opened and Nick walked in.

“Good evening.” He told my parents his eyes quickly moving to me. “You...called?” He asked with a curious look on his face.

“Not too loud I hope?” I inquired then smiled when he shook his head.

“I remained seated this time, thank you. Your control seems to be improving.”

“Great. So we were thinking dinner out? Can you arrange to have the car pick us up in the alley without the media’s attention?”

Nick frowned and did that spread legs wrist in hand thing he does so well. “I can’t let you out alone. Gareth would skin me alive.”

“Oh that’s not a problem, send as many men as you think we’ll need.” I assured him. “And maybe someone could call ahead for us and make arrangements for three at a nice restaurant somewhere?”

He frowned but with my parents there he couldn’t really disagree. After nearly a minute he nodded. “Give me a few minutes.” And he turned back to the door and started talking low and fast into the communicator on his wrist.

I clasped my matching purse Areth had provided and smiled to myself. Dinner out at a real restaurant! Wow I was almost feeling like a normal person. Add both my parents in attendance and it was actually rather amazing. Nick came back motioned us to the door and we headed into the elevator.

“Where exactly are we?” My Dad asked as he watched the floors light up in descending numbers.

I gave him a surprised look but replied. “San Francisco. Gareth and Jace own a dance club called the Salty Dog. We are...beneath it.”

“Oh.” He replied as the door opened and he assisted Mom into the foyer. Nick got the door and we entered the hallway behind the club leading to the elevators, storage, and the back stairs up to the street. The club was huge and took up two floors with vaulted ceilings. It was great for the acoustics. Through the wall we could hear the music low and vibrating.

“Wait here.” Nick told us as he went up the steps and pushed opened the door. Apparently he was satisfied as he waved us up. Outside in the alley was a long black car pulled up close to the door with four of Nick’s bodyguards standing at attention. At the top of the stairs Nick took my arm and handed me into the back while Dad helped Mom. Nick took something from one of the men and leaned in to pass it to me. It was my communicator which I kept forgetting to use. He watched me through narrowed eyes as I slipped it into my purse then nodded. “The reservations are under Princess Lexi at the St. Francis over in Union Square.” He told me with a grin. “They were only too happy to accommodate you. We need to hurry and get you out of here while some of the men are out front distracting the press.” Then he closed the door and I heard him tap twice on the roof.

The three of us took up the bench in the back facing forward. On the seat across from us, two of Nick’s men were seated. I recognized both of them from the training room and smiled. I wondered if Nick had asked for volunteers, because these guys had been caught in the crossfire the other day when I’d become annoyed with Jace and caused an orgy. Mi and Areth had had to help me untangle the thirty or more people that had been unintentionally caught up in the spillover. When we managed to get everyone separated and redressed these two had been amongst the group who offered to be test subjects in case I ever needed to practice my new ability. That was before Amras had assisted me in building a wall around that part of my mind which creates lust, the one with the little red door

“Hello.” I said. “And you are?”

“Nate and Calvin, up in front are Dean and Jon.” Nate informed me. Nick must have asked for tall dark and brooding because they were all over six feet, had wide

shoulders and large hands. The car smelled of wolf and some type of big cat. These were Hunters in training and would be formidable if threatened. I had to smile, seeing as how I could kick all of their butts in both swords and Karate. I knew because I was training them and had watched them on the floor.

“My parents, Princess Shaylee Helyanwe and Roark ‘e Venth.” I replied.

The two facing us nodded while I caught Dean’s eyes in the mirror. “You look lovely this evening.” He commented and I laughed.

Dad frowned at me and my laughter subsided into chuckles. “I’m sorry Dad we’ve been training together and they usually see me drenched in sweat with my hair plastered to my head.”

Mom had a slightly horrified look on her face but managed to hold her tongue. Dad didn’t have the same restraint. “Training for what?” He asked his eyes turning suspiciously on the men and giving them the look. Yeah that was the look he’d given Amras earlier. I recognized it. Apparently so did the others. It was like some secret male handshake or something because Nate and Calvin jerked upright under his stare and I felt the tension increase sharply. I couldn’t help the blush that stained my cheeks when I realized what Dad must be thinking.

“Ah...Karate and swords.” I told him quickly and everyone breathed again when Dad glanced at me in surprise, his features immediately losing that, you are so dead ambiance.

“Is that wise Lexi?” He demanded. “You might be hurt.” He added his voice filled with concern. I couldn’t help it, my cheeks heated up again as all four guards snorted and chuckled softly. Dad frowned and I held up my hands palm up and shrugged.

“Well Dad,” I replied trying not to roll my eyes. “I’m always very careful not to... injure.” In the mirror Dean’s eyes twinkled and Jon placed his arm on the back of the seat shifting so he could give me a wink.

“That’s good sweetheart.” Dad said, not catching my intentionally slip. I had to duck my head to keep from laughing at the look on the guard’s faces!

Mom chose that moment to add to the conversation. “Lexi has been training in martial arts since she was eight. She was so gangly at that time we thought it might help to improve her balance.”

I winced and glanced at the men who were trying not to laugh. “Gee Mom I hope you weren’t planning to tell everyone about the blemish I got when I was fifteen or that I skinny dipped with a friends when I was twelve? Or how about the time I got into your chemicals and turned myself yellow for a week? Because that will be real fun!” I assured her with a touch of sarcasm.

She gave me a look that basically said she didn’t appreciate my humor while I stared right back at her letting her know I wasn’t too happy with her at the moment either.

“Perhaps you can tell me about Harvard?” Dad said trying to ease the tension. “You graduated at seventeen?” He asked. His arm had gone around Mom and his fingers appeared to be soothing her shoulder.

“Sure yeah, but I’ve never seen the campus. I just...took the tests and got my degree. So there’s not much to tell.”

“But Business? That seems...well I might have expected you to excel in one of the sciences.”

I could tell that the guards were listening closely. And clearly enjoying every tidbit he was dropping them. “I figured you two already had that area covered and business seemed a good alternative. Besides, as it turns out, I’m not such a bad healer after all. I must get that from Mom.” I told him.

Mom glanced at me. “You never told me you could heal? How long have you had the gift?”

I thought about it for a while. “I think I was a teenager the first time. I fused a broken bone, nothing major. Lately I’ve had a little more practice.” I replied mildly.

She seemed to mull that over as we rode along in silence. When we reached the hotel Calvin and Nate climbed out, looked around then held the door for us. Apparently we’d fooled the press momentarily. I didn’t think it was going to last long.

Dean turned the car over to the valet. The doorman got the door and the seven of us moved into the building while our guards cleared a path through the lobby to the elevators. Around the room heads turned and all eyes tracked us curiously. The sound of Mom and my heels on the parquet floor seemed loud. Somewhere off to my left I heard someone whisper ‘Elves’ and had to smile. Yep...there *be* Elves *and* Dragons here!

I followed my parents to the table which we were seated at immediately. It was a next to the window with a fabulous view of the city and the Bay Bridge. The fog hadn’t yet set in and I could see the lights from Oakland across the water. I wondered who we’d displaced to get such a prime corner spot as the staff fawned over us in a most alarming manner. Our guards took up positions around us and tried to fade into the walls. It’s hard to be inconspicuous when you are a really tall, extremely buff, attractive man dressed all in black. People just tend to notice. Dean ended up standing near my chair. With his arms crossed over his chest, he was drawing nearly as much attention from the women in the room as my Mom and I. Of course Dad was no slacker either so maybe it was just us in general.

My eyes swept the crowd and widened when I caught sight of the table over in the other corner. Oh no, Gareth and Jace were so going to kill me, I thought as my eyes met first Bodark’s then Alan’s. Thank God Nick had selected the restaurant because none of my men were going to believe this was a coincidence. Damn! I couldn’t even hope they’d ignore me because Bodark had already pushed up from his chair and was headed in my direction trailing Alan and their other two dinner guests.

“Someone you know?” Dad asked as he turned to glance over his shoulder and frowned at the four approaching men.

“Well this is a treat. You are about to meet at least two of San Francisco’s most wanted. Though I’m fairly sure their pictures don’t appear on any Post Office walls.” I muttered then forced myself to smile as Bodark lifted an eyebrow at me from half way across the room. His pale grey eyes looked amused at my comment. Obviously there wasn’t anything wrong with his hearing, and I was wishing I’d had the foresight to sit

with my back to the room instead of the window. That's what I get for being polite and giving up the view.

Dad shifted his chair closer to Mom and placed his arm across the back while his silver eyes tracked the four headed in our direction. All of our guards turned to me with worried looks. It was clear they knew who we were dealing with here and weren't sure how to proceed. I waved them back, letting them know it was okay and they could let the others approach. Their bodies remained tense but they held their ground at my request. Something I was certain none of my lovers would have done.

"This is a pleasant surprise Princess." Bodark commented as he came to a stop between my Dad and me.

"Good evening Bodark and thank you for the flowers. The key was...amusing." I told him lifting my hand as he reached for it. He bent at the waist and brushed back my sleeve taking a second to study the bracelet before he smiled and gently kissed my knuckles.

"I see you've added it to your collection. Dare I hope?" He told me his voice sounding very pleased and I yanked back my hand and did some staring of my own. I hadn't noticed earlier but there, hanging on the chain was the little golden key he'd given me which I'd left in the drawer next to my bed! It was swinging along side a perfect miniature spotted jaguar figurine. The jaguar was leaping through the air and looked sleek and dangerous. Apparently Alan had done more than just slobber over my hands earlier and I noted with some dismay that I'd been robbed. My bracelet was missing my little gold dragon. My eyes lifted to Alan who had stopped next to Bodark. His face was covered in a sly grin and if we hadn't been in mixed company I might well have done him bodily harm. I think he sensed it because his grin widened and he too reached for my hand.

It was all I could do to keep from hissing at him while he brushed the back of my knuckles. "Lexi." He purred. "A charm...ing surprise." I smiled tightly my eyes promising dire things.

“I’m going to need that back.” I told him tightly. I’m sure the others thought I was referring to my hand but I was positive Alan knew exactly what I was talking about.

“Hmmm.” He replied then released my fingers and smoothed his hand down the front of his suit drawing my eyes to his tie and the tie pin currently holding it. I bit the inside of my cheek and felt my nostrils flare at his audacity. The damn man had had it mounted in gold and was wearing it for all to see! His look said I’d love for you to try and take it from me. I looked away from him before I did something I might regret, while he chuckled softly.

“My gaze swung to the others and it was all I could do to keep from screaming. Bodark glanced between the two of us but made a point to introduce the first of their dining companions. Him I recognized instantly. May I present Jared Detry current Leo of our Werelion Pride? I believe you might have already met?” He told me with an innocent smile. Yes how could I forget? I’d only caused the poor man to wet himself then pass out on the floor of Jace and Gareth’s club. Well technically Kit had probably had more to do with that than me.

“Hello.” I replied then tried not to blush. His eyes were a pale brown in a too pretty face surrounded by a very thick head of light brown hair. In male lions the amount of mane usually correlated directly to sexual maturity. Judging by Jared’s luxurious do one might say he was very potent indeed. Jace had hinted that the man preferred men to women but even in the wild male lions tended to exhibit bisexual tendencies. I couldn’t help wondering and turned a sly assessing look on Alan and Bodark. I struggled not to laugh when they both stiffened.

“It’s a pleasure to be...formally introduced. I hope you will forgive my manners at our last encounter. I was... distraught and you looked tasty. I assure you there was no insult intended. In fact it was quite the opposite.” I explained. The man stared at me in surprise then his lips parted slowly to reveal even white teeth. Jace may be right, but he was also dead wrong.

“Tasty...” He repeated then chuckled softly and added. “It is an honor Princess.” And he too pressed his lips to the back of my hand. I caught the look of irritation that passed through Alan’s eyes as I shifted my glance to the fourth and last man who was watching the interaction curiously and waiting calm as death to be introduced. I could feel the cold coming off him and though his skin held no pallor, I was careful to not stare directly into his eyes.

“May I present Blake Chrisanti?” Alan informed me his eyes studying me as he added. “Blake is Valentine’s Lieutenant Master.”

Hmmm, Valentine’s second in command and right hand. This was interesting. I couldn’t help wondering if Alan was going to regret this introduction and worry that opportunity might be slipping through his fingers. I turned my full attention on Blake and leaned forward while my eyes stared up at him...just slightly off center. It was a trick I’d picked up years ago. I’d never had a Vamp bespell me. I wasn’t sure if it was even possible but better safe than sorry.

Blake’s voice was a warm caress full of old world charm and heavy southern accent which made me smile as he bent over my hand and whispered. “I’ve heard much about you Princess. The whispers of your beauty do not do you justice. And I am delighted to meet you in person.”

“Hmmm.” I murmured as his lips touched my skin and I felt the press of his teeth against me. I went still as it dawned on me that I’d just placed myself in an extremely venerable position. If he blooded me I’d be obligated to kill him rather than risk allowing him, and perhaps Valentine through him, any kind of hold over me. I thought about the chopsticks in my hair wondering briefly if I’d need them. Then the pressure lightened and I felt instead a stirring in my blood which was really rather naughty of him, but that at least wasn’t going to get him killed. When he released me and stood, I placed my hand in my lap with a sigh and turned to glance at my parents.

“My Mother Princess Shaylee Helyanwe and my Father Roark...Silver.” I replied watching closely as all four of them looked like I’d just struck them over the head. Well, if the little men in white coats weren’t coming to get me, there seemed to

be no reason to hide in the closet anymore. And hey, I'd just managed to come out, in a very big way. Besides it was payback for my childhood. Mom would just have to deal.

Bodark recovered first and bowed from the waist. "I'm honored." He replied and the other three murmured similar sentiments.

Blake quickly rearranged his features to cover his shock and turned back to me his attempt at bland not quite hiding the urgency in his eyes. "Perhaps we could tempt you to join us down stairs after your dinner for some dancing? I...we would very much enjoy the opportunity to speak with you." I could almost feel the weight of his need pressing in on me as I glanced at my parents and nodded.

"Perfect." Bodark interrupted when Blake looked like he might add something. "We will leave you to enjoy your dinner and see you downstairs." Then they were gone and Dad leaned forward and opened his mouth to speak but I held up my finger to my lips then touched my ear and he shifted back in his chair with a frown and a worried glance at their retreating backs.

Dinner was excellent and I fully enjoyed the pan seared Pacific salmon while Dad tried the cioppino and Mom settled on braised chicken. I sipped my water, and ruminated over the fact that the place boasted more than three hundred wines to select from while I was too concerned about my upcoming meeting downstairs to try even one. I paid the bill and when the elevator doors opened the soft sound of jazz and the smell of...musk filled the air. Licking my lips I followed Dean through the arch and into the dimly lit bar. In for a penny I thought and pushed back my shoulders.

Chapter 11

Dad ordered drinks and started a tab at the bar while the rest of us found a small table in the corner. Again the men tried to disappear into the walls and failed miserably.

“Do you mind Lexi?” Dad asked after he delivered the drinks. He held Mom’s chair when I shrugged and I watched them cross the room to the dance floor. They looked good together.

“Incoming.” Dean muttered and I glanced up from the Shirley Temple my Dad had ordered....and how embarrassing was that I wondered, and watched Blake glide out of the shadows across the floor toward me. I leaned back slightly and made a point of looking behind him surprised that he’d beat the others to my table and wondering if he hadn’t killed them to do so.

“Shall we?” He asked holding my chair and assisting me to my feet when I nodded, his accent sent a shiver up my spine. I was all for getting this show on the road. Hopefully I’d learn something that might prevent Jace and Gareth from

strangling me later. I glanced around the room taking care to ensure there were no immortals present, beside my parents, who were so involved with each other I doubted they'd notice if the building fell down around them. Nope only pale or no auras present. A good sign that I didn't need to shield.

"I don't have much time so I'll get right to the point." He told me as he pulled me onto the floor and twirled me into his arms to the smoky sounds of jazz. "I think we can help each other."

"Oh? I wasn't aware I needed help." I replied as his cheek brushed my temple. He was only a few inches taller than me which made it easier on him since he didn't have to bend far to reach me.

He pulled back and looked down while I shifted my gaze to a point just to the left of his eyes. "I wish you wouldn't do that." He muttered. I shrugged and he sighed and pulled me back in. I was content to wait for him to make his pitch. He'd come to me not the other way around. In negotiating, patience is a good thing. I was interested in hearing his proposition and curious to know what he thought I could do for him. By his tone I was guessing it wasn't my person he was interested in, although with Vamps it wasn't always easy to tell. We danced for several minutes until he sighed and whispered. "Things have been...deteriorating. Something needs to be done."

I thought about his comment for a minute and replied. "Are you aware we were attacked in our bed about a week ago by more than a dozen underage Vamps?"

"Really?" He commented, his voice not exhibiting any emotion.

"They were just babies. No one enjoys slaughter."

"Word reached us that someone powerful enough to scatter the crowd had entered the club and not come back out, someone young and very beautiful. Belinda wasn't amused, apparently she has history with the Guardians. You can thank her for your late night visit. Of course, after last night I wouldn't be surprised if the next group he sends might are so easily dealt with."

"So it wasn't Belinda who sent them, it was your Master?" Blake pulled back again and looked down at me then nodded. "How did they get in?" I demanded that

old adage about Vampires not entering your home without an invitation was still true and Jace and Gareth definitely lived in the third level even if there were numerous tunnels leading in and out. I assumed we weren't going to mention *his* name. If Valentine had sired Blake there was a bond between them and I didn't want to call his attention to us. Of course I had no guarantee he wasn't listening in via Blake at that moment anyway so it might just be a worthless exercise. Even more interesting is that Belinda seemed to have some sway over him.

“Kajsa.” He replied and I stared up at him in confusion.

“I believe your Elf cut off her lover's head.” He told me calmly.

I thought...Troll! Was that her name? I don't believe anyone ever told me. “Oh. I see. And that makes you responsible for restoring Ricky's memories?” I frowned when he shook his head.

“No we had nothing to do with that. We thought he was dead, last night was....surprising.” So, who did we have to thank for restoring his memories? Interesting.

“But I was the one that healed Marcus and I could have killed Belinda. So why send anyone after Jace and Gareth? I'm not aware that either of them have done anything to warrant his animosity.”

“They exist.” He told me abruptly then hesitated for a moment and added more softly. “And now, so do you and your Father.”

Ricky must not have had the chance to tell them how I'd killed Kajsa otherwise they would have known long before now about my shape shifting abilities. It didn't matter now. In for a penny I thought again. It was either Amras or me, I wasn't sorry. I'd made the conscious decision earlier to introduce my Father, a decision Blake had just warned me I might live to regret. “So he wants us dead?”

Blake shook his head again. “Not dead...enslaved. He's become consumed with madness. I'm afraid when he learns about you....”

“He will want me too, and not just as bait for the others.” I finished for him and felt him nod. “He has power over them?” I asked and again he nodded. “Has it something to do with the necklace he wears?”

“It is...a focus.” He answered softly. “More than that I am not allowed to say.”

“What will you do?”

“What I have always done...survive.”

“And I should help you...how?”

“Old guard...new guard. The Council is coming to town. They are...concerned. Rumors have reached them. I need space to maneuver and a token assurance of support would be welcomed.”

He was talking about taking over Valentine’s operation and using the Vampire Council to do it. It could well cause a blood bath in the streets! “What manner of token?”

His voice went low and sexy the syllables wrapped in a sultry coating of heavy southern charm as he replied. “I’m sure we can come up with something.” His hand caressed my back and ghosted over my skin. I stiffened slightly shocked at his interest. I had not expected it and it made me angry.

“And we get?” Outraged I struggled to control my voice. To give me over to Blake would be more than a small token. Everyone who knows Dragons knows they are territorial, especially with their woman. I might go to Blake on my own since I was not formally mated. But we had an agreement, not exclusive but still, to expect Jace and Gareth to hand me over to him to merely seal the deal? That would be tantamount to their signing a contract in blood saying Blake had not only their support, but their best wishes in eliminating Valentine. I suspected the only thing that might save Blake is that he hadn’t actually spoken the words, only implied them. Jace and Gareth were not going to be amused.

“The Drakes will be safe...all of them. And the Red will be released. Status quo will be reinstated.” He assured me. The song came to an end and he stepped back and bowed. “I must have an answer by next week. Tell the Drakes the Council arrives

in ten days. Alan knows how to contact me. I apologize, but I must leave you here. The press has caught your scent and will be arriving soon. It would not do to have our picture appear together on tomorrow's front page. It was a pleasure." He assured me then fled the dance floor leaving me standing there gritting my teeth.

The scent of wolf filled my nostrils and I turned and glanced up at Bodark. He winced and coerced my resistant body into his arms as the band eased into another song. "I hope that look isn't for me Princess?"

"Are you here to strike a bargain for a night in my bed too?" I asked sharply. "I've now been offered secrets and veiled threats against those I care for. What have you got to offer?" My voice was low and harsh. My head felt like it was ready to explode I was that angry.

"I'm no horse trader. I am a predator, I see what I want and I take it. However, I'd like to think we could take a more romantic approach to sharing your bed." He told me, his voice sounding amused. "Might I hope by your wonderfully flashing eyes that you were not impressed with either offer?"

I sighed when his hand pressed against my back and pulled me in a little tighter to his body. "The offers will be considered. It's Blake's token pledge I object to."

"I suppose we've come a long way from tying your scarf around an arm." He replied lightly. And I couldn't help thinking I'd like to tie it around Valentine's neck! As that would be the most expedient way to eliminate all of our troubles.

"Bodark, what is going on?"

He made a humming noise in his throat and moved us farther away from the other few couples on the floor, giving us space in which to talk softly. "Valentine appears to have gone round the bend." He replied. "It happens to older Vamps once in a blue moon." He replied then shrugged. "We started noticing things were wrong about six months ago."

"What kind of things?"

He took a second to think about it then answered. "Shipments went missing. A breakdown in communication. A higher than normal number of turnings, and those

that were turned were much younger than is allowed. Whispers of strange rituals and then our people started disappearing. At first we didn't think too much of it, a lion here, a wolf there. This is a big town and people have accidents, they go missing or move sometimes without letting others know. And then the muttering started. Joe had a beer with Steve and one of them mentions Fred hasn't been seen in three weeks and Tim hasn't shown up for work this week. People simply comparing stories over nuts and a hot dog at the ball game. When we started doing a tally it was alarming. Fifty or sixty unaccounted for just across the weres, and wicken. We have no way of knowing if regular humans are involved and the Dwarfs and what few fey we have in the city refuse to speak with us. I was hoping one of the Dwarfs might talk to you. Help us determine if it's only former humans and those humans with powers that are affected."

I nodded and told him. "I think perhaps Dten might. If you think you can arrange a meeting?"

He grinned down at me. "Yes I think I can arrange that. When are you available?"

"Tomorrow is too soon, and tomorrow night...I don't think it will be possible, I'm not sure if he'll even be there. I'll be gone after that. I can't say for how long, a few days maybe. It will have to wait till I return."

Bodark glanced down at me. "Going on a trip?" He inquired his eyes curious. I bit my lip and nodded as I thought of Amras and the upcoming visit to the Queen. "You look worried all of a sudden and there is a shadow in your eyes. Is there anything I can do to assist you?" He asked gently.

"No unless you can convince a Queen to give up her subject." I muttered. Bodark didn't know what to say to that so he simply shook his head and held me as we slowly danced around the floor. I gave myself a mental shake and asked. "I am not going to be visited by your mate am I? Because that would be rather awkward."

He chuckled and gave me a squeeze. "When you change subjects you really change subjects!" He winked when I turned my head sideways and lifted an eyebrow. "No, I have not chosen an alpha. Much to the annoyance of my pack."

“Can’t choose amongst the lot eh?” I teased.

“Let’s just say...when I took over there wasn’t a large female population to select from. The previous leader...had a preference for men.” He replied with a grimace. “It’s been nearly eight years, and luring females here has been more difficult than you can imagine. Some days I think it would be easier if I could hand pick a human to turn. But I don’t want your Drake’s Hunters down on us. And honestly, turning a human can cause more problems than it solves.”

“So why did you come here?”

He shrugged. “Their leader was weak...I wanted a pack. There was no chance of that happening where I was. It seemed a good solution.”

“And why did you come to San Francisco?” He asked.

“To get away from my Mother!” I told him then grinned when he laughed and glanced across the floor at my parents. “Seriously living with Mom at twenty four was just...wrong.”

“You’re twenty four?” He asked his voice sounding surprised.

“Actually I’m much older than that...I’m twenty five. And I’ve been living not five miles from here for more than a year.”

“I would have thought...” And his voice trailed off. When I glanced up at him he seemed deep in thought.

“Did you think I was older? Younger?” I asked wondering which it was. Elves and Dragons took longer to reach maturity and I could see where someone might easily mistake my age. Growing up I’d been careful to shimmer and show my Plain Jane face so that I always looked the age I was supposed to be. But as myself I had to admit at times I didn’t look much older than a teenager.

“How did we miss you for an entire year?” He finally wondered out loud his voice sounding bewildered.

“Oh well that.” I told him then gave him a secretive smile. “That’s for me to know.” I teased.

“Twenty five....ah so young.” He muttered. “The Elves were always secretive, have they started having children again in their mounds these past fifty years?” He asked.

“No, I wasn’t born in the Sidhe.” I told him feeling a little uncomfortable in admitting it especially when he sucked in a breath and stared down at me in surprise. Then simply shook his head.

“It is too much for this poor old wolf’s brain.” He remarked.

“Old?” I chuckled and jerked my chin in my parent’s direction. “That’s old.” I told him and grinned when he laughed.

The song came to an end. “I suppose it wouldn’t be polite of me to keep you out here to myself all night, though I am sorely tempted.” He told me and glanced toward my table in the corner. Alan and Jared were seated at the next one over. Both of them were watching us and I had to wonder how much of our conversation they had picked up on. The club wasn’t all that big and we hadn’t exactly been whispering. Bodark motioned for me to precede him and I took two steps and stopped, watching as Alan rose to his feet and threaded his way smoothly through the chairs. Bodark sighed and waited for him to join us, he was quite the gentleman not leaving me stranded on the dance floor and I smiled up at him to let him know I appreciated his manners. He leaned down and kissed my temple. “So young.” He muttered and I reached for his hand and gave it a squeeze. I liked Bodark. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Save me a dance.” I told him and grinned at the pleased look in his eyes.

“Lexi.” Alan purred as he nodded to Bodark who rolled his eyes and winked at me then left for the table in the corner. With his hand at my back Alan moved us onto the floor and me into his arms. We swayed with the music for several seconds before he leaned down and whispered. “Jaguars do not take permanent Queens.”

“Hmmm, I believe your friends in the wild can make love more than a hundred times a day and only last an average of nine seconds. It...might explain why.” I told him in an amused tone. Across the room I heard Bodark’s burst of laughter and glanced over Alan’s shoulder to see him leaning on his elbow with his hand over his

mouth. His eyes stared back at me and his shoulders were shaking. Obviously he could hear everything being said and now I was pretty sure Alan and Jared had too, as well as my guards.

He turned me and replied. "Forget the contract, come home with me tonight and let me prove that that is not the case." He whispered his voice going low and dangerous...I felt his pull immediately and licked my lips and forced myself to breathe.

"You keep that up and I'll call my Father over here to deal with you Sir." I warned him and I glanced toward Dad only to find he was staring straight at us. "See he already doesn't like you." Alan turned me so his back was no longer facing my Father. He seemed to stiffen slightly and eased some room between the two of us. Obviously Dad was giving him the look and I had to bite the inside of my cheek not to laugh.

"I see that you remain well guarded even without your others in tow."

"Yeah well, Dads new at this so I'd be more worried about him at the moment than the others. Except Kit that is. Dten is right. You don't want to meet him in a dark alley."

Alan looked irritated at my comment. "Then I suppose I'll have to wait to hear your decision once you read the contract."

I nodded and concentrated on the music just enjoying the feel of dancing around the floor to the sultry beat. I wondered what Jace and Gareth were up to and if they were having any luck. I wasn't worried about them, not with the other four at their backs. There wasn't much the six of them couldn't take on together. Kit and Owen would ensure their safety. Alan stopped abruptly and I opened my eyes and noticed a hand on Alan's shoulder and well shaped fingers digging into his muscles. Lifting my face I looked into Kit's blazing red eyes and wondered how long he'd been standing there.

"Long enough." He informed me angrily. He looked so mad I thought he might actually start vibrating any second.

Across the room Bodark and Jared both rose from their chairs with alarmed expressions while my guards moved to block them from reaching us. I wasn't sure if Bodark and Jared were more worried about Alan or me, since neither knew who Kit was. Luckily my men must have recognized him and I could see Dean talking to them, probably explaining Kit. My guards were brave but I wasn't sure four of them would be enough to hold back two proven leaders. I spared a reassuring look to Bodark who backed off and crossed his arms over his chest but remained standing, his eyes glued to us. Jared took his queue from Bodark and the two of them stood quietly within the circle of my men.

"You called Mistress?" Kit asked and somehow plucked Alan up and set him down about three feet from me. Alan looked shocked but managed to restrain himself from reacting likely because of Kit's comment.

Kit looked handsome in a long black wool coat that reached mid-thigh. He was wearing black slacks and a blood red button up shirt with several of the top buttons undone. He looked so good it distracted me for a moment and I had to concentrate to remember what we were discussing. Had I actually called Kit? I remembered thinking his name was that enough to call him to me?

"Yes." He replied while his eyes bore into Alan and I watched the smaller man shake his head as if something was wrong. "Imagine my....surprise to find you here with this one."

Apparently the fact that I found him hot wasn't going to calm his temper since he seemed to be ignoring my thoughts. "Ah...you mustn't hurt him. He's just...being himself. He can't help it."

Alan spared me a glance and frowned. I don't know if he knew what to think about my attempts to spare his life. "Who are you?" He demanded glancing between Kit and me. Kit was nearly as tall as Owen which meant Alan had to look up to see his face.

“I believe I told you to find your own, this one is taken.” Kit leaned forward slightly and growled. His posture was extremely aggressive and matched perfectly the wicked rage on his oh so beautiful face.

“Lexi do we have a problem? Why is Kit here?” My Father asked. He’d moved up to us and had inserted himself between Mom and the men.

“This is Kit...your Dragon?” Alan demanded.

I took a deep breath. “Yes, and no Dad I don’t think so. Alan was just returning to his seat. Thank you for the dance.” I told him my eyes urging him to go while he still could. He hesitated for a moment then gave Kit a glance that narrowed my Demon’s eyes and tightened the skin across his cheeks.

“Walk away cat before your curiosity forces me to disobey my Mistress and skin you. Your spotted pelt would look good on my floor, and I would enjoy wiping my boots on it daily.” Kit told informed him softly while his pupils disappeared, replaced by miniature reddish orange flames flickering in his eyes. I’d never seen him do that before and it surprised even me. Alan’s own eyes widened and his nostrils flared as he stared back at my Demon.

I watched Kit for a few seconds, his eyes mesmerizing me before I finally gave myself a mental shake and told them. “Boys, the press is on its way. I’d hate to give them something to print tomorrow. Can’t we all just play nice?”

“You know I live to serve you Mistress and that I am only too happy to play with you anytime, anywhere. He however, is off limits.” Kit informed me bluntly. “I like jazz.” He then remarked, rudely turning his back on Alan and reaching for me. I went into his arms with a sigh and an apologetic look at Alan that got me a growl and a quick turn by Kit so that I could no longer see the other man. When next I glanced toward our table, Alan was gone and so were the others. I was sorry I hadn’t had the chance to say goodbye to Bodark.

“Is everyone alright? You didn’t leave them unprotected did you?” I asked, my voice sounding worried at the thought.

Kit scoffed and held me tighter. “You look wonderful in black silk.” He replied and slid his hand over my waist down to my hip.

“Thank you.”

“I am very annoyed with you.”

“I know.”

He sighed and rubbed his cheek against my temple. “I thought that you were supposed to be at home. Why are you here and not there where we left you?”

“I took my parents to dinner. I didn’t plan on finding Alan and the others at the same restaurant as us! You all went out to have a fun without me and I was bored and...I’m a little irritated at you all too.” I told him my voice a tad defensive.

“Dinner is one thing. But I cannot leave you alone for five minutes, and you are with that mongrel!”

“Well if you had shown up five minutes later I would have been dancing with Jared.” I told him then thought to myself, because I’d already danced with Bodark and Blake. It wasn’t as if I met Alan here just so I could dance only with him!

“Who are Jared and Blake?” He demanded.

“Jared is Leo to the Werelions. You might recognize him as the man you claimed wasn’t good enough for me that first night in the club? Just before I met Jared and Gareth.” I told him then thought...Peewee? He made a pleased noise in his throat at the nickname I’d dubbed Jared with. And I mentally added, I’ll tell you about Blake when there aren’t so many ears present, and felt him nod.

We silently danced our way through several songs. I was simply enjoying the way he moved with me when I felt my Father’s gentle touch brush my mind and glanced around to find him standing with Mom at the edge of the dance floor. His eyes were focused on the arch leading into the bar from the elevators. When I turned to follow his gaze I was blinded by the flash of a several cameras. “Time to go.” I told Kit. “I need to pay the bar tab first.”

He glanced down at me and smiled while more flashes went off. “Shall we send the guards home alone?” He whispered then chuckled when I agreed. “Then let’s go

pay the tab and I'll ensure we leave no trail to follow for the press. You do realize we are going to make headlines tomorrow?"

"It's what I was hoping for." I told him with a mischievous smile.

"Hmmm do you think I'll look good in print?"

I hugged his arm and smiled up at him while cameras flashed furiously from the vicinity of the doorway. My guards had moved over near the bouncer and were helping to block the press from getting at us. Meanwhile the press was starting to shout questions which we all ignored. "I think you'll look fabulous." I assured him.

I paid the tab while Kit stood blocking me from view. I'd motioned for my parents to join us then turned to look at Dean and nudged a thought in his direction. He jumped and turned toward me his eyes wide as if he wasn't certain what had just happened. Beside me Kit grinned, seeming pleased with me. I crooked my finger at Dean and he hurried over. "Kit's taking us home the fast way." I whispered in his ear. "Can you make sure you lose the press so they don't follow you in the car?"

"Sure." He agreed. "Was that you...in my head?" He asked then looked at me strangely when I nodded. "Convenient." He whispered his eyes looking thoughtful.

"Thank you." I told him then glanced at Kit and felt my world tilt while colors swirled around me like a kaleidoscope and I squeezed my eyes shut. When I opened them I was standing in the middle of our front room and Jace and Gareth were staring back at me with Cursed, Amras, and Owen all frowning as they caught site of what I was wearing. Kit must have deposited my parents directly to their room since it was just me he had in tow.

"Look who I found dancing in the arms of your little friend Alan." Kit told the group then left me standing there like a lamb at the alter, as he crossed the room and seated himself in a chair while I glanced at him in shock.

Chapter 12

The room went dead silent but in my head I heard static as if they were all yelling at me though no one's lips moved.

“Interesting, I could have sworn we told her to stay here.”

“I seem to recall leaving her dressed in frumpy clothing and mismatched slippers.” Jace added his green eyes narrowed as they swept me from head to toe. They all looked tense...frustrated and suspicious. I actually took a step back and straightened my shoulders.

“Thanks Kit.” I hissed and sent a glare in his direction. He gave me a twisted smile and shrugged.

“It's true.” He replied.

“It's also true that I was out having dinner with my parents, which you conveniently neglected to mention.”

Kit shrugged when Amras and Owen turned to look at him and added. “The only thing on the menu when I found you was you.” He informed me as he leaned back

in the cushions and crossed his arms over his wide chest. He must have changed during travel because he was now wearing black leather and the pose strained the ties down his front. Leaving a large expanse of black and silver tipped chest hair exposed. I knew he was mad at me but I didn't realize he was going to be petty about it.

"Petty?" He growled...sitting straight in his chair. He looked like he was going to start throwing off sparks he was suddenly so mad. I think his hair actually crackled. "I warned you, you should have listened."

I tossed my hand in the air and threw my purse onto the nearest chair then kicked off my heels sending them flying several feet because they were pinching my toes and after all the dancing I'd done it felt good to bury them in the carpeting. "I did listen damn you. But you shouldn't have left me here alone while you all went out to play Heman!" I snapped while my gaze raked them all. "And I didn't plan it to happen, it just did and I'm not sorry I went. I didn't invite Alan into my room earlier and it wasn't even Alan I agreed to meet at the club when they approached us at dinner. I certainly didn't put these damn things on my wrist! Or tell him he could have my gold to mount on his freaking tie tack!" I ended by yelling at them all. My breath was coming in short pants I was so emotionally overwrought.

Kit pushed up from the chair and just flowed to me while I glared at him and stuck out my wrist for his inspection. His eyes narrowed and he hissed softly as he ran a finger over the key and jaguar. The others moved closer so they could see my wrist as Kit snapped his fingers and the dragons all disappeared into a tennis bracelet with a little gold key and spotted jaguar hanging off it. "I'm going to kill him." He breathed and glanced up at me.

"Get it off me!" I shouted at him and he shook his head. "Damn!" I muttered then ran my hand over my eyes. "Could you just...put it back then?" I finally asked, lowering my voice to a more normal level. "And you can't kill him...it would cause Jace and Gareth problems." I sighed and closed my eyes tilting my face toward the floor. "Honestly at the moment I couldn't care less. Just make sure you get my gold

back first.” Kit snapped his fingers again and I knew without looking that my little dragons hung once again from my gold chain along with the damn key and jaguar.

No one spoke for several minutes until I finally sighed and lifted my face to Gareth who had a stony look on his face and a shadow in his eyes. “Did you have any luck tonight?”

“I don’t believe we’re yet ready for a change of topic.” He told me coldly. “I think we’d all like to know what you think you were doing out dancing with someone we all clearly don’t trust and have no desire to include in our little family.”

“Fine.” I snapped then kicked at the bottom of my dress as I moved to a chair, tossed my wrap on it, then flopped down and lifted my feet onto the coffee table. I looked around the room and gave them each a dirty look. Mostly because they were making me feel guilty for something I had not done and really had no desire to do.

Jace sighed and moved to the couch. It seemed to be the catalyst for the rest of them as they all took a moment to seat themselves. Probably guessing I wasn’t going to talk till they did so. I had no wish to crane my neck while they heaped disapproval upon me from above. At least seated I wouldn’t get a crick in my neck from staring up at them.

“First of all I didn’t pick the restaurant, Nick did. I simply asked him to make reservations somewhere nice.” I started and Gareth and Jace nodded as if they already knew that. Not surprising since it was probably the first thing they had done once they realized I wasn’t there. “I’d tell you to confirm it with Nick, but obviously you already have. Second, if you were listening earlier today you know I did not make any arrangements to meet anyone this evening. I didn’t even know I’d be going out until you all abandoned me.”

“Who’s Blake?” Kit asked abruptly and Jace and Gareth turned to him their eyes widening then narrowing as they swung back to me.

“Chrisanti.” I replied and looked straight back at Gareth. “He was having dinner with Alan and the others.”

“What others?” Jace growled softly and my eyes moved to him.

“Bodark and Jared Detry.”

“What was that Cajun le lacky de maître doing with the leaders of our three most prominent were packs?” Gareth demanded.

“Apparently the Master’s lackey is planning a coup.” I informed them then took a moment to savor their surprise before adding. “He wants your support.” My eyes lowered as I remembered Blake’s request for a good faith token and how Bodark had commented that things had come a long way from a scarf tied around someone’s arm.

“Is there any men of power in this town that haven’t offered to sleep with you?” Jace asked tightly.

I shrugged. “I haven’t met them all yet. But Eldel and Dten didn’t seem impressed. I’m not sure about Jared, I got sidetracked before we had the chance to dance, but he did manage to get through an introduction without wetting his pants this time, of course Kit wasn’t there to help him. I think I made Bodark feel old and it seemed to put him off, I’m not sure he is still interested.” Gareth grunted and ran his hand over his face.

“Old?” Jace demanded with a lifted eyebrow.

“When he asked me my age I informed him I was twenty five. It seemed to surprise him. That was after I introduced my parents to them. Both parents.” I told them, not wanting to be mistaken.

Amras jerked in his chair and stared at me as if he couldn’t believe what I had just said. “No.” He breathed.

“Lexi.” Gareth growled. “You know that wasn’t wise. Now on top of Valentine we’re going to have to worry about you disappearing and ending up in some lab being experimented on!”

“Oh yeah...well about that.” I replied leaning my head back against the couch. “It seems that was all a misunderstanding my Mother let me believe so I wouldn’t ask questions about my Father. Apparently she couldn’t bare the stigma of having a kid out of wedlock while engaged to someone else. Imagine that. So I guess...I didn’t really

need to move in for protection. I'll have to have a conversation with Mi about that soon. I mean, a joke's a joke, but letting your kid think men in little white coats might come for her in the middle of the night to slice her into little pieces so they might study her DNA? All that just to keep her from mentioning who her parents are, well it's a bit much! And to think I spent all those years hiding behind Plain Jane! Moms just lucky she's pregnant at the moment!"

I rolled my head on the couch and glanced over at Amras and Cursed. Neither looked happy. Amras looked like he'd swallowed a horned toad the wrong way. Cursed just looked like he was having a hard time following the conversation. But then he might not know what men in little white coats referred to so that might explain it.

"Scientists, like those who created the mushroom bombs." Cursed replied. "I know what little white coats are. I find it hard to grasp that you would be allowed to believe such a thing. And I wonder...if I had swallowed my pride and come to you sooner, would it have made a difference." He replied tightly. That he would blame himself was not something I had considered and I searched his dark gaze seeing the uncertainty there.

"What's done is done Cursed you cannot change the past. And Amras if it makes you feel better, she held him off for nearly a quarter of a century." I advised them all. "According to Dad I'm a result of a one time indiscretion. If it wasn't so tragic it might actually be funny! Certainly it is poetic justice! Especially since she's now pregnant with my sisters! You've got to appreciate the irony."

"Ah...that is...good news. That we don't need to worry about you disappearing into an underground lab. But it doesn't release you from our agreement." Jace was quick to warn.

"I hadn't for a moment considered it. I just thought you all should know I'm not in any danger from mad scientists."

"Well I wouldn't go that far." Owen muttered then frowned when I glanced at him. "You are the first viable female offspring of a Dragon and Elf...ever. And neither species has successfully reproduced in a very long time."

“Well gee thanks Owen, and here I was starting to feel good about myself.” I muttered and clasped my hands in my lap.

“Scientists may not be a problem at the moment, but Valentine will be if he’s truly after Dragons! Lexi you just waved a red flag in front of him. You’ve put yourself in danger.” Gareth growled.

“I was in danger anyway. If he wants you, I’m going to be the one he comes after. With me he can manipulate you both.” I shrugged. “Besides, it was my choice.” I replied softly glancing at Amras’ and then away when his eyes filled with guilt. “I’m sorry I just couldn’t allow it.”

“Can someone explain what this Cajun is and who is he planning to overthrow?” Cursed asked quietly his voice breaking the hush the room had fallen into.

Gareth seemed to shake himself then answered. “He’s a Vampire of Cajun decent from the bayou. We think he originally emigrated there from Canada before France ceded Louisiana to Spain back in the seventeenth hundreds. His name is Blake Chrisanti, and he is Valentine’s lieutenant, his first in command. He’s old enough and strong enough to be a Master himself.”

“He wants a decision by next week. He said...the Council will be here in ten days.” I told them softly as I glanced up at Gareth and watched his face lose some of its coloring.

“And did he mention what we might get out of this deal?” Jace inquired sharply.

“Status quo....a guarantee he wouldn’t allow Valentine to enslave us. Freedom for Marcus.”

“And he demanded we give you to him as a token of our agreement?” Gareth breathed his blue eyes going hard.

“He didn’t actually say those exact words. Though he had his hands on me at the time and I would have had to be deadlier than he is to mistake his meaning.” I muttered.

Jace glanced at Gareth and something passed between them that I couldn't follow. Whatever it was didn't bode well for Blake. I knew they weren't going to be happy. Maybe I should have kept that last bit to myself. Gareth turned back to me and stared. "That would not have been wise." He informed me.

I shrugged and added. "Are you aware that over fifty weres and wiccans have gone missing in the past six months? Bodark wants to set up a meeting between me and Dten to see if the Dwarf will tell me if they have had any of their people go missing too. Apparently the Fey refuse to discuss the current problem with the weres and Bodark isn't sure if the disappearances are only humans with powers and non humans or if they include the Fey too. Also, your little friend Kajsa let in the Vampires that attacked us the first night I was here. Blake mentioned they'd heard a woman with power had entered the club and not left. He said it made Belinda jealous so she convinced Valentine to send his youngsters after you. Blake said she had 'history' with you. I can only assume she means Jace since they've been together. Unless you turned her down at some point in which case she might not like either of you."

"Was there anything else?" Jace asked, his eyebrow raised and a chagrined look on his face. I wasn't sure what it was caused by, the fact I'd unearthed so much information or the shocked looks the rest of the men were giving him because he'd been with Belinda.

"Blake was surprised that Ricky was still alive. Someone else must have repaired his memory and sent him back to us. And Ricky didn't have time to inform Valentine about my...abilities before Jace had him put in the park. Blake told me the next set of Vamps Valentine sends for us won't be youngsters. I think...we should have someone in immediately to consecrate the doors. Will that be a problem for you Kit?" I asked, turning toward him where he sat quietly listening to me ramble on.

"Not as far as I know. I'm not undead and protection spells won't harm me since it isn't me you're trying to keep out."

"So do you know any clergymen?" I asked, my eyes moving to Jace then Gareth.

“You do not require a...human for this.” Amras replied quietly. “I have some small power and can ward against the undead. With Owen’s assistance it can be done tonight. It would please me to do this for you.”

“Your assistance would be welcome.” Gareth replied and I placed my feet on the carpet and stood. I couldn’t sit there another moment. Amras was slipping away from us and the rest of our problems seemed immaterial. I didn’t care that they were angry with me or that Valentine was sick and wanted to collect us like toys. I just wanted tomorrow to be over so I could face my Grandmother and somehow convince her to let him stay.

“I believe I have an errand to run.” Kit remarked as I quietly gathered up my wrap and purse.

“Don’t kill him.” Jace muttered. “Now is not the time to start a war with the weres.”

“Fine, I won’t kill him...yet.” Kit replied though he didn’t look happy about it. “I’ll just pop over and retrieve what he took from us.”

I didn’t say anything just started walking toward the hall my eyes trained on the carpet. At the moment I just didn’t care. Between my anguish over Amras and the fact that I’d blown a fuse and thrown at tantrum, I was feeling pretty depressed. Or maybe it was that none of them seemed to trust me.

“Lexi.” Gareth called and I stopped but didn’t look at him. “We owe you an apology.” He replied then waited while I continued to stare at the floor and I heard him sigh. “It is our nature to protect that which we cherish. Please do not be angry at us for wanting to keep you safe. When it comes to our hearts, it is difficult to remember you are a Hunter and can take care of yourself. But we are sorry. We never meant to make you feel we do not trust you. We do. And in spite of us, you did well tonight.”

I nodded and walked down the hall thinking I really liked my men, but dealing with them sometimes was a real pain in the posterior. After I got done yelling at Mi next time I saw her I might just fall to my knees and thank her for blocking my sexual

drive until I was twenty five! Surely if I'd had to deal with them in my teen years someone would have died.

In my room I dropped my purse in the bedside table taking a moment to remove the box that had held the key and turning it over in my hands. Alan was smooth. I'd have to keep that in mind. Dropping the box back in I closed the drawer and crossed to the closet taking a moment to hang up my wrap and stripping out of my dress. "Areth can I have something to wear?" I asked softly, and then pulled a floor length negligee in lavender silk and lace off the hanger when it appeared. I slipped into it and pulled on the matching string panties that were wrapped around the hanger's hook. Glancing down at myself I smiled grimly then reached for the chopsticks giving my head a shake and sending my hair cascading down to my hips. The sheath gathered across my breasts like something from an old Regency Romance novel. It had tiny straps and a wide lace insert that fell from below my barely covered breasts to the floor down the front of me. The lace panel wasn't connected to either side so when I walked it was supposed to split up the middle of my thigh. On another hanger was a sheer robe with a frilly collar and sleeves that gathered at the elbows. Lace extended from the elbows in a wide sleeve that looked like it was meant to flow over my wrists. It matched and I assumed they were meant to go together. I pulled on the robe and tied it with the draw strings between my breasts. The outfit came complete with little lavender fuzzy high heels and I sighed and slipped them on then headed for the bathroom.

When I came out Cursed was standing in my room staring at the photo of the Elves. He shifted and turned to watch me. I saw his eyes go smoky and his body tense. He made a pleased sound in his throat as his eyes followed me across the room.

"Cursed." I acknowledged him as I crossed to my bookcase and stopped in front of the section which held my flute. The recessed lighting shown down upon its golden length and I was overcome with a very strong urge to play. So strong in fact that my fingers tingled and my palms itched. I plucked it from its holder before I changed my mind.

Cursed watched me closely as I carried my flute toward my bed. “My Lady?” He breathed his voice sounding worried. “Do not do this.” He told me as his arms uncrossed and he looked like he might take a step toward me. I sensed his intent was to take the flute from my hands, and something inside me shifted. I blinked and my eyes started whirling slowly, I could feel that they had gone multi faceted and when I stared back at Cursed he paled at the look on my face and dropped to a knee his eyes wide and confused.

“I must.” I replied and turned from him then climbed onto the bed. Something had a hold of me. I could feel it swirling inside like a compulsion. I seated myself amongst the cushions somehow remembering to place my legs together bent at the knee instead of crossing them as I’d done last time. “Get up Cursed.” I called to him in a voice that sounded hollow, not my own. “Come.” I invited and motioned to the end of my bed watching as he rose gracefully and came to me, careful not to touch as he seated himself at my feet.

I closed my eyes and raised my Elven flute to my lips and began to play softly. The music was solemn, sad, and sweet and heart wrenching. My heart was heavy and it poured into the music, filling the room. There was no joy to my song, no light in the dark. It was a lament, tears shed for a lost love full of pain and suffering. I played for what was to come, channeling my heart’s distress into the music. I lost all sense of time as I played. My mind consumed with the notes and melody. I sensed Cursed shift on the bed but ignored him.

When I came back to myself I was cold and the muscles of my arms were cramping. My hand shook as I lowered the flute to my lap and pulled air into my lungs. I was afraid to open my eyes, sensing that I had done it again. In my mind I could feel minds pressing on mine and knew Cursed and I were no longer alone in the room.

“Are you well?” Cursed asked, his voice holding no emotion, as if my song had stripped it from him. I sighed and opened my eyes to find him very near me, his long hair brushing my knee. Tears spilled from his dark eyes and ran down his cheeks and I lifted a shaky hand and gently brushed them away. He searched my face his eyes

intense. When I smiled he seemed to release the breath he was holding and turned his head toward the room. I hesitated but followed his glance almost afraid of what I might find.

It was worse than I suspected and I reached for Cursed's arm, my fingers tightening on him so that he turned back to look at me in alarm. "The Queen's guard." He told me, his voice having gone flat as if he was already withdrawing emotionally from me. When he would have moved away I snaked my arm around his bicep and pressed my body to him.

"Do not remove yourself from me." I whispered. "Please Cursed....I could not bare it. Not now." He stilled, and in his eyes I could see his struggle.

"You do not know what you ask." He growled and yanked his arm from me sliding to the floor, and giving me his back. He stood with his hands on his hips. His feet spread shoulder width staring at the three strange men, and one not so strange man, my flute had brought to my room.

I swear I felt my heart tear at his harsh words and my blood seemed to freeze in my veins. Pride kept me upright but couldn't prevent me from swaying like a leaf in a breeze. The flute rolled from my lap and I stared down at it in anguish.

What had I done?

Chapter 13

“Call off your dogs.” Marcus growled. He was standing with his arms crossed staring at me, his light eyes angry. Sharp blades pressed against him from three directions and I could see at least two blades had pricked him leaving trails of blood down his neck. Obviously the Queen’s guards took their job seriously.

“You may lower your weapons.” Three heads bobbed in my direction and swords were lowered but not sheathed as they took a step back widening the circle around Marcus. Smart men.

“Did you invite me here to watch you play with these...Elves?” Marcus demanded, his eyes raking me. The three surrounding him tensed and at least two sword tips were raised en point. “I think my Mother is right about you.”

I sucked in air and narrowed my eyes until they were mere slits. “Belinda is not your Mother Marcus.”

“You lie.”

I took a moment to try and calm myself before I did something I might regret. It had been a long day and my emotions were in an upheaval. Giving myself a mental shake I took several deep breaths and leaned back against the pillows, forcing my body to relax. “Belinda may have carried you in her body from which you had to be surgical removed.” I told him. “But there is nothing of her in you. She was a surrogate...an incubator...nothing more.”

His arms dropped to his sides and his fists clenched. His eyes narrowed and he actually took a step in my direction which was immediately stayed by a sword tip pressing against his lower jaw just at the neck.

“Elven steel, pay attention...you are like me Marcus....your mother was Seelie your father Dragon.” My comment shocked the three Elves who tensed but managed to refrain from turning to look at me.

“No!”

“Yes and you should know Elves do not lie. My Father created you...for a higher purpose. And yet there you stand...Valentine’s little plaything. What did he offer you for your soul?” I demanded.

My words brought him up sharply. “What story is this? Next you’ll tell me you are my sister!” He scoffed.

“Sister....hardly.” And I forced myself to laugh. “My Father is Silver...yours was merely Brown.”

“Prove it.” He demanded.

I shrugged and straightened my robe over my knees. “Why would I waste my time? If you wished to find your true Mother I might help you. But not as you are now...a soulless creature tied to a bloodless master. I should allow them to take your head, as I believe it will save me the trouble of doing so later.”

“You dare threaten me?” He breathed and I could almost see him expand.

I slid to the edge of the bed and onto the floor, pulling my body straight and forcing my shoulders back. Cursed took a step to his right away from me, giving me room. Inside me Goldy rose from her stone couch her golden eyes beginning to whirl

while above us the outline of a large golden tail flicked back and forth, just as it had earlier when my Dad had done it. Harvard wasn't the only thing we'd discussed at dinner and I was glad I'd been paying attention. The look on Marcus' face was priceless. And when I cracked open the little red door and shoved my desire into him like a battering ram his knees buckled and he went to the floor. This time the three guards staggered slightly then turned to me in shock but managed to hold their ground. Marcus was on his hands and knees gulping air and I took two steps in his direction. Kit had said Lust could be used as a weapon...how right he was. "I dare." I hissed. "Because I can, and for the shame you have heaped on us all! I should kill you myself. You are no fit mate to me!" I growled then took a breath and forced myself to calm down telling him dismissively. "Run back to your master Marcus...you are weak and belong with him."

"Lexi no." He cried lifting his head to me. "I did not want this! My Mother...Belinda tricked me. You must help me." He choked out and I stared down at him thoughtfully as his false bravado flowed out of him like so much sand in an hourglass. It left him looking young and frightened.

"Tell me of this hold he has over you. Tell me so I might prevent it from occurring to Jace and Gareth."

"I do not know." He replied miserably. "When he speaks I must obey, his voice is insidious."

"And yet you are here now. Does he speak to you from a distance?"

Marcus looked confused as if he wasn't sure how to answer the question. "I have not heard him since I came to be here." He replied cautiously.

"Is he listening to us?" I asked, my voice having gone soft and dangerous.

He tilted his head to the side, much as he had done upstairs last night.

"I...cannot tell."

My gaze swung to Cursed who refused to meet my eyes. That was just fine! I thought, my blood pressure starting to rise again. "Kit!" I gritted out and held out my arm. "Here?" I added more softly visualizing him in his Dragon form. Darkness

swirled and little red eyes appeared then his black and silver body materialized around them and there was suddenly a clamoring in my head. This seemed to be a rather socking evening for the guards. I didn't even bother glancing at them. In Kit's teeth was my golden dragon still attached to the tie tack and a piece of Alan's neck tie. There was blood on both as well as three deep scratches on the side of his head stretching a ways down his neck. He looked pleased and then annoyed as he turned his head and caught sight of Marcus and the strange Elves in my room. I held up my hand as he spit out his trophy and told him. "Thank you." As I ran a finger over my little gold then placed it on the dresser table. "You will put it back for me later?" And he nodded.

"Has Amras gone?" He asked his red eyes glancing up at me and widening at the image I was projecting above me. "Ooohhh." He muttered.

"Not yet."

"What can I do for you Mistress?" He asked his glance flicking to Cursed and returning to me immediately.

"Can you tell me if Valentine is...observing our conversation?" I asked while Kit hopped to my shoulder and nuzzled his way carefully into my hair. He ended up with his face resting against my neck, his tail draped under the back of my hair.

"No...there seems to be some kind of temporal shift surrounding the entire room. Have you been playing the flute again?" He asked, glancing toward the bookcase where my flute usually rested. He signed when I nodded.

I wanted to know how he'd managed to get through, but didn't know how long I had and didn't want to waste this opportunity. It could wait. Instead I took a deep breath and continued speaking to Marcus. "Your Master is mad. He seeks to enslave us all and you would help him. Why should I lift a finger for you?" I demanded harshly. On my shoulder Kit jumped at my tone and his little red eyes began whirling.

"Because...I am yours. You said so yourself." He replied quietly.

Air hissed between my teeth and had I been closer to him I might have slapped him I was suddenly so angry. Our tail flicked again and Goldy growled low and sharp.

Kit jumped again and eyes widened around the room. One of the Elves actually licked his lips. I placed my hands behind my back and considered my next words. “See these men surrounding you?” I asked, nudging my chin in the guard’s direction.

Marcus moved his head slightly and glanced around before nodding.

“These men were sent to me by the Queen, my Grandmother...if I free you, you will find yourself a subject of the Unseelie court for while your mother was Seelie, she remains outside the Sidhe and is not of royal blood. This one.” I said indicating Cursed behind me. “Is Prince of the Unseelie Court.” Beside me Cursed shifted and made a low displeased noise. I ignored him. “He allowed my Mother to escape the Sidhe fifty years ago and was thrown into a cell for more than a quarter century... where he endured frequent torture. The guards encircling you would probably prefer to kill him rather than look at him. Because they mistakenly believe he dishonored himself and had unlawful interaction with my Mother. And while it is true that his Uncle sits the throne, to the Seelie he is no more than a half breed traitor and is shunned by all. The Elves are a proud race Marcus they do not suffer fools lightly. I will not suffer fools lightly. If you wish to be saved you must convince us all that you are worthy. So tell me, why should I save you?”

Marcus dropped his head to the floor and was silent for a moment. “I do not know. Only that I did not wish this enslavement and need your help to free myself.” He replied.

I glanced at the three men surrounding Marcus and considered each of them. “Then your life is forfeit...unless.”

Marcus glanced up at me with a glimmer of hope. “Unless?” He breathed.

“It seems to me that Valentine is the crux to our problem here. He threatens me and mine and has managed to lessen you significantly. Eliminate Valentine and you eliminate all of our problems.” I replied casually. “Freed from him, your life takes on new meaning and possibilities.” And then I leaned forward and cracked open my red door again...and this time my desire was a gentle caress that whispered against his skin and through his body luring him to me. I wasn’t good enough yet to miss those

standing next to him. But I was confident their discipline would prevent them from falling on me like wild dogs.

Marcus however, didn't seem to have their fortitude and he lunged at me from the floor, his eyes wild. I merely smiled and turned my back on him going to seat myself on the edge of the bed while behind me sounds of struggle erupted. Out the corner of my eye I caught Cursed's angry look and once again I ignored him. When next I glanced at Marcus he was being held on the floor by one of the guards who had his knee in his back and his arms lifted nearly even with his shoulders. "Prove yourself worthy Marcus. Do not disappoint me." I told him and then to Kit I said. "Send him back to them." Kit nodded his head and Marcus was suddenly gone. The guard rose gracefully and glanced at me. When he was certain I was looking they all went to a knee and bowed their heads.

"Messengers? Or have you somehow managed to annoy the Queen and been thrown out of the Sidhe?" I asked dryly.

"Princess we have been sent here to serve you upon the Queen's request." The one who had been holding Marcus replied.

"So it's the latter eh?" I asked. "Kit could you come down please. It seems they will be here for a while."

"Are you sure that's a good idea...you seem....not yourself." He replied softly.

"Get off."

"Yes Mistress." And he materialized on the floor standing on the other side of Cursed. I sighed and brushed my hair back from my face.

"Come here Kit." I told him ignoring the furtive glances from the three still kneeling on the floor. His face looked raw, the claw marks red and angry. "Are you aware you are injured?" I asked him then sighed again when he nodded. "How did you allow this to happen?"

"Demon and large cat is a potent combination." He remarked. "But he looks worse than me." I shook my head and lifted my hand to his neck closing my eyes and thinking of his perfect dusky skin and the power I required as I pushed my will down

my arm out my hand and fingers. When I opened my eyes he was once again whole. That's nice I wasn't sure I could heal Demon.

"Leave the alley cat alone for a now. We have more important things to worry about." I told him. "Is the room back to normal?"

"It is, except we seem to have increased by three."

"I suppose it's not polite to return a gift from the Queen?"

"I wouldn't know, but I would advise against it."

"Cursed won't speak to me." I told him, ignoring for the moment both Cursed and the other Elves in the room. "He seeks to protect me by acting cold. He hopes that by doing so the others won't realize I've taken him into my bed." I told Kit calmly and watched as he struggled to hide his smile when Cursed choked and growled. And the buzzing started up again in my head from the three across the room. "What he doesn't realize is that I'm not ashamed and as I'm neither mated nor committed I will damn well take whomever I please to my bed. And anyone that has a problem with that can go right back where he came from." I finished as Kit moved out of my way and my eyes focused on the three still kneeling on the floor. "Do I make myself perfectly clear?" I asked sweetly. "Shall I have Kit send any of you home?"

Three heads shook abruptly and I let out the breath I was holding. "Cursed come here." Kit moved to the other side of me as I turned toward Cursed. He looked tense and wary and held his ground. "Do not disobey me." I told him softly and he narrowed his eyes and flashed his pointed teeth at me. "Here!" I told him sharply my finger pointed at the floor in front of me. And when he held his ground I did to him what I'd done to the box holding Bodark's key. He jerked but couldn't prevent his feet from skidding across the floor toward me until he was standing right where I'd indicated. Quickly muffled gasps erupted from the three still kneeling.

"My Lady, do not do this." He implored.

"Do what Cursed?" I asked reaching up to brush a lock of hair from his cheek. My palm cupped his jaw and my fingers whispered over the sensitive skin behind his ear. "Care for you? Too late for that." I assured him. His eyes were nearly frantic and

his fists clenched at his sides. "I cannot lose you both." I told him. And he growled and reached for me his arms pulling me against his body while his lips crashed down upon mine. I tasted blood and he groaned and held me tighter.

Several minutes, or perhaps it was hours it's difficult to say, later he pulled back from me and rested his forehead against mine. "You should allow them to introduce themselves...the floor is hard My Lady." He told me, his voice sounding a little sad.

I gave him a nod then leaned into his body and sighed when he slipped behind me and wrapped his arm about my waist. "I am sorry. I did not mean to leave you there so long. Please." I said waving them to their feet. My admission clearly disconcerted them because their faces went slack as they stood.

"I don't think you're supposed to apologize." Kit offered. He'd moved onto the bed and was lying on his side with his head propped in his hand.

"Hmmm...note to self." I muttered and Cursed gave me a gentle squeeze.

"Ah...Mistress..." Kit muttered, pushing himself up to a cross legged position on the bed. "We're about to have company."

"Do not harm them." Cursed spoke and the three flicked their eyes at him then at me.

The door slammed open and Jace stood there with an annoyed look on his face. Gareth pushed in past him and stared first at me and then at the three who were standing hands on their hilt their bodies tense. "What did you do to the hall? And where is Amras?" Gareth demanded as he crossed the room and looked at Cursed and then Kit.

Kit pursed his lips for a second and replied. "Shielded somehow. And he and Owen are in the upper caverns."

Gareth sighed and held out his hand for me. Cursed's arm slipped away and he stepped back. "We need to talk about...your attire, and then perhaps about your flute playing." He muttered as I went into the shelter of his body. Unlike Cursed he pressed me against his side, effectively blocking the view of my front. "But first, perhaps you should introduce our newest additions." He urged.

“I’d love too Gareth, but I have no idea who they are. They appeared at the same time as Marcus, and came from the Queen.”

“Marcus?” Jace demanded as he came to stand next to me. His fingers caressed my cheek and his eyes searched mine for a moment before he laced our fingers together and turned back to the newcomers.

“She sent him on his way with a reason for living.” Kit commented then grinned when Gareth and Jace both widened their eyes while they glanced down at me in question.

“Kit....!” I growled.

His laugh was pure evil as he added. “And incentive for knocking off Valentine. Make me proud?” Kit scoffed then flopped back on the bed laughing. “Oh that was rich! Should you tire of entertaining us Mistress you can always consider a career on the stage.”

“What is he blabbering about?” Jace growled.

I winced and leaned my cheek against Gareth’s chest. “I might have laid it on a little thick.” I muttered.

“Laid what on whom?” Gareth demanded.

“Marcus arrived with the others...he started off acting all high and mighty. It might have irritated me a bit so I told him he was a disappointment and that I should kill him myself for the shame he’d caused to us all...”

“And he bought that?” Jace asked his eyebrows nearly at his hairline.

“Well I might have mentioned something about these guys being Elves and them not being partial to fools. I introduced Cursed as the Prince of the Unseelie...it kind of went downhill from there. I may have cheated a little and cracked open my red door...once or twice.”

“And what were your new friends doing at the time?” Gareth asked softly and I knew I was skating on thin ice.

“Oh well they were...you know...holding him back and being stoic. Much what you’d expect from the Queen’s hand picked bodyguards.” I told them

confidently. “I was never in any danger. Cursed was here and I called Kit to make sure Valentine wasn’t listening in before I suggested Marcus might save himself by doing a little eliminating of his own. It was that or send him to the Unseelie court.” I told them all. “I figure in the Sidhe he’d be free of Valentine but that wouldn’t be any guarantee he’d survive. We couldn’t very well let him stay here and if it hadn’t been for the strange shielding my flute apparently provided him, Valentine would have probably heard every word we said.”

“So you convinced him he needed to kill Valentine to save his honor?” Jace asked.

“Something like that.” I agreed.

“Pardon me.” One of the guards interrupted and we swung toward him having nearly forgotten they were there. “Princess did you not mean what you said earlier?”

“And you are?”

“Roral.” He replied and bowed his head. He was just a little more muscular than the other two and had chestnut brown hair and pale green eyes. He like the others, had his hair wrapped and was wearing standard guard black. He was about five eleven or so. There didn’t seem to be anything extraordinary about him aside from the fact that he was as fair as any Elf and seemed to handle his sword well. Oh and he’d managed to restrain a young hybrid Dragon.

“And the others?” I asked, tilting my head to the side.

The man on the left stepped forward and tilted his head. “Lira.” He replied in a deep voice and I took a moment to study him. He had dark auburn hair which had a thin shaved swath over his ears. With his hair pulled back you could see the tattoos that ringed his head crossing his brow in a several fine lines near the top of his hairline and widening as they went over his ears and around his neck. I did not recognize the symbols. His eyes were two toned with a ring of brown encircling the outer ring of green and seemed friendly enough. He was taller than Roral by at least an inch and nearly as muscular as Cursed.

I nodded and glanced at the last man who stood his ground and barely dipped his head. Uh oh I thought...this one's attitude reminded me of my first meeting with Amras. Sighing I waited patiently for him to introduce himself. "Nolls." He finally spoke and my eyes took in his light brown hair, icy blue eyes, and pierced ear. Over his cheek was a scar which looked like it would have blinded him had it been just a half inch higher. He was the same height as Roral and more slender like Amras. On his person I counted at least six knives. There were probably more, I just couldn't find them without asking him to turn around.

"Nolls you seem annoyed to be here? Is it myself or Cursed you find offense with?" Nolls seemed to pale slightly but stood straight his eyes focused somewhere just over my right shoulder. He pressed his lips together and after several minutes of silence I finally shook my head and added. "You may speak freely."

"Nolls and I served together previously." Cursed finally responded. "He was not on duty the night the Princess fled the Sidhe."

I sighed. "Why is it that men cannot place blame where it belongs? Had my Mother stayed where she was told, none of this would have happened! And yet there he stands consumed with bitterness either at himself or blame for you. It is most irritating."

"Had the Princess remained where she was bid...you would not be here." Cursed replied calmly. "Perhaps once Nolls has spent time with us he will come to see that keeping the Princess within the Sidhe would have been a great tragedy. If I myself had known I would be standing here with you now, I would have shoved her out the door and locked it behind her myself all those years ago." It was one of the most enlightening conversations I'd ever heard from Cursed and it nearly caused my jaw to drop. Cursed looked chagrined when I glanced at him and he held out his hands palm up.

We had been sidetracked and I gave myself a mental shake, it was going to take some time to absorb Cursed's words. I'd have to think that over later, right then I had other things I needed to concern myself with. "Roral, to answer your question...I

believe I meant every word I said.” I told him then sighed when he looked at me as if he was confused. “It is my delivery that is in question. I was...a bit harsh.”

“And who is this Valentine?” Lira asked his two tone eyes swinging amongst us.

“Wait please.” I replied, holding up the hand Jace wasn’t attached to. “Areth? A little help here?” No one spoke while I waited and the three new guards looked curious but said nothing. When she arrived it was in a swirl of black smoke and hair. “Hi there Areth...it appears we’ve grown by three. Could you add rooms across the hall?”

“We heard you play Princess and took the liberty of doing so already.” She told me with a twinkle in her eye. “And may I add...I am sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you.” I told her in a choked voice. It took me a moment but I pulled myself together enough to say. “They were sent by the Queen. I did not call them.” I told her softly.

Areth tilted her head and looked at me from where she hovered about three feet off the ground before me. “It is the music that brings them. Or perhaps it is the emotion behind the music?” She advised. “To lose one you care for is never easy. It seems the Queen offers a token.”

I bit my lip and struggled to keep the tears from my eyes. “It is hardly a fair exchange.” I whispered to which she floated closer and laid her delicate hand upon my cheek.

Areth’s dark eyes were full of compassion which nearly undid me as she replied. “All is not lost yet. Perhaps it is not reason that will win the day...but your heart?”

I nodded. “Or I could continue to play until we are overrun by Fey.” I added with a small smile. Her high clear laugh filled the room and she took a moment to glance about it and lifted an eyebrow at me while she smiled. I think she was right, we pretty much were already!

Kit leaned over and said. "Bye the way, love the nightgown." And Areth grinned mischievously then disappeared. Everyone in the room looked at me and I shifted restlessly and felt my cheeks heat up. Gareth made an annoyed sound and the three new men did their best to look anywhere but at me.

"Ah...who is in charge?" I finally asked my gaze going naturally to Roral who was looking at Cursed. Cursed stood just a little straighter and glanced at Lira and Nolls.

"We were ordered to report to Cursed." Roral replied

My lips turned up in a slow smile as I glanced toward my Goblin and noticed he looked as if he was in shock. He recovered quickly but about him there was an air of confusion. "Why?" Perhaps my yelling at Mom had made her feel guilty enough to admit the truth and this was the Queen's way of apologizing. It would be nice to think Mom had wiped his slate clean by admitting he'd never touched her.

"Princess?" Roral replied, his eyes widening slightly and I remembered I didn't even have my lower shield in place.

"Why are you here, why were you ordered to report at all? Your timing is...ahead of schedule." I told them. We had expected Grandma to send them, but not this soon. I was hoping Mi was entertaining her and that she would hold off shipping me more men. Obviously I was wrong. "Was there some message or particular reason you are here?"

Roral looked at the other two then shook his head. "If there is, I am not aware of it Princess. Our Captain called for volunteers when the music filled the Sidhe and the Keeper of Knowledge sent us here."

"Mi sent you?" I asked worrying at my lower lip. All three of them nodded. Well at least the music hadn't rent any holes in space or time. Well actually that might not be true...after all it had also brought us Marcus and I was certain Mi hadn't sent him. "You volunteered?" I asked as my eyes flicked toward Nolls in surprise. Again all three of them nodded. "And what did they tell you you were volunteering for exactly?"

“The honor of escorting the Queen’s Granddaughter back to the Sidhe.” Lira replied. Everyone in the room tensed and Gareth’s arm tightened.

“Really?” I replied, my voice sounding tight. “And did they tell you when that is supposed to occur? I have received no summons, no invitation at all. I was not aware I was expected.”

“How can that be Princess?” Roral replied a slight frown marring his brow.

“Maybe your invitation got lost in the mail.” Kit replied skeptically. Roral turned to look at him and frowned some more.

“We obviously won’t resolve this tonight.” Gareth offered. “Perhaps a discussion tomorrow with your Mother will clear things up.”

The three guards looked surprised. “Is Princess Shaylee here?” Lira breathed his voice sounding awe filled. He didn’t quite gush or anything but it was clear that the possibility was a real treat.

“Yes, she and my Father are sleeping together just down the hall.” I replied softly and watched as all three of them stood just a bit straighter. Obviously dear old Mom had more than a few admirers and I fought not to roll my eyes. Good thing Dad could take care of himself.

“Perhaps Cursed can get you settled in and let you know how things work around here.” Jace suggested.

I glanced in Cursed’s direction and our eyes met for a heartbeat and then he was striding across the room while the other three went to a knee before following him out the door. I suppose since Cursed is a Prince he didn’t need to kneel...I wondered if I started letting everyone exit the room like he did would it cause problems. Oh well, tomorrow was soon enough to deal with that.

Kit slid from the bed. “I think I’ll just tag along and see if I learn anything interesting.” He replied then blew a kiss to me as he headed out the door.

Chapter 14

“What time is it?”

“Close to two.” Jace replied.

“Are you coming to bed?”

“We need to go back upstairs. Your music made quite a mess.” Gareth replied.

“How can that be? It didn’t have anything to do with desire.”

Jace heaved a sign and sat on the edge of the bed. Gareth soothed a hand down my hair and told me. “Apparently your song caused feelings of loss. Mix it with alcohol and sweaty bodies and....well I’m just glad we’ve already paid for our sex license.”

“Sorry about that.”

“Oh don’t be...its becoming good for business. Apparently our customers just never know what they’re going to get and that seems to excite them. But then the majority of them are weres so it’s to be expected.” Of course it was. Everyone knew

were had fewer inhibitions and no issues with public nudity or sex. Heck I wasn't all that opposed to it either or so it seemed lately.

"I never thought I'd find myself the proprietor of a sex club." Jace grumbled then shook his head sadly.

"Why don't you try and sleep. You've had a full day." Gareth told me then led me to the bed and pulled back the covers, waited for me to climb in, then he kissed me briefly.

"Owen and Amras should be back soon." Jace murmured and he too kissed me then they were gone, turning down the lights as they went.

I woke still wearing my nightgown under the covers in the middle of my own bed. Apparently Jace and Gareth either hadn't come to bed, or hadn't bothered to retrieve me. I blinked and rubbed at my eyes then shoved back my hair sitting up in bed and glancing around. I felt like crap, my insides felt achy or maybe itchy was a better word. I was alone...it was a first since my four had arrived. My bathrobe was lying across the foot of the bed and I reached for it. On top of my body feeling odd, my head was fuzzy and I needed coffee badly. It looked like I was going to have to go find it myself. I tied on my robe and slid to the floor. My slippers had gone missing but I couldn't be bothered with that. Not when the thought of coffee was all that was keeping me upright at the moment.

Out in the hall Lira and Nolls stood to either side of my door like twin gargoyles guarding the castle gates. I ignored them as I headed down the hall toward the kitchen. I didn't want to think about the fact that they were behind me or the way they had looked at me when I'd opened the door. It made my skin seem to burn and I walked just a little faster. Had I had a heavy robe I would have put it on. No sense in advertising something not on the menu.

In the Kitchen my four were seated at the table just finishing what looked like lunch. Roral was with them and they all pushed up from their chairs as one. I groaned,

feeling my temperature shoot up another degree or two and headed for the coffee maker waving them back to their seats.

“Princess are you well?” Amras asked. I mumbled something as I poured coffee into a huge mug and then went to the fridge for the creamer.

“Lexi?” Owen tried next. “You seem...unsettled.” He informed me and I grumbled some more and pushed my hair behind my shoulder, trying to ignore the way they were looking at me and the effect it was having on my body. I turned my back to them and gritted my teeth while I finished pouring in my ingredients and found a spoon.

I stirred my coffee and took that first heavenly sip and nearly spat it back out again, knowing full well I couldn't drink it with them there and not cause a scene. “Damn.” I muttered and grabbed my mug and fled out of the kitchen. “Don't follow me.” I growled as they all shoved back their chairs and moved to come along, worried something was wrong and ready to assist.

Nolls and Lira stared at me as I went past. “You either!” I yelled and nearly bolted down the hall. I made it all the way back to my room before I slammed the door and leaned back against it, then raised my mug to my lips. Oh...that was heavenly I thought as I ran the sweet taste over my tongue and let it seep down my throat. The sensation nearly set me to purring it was so good. I took another drink and crossed to the bed and seated myself on the edge while I proceeded to thoroughly enjoy my coffee in peace. I couldn't seem to stop myself from emoting while I drank...the best I could do was sequester myself while doing so. Usually Gareth and Jace were here.... apparently today I was on my own. No worries I thought as I tipped my cup up and drained the last dregs. I'd made it through without bringing anyone to their knees or being attacked.

“Areth can I have my workout clothes?” I asked and headed for the bathroom feeling just a wee bit better but still itchy and as Owen had said...unsettled. Of course with everything that had happened in the last day maybe it shouldn't be a surprise.

I dressed and headed out the door. The men were all in the front room milling around and looking....distressed, or maybe hungry was a better word. Lira looked dazed and was seated on a coffee table with his face in his hands. Roral just looked uncomfortable and when my gaze swept his body there was little question why. My eyes widened then narrowed and I had to shake myself as I licked my lips and jerked my gaze away. Nolls was turned away from me and his back and shoulders were very tense. "Any of you men married, engaged, or currently in love with someone?" I finally asked. When all three of them shook their heads I nodded thoughtfully. "Well that's something." I muttered.

"What was that?" Lira nearly moaned. "I have never felt anything like it. It was...like last night only different."

I looked at Cursed who pursed his lips and shook his head slightly.

"That was my Mistress enjoying her coffee." Kit informed him in a cheerful voice that carried a note of pride in it. He wandered over to me and leaned down to give me a kiss on the cheek. "Mmmm yummy." He whispered and I tensed and clenched my hands into fists to keep from grabbing him. What the hell was wrong with me?

"Where are Gareth and Jace?" I asked while I watched Lira pull himself together and stand. Nolls turned toward me and each of the three went to a knee, albeit it was belated. My eyes flitted between the three of them and I licked my lips again. Beside me Kit made a low noise in his throat that sent gooseflesh skittering over my skin and I took a step away from him toward those kneeling on the carpet. My eyes trained on their bent heads.

"They went out earlier. They did not say where they were going." Owen informed me in his worried voice.

"Where are they?"

"The bank." Kit replied. "Earlier they met with their Accountant. Nothing too dangerous. Unless you consider the gorgeous Secretary who's been petting them since they got there a threat."

My body went still and I gave him a look that raised both his eyebrows.

“Really and what are they doing about it?”

“Ah...” He said grinning slightly. “If I say enjoying themselves will you injure me?”

I stood there feeling my blood pressure rise and snapped my fingers. “Send them this.” I told Kit opening my fingers and handing him my little gold still attached to the tie tack with Kit’s blood on it. “Perhaps that will remind them what is what.”

Kit laughed and snapped his fingers then tilted his head to the side. “Oh...yes I think that seems to have got their attention.” He replied while I moved my gaze back to those on the floor. .

“Princess are you alright?” Amras asked again his eyes searching my face. I’d been avoiding looking at him since I came into the room. No I was not alright. I was completely out of sorts and not exactly sure why. Jace and Gareth had not come for me and were already gone without even...ah... I slammed closed my lower and upper shields before I could complete the thought. Everyone in the room jumped and stared at me in varying degrees of surprise while I gritted my teeth and tried to appear normal. With my shields in place I felt free to finish my thought...was I out of sorts because Jace and Gareth hadn’t made love to me last night? I moved to a chair and slumped into it then dropped my face into my hands. Much as Lira had done earlier.

Surely there must be an explanation for them not coming for me...but we had not gone a single night...or day for that matter since we’d met without making love...multiple times. And time of night had never mattered. This was...I did not like this at all. It had been more than twenty four hours and this just wouldn’t do. “Let me know when they return.” I told Kit through my fingers and pulled myself up from the chair. “I’m going upstairs to work out.”

Not surprising, the elevator was packed. I stood in the corner by myself and stared at the floor.

“Lexi. You are still shielded.” Owen reminded me. Then tried again when I nodded. “The others cannot sense you with your upper shield in place.”

“Dragonsward.” I muttered.

“Pardon.”

“Dragonsward, my upper shield is called a Dragonsward. And it stays right where it is for the time being.”

We came out of the elevator and I inhaled deeply, pulling the smell of sweaty male into my lungs. It was like ambrosia and I walked quickly down the hall and out onto the training floor with the rest of them trailing behind me like the end of a Chinese Dragon float. My eyes scanned the floor catching site of several individuals that caused me to pause as my eyes moved over their sleek bodies.

“I don’t think this is a good idea.” Kit mumbled behind me and I ignored him and headed for the track.

Eight laps later I was feeling slightly dizzy from lack of oxygen and male pheromones, and wondering if I was going to make it through my workout. Rather than run with me the men had stationed themselves around the room and were facing toward the track, arms crossed over their chests eyes intent on me. It was as if they were protecting those on the floor rather than me. Kit was the only one that stayed with me after having shifted to wolf form. Twice he had used his body to push me back to the track when I had veered toward someone standing too close. On both occasions it was a man that had drawn me...though I was not familiar with either of them.

I moved to the mats and spent several minutes stretching and sneaking glances at the trainees as they gravitated toward me. As the space started filling up my guards were pushed back to the edge and I went to the front and started with the lower level katas and began working the class up to the more advanced forms. With my shields firmly in place it wasn’t long before a good portion of the class moved off to the side leaving just the advanced students. When we reached the seventh level I stopped, turned and bowed. Thanking them for the honor of allowing me to lead.

Dean and Nate were amongst the survivors and I eyed them thoughtfully. “Owen, swords please?” I asked my eyebrow lifted inquiringly at the two who were standing there eying me with interested looks of their own. Kit hovered at my shoulder

and I brushed him away then took a sword from Owen, while the two guards from last night did so too. “Go find something to do.” I ordered the others then motioned for Nate and Dean to join me. “Are you interested in assisting me in practice?” I asked and smiled when they both nodded and took the swords Owen offered them. I walked us toward one side of the cavern away from the rest of the trainees. Owen and the others trailed along behind me, giving us some room but not a lot. I finally turned and gave them all a look. “Why don’t you boys go practice beating up on each other?” I suggested more firmly then stood there till all of them drifted away except Owen who simply refused to leave.

“Take a seat.” I urged Dean and Nate motioning to the floor. They waited until I was sitting cross legged with my blunted sword lying across my knees and then copied my position. There was about three feet separating them and I hoped it would be enough.

“Are we going to use our swords?” Nate asked his eyes curious and I nodded.

“It may come to that.” I told them then added. “You were both here last week when I...had a bad moment and leaked all over everyone?” I asked and they sat up a little straighter and leaned forward slightly. At their nod I continued. “Well I could use more practice...and thought you might assist me if you wouldn’t mind?” The two of them looked at each other then back at me with smiles. “Good then shall we begin?” I dropped both my shields which caused Owen to make a slight noise behind me. Of course I ignored him. I was doing that a lot lately.

I focused on my mind and reached out across the four feet of space between us brushing a soft caress against Dean’s arm. Or I thought I was aiming for Dean but managed to touch them both. Their eyes widened and Nate jumped.

“What was that?” He asked.

“Me. Did it hurt?”

“No, it just surprised me.” He replied and glanced at Dean who also nodded.

“It was different than when you spoke my name in my head last night.” Dean told me. “I felt it against my arm.”

“Well I was actually aiming for Dean so let me see if I can improve my focus.” And I rolled my head on my shoulders and this time I sent a caress, much like a finger over a cheek toward Nate. He raised his hand to his face and nodded.

“Yes I felt that.” He replied and looked at Dean who shook his head.

“Hmmm.” I murmured and increased my pressure slightly and sent more of a hand sized thought toward Dean. I smiled when his hand covered his heart and he grinned at me.

“It is like I can feel your palm pressing against my skin, just here.” He told me. Behind me Owen muttered something under his breath. Next I sent the force of my fingers gliding up Nate’s thigh and his eyes flicked to mine and widened in surprise. I lifted an eyebrow and he grinned. Owen grumbled. I scooted back another foot and tried again. The feel of a soft sigh of a lover’s breath against your neck was my next sending and Dean shivered and twisted his neck as if I’d tickled him.

“I’ve got gooseflesh.” He muttered holding up an arm and staring at it in surprise. “That was...mmm, nice.”

Neither of them was wearing a shirt and over the next forty minutes or so I went at the two of them with the feel of whispered caresses and soft fingers, sliding them all over their chests and sides until they were nearly twitching and their eyes were quite intense. Both of them were rock hard and it wasn’t hard to miss with their shorts on. Kit came to stand next to Owen and I could sense that the two of them were not happy with me, though neither said anything until I started sending the soft press of kisses along Dean and Nate’s necks.

“Lexi that’s enough.” Owen growled. Dean and Nate didn’t appear to agree and they frowned at Owen where he stood behind me.

“Is that enough?” I asked my two willing subjects then smiled when they both shook their heads vigorously.

“No, don’t stop.” Nate urged me. “I’m fine.”

“What about you Dean? Are you fine too?”

Dean's eyes were very dark and the skin over his cheeks was dusky. He looked tense but not yet ready to break. "I'm good." He rumbled. "Keep going."

"See Owen they are fine." I told him while I sent the feel of both palms sliding over Nate's nipples and watched as his head went back and he pulled air into his lungs. Dean ignored him, his gaze focused on me. To Dean I sent the feel of my naked upper body pressed against his and watched as his fingers clenched and unclenched. It was as if he wanted to reach for something that wasn't quite there. The tension went up a notch when I started sending them the feel of my tongue, across a nipple, along the sensitive skin just under a jaw, around the outside of an ear.

It was Nate that broke first when I gave him the feel of me pulling his finger into my mouth. He lunged for me and I was up and holding my sword between us quicker than Owen or Kit could respond. Nate remembered his own sword and in his need to have me he raised it and the fight was on. Dean watched through narrowed eyes and I was careful not to turn my back to him, concerned that his raging lust might overcome his good sense. Nate was very strong and I struggled to keep him back from me while I tried not to hurt him. If he got his hands on me now I'd be in big trouble.

Nate seemed intent on disarming me and I struggled to slip his powerful swings instead of taking them straight on so my arms wouldn't be wrenched from their sockets. He was panting and his eyes were wild when I slid under his swing and leapt upon him. The force of my body striking his, took us both down to the floor with me astride him. He grabbed for me and I pressed my blade across his windpipe giving him just enough pressure so he knew I meant business.

"Uh ah ah." I told him then grinned when he wiggled beneath me and tried to press his hips into me.

"My God." He moaned and let go of his sword throwing an arm over his face. I could tell he was fighting to control his body and I leaned over his face and brushed his cheek with my lips, taking a moment to inhale the sharp scent of musk and wolf coming off him into my lungs. It tasted good.

“Thank you.” I whispered then imagined the feel of contentment I had after really good sex and pressed it into him while my lips moved over his skin and I tasted the musk of him. He stilled and his body seemed to sigh then completely relax beneath me.

“What did you just do to him?” Gareth’s asked from behind me. I ignored him and raised my eyes to Dean who was struggling with his own emotions.

“Come here Dean.” I urged and he glanced behind me then back at me. “Let me help you.” His eyes flicked to Nate beneath me and then they focused on mine and he laid aside his sword and crawled to us. I wrapped my arm around his shoulder and hesitated just a moment when he nearly yanked me off Nate and into his arms.

“Shush.” I whispered and pressed my cheek to his breathing into him the same sense of overwhelming sexual release and satisfaction that I’d given to Nate. “How’s that?” I asked and smiled when he slid to the floor and onto his back.

“Mmmm wonderful.” He murmured and closed his eyes looking completely at peace. I sat there looking down at the two of them allowing myself a moment of intense satisfaction which lasted only as long as it took Gareth to grab my arm and yank me to my feet.

“Owen.” He hissed and I heard fingers snapping just before my world shifted and I found myself standing in Gareth’s bedroom with a very angry Drake glaring down at me.

Jace was already there and he glanced between Gareth and me with a questioning look. “Oh I remember this room.” I told them sarcastically before either of them could start up on me. “It’s where I sometimes spend the night. But not last night...apparently someone was too busy for me.” I continued turning my head to look around the room as if I hadn’t been there in months.

“Why are you so angry?” Jace asked ignoring my comment with a frown.

“I found her playing with two of Nick’s men.”

Jace turned his green eyes on me and his frown deepened. “Playing how?” He asked his voice dropping to the....speak fast before I lose my temper range.

“She was exciting them sexually...from a distance.” Wow he made that sound a whole lot worse than it was. I’d been very careful not to touch anything covered on either of them! Was it my fault they all like to wear short shorts and left so much exposed skin for me to choose from?

Jace crossed his arms over his chest and his frown turned to something...less friendly. “And where were the others?” He demanded.

“Only Owen and Kit were close enough to assist had it gotten out of hand. The others were...practicing some small distance away.”

“Would you like to explain yourself?”

I used the line that Gareth had used on me last night. “I don’t believe I’m yet ready for a change of subject. I’d like to know where you two were last night and why I woke up alone in my own bed, still wearing my nightgown while you were out playing patty cake across town with some bimbo.”

And just like that, neither of them would meet my eyes. Hmmm not a good sign. “Fine.” I spat out and started toward the door.

“Stop!” Jace growled and I ignored him or tried to, of course that only worked in my imagination because it surely didn’t work in real life. Jace’s hand landed on my arm and I was swung around, my momentum plastering me against his chest. I took it for about half a second and then I started struggling wildly and it required both of them to hold me I was suddenly so angry I was seeing red! We ended up in a heap on the floor with Jace wrapped around my top half and Gareth holding the bottom. “Lexi get a hold of yourself!”

“Get off me!” I screamed back at him.

“What is wrong with her?”

“Let me go!”

“No.” Gareth replied softly. “Never.”

The feel of their bodies pressed against mine overwhelmed me and my body seized, the force lifting both of them as my back bowed and my head snapped back. My eyes rolled back in my head and violent tremors wracked my body. A high pitched

scream spilled out of me. From a distance I heard both of them yell and the door slam open and then the smell and taste of more men and my body seized again while they held me down and I screamed and screamed.

I opened my lashes and glanced into large round amber eyes surrounded by Mi's tan and grey face. "Hi." I rasped, my voice sounding and feeling as if someone had shredded the delicate lining with broken glass. My Mother's face swam into view as she knelt on the floor behind Mi. We seemed to be the only three in the room.

"What happened?"

Mi looked at my Mom who shook her head. I noticed her eyes looked worried and she brushed her palm across my forehead then frowned. "We don't know." She told me.

"Where is everyone?" I asked and realized I was drenched in sweat and my skin felt clammy.

"You wouldn't stop screaming until we sent the men from the room." Mi replied.

"How do you feel?" Mom asked me.

"My throat hurts. And I feel...itchy inside...distressed." I added in a whisper. "Since I woke this morning."

"Have you eaten anything today?" She frowned when I shook my head no. "Mood swings?" She asked and I thought about it for a moment and nodded. "Have you been irritable?" Ah yeah, I think you could say that, I told her by nodding as I thought over my actions this morning. "Lexi, you aren't taking any drugs are you?" Mom asked softly her pale blue eyes searching my face and I could see she was clearly upset. When I shook my head she worried at her lip and brushed back my hair. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were in withdrawal." She told me. "But from what I can't say."

That didn't make any sense. I'd never taken drugs of any kind except for the normal childhood shots which mostly I could have skipped given my nature but didn't because Mom was a Doctor and just funny that way. I didn't even take vitamins or

anything for headaches. The only thing I might be addicted to was coffee and I'd had my fix that morning. Coffee...and.... wow! My eyes widened and I stared up at Mom and then Mi in horror. No, no that couldn't be. It had been less than twenty four hours since I'd had sex. That was silly. I couldn't be having withdrawal from sex. I couldn't...could I? Of course I'd slept late and had no idea what time it was. I'd been with Cursed and Kit last...that was yesterday sometime early afternoon.

"It's after two o'clock now." Mi informed me.

"Which one would you like me to call in?" My Mom asked calmly being a Doctor and a scientist obviously prepared her well to test the theory. I was almost afraid to find out but she soothed me with her gentle hands and told me. "If it isn't that then between your Father and I we'll figure something out." She promised.

"Gareth...and Jace." I whispered then held Mom's hand while Mi tilted her head to the side.

"The hall was too close." Mom told me. "Even on the other side of the door you still screamed." Explaining the reason it took several minutes for the door to open and Jace and Gareth to be framed in the doorway. The open door shifted the air, bringing with it their scent and I squeezed Mom's hand and felt myself convulse on the floor while she held me down. Voices swam above me and I felt my nails dig into my palms as my head struck the floor. A God awful noise filled the room and I somehow realized it was coming from me. Then I was lifted into Gareth's arms and my convulsions became so violent that he had to struggle to get me to the bed. My clothing disappeared and Gareth was above me, his body pressing me into the comforter while Jace held my arms and shoulders against his chest. I felt Gareth slide inside me and I shuddered and moaned softly my body stilling instantly on the bed, just at the feel of him within me.

"Stars and scales!" Jace muttered and I turned my head and brushed my cheek against his bare chest while my hips lifted to Gareth.

"Please." I whispered hoarsely. "Don't stop." And he didn't, not for a very long time. And when he was done, Jace rolled me into his arms and proceeded to start

the process all over again. I lay in the middle of the bed curled between the two of them. My mind and body satiated with a heaviness that dragged me down into the soft velvety folds of exhausted sleep.

Chapter 15

When I cracked open an eye sometime later, I was laying on my back still cocooned between Jace and Gareth's bodies. Jace's fingers brushed my arm and shoulder while Gareth lay on his side with his head propped in his hand. Both of them looked serious and I gave them a smile. "Hi." I rasped my voice obviously in distress still.

"Mmmm." Jace replied softly. "How do you feel?" I closed my eyes and did a self check, realizing the biggest difference between morning and now, was that the itching seemed to have disappeared and I felt...calm.

"Better." I told them and smiled again when they both seemed to relax.

"You gave us quite a scare." Gareth advised me softly, his fingers coming up to trace my nose and lips. "I suppose we are partial responsible...for not bringing you to bed last night where you obviously belong."

I glanced up into his dark blue eyes and nodded. “Why didn’t you?” I finally rasped out. Gareth’s finger moved down my throat and over my collar bone while he considered my question silently.

“It was a long day yesterday.” He replied softly. “For all of us.”

Yesterday...my Mom turned up pregnant, I had multiple encounters with potential rivals starting with the flowers delivered in the morning and escalating from there, and ending with my obvious distress over Amras being taken from us. Yes I could see how it would be a long day for Gareth...a long day for both of them and that they might need space from me. “I’m sorry.” I told them reaching up to cup Gareth’s cheek in my palm while I laced my fingers through Jace’s. “I do not mean to hurt either of you.”

Gareth nodded and Jace pressed his lips to my temple. “Your Mother seems to think you were suffering from withdrawal. It is...I don’t know what it is.” He replied candidly and shook his head. “Will you be angry at us if we take it as a compliment?” I glanced first at Gareth and then Jace, seeing a glimmer of pride shining in their eyes.

“Offended if you didn’t.” I whispered and felt suddenly better when they both smiled warmly at me.

“Addiction isn’t necessarily a bad thing.” Jace informed us. “We just...didn’t hold up our end of the bargain.” And I nodded and frowned at him. “We’ll need to speak to the others too.” He added, his voice going soft.

I glanced sharply at him and inside me Goldy lifted her head and snorted rudely. Gareth and Jace both raised their eyebrows. *Need Dragons, want others!* She informed us and licked her lips and laid her head back down closing her big golden eyes with another snort. Okay well I guess that settled that.

“So does this mean one or both of you will be visiting the Sidhe with me?” Jace looked at Gareth who looked back at him and they both nodded. “Need to...thank Kit.” I rasped.

“Why is that?” Jace asked.

“He thought...you two....were worthy.” I replied and Gareth laughed and shared with Jace what I had told him last night, before Jace came into the room.

“Lexi you need to do something about your voice.” Jace told me and I nodded and shifted everything between my shoulders and head and back again.

When I was done I stroked my throat and told them. “I think that should fix the problem.” And indeed it did.

“Anything else hurt?” Gareth asked. “You hit your head on the floor several times. It was...terrifying.” He told me abruptly and I pressed my lips together and nodded.

“It wasn’t real fun from in here either.” I admitted, using my finger and tapping my forehead. “I’m okay. In fact thanks to you two I’m better than just okay.” I told them with a saucy grin. “Maybe a little hungry.” I admitted.

“I suppose we can’t bow out of this thing tonight?” Jace muttered glancing at his watch. “If not we should get something to eat and then....we’ll have a little time before we need to think about getting ready. I imagine traffic is going to be all kinds of fun. As long as we’re ready by eight we should be fine.”

“I wish we could skip and stay here in bed.” I told them. “Unfortunately Mom and Dad are going and that means so are we.”

“Let’s get you up and fed then.” Gareth offered. “I’m sure the others would like to see that you are unharmed. Good thing we’re immortals or the sight of you seizing might have sent the lot of us into cardiac arrest and there would have been more than one of us flopping around on the floor! Your Father was particularly distraught especially when your Mother kicked him out with the rest of us.”

“I had a problem with Dad too?” I asked, somewhat grossed out at the thought.

“You screamed the loudest when he touched you. I think you might have been trying to drive him away.” Oh.

Jace leaned down and gave me a kiss then rolled off the bed, handing me the red velvet robe lying across the end. I sat up and pulled it on then slid to the edge. Gareth got off the other side and came around to me. His arms gathered me in against him

tenderly and I buried my face against his neck and inhaled his warm earthy smell into my lungs. I loved the way Gareth smelled and always had. He held me for several minutes and then set me back and kissed the tip of my nose. “Lets not do that again, okay?” He whispered and I nodded.

When they’d pulled on their clothing we left the room. Everyone was congregated in the living room and they all stood as we came down the hall. Cursed was actually closest and reached me first. His black eyes roamed my face and he stepped between Gareth and Jace and pulled me into his arms, cradling my head against his chest with his hand. His breathing was slightly uneven and I felt a tremor run through him as I slipped my own arms around his waist. “My Lady.” He whispered and kissed my temple. Then he released me to Amras who had tears in his eyes. I recalled seeing his face above me beside my Mom’s and wondered if he’d tried to heal me in some way.

Amras’ pale hair brushed my face and cascaded over my shoulder as he pulled me to him and placed his cheek to mine. “Cormamin lindua ele lle” my heart sings to see thee, he whispered and I hugged him tightly.

Owen was next and he held me briefly then set me back from him so his dark eyes could look me over. “Power is a two edged sword.” He told me softly. “We need to determine if this is physical or psychological.” He advised before he kissed my brow and hugged me tightly and I found myself facing Kit.

“I have no desire to return to Hell Mistress.” He warned me bluntly. “You must take better care of yourself.” He scolded then reached for me and nearly cracked a rib as he lifted me off my feet and pressed me to him tightly. “Damn you.” He muttered. “You scared the devil out of me, and that’s not easy! I don’t ever want to see you do that again.”

“I’m sorry.” I muttered against the leather covering his chest and hugged him back. “I’ll try to have sex more often.” And he chuckled and kissed me hard then set me back on my feet.

“See that you do!” He warned then released his hold.

Jace and gone to the kitchen and Gareth was still standing a little to my side, I caught his eye he gave me a small smile. I walked to Mom and Dad and held out a hand for each of them. Dad took one look at me and pulled me into his arms. “Lexi.” He grumbled. “Do not ever scare your Mother like that again.” And I chuckled and held him tightly. When he released me I hugged Mom.

“What can you tell me about addiction?” I asked her when she released me.

She glanced between my Father and myself and said. “Two choices, quit whatever it is you appear to be addicted to and hope you survive withdrawal or... ensure you receive your fix in whatever intervals work best for you. If I were you,” She offered her pale blue eyes flicking to my Father again. “I’d select the second option. This might just be a temporary thing. It could be tied to your powers...your body’s way of ensuring you reach full potential now that you’ve become...active. Just be careful Lexi. Watch for the signs and take action before you become so distressed.”

I nodded thinking as medicine went, this was a lot better than the stuff she forced on me as a kid. “Hey Mom?” I teased. “Can you write me a prescription?” It caused everyone in the room to chuckle except Nolls and Lira who couldn’t seem to take their eyes off my Mom.

“If you are alright Lexi, I think your Mother could use a nap before we go.” Dad told me while Mom sighed and shook her head.

“I’m expecting Roark, not ill.” She reminded him and I could see by Dad’s face that this was not going to be one of those arguments she might win. It occurred to me that our newest additions weren’t aware of her delicate situation and my eyes slid to Lira and Nolls, flicking across Roral first to see that they were all shocked and in Lira and Nolls case, seemed to be dismayed. I hoped that wasn’t going to cause a problem. Dad picked up my thoughts and his silver eyes followed mine.

“The Queen has not yet been informed of my Mother’s condition. You will, of course, keep this knowledge to yourselves until she has the opportunity to deliver it in person.” I informed them sharply. All three of them dipped their heads but their eyes remained on my Mother. “I think it would be a good idea for these three to guard my

parents this evening.” I remarked my words aimed at Cursed. “I doubt they would notice if I was murdered in front of them with Mom in the same room.” My comment caused a buzzing in my head and all three of my newest guards acted as if I’d slapped them. Which, I suppose, I had. Nolls’ face flushed and his eyes narrowed while I simply lifted an eyebrow and crossed my arms.

Lira made a strangled sound in his throat but dragged his eyes away from Mom long enough to give me a horrified look. Roral pursed his lips and glanced from Lira to Nolls then turned his eyes on me and crossed his own arms. “I believe we might notice Princess.” He remarked gruffly. I said nothing, just glanced at Cursed who looked like he was torn between defending his men and wanting to agree with me.

“Lexi I believe I can protect your Mother. We don’t need guards.”

“Unfortunately Dad I made you a target last night when I introduced you as my Father. I therefore feel a responsibility to keep not just Mom and my sisters safe, but you too. I already have six men of my own, you’ll take these three or you won’t be going.”

Dad frowned at me and glanced at Mom. “Is she always this bossy?” He asked.

“No actually, she used to be so sweet you hardly knew she was there.” Mom replied and I felt myself stiffen and was immediately pulled in against Gareth’s chest. I suppose he was worried I might lose my temper and mention how she’d ensured I’d been a mouse by first teaching me to shimmer and then allowing me to think I was going to be carted off if I drew attention to myself. In either event, his perfect cupid bow lips nibbled the point of my ear in an attempt to distract me while his palm and fingers splayed across my stomach.

Mom looked at Gareth and informed the group. “Perhaps she isn’t completely over her earlier distress.” And her words sounded accusing while behind me Gareth tensed his own self and I could tell he was having second thoughts.

Ha! I was fine. That was just Mom’s way of informing me she wasn’t pleased with the fact that I’d drawn Dad’s attention to the unseemly interest she was receiving

from our newest additions. Dad nodded his head thoughtfully and Gareth's hold on me loosened a bit. While Mom gritted her teeth and gave me a dirty look.

Unless she wanted me airing our dirty laundry in front of her sycophants I thought, and out of the corner of my eye I watched Nolls jerk while Roral and Lira both hissed in air between their teeth, I strongly urged her not to say anything else.

"Well, we'll be going now." Dad muttered and almost pulled Mom from the room with him. When the door closed behind them I took a deep breath and placed my hand over Gareth's.

"That was a bit harsh." He murmured against my ear. "I realize you are angry at your Mother and you have every right to be. But these three." And he jerked his head in the guard's direction. "Do not deserve your animosity."

Gnashing one's teeth is not a good habit. We are born with only one permanent set and wearing them down when I might conceivably live to a very very old age would not be a good thing. I took a deep breath and glanced across the room. "Yes I have every right to be angry and it irritates me that everyone thinks she's so damn perfect. What was it you said Amras...she never placed a foot wrong or raised her voice. Goddess that makes me want to scream and then throw up in turns. After what she did to him and then Cursed! Not to mention my own childhood." And I flung my hand at Nolls, Lira, and Roral then finished with. "And there they are nearly drooling over the fact that she happens to be standing in the same freaking room with them. It's irritating, especially with my Father standing right next to her!"

"Ohhhh the Mistress is jealous." Kit muttered from the chair he'd flopped down in earlier. His fingers were laced over his stomach and there was an amused look on his face. "I can't blame you. It must have been difficult growing up in her shadow. And what's worse, the Queen sends you guards who can't keep their eyes off her. In fact, since she stepped into this room the lot of them have been following her around like she's their Goddess herself and responsible for every breath they take. If I didn't look at you that way, I'd be tempted to throw up myself. If I could throw up that is."

I looked at Kit and frowned then smiled. Nice to have someone agree with me! Validation was a good thing. “It’s obvious they want to be near her so I think we should give them to her.”

Cursed stood at the edge of the living room and he informed me softly. “My Lady, they were sent to guard you, their duty is to you.”

“Actually, they were not. They were sent to escort me back to the Sidhe. Assign them to her, make them all happy. When the summons comes I’ll drag them along as I’m obligated to do. In the meantime...in the meantime it would be best if they took up residence across the hall, away from me.”

Before I finished my comments all three of them had dropped to a knee as if to ask my forgiveness. No one said anything for several minutes and then Jace spoke up from the doorway to the kitchen. “Lexi you are behaving as you did when the others arrived. Are you worried you might seduce these three too and that is why you are being so harsh with them?” Everyone’s eyes came to rest on me and I suddenly felt a little sick to my stomach. “Do you think that is what Goldy meant?” He continued and I glanced at the floor and shook my head. I wasn’t exactly certain which of his comments I was trying to deny.

“If anyone should be sent away it should be your mother.” Owen offered. “You have too much pent up anger to be in the same room with her. And the words that she speaks, though they sound kind, are designed to remind you of the place she forced you to occupy throughout your childhood. I for one will be glad to see her go since she upsets you.”

“And don’t worry about these three.” Kit offered. “If they get too close to you I’ll ensure they are unable to perform.” I moaned and covered my face with my hands.

“Which reminds us.” Gareth spoke up. “Thank you Kit. Lexi tells us we have you to thank for...not impeding our ability to...become acquainted with her.”

Kit glanced at me and winked when I looked at him through my spread fingers. “Promise?” I asked.

He chuckled and glanced at the three who were still on their knees but no longer had their heads bowed. All had wary looks on their faces and they were staring at Kit as if he'd grown a second head. "It would be my pleasure." He assured me.

Amras spoke up and his words surprised me at their harshness. "Personally Princess, I prefer their eyes follow your mother and not you. But your Father might not agree and the three of them have no idea how lucky they are to still be breathing. Had I been your father, I would have taken exception to their manners and blood would have been shed. One can only assume their rude behavior is due to stupidity or perhaps they each feel they have lived so long they court death by expressing interest in your father's mate. I say you give them to her, perhaps they all could use a lesson."

"What say you Gareth?" I asked softly.

He took a breath and his arm tightened slightly. "I say...it is Cursed's decision as they were given into his command."

We all turned to look at Cursed who folded his arms over his chest and first glanced at the men still kneeling and then at me. "Guard her with your lives. And see that you do not annoy Roark for the Princess carries his seed and will not tolerate your interference. Go now." He told them and they rose as one and moved down the hall and out the door.

"I made enough for everyone. And Lexi, you need to eat I think you're cranky from lack of food." Jace informed us then turned and went back into the kitchen while the rest of us followed him.

"Oh Areth, it's beautiful." I told her as I held up the dress she'd laid out for me. If the meeting the night before last was meant to prove I was an elf, this dress was designed to make me look like a Faerie princess. The dress was dark cream or perhaps a pale gold satin. It was strapless and fit like a corset with a low back which laced up. The bodice was covered in seed pearls at the edge and down the center. The dress cinched in over my ribs and at my waist, making me appear quite tiny. Well tiny everywhere except my breasts, which were more than ample for the tight dress. While

the top fit like a custom made glove, the skirt bellowed out from just below my waist in yards and yards of material that gathered up here and there by large matching satin rosettes in several locations around the back and a couple at the front, adding to the bell shaped skirt and train that flowed along behind me. Long fitted gloves in the same color reached several inches above my elbows. The dress was romantic and enchanting and made me feel beautiful.

“You are a vision.” Jace commented as he leaned against the bathroom wall and watched Areth finish my hair. It had taken a while for it all to dry to her satisfaction before she could begin putting it up. Now it only required a few remaining touches. There was a knock on the bedroom door and Gareth went to answer it. When he returned he was carrying a large blue velvet box and my eyes widened in dread. Now was not the time for anymore of Alan or Bodark’s jokes I thought and caught Jace’s frown in the mirror.

“It’s from your mother. Owen just dropped it off.” Gareth replied and I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Open it.” I urged him and he shook his head.

“I can not. It is intended for you and will not open or so Owen was told.”

I sighed and reached for it while Areth pinned the last curl into place atop my head. Areth made a pleased sound in her throat when I lifted the lid and stared down at the beautiful tiara nestled within. “Perfect.” She told me and plucked it from its bedding and lifted it to my brow. When I glanced in the mirror I had to agree with Areth, it did look perfect. “Some earrings and...” Areth muttered. “If you will allow me?” She asked and I nodded. She closed her hand and when she opened it again she held a pair of screw on pearl earrings and a multi strand pearl choker that looked to be at least three and a half or maybe four inches wide. Gareth held out his hand and bent to fasten the choker at the back of my neck. I shivered slightly as the long connecting strand slid down my back and the coolness of the pearls chilled me.

“Good idea Areth, baring Lexi’s neck at a Vampire party might be dangerous. This should let them know she’s not interested.”

“Is that the explanation for your mandarin collars?” I asked, not realizing there might have been a reason beside they looked good enough to eat. Both of them were wearing black tuxedos with no lapels and black piping which edged their jacket and high collars. Jace had on a raw silk dark green vest and ascot while Gareth’s was blue. Their white cuffs peaked out beneath their sleeves and each of them had little golden dragon cuff links. Their pants were also black and Jace had done something to his mahogany colored hair so that it was slicked back and was kind of spiky on top. With his morning after shadow he looked very sexy while Gareth presented the more conservative all American Eagle Scout look that I knew made women’s hearts flutter. Gareth and Jace both shrugged and Areth smiled.

Jace slipped out of the bathroom and came back carrying my dagger. “In case the pearls don’t work.” He told me and went to a knee next to my leg while I lifted the voluminous dress out of his way.

I thanked Areth when she proclaimed me done and she winked out, on her way to check in on Mom and Dad. My palm cupped Jace’s cheek, the soft fabric of my glove catching on his day old growth with a rasping sound that made us both smile. I had had to leave my ring in the dresser drawer since my glove wouldn’t fit over it. I’d pulled my glove on over my bracelet and it had melted through the fabric so that the glove was next to my skin, while the bracelet was now hanging on the outside. I’d never seen it do that before, but then I’d never wore anything skin tight over my wrist either. “You look...very handsome.” I told them both my eyes roaming their wide shoulders and gorgeous faces. “I want to feel your hot skin pressed against mine while we make love.”

“Now?” Jace asked, his eyes widening in alarm.

“Yes and later and then again afterwards. In fact I can’t conceive of a time I won’t want you.” I teased and watched as the worry slid from his face. “I just thought I should warn you both.” I told them. “But I’ll take a kiss at the moment and tonight when you catch me looking at you....you won’t have to wonder what I’m thinking.” Jace rose to his feet and pulled me into his body. My arms slipped up his chest and

around his neck while he lowered his mouth to mine and proceeded to set off bells and whistles all through my body. When he released me I was breathing heavy and my eyes were whirling slowly. He growled and handed me to Gareth who cupped my cheek in his palm and lifted my lips to his. The first brush was tender and searching. As if he was savoring the taste of me. I clutched at his coat and his hand slid over the bare skin at my back.

“My Princess.” He whispered and bent me over his arm while his mouth reached into my soul and set it afire. His shield dropped away and I could feel the pleasure in him, his desire to hold me tight and keep me forever and I pressed against him and offered myself, knowing that it might not be forever but for now there was nothing I would not give.

Chapter 16

Our limo pulled up in front of City Hall and I leaned forward and stared in dismay at the crowds being held back by dark red velvet ropes. “Welcome to stardom.” My Mother told me calmly from the seat across from me. We’d managed to cram all of us into the limo but only after Owen and Kit shifted to miniature dragons. Dean was driving and Gareth had frowned and given him a second look when he’d held the door for us. When Gareth climbed into the limo ahead of me, I’d winked at Dean who’d lifted an eyebrow and flashed me his teeth when he smiled.

All of my men looked wonderful. At the moment Owen looked adorable as a little white perched on Cursed’s knee while Kit was his normal black and silver and sitting on Amras. All of my men were dressed similar to Gareth and Jace with the exception of their vests and ascots which were all in two tones having gold and some other color. Amras was dressed in a dark purple and Owen had on chocolate brown, their clothing matching each of their eyes. Kit had on silver and Cursed was dressed in a wine color that looked sumptuous on him.

Mom was wearing an elegant pale blue dress that had a square neckline and long flowing sleeves. The dress was fitted to her body down to the knee where it flared wide at the hem. The dress made her skin seem to glow and brought out the highlights in her hair. She was wearing a matching wrap to keep the evening chill from her. Dad looked fantastic in a high collared brocade jacket that fell to mid thigh. Like Kit, he was dressed in black and silver and looked so good I couldn't help but be proud. I think his chest actually puffed up earlier when I'd looked him over. I noticed Mom had moved her ring which she always wore on a chain around her neck to her finger. It was the feminine twin to the ring my father wore. I could only hope it meant Dad had convinced my Mother to actually consider marriage to him. Dad's eye met mine and he gave me a pleased smile...hmmm perhaps there would be a wedding in the near future? It was something to think about later.

Nolls, Lira, and Roral were all dressed in standard guard black and none of them appeared interested in making eye contact. I could tell they were annoyed with me, but at the moment I couldn't get too worked up over it. After all, I'd had them assigned to my Mom and Dad it wasn't as if I'd banished them back to the Sidhe.

"I see they rolled out the carpet for you." Jace commented and I nodded, for indeed they had. A long red carpet stretched from the sidewalk all the way up the seven or eight steps that lead to huge center doors which were standing open. Press lined both sides of the walkway.

"Nervous?" Gareth asked as I continued to view the crowd and I knew my eyes were wide.

"No, not really." I replied. "It's not like I haven't seen this before." Mom had always caused a stir wherever she went and this was not the first time I'd seen the crowds or the press mob a place she was going to show up at. However this was the first time I'd ever been the center of attention, well the first if you didn't count the crowd we'd drawn at the courthouse earlier in the week.

City Hall was lit up like a lighthouse on the cliffs. The building itself was very beautiful almost like a fairy tale Castle. I'd taken the tour when I'd first moved to

town and guessed that we'd be holding the party in the rotunda which was at the base of the huge dome. The four story high dome was detailed on the outside in real gold. The entire place had been rebuilt after the great earthquake in the early nineteen hundreds when nearly the entire city had been leveled, and they had spared no expense in making it a show place. The rotunda is four stories high and if you stand in the middle and look up you see the dome with its intricate carvings and designs. There is a huge sweeping staircase that leads up to the mezzanine. The entire place is creamy white brick with light brown marble and cream colored floors and is open and airy. The stairs have two levels, the bottom is nearly round and there are about ten steps leading up to a platform from which the rest of the stairs go up straight to the mezzanine. From what I remembered of the tour, the upper floors are like large balconies all the way around and overlook the main room. It is usually where the VIP tables are situated during dinner parties. Since tonight wasn't a dinner party, the upper floors were probably open for strolling. Nice to know if something happened and we were forced to shift that there was plenty of room to maneuver.

"Shall we?" Jace asked and leaned forward to look at Cursed who was closest to the door.

Cursed leaned forward and struggled with the door handle for a moment before it opened and he stepped out and was nearly blinded by the flashes going off. Amras went next then the three guards. We had argued about the order we would exit the car and needless to say I hadn't won. Owen and Kit both shifted and followed the other five out then Jace slid to the door and gave me a smile before he disappeared. I pulled my dress out of the way so Gareth could get around me. When he was out I edged down the seat and took a deep breath.

"Don't worry Lexi. Any trouble will come later, not now." Dad told me calmly. "I've never known a Vampire that wasn't a show off." He added and I had to agree. On some level they just seemed to need to prove themselves. Or maybe that was just my experience.

“Break a leg.” I teased, then raised my lower shield and slipped my hand into Gareth’s as he stood at the door and bent toward me. I was a little worried about flashing the crowd, my dress was so wide at the hem. But with Gareth there he managed to block any chance of that happening. Outside the crowd went silent for half a second as they got their first look at me when Gareth stepped back and I was left standing at the end of the carpet facing them all. Sound exploded and lights flashed and through it all I managed to smile. Cursed and Owen took the lead. Kit and Amras fell in behind us as I walked forward to give my Parents room to exit the car. The cameras hesitated briefly as Dad stepped out and reached back in to assist my Mom. When she stepped onto the carpet there was another explosion of sound as if the crowd couldn’t believe their good fortune. People jostled each other on either side of the ropes and Cursed got us moving toward the doors while the doormen in attendance ensured none of the bystanders broke through the barriers.

Jace and Gareth flanked me as we walked toward the doors. Someone must have gotten a hold of either my credit card receipt from last night or the invitation list because they seemed to know me by name. Reporters were yelling questions and when one asked if I was related to Princess Shaylee I stopped us and turned to the older gentleman who was holding a microphone aimed toward me. I turned slightly and looked back at my Mother who was looking at me and smiling. “Yes, she is my Mother.” I told the man and yelling erupted while I slipped my hands through Gareth and Jace’s arms and began my stroll toward the front doors. We had planned to make that one announcement and let the Press do the rest of the work for us. I suppose someone would force me to do a Press conference soon, but here and now wasn’t the place to answer the Press’ questions.

We were met at the doors by Mayor Claudius Courday himself and his entourage. Courday was much as you would suspect a lifetime politician to look. He had short sandy blonde hair, dimples in his cheeks, hazel eyes and was about an inch shy of six foot. His body was neither overly muscular nor too slender. And aside from the cold I could feel radiating off him, there wasn’t much to set him apart from any

other politician I'd ever seen. Except perhaps that his incisors were pointy and he literally sucked the blood out of his constituents. That and the way his eyes moved over me. It was as if he couldn't get enough and would have liked to have eaten me all up right there on the steps.

Courday stepped forward and Cursed and Owen parted hesitantly when he held out his hand to me. Our introduction became a photo opportunity and those Press members that had followed us up the carpet became frenzied as Courday lifted my hand to his mouth.

"Princess Lexi I am so very pleased you were able to join us tonight. I have been looking forward to meeting you and welcoming you to our fair city." Courday informed me in a surprisingly deep well modulated voice. I could see with his pale boy scout features and fine speaking voice how he had found a place as Mayor. His eyes whispered at pleasures untold and I felt myself drawn into to them and gave myself a mental shake when I found myself wondering things I had no business thinking. His smile told me he was not unaware of his effect on me and that he was very pleased at my reaction. Myself, I was somewhat appalled that I'd forgotten my most basic lesson and stared into his large hazel eyes. Though aside from his sex appeal he seemed harmless enough I thought as his fingers slowly released mine and the corners of his lips lifted slightly.

"Thank you Mayor it is a pleasure to be here. May I present my Consorts, Gareth Blue and Jace Green? And I believe you might recognize my mother Princess Shaylee and this is my father Roark Silver." I told him as Amras and Cursed shifted leaving an opening that revealed both my parents to Courday's view.

"What an unexpected surprise." Courday gushed and stepped forward to kiss the back of Mom's hand. "Such a pleasure to meet you Princess I have, of course, heard much about you and am familiar with the work that you do." He informed her then turned to my father and shook his hand then moved on to Gareth and Jace.

"My men." I continued once he'd finished with Jace. "Lord Amras, Owen, Cursed, and this is Kit." I told him and he smiled at each of them in turn. Once we

were done with the introductions Courday invited us to all pose for the cameras and I found myself nearly pressed against his side. I could swear his hand caressed my arm but it happened so quickly I couldn't be certain. "You are even more beautiful than your pictures." He whispered at one point while we were posing and I had to wonder if the good Mayor of San Francisco was hitting on me right there in plain sight of the reporters and what looked like half the population of the city!

"You do realize....the meaning of consorts?" I replied under my breath and he flashed a grin as the cameras went off.

"Come home with your shield or on it." He replied as his arm slid around my waist and I struggled to keep a shocked look off my face while the press went right on capturing us on film. What the heck was that supposed to mean? I wondered then sucked in a breath when his fingers stroked my side. Good lord the Mayor was a leech! Who would have thought it? Over the next five minutes he managed to brush himself against me several times, irritating my men who couldn't very well do anything about it. Gareth and Jace looked like they would have liked to use his face for a punching bag but Courday merely smiled and stuck to my side as if he'd been glued there, preventing either of them from inserting themselves between us. After about ten minutes of picture taking and Courday fielding questions we mercifully left the red carpet and moved into the building through the double doors.

Courday's people surrounded us sweeping me into the building at his side and I glanced over everyone in his group, realizing that most of them were human or much younger Vamps as none of them had very strong auras. Courday shooed several of his staff out of the way as he escorted me across the hall into the rotunda and up the seven or eight stairs to the platform area. Behind us my men followed closely, their expressions ranging from outrage to annoyance. At his signal the music stopped as he walked with me to the microphone standing to one side of the platform. His hand continued to caress mine until I thought I might scream or yank it out of his grasp. He gave me a look I might have expected from Gareth, something along the lines of *behave yourself* and my eyebrows nearly shot into my hairline from his audacity.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I’d like to thank you for coming....” Courday began and somewhere in the middle of his speech one of his assistants carried up a large gift box wrapped in a big red ribbon which contained a very large golden key to the city. After introducing me to the crowd he presented me with the key and then introduced my Mother and Father.

The entire thing was kind of corny but in the midst of the key exchange I was finally able to retrieve my hand and take half a step away from him. His eyes told me he’d noticed my movement and I ignored him struggling to pay attention while I scanned the crowd. I’d already picked out Bodark and Jared and it wasn’t difficult to find Blake and Valentine. Of the four, only Jared appeared to have someone on his arm. She was a svelte little brunette that was barely covered in a black little number that draped down the front to her belly button and was slit up her thigh nearly to her hip. She looked to have a death grip on his arm and a jealous gleam in her eye. I was suddenly glad I hadn’t had the opportunity to dance with Jared last night. A jealous mate was the last thing I needed to contend with.

Bodark looked handsome in a dark grey tuxedo that lit up his grey eyes. He looked cute when he smiled and made a funny face at me and I had to struggle to keep a straight face and look away lest I laugh inappropriately while the Mayor was droning on.

I suppose I shouldn’t have been surprised to see both Belinda and Marcus there and my gaze never stopped as I scanned right over them. Tonight neither of them wore collars or leashes and Marcus had lost some of the healthy bloom I’d given him two nights previous and looked quite serious. I worked at thinking happy thoughts and turned away.

Alan was there and Kit hadn’t been kidding. Kit may have come home scratched, but Alan looked... much worse. His face was bruised and his lip was split. He had his arm in a black sling that matched his black tuxedo. If he hadn’t stolen my gold I might have felt guilty. When our eyes met he smiled and I shook my head slightly letting him know he should have listened to me.

I think one of the biggest surprises was when I saw Margie the dark haired Werewolf who'd originally taken me to the Salty Dog discreetly waving her fingers at me from near the base of the stairs. I smiled back at her and winked noticing she was wearing huge diamond earrings. My eyes moved to Gareth then back to her, catching his eye and raising an eyebrow. When I teased that I was going to send her a yacht to thank her, he'd told me he'd included a nice pair of diamonds in with flowers he and Jace had sent. It was just their way of saying thank you for her bringing me to their club. I didn't realize he'd sent her mini icebergs! Gareth's grin was sweet, his eyes told me I was worth every penny and I felt my cheeks flush with his pleasure.

There were a few other people I recognized. Dten was there but I didn't see Eldal. Milos and Adar were there too but Angel appeared to be missing, but then she hadn't really seemed the party type of girl to me. My eyes scanned the crowd and I skimmed over a man standing near the front doors, he was tall and dark and leaning his shoulder against the wall. His body language said he was bored but it was his eyes that drew my gaze back to him...that and something familiar about him. When our eyes met it felt like I was falling into him and in my head I heard my name whispered.

Gareth and Jace both jerked as did the rest of my men spread out up the stairs so we looked almost like a wedding procession, with my men as the bridegrooms. Apparently I wasn't the only one hearing things. Jace glanced at me and his eyes followed mine across the room. Gareth was already glancing toward the doorway and both of them appeared to grow about three inches as they stared in the man's direction. The man leaning against the door flashed a smile and pushed away from the wall, pulling himself up straight while his eyes flicked over the men surrounding me. When he was done looking them over his eyes met mine again and he dipped his head and turned his back to us and strolled through the arch.

Jace cursed under his breath and my eyes flicked first to him than Gareth. Both were tense and struggling to remain calm. I wasn't sure what the problem was but it didn't look good. Thankfully Courday appeared to be wrapping up his speech and the majority of the crowd appeared to be none the wiser although when I glanced over at

Bodarks' tall form I discovered he was moving toward the arch where the man had disappeared. Alan seemed to have disappeared too, until I scanned the crowd and found him also moving in the same direction. It seemed they both had caught the interplay and were curious enough to investigate.

“Our town is suddenly over run with Dragons.” Gareth whispered in my ear, he'd moved in behind me as we all clapped loudly for Courday when he finally finished his speech. I wasn't even sure what all he had said and hoped I wouldn't be called upon later to comment on anything in particular. Gareth's remark surprised me and I pulled back and glanced at him curiously. “Dane.” He muttered and I felt the blood drain from my face. Oh great just what we needed!

Gareth and Jace eased me off the stairs before Courday could grab me again and down into the crowd we went where I was immediately surrounded by both my men and everyone intent upon introducing themselves to me. I smiled and nodded and had my hand kissed while my men scanned the crowd looking for my Black who Mi had warned me against and Jace and Gareth thought coarse and not good enough for me. At the moment I had my hands literally full. Dane had made himself known to me and would approach when he was ready. I felt no obligation to chase him down and worrying over it was only going to upset me. Besides I wasn't in any hurry to draw Valentine's attention to him. If he had just arrived in town he'd need to be warned. Any interest I showed in him would only arouse Valentine and I already felt responsible for my Father, Jace, and Gareth. Adding another Dragon to my list was not something I needed to be doing at the moment.

Beside me Gareth gave my waist a squeeze and his mind brushed across mine, and I smiled. We worked our way around the room and Jace snagged a glass of Champaign off a tray for me while those around us did the same. Mom and Dad worked the other side of the room drawing nearly as big a crowd as I did. I stood there sipping my drink and chatting with people whose names I could never hope to remember and answered as many questions as I could, some rather vaguely.

Somewhere during the one hundredth introduction my mind starting wandering and I glanced over at Kit who was staring intently at those people surrounding us. His eyes looked mischievous and I wondered what exactly he was thinking. His black eyes met mine and he licked his lips. Apparently whatever it was was entertaining. But then he was a Lust Demon so maybe it wasn't all that hard to figure out. Between the looks the women were giving my men and the looks I was getting from the men, if he'd been an incubus it's likely he would have overdosed and slipped into a coma by now. His teeth flashed in a wicked smile and I shook my head. *Excuse me, my penis is not cold.* He informed me in my head and I bit my lip to keep from laughing. Apparently Incubus had cold penises and Kit was right...his was not.

That thought got me several odd looks and a throat clearing from Gareth while Jace leaned down and nibbled my ear. "Neither is mine." He whispered. And I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from groaning.

Gareth leaned over my other shoulder his back cupping my body and remarked casually. "You drank Champagne the night we met. Do you remember?"

My mouth went dry and I stared down at the glass in my hand watching the bubbles rising to the top. "I remember.... everything." I replied in a husky voice. I wasn't likely to forget.

"You changed our lives that night." Jace murmured from my other side and I tilted my head and met his eyes thinking how they had altered my life, enriched it in such a way I could not imagine them not in it. This conversation was turning very serious and I'd soon be in tears. Giving myself a shake I looked around me realizing Gareth and Jace weren't the only ones affected by his words.

Owen and Cursed looked intense, their eyes continually scanning the room as if they were afraid to look at me. But when my eyes met Amras' the look in his violet orbs made my heart skip a beat. He looked like this was the last time he would ever see me. I didn't stop to think, I simply acted and just as I had practiced earlier on Dean and Nate, I sent Amras the feel of my palm cupping his cheek while my lips pressed softly to his. Apparently having my shield in place didn't prevent me from projecting but I

took a second to slow my shield as I watched his nostrils flare and his lids lower slightly. In my mind I heard him whisper...*Lle naa vanima*, you are beautiful.

My timing was still not perfect, but I concentrated on my lower shield and whispered back to him, *diola lee*, thank you. Beside him Cursed raised an eyebrow and glanced between us. Obviously it wasn't just my timing that was off since Owen smiled and Kit spared me another glance but went back to studying the people around him.

After that it became something of a game, a way to lighten my mood and prevent myself from crying. Every fifth person or so I'd reach out and brush a mental finger or hand down one of my men's faces, ears, or necks. At one point I sent the feel my palm gently cupping Owen's bottom and he growled softly causing several people near him to back away from him in alarm. His dark eyes gave me a look that promised I'd regret that later and he went back to scanning the crowd.

Playing with Kit appeared to be even more dangerous as he had the skills to play back and when I sent a soft kiss against the back of his neck he took the field and I felt his teeth against my nipple. My eyes widened and I nearly spilled my drink on the older human woman who was telling me all about her trip to see the mounds in South Dakota as a child. "Excuse me. I'm very sorry." I told her, my cheeks turning pink as she eyed me strangely.

"What are you doing?" Jace leaned down and asked his eyes glancing amongst the others suspiciously.

"Just um...I'm fine." I told Jace trying not to look at Kit who was grinning, his eyes daring me to retaliate. "Just lost my concentration there for a moment."

Jace didn't know if he should believe me or not but it was Gareth that leaned down and whispered. "Be careful you wouldn't want to give one of these people a heart attack." I bit my lip again and nodded. When Gareth and Jace went back to chatting with the people around us I narrowed my eyes at Kit and sent him the feel of my hand squeezing down his cock and was rewarded by the surprised look on his face as his cheeks flushed slightly.

“Ohhh that was well done Mistress.” He murmured and bowed his head to me. Beside him Cursed frowned and Amras glanced between the two of us. Apparently my sendings were getting better because neither of them had felt anything. Beside me Jace shifted and made a low sound in his throat. I went back to paying attention to the people streaming past me.

At one point I glanced up and smiled to find Bodark standing in front of me. He leaned down and gave me a kiss on the cheek while I hugged him much to the dismay of those around me. “Hi Bodark.” I told him happily. It was nice to see a face I knew. “You will remember to save me a dance?” I asked and he grinned.

“Lexi...Princess.” He corrected himself. “You look lovelier each time I see you.” He teased.

“And you look rather spiffy yourself, very handsome in a tux.” I replied, reaching up to brush back his hair. “Remind me later, I have someone I want to introduce to you.” I told him and he lifted an eyebrow at me skeptically. “Don’t worry it won’t hurt I promise.” I teased him back. He nodded then glanced at Gareth then Jace.

“Who was the man at the back of the room earlier?” He asked his face serious as he came right to the point while lowering his voice so it wouldn’t carry past our little group. The three of them looked at each other and I could tell my other four were listening too, though I wouldn’t be surprised if they had already recognized him from the painting in my bedroom I thought, and heard Cursed pull air through his teeth. Kit grumbled under his breath and I caught maybe one in every three words...he wasn’t mumbling nice things.

Gareth glanced at Bodark and looked at the taller man for a moment before he replied. “Someone interested in meeting Lexi.”

Bodark glanced down at me and his grey eyes searched my face, perhaps looking for some indication if that was acceptable to me or not. “Alan is watching him at the moment. They are both upstairs on the mezzanine. Would you like us to get rid of him?” He asked.

I thought about it for a moment and closed my eyes, yes...there, I could actually sense his gaze on me and tilted my face back and turned my head slightly. When I opened my lids again I was looking directly into Dane's eyes. Bodark and the rest of my men followed my gaze until we were all staring up at him. "No he's fine." I told Bodark. "Leave him be, he will not harm me."

"Are you certain? He looks like trouble." Bodark replied, his eyes skeptical.

I gave him a lopsided smile and nodded. "Yes, I'm certain he will be trouble, but at the moment he is the least of my worries. He must not be harmed. But it was very sweet of you and Alan to offer." I told him and placed my hand on his arm. "Please go find Alan and bring him down. I would not want him injured on my behalf."

Bodark seemed to find that funny and chuckled softly. "I'm dammed if I feel good about leaving him up there like that, but if you don't want us to break him in two then I guess I'll go find Alan and let him know its okay."

"Thank you Bodark." And using my hand on his arm I leaned up and kissed his cheek. "That's for wanting to protect me." I told him.

When he was gone I glanced up again knowing that Dane was already gone. "Excuse me." I told the person that stepped up once Bodark moved off through the crowd and my eyes scanned the room for my Father. "I need to get closer to Dad."

Gareth and Jace nodded and Jace took my arm and led me through the press while Gareth cleared a path for us and the others followed along in our wake.

"Dad," I whispered when I pulled him away from Mom for a moment. "Dane is here."

"Who is Dane?" He asked giving me a strange look.

"The Black you...ah....the Black." I told him holding up my bracelet and giving it a shake and understanding dawned. "Apparently he's been looking for me for a while. Gareth and Jace tell me he came to town not long after I moved here. They don't like him." I added and watched as Dad frowned and glanced around the room.

“Where is he?” He asked me and I shrugged which made him look closer at me. “You can sense him can’t you?” He asked softly.

“Yes just as I can sense Marcus is behind me to the left across the room.” I told him then closed my eyes and pictured Dane. “He is... over by the staircase.” I added. “I guess we’ll keep our eye on Mom.” I muttered when Dad scanned the room and made a beeline for the staircase. Obviously he’d picked Dane out of the crowd and was heading in his direction. I turned to look at Lira and Roral then glanced at Cursed who moved to the other side of my Mother. Owen and Amras spread out basically encircling both Mom and I while Kit took up the space to my left and Jace, Gareth and I turned to watch Dad approach Dane across the room.

“Where did Roark go?” Mom asked.

“Apparently we’ve got Blue, Green, Red, Silver, Gold and now Black in the room.” I told her cryptically and nodded when her eyes widened and she too turned to watch Dad.

“This is the one that haunts your dreams?” Mom asked sharply and I glanced at her in surprise and nodded. Either Mi had been tattling or Dad had. I couldn’t remember ever saying anything about my dreams.

Across the room Dane actually went to a knee before my father which caused heads to turn. Luckily they were on the opposite side of the staircase from Valentine. My Father bid him to rise and they proceeded to have a brief conversation before Dad turned and led him toward us across the floor. Beside me Gareth growled softly while Jace slid an arm around my waist and stepped closer to me. This really wasn’t the place for this I thought and watched as Dane’s eager eyes met mine over my Father’s shoulder.

Chapter 17

“Dad.” I told him when he reached me and stepped aside so Dane was standing before me. “You are endangering him. Can’t we do this later...somewhere less public. Somewhere where, psycho Vampire isn’t?” I hissed.

Dad just frowned at me and shook his head. “Dane Elensar may I present my daughter Princess Lexi Helyanwe.”

“Princess tis a pleasure to be meeting ye finally, I’ve been searching for you for some time I have.” Dane replied in a deep voice with a heavy Irish accent. When he went to a knee I wasn’t sure what to do and reached out my right hand to him, the one with the bracelet. His fingers slipped over mine and even through the gloves I felt some sort of an electrical surge between us which I struggled to ignore. Dane’s hand tightened slightly, letting me know that he’d felt the current too. He raised his other hand and ran a finger over my dragons gently turning the bracelet till he came to the black. His finger stroked his image and he whispered softly. “Ta’ sibh mo banrion.”

“What did you just say?” I asked but Dane simply shook his head and kissed the back of my hand, his fingers sliding off the black. I looked around at my men to see if any of them caught his phrase. Several of them looked annoyed so I guessed they must have understood him and simply didn’t like what he’d had to say. I wasn’t even sure what language he’d spoken, though given his accent I supposed Gaelic was a good bet.

“Please.” I muttered. “Get up this is embarrassing.” When he rose to his feet I got my first up close view of him. He looked, large. His shoulders were wide and his chest deep. He was clean shaven with short blue black hair that stood up much like Gareth’s. His eyes were darker than Kit’s if that was possible and he had a broad forehead and eyebrows that were thicker than Cursed’s and Kits. His nose flared slightly but wasn’t too large for his face. High cheekbones and wide eyes and like Marcus, neither had ears that were pointed like mine. He was nearly Cursed’s height which made him taller than Gareth but shorter than Kit. His body was heavily muscled and he reminded me of Nick. I had no reason to believe he’d be ugly and he wasn’t. I suspected any cross between Dragon and Elf would result in beautiful offspring. “I can’t do this now.” I told him abruptly.

Dane’s eyes moved over my face then wandered down my body and I assumed over Jace’s hand around my waist since he lifted his eyes and glanced between Jace and Gareth while his eyes narrowed slightly. “Ye’ve been running from me for some time now.” He replied softly his dark eyes pulling me in. “Lass, I dinna meant to frighten.” He added. “Tis flying with ye was me goal ye kin?”

I swallowed and gave myself a mental shake. “In your wanderings around this room did you happen to notice the Red?” I asked softly.

“Tis...odd he is.”

“Did he notice you?”

He shook his head slightly. “Both he and the female seem distracted.” He replied with a grimace. “Tis as if they are unaware of their surroundings. I nae think either of them noticed me.”

I nodded and told him. “His Master would like to enslave us all the same way. By being here tonight you risk bringing yourself to his attention. We cannot protect you.” I told him softly. “We aren’t sure if we can even protect ourselves.” I added not much above a whisper.

“Lexi.” Gareth growled softly and I turned to look where he was.

“Walk away Dane. Do it now. If for no other reason than we might need someone to help us later. Go.” I whispered and he glanced at me then at the men walking our way and bowed his head and melted into the crowd. “You too Dad, take Mom to the other side of the room....for my sisters.” I urged him when he hesitated and I breathed again when he offered Mom his arm and the two of them slipped through the crowd in the opposite direction, with their three guards surrounding them. Amras, Cursed, and Owen moved closer and Kit stepped in to make an imaginary box around me.

Valentine brought Belinda and Marcus in his wake and was walking next to Courday chatting softly his light eyes watching our group. I saw his eyes flick to my father and stepped forward, bringing his attention back to me. Belinda and Marcus did look odd...they seemed to move fine but it was like their minds were...elsewhere. I had to wonder if they were drugged or if they were merely being controlled by Valentine in some manner. Perhaps they needed to be controlled to be let out amongst the public. Marcus was looking pale again and I could see that someone had been feeding at his neck. My healing was already being undone and I assumed it wouldn’t be long before he was back to the same pale, ravaged person he’d been before I healed him.

Unlike the other night, Valentine seemed more interested in me than in either Jace or Gareth. Surely that wasn’t a good sign nor did it go unnoticed by any of my men.

“Ah, Princess...may I introduce Valentine Loveless an old...friend of mine?” Courday asked while his hazel eyes roamed over my face and upper chest. His eyes

fastened on my neck for a moment and I felt myself still beneath his gaze. The man was incorrigible and not very subtle about his intentions!

“Thank you Mayor, we have already met. Mr. Loveless, a pleasure.” I replied though my skin was crawling and I had a sudden itch between my shoulder blades. I didn’t offer him any part of myself and trusted Gareth and Jace to make polite conversation while I tested a theory.

I still had my lower shield in place and dropped it suddenly. Valentine was dressed in a black tuxedo with a blood red cummerbund and bow tie. So cliché I thought unkindly. He would have looked much better in sky blue or a pale green. Red just seemed to make him look more pasty. In front of me Valentine hesitated and his eyes widened slightly. I raised my shields and thought. Such a handsome man...but he really needs a new barber and my God what is it with those side burns? This time there was no response from either Courday or Valentine and I realized with my lower shield raised that they could not hear me. Meanwhile behind me Kit coughed softly and I knew if I turned to look at him that he’d be covering his face, trying not to laugh. I’d like to strangle Valentine with that damn bow tie then watch as his eyes exploded out of his head and his tongue swelled to the size of a cucumber. I thought fiercely and beside me Gareth shifted while Jace’s arm tightened slightly. Again there was no response from either Vampire and I breathed a sigh of relief.

Behind Valentine Marcus’ jerked slightly and his eyes seemed to come into focus. And suddenly it was Marcus gazing out at me from his sherry colored eyes. *Beware* his mind whispered and I raised my Dragonsward into place just as an unpleasant force slammed into my mind, bouncing harmlessly off the shinny scales of my second shield.

Beside me Gareth and Jace staggered slightly and my eyes narrowed on Valentine whose smile dimmed considerably as I stared back at him without flinching. It didn’t even dawn on me that I was staring directly into his eyes and was totally unaffected. Oh well it had worked on Courday no reason to believe it wouldn’t with Valentine.

Cursed moved so quickly I might have missed him if I had blinked, he was just there behind Valentine, the point of a wicked silver knife pressed against the side of Valentine's neck. Owen and Kit flowed next to me, their bodies somewhat ahead of me between myself and the Vampires while Amras took position behind Claudius. Everyone stood loose and ready their eyes deadly serious.

"That is Elven steel pressed against your neck." I told Valentine softly. "Move and your head will be relieved of its body." Claudius looked shocked and turned his eyes on Cursed who pulled back his lips exposing his own set of sharp pointy teeth.

Valentine stood perfectly still, his eyes focused on me. "You will regret this." He told me calmly in spite of the anger burning in his eyes.

"Oh no, I think it is you that will regret attacking me." I breathed at him as I took a step forward putting myself ahead of Gareth and Jace slightly. I knew my eyes had shifted to Dragon by the gold lights reflecting off the floor and their clothing. Inside me Goldy raised her head and bared her teeth while the tip of her tail flicking back and forth in agitation.

"Attacked you? What nonsense is this?" Courday asked as he glanced between Valentine and me. He seemed genuinely surprised and I had to wonder if he was just a dupe or just that good.

"I believe we'll be leaving now. It's obvious your friend has worn out our welcome." I told Courday.

"Leaving...but you haven't even danced yet." He replied his face looking horrified. "Please I'm sure this is all a misunderstanding." He told me his eyes going to Valentine and narrowing dangerously. "A horrible misunderstanding. I'm sure Valentine meant nothing by whatever it was he did and will apologize immediately." He growled while his eyes nearly drilled holes into Valentine.

I'm not sure what the tie was between these two but apparently Valentine didn't want to upset Claudius because he did exactly what he was told. Or maybe it was Cursed pressing the tip of his knife into Valentines pale skin that did the trick. Either

way he gritted out. “My apologize Princess. I did not mean to offend you. Please it would distress Claudius if you were to leave on my account.”

“You have offended me by attacking what is mine. Apologize to them.” I told him, holding my ground and indicating Jace and Gareth who had stepped up beside me and seemed to have recovered from whatever had hit them. Or was it that it bounced off me and struck them? Either way they had been affected.

Valentine flashed his fangs and his nostrils flared suddenly. I merely raised an eyebrow and clasped my hands together in front of me while I waited. My eyes flicking to Courday who looked like he wanted to kill Valentine himself. “Gentlemen my pardon.” He replied, his voice a soft hiss that indicated just how insincere his apology truly was. I stared at him for several more seconds then blinked my eyes, returning them to normal as I did so.

“There now, see everyone is all better. Why don’t we just leave you alone and go see about the music, I think it’s time we start dancing. You will save me a dance later Princess?” Courday asked and I hesitated, my eyes staring directly into Valentine’s face then I nodded and glanced over his shoulder and realized Bodark, Alan, Jared, and Blake had all moved into the crowd behind Valentine. I wondered if he knew how close he’d just come to annihilation. My eyes found Marcus. *Thank you!* I thought and he blinked then dropped his gaze to the floor. Cursed stepped back out of Valentine’s reach and his blade disappeared into his sleeve. Behind Valentine, the others melted discretely back into the crowd.

“I would be delighted to.” I told him then turned my back on them both bringing Gareth and Jace with me as I dropped my Dragonsward and caught the look of relief on Jace’s face.

“Are you well?” I asked softly once Courday and Valentine had made their way out of hearing with Marcus and Belinda in tow. It was odd that neither had made a move to protect Valentine. I took a deep breath and felt the adrenaline flow out of my body when they nodded.

“Your shield seems to be growing stronger.” Jace commented and rubbed at his temple with a finger.

“Or perhaps it is just that it’s never been attacked before?” I replied softly. Gareth nodded while his eyes focused on something over my shoulder. “What is it?” I asked.

“Valentine is heading toward your parents.” He warned me tensely and I swung around to see Valentine glance over his shoulder toward me and smile. Claudius was headed in the opposite direction toward the band in the corner.

“Kit move them...” I spoke sharply and he snapped his fingers and my parents disappeared along with their guards just as Valentine came within ten feet of them. “Sorry.” I thought towards my parents as the five materialized on the opposite side of the stairs from Valentine and out of his line of sight. The guards looked shaken and went into a defensive stance but relaxed slightly when my Father said something to them. Meanwhile, Valentine stopped abruptly and turned to glare at me. This time we all smiled back at him and I leaned toward Kit and asked. “Can you move Belinda and Marcus to the second floor?” Then grinned when he snapped his fingers and the pair appeared on the balcony across from us. Both seemed disoriented but neither of them rushed back down the stairs.

“Provoking him will only make him madder.” Jace commented.

I nodded and smiled while I watched Valentine practically lose it across the room he was so enraged. “I certainly hope so. If he gets near my parents again, give him a necklace of crosses and we’ll see if that doesn’t convince him to maintain his distance.”

“I love the way your mind works Mistress.” Kit muttered and he grinned and turned to watch Valentine who’d finally discovered where his Dragons had disappeared to. His eyes swung between the Reds and myself his look promising dire consequences and I folded my arms and glared back at him.

“Fill his coat pocket with garlic Kit.” I told him. “I don’t like the way he’s looking at us.” Kit chuckled and snapped his fingers while across the floor Valentine

staggered and nearly went to a knee while scrabbling to get his jacket off. He threw it to the floor and backed away from it hissing. His eyes were pits of burning fire as he stared across the room at us. While the people around him moved away from him. He was causing a scene and Claudius did not appear happy about it. Much more of his disruptions and he might be asked to leave. I wasn't sure I wanted him out of my sight, but then I could always send my parents home the fast way.

“Lexi I think you've made your point.” Gareth muttered.

For now, I thought then turned my back on Valentine and glanced between Jace and Gareth. “I believe I'd like to dance now, can I interest either of you?”

They both smiled but Jace was quicker and he placed his hand on my back quickly steering me toward the dance floor. The others tagged along while Gareth went to chat with my parents.

“Have I told you tonight how beautiful you look?” Jace asked against my ear while we waltzed around the dance floor.

“Hmmm....let me think.” I teased him while he growled softly and held me closer.

“You feel good in my arms...so perfect. There isn't much I wouldn't do to keep you here always.” He admitted.

“I am here.” I told him and cupped his cheek in my palm. “I'm not going anywhere.”

His green eyes searched mine and he looked so serious I wondered what he was thinking. “That I need you.” He told me as his eyes stared down into mine and I felt his mind open to me. “That I want you.” And I fell into his eyes and felt the intensity of his emotions surrounding me, wrapping me in the velvety blanket of his desire until my pulses raced and my breathing became erratic. We danced through two dances before he returned me to the edge of the dance floor where Gareth was waiting. Jace kissed my lips and left me standing in front of Gareth who was looking at me as if he was picturing me without any clothing on, laid out across his bed. He smelled good to

me and I felt my pulse accelerate even faster as he reached for me and swept me back onto the floor.

“Lexi.” He whispered my name and I shivered slightly at the emotion in his voice. “Did you know that every man in this room would love to be me at this moment?” He breathed against my ear.

I shook my head slightly and had to swallow before I could reply. “I know there are several women in this room that would like to slit my throat for being this close to you. They were fairly easy to pick out earlier in the crowd. I think you may have broken a few hearts in this fair city.”

“I wouldn’t know about that.” He replied calmly. “Are there other women here tonight? I hadn’t noticed...I only have eyes for you.”

“Hmmm....pretty words.”

“Yes but true. Lexi there is no other woman for me but you.” I swallowed and looked into his dark blue eyes seeing that they had shifted to Dragon and were whirling slightly. “I want you Lexi...forever.” He whispered.

“Gareth....?”

He blinked and brought his eyes back to normal. “I told you I would try to convince you to stay.” He warned me softly. “Seeing you here like this tonight...it makes me want you all the more. I just needed you to know.” And he kissed me...his lips brushing mine oh so sweetly there on the dance floor until my head swam. My heart hammered against my breast and the pleasure in me rose up and spilled over onto those around us.

“That was naughty.” Kit scolded me when my dance with Gareth was finished. “I believe there might be some people going home with someone other than their spouse thanks to your little display on the dance floor.” I bit my lip but my eyes watched Gareth’s back as he moved through the crowd toward my parents. Kit sighed deeply. “The Black seems to have upset them both.” He told me softly.

“They think he’s a thug and too intense.”

Kit shook his head at me. “They don’t want him anywhere near you. None of us do.”

“I didn’t go looking for him Kit.”

“I know, it’s just....we all agree Marcus is not suitable so aside from you doing something foolish while trying to rescue him from the mess he’s gotten himself into, none of them perceives him as a potential rival in your affections. But there doesn’t appear to be anything wrong with Dane. And he already calls you his Queen. It is worrisome.”

Queen...I thought my mind trying to wrap itself around the term. Is that what he’d said earlier? Why would he consider me his Queen?

“Lexi you are so naïve sometimes.” Kit chided me softly and sighed. We danced for a moment in silence and then he told me. “On the world that Gareth and Jace came from....their Queens were only ever Gold. Not Red or Green or Blue. There has never been a male Gold, and females were extremely rare even before their world tore itself apart. Mistress you are more special than you realize. And while your Grandmother may or may not recognize you as a Princess, you are already a Queen. Should you wish to claim the title...for there are none that survived the Everlasting and you are the only Gold in existence today.”

“Why hasn’t someone told me this before?” I demanded thinking it was hardly the appropriate setting to be learning this sort of thing.

“I think it is not my place to say....if you wish that answer you must ask them.” Kit told me.

“It hardly matters now. The only thing that could tie me to another would be a child and even that would not be permanent.” I told Kit bluntly. “I will decide when and if I wish to conceive. I think I’ve done enough in the past two days to ensure the survival of the Dragon’s. I am in no hurry to offer any additional assistance right this moment.”

“Yes Mistress, I suspect it will be some time before you’ve gathered all your potential mates. And then we will see.”

“What do you mean...we will see?” I asked sharply. “And how do you know so much about Dragons all of a sudden?”

Kit smiled down at me. “What do you think I’ve been reading up on since I got here?”

“Those books are full of Dragonlore? I thought you were reading Jace’s Demonology books?”

“Some, not all.”

“What did you mean by your other comment?”

“Only that it is the males who determine when a Queen goes into heat. Not the Queen herself.” Kit’s words were so shocking to me that I missed a step which he gracefully covered. My eyes searched out Gareth and Jace who were standing with my father. All three of them were staring back at me and I knew they were following Kit and my conversation by the look on their faces. I lifted my head and found Dane leaning on the balcony above me, his eyes were intent and he had a pleased smile on his lips. I wondered how he could know this about me while I was obviously unaware. I dragged my eyes off him and glanced toward Marcus who had rejoined Valentine. He too was watching me from behind veiled eyes and I suddenly felt unsure of myself...unsettled...hunted.

I had a frightening insight and held out my wrist. “Kit...it won’t only be these will it?”

He glanced at me when I lifted my hand from his shoulder and shook the little Dragons. His eyes went thoughtful and he glanced across the room to Gareth and Jace before shaking his head. “No I suspect you will draw more than just your ten. Hush.” He whispered and stroked a finger down my cheek, “you still have time. Only two have come forward. It could take years for any others to find you.”

“The White will be next.” I told him while my hand clenched in his. “And it won’t be long. Oh no Kit, I’m not ready for this.”

“How do you know the White will come next?”

“Because I dreamed of him. I dreamed I was being chased by Marcus and Dane. There was a White with them and because of the portrait in my room.”

“Then we will deal with him when he comes.” Kit advised.

Chapter 18

I danced with Owen and then Cursed. What I had to discuss with Owen wasn't for consumption on the dance floor so I held my thoughts and simply enjoyed the time we spent together. Cursed was distracted yet when I asked him what the matter was, he wouldn't say only instead he placed his cheek against my temple and hummed along to the music which in and of itself was surprising.

"I thought...living outside the Sidhe would be distasteful." He informed me in Elvish during our second dance. He'd neatly maneuvered us nearly clear across the floor so that when the music moved to the next song it made more sense to stay on the floor together than to try and push through the press to change partners. It was the first time I'd actually seen the calculating side of him.

"Surely you have lived outside the Sidhe before?" I replied also in Elvish.

"No...not in this country....I was pledged to the Queen's guard at a very young age as an act of goodwill between the courts. It was my Mother's wish. I was already with the Seelie when we moved to this land and directly to the Sidhe." He replied.

“Goodwill or as hostage?” I asked knowing that it was not an uncommon thing for those of royal blood to be pledged to the other court to ensure peace. I knew I was right when he nodded. His hair slid over my hand and I ran my fingers through a length of his midnight fall. “I love your hair.” I told him softly while he made a low purring sound in his throat and held me tighter. All of them had worn their hair down at my request tonight and the sight of it dancing about their slim hips had caused more than one female to catch her breath. I know it set my pulse to racing. “Are you worried about returning to the Sidhe?” I asked softly and felt his body tense against me.

“Yes My Lady.” He replied after several minuets. “I’m torn between fear for your safety and those that will try to bend you to their will. You are much too beautiful and powerful to overlook.”

“What is it exactly that you fear Cursed?”

He took a deep breath and replied. “I fear I’ll lose you to the darkness.” He replied softly and I couldn’t help the shiver that ran up my spine. The music was still playing when he stopped us in the middle of the floor and dropped to a knee. His hand found mine and his eyes held me captive as he told me urgently. “By the Goddess, I pledge my fealty and swear to protect you with my life, as I have been given to you, so shall my heart remain yours forever. Do you accept?” He finished on a whisper his black eyes urgent. “Do you accept My Lady?” He asked and raised his hands to me. I reached for them and pressed them between mine.

“Yes I accept your pledge.” I whispered and a loud shrieking noise filled the room. It sounded like a banshee cry as it echoed around the hall and up toward the dome and then it was gone and Amras was beside us his eyes wild. Around the room women screamed and men muttered in fear.

“Cursed what have you done?” He breathed in Elvish while Cursed rose to his feet. “Goddess protect us! You will bring him down on all our heads!”

“Not if she declares.” Cursed replied his dark eyes intent.

“You wish her to declare?” Amras demanded in awe.

“Yes, she must. It is the only way.”

The music started up again and I turned and walked to the edge of the floor. I wasn't certain Amras and Cursed knew I was going they were so intent upon each other but of course I was wrong. They followed me to the edge, still speaking in Elvish so softly I couldn't hear their words. By the time I stopped and turned around Amras had stopped looking so panicked and his violet eyes flicked between Cursed and me while he leaned in to listen to Cursed. I wasn't certain what he was saying, but Amras finally nodded then moved to take my hand and edged me back onto the dance floor and into his arms.

“What just happened?” I asked in Elvish.

Amras pursed his lips and shook his head. “We shall discuss it later.” He told me.

“Fine you aren't going to...do what he just did are you?” I asked, worried we would cause another scene.

“I wish that I could Princess. But I have already sworn fealty and unless released or until the Queen is replaced, I am not free to do so.” He told me gently, his voice sounding sad.

“Was Cursed not sworn to the Queen also?” I asked in surprise.

“He was...but she released him from his duty when she punished him and gave him to you. I do not think she realized he would swear to you.”

“And his Uncle?”

Amras shook his head. “You heard...he is not pleased.”

“You mean that was...the King was here?” I asked my voice sounding as horrified as I felt.

“His spies.” He replied.

“I'm being watched?” I demanded angrily.

“For some time Princess. I thought you knew?”

“No...I mean...no I did not know. Cursed said he was worried about me but I didn't realize...” I trailed off biting my lip and glancing toward Cursed where he stood

watching me from the edge of the floor. Gareth and Jace were next to them and he nodded once while they glanced between the two of us and spoke quietly with him.

I closed my eyes and concentrated on Amras. This could very well be the only opportunity I had to dance with him and I wouldn't let my confusion over what had just happened ruin this moment. "Princess." He murmured and aligned his body to mine. His lips pressed against my temple and I sighed in his arms. "I feel you slipping away from me and do not know how to prevent it." He told me in a choked voice.

Tears filled my eyes and I buried my face against his neck while I held him tightly. "I am sorry. Please do not cry." He whispered against my hair, which of course made me snuffle all the more. "Shush...you do not want to look like a...raccoon." He teased me gently and I hiccupped and tried to pull myself together. This would be so much easier if I could just be mad at someone. I thought and felt Amras stiffen then chuckle against me.

"I wore waterproof mascara...just in case." I replied in a muffled voice.

"I am not certain if that is a good thing or not Princess."

My lips found the skin between his jaw and the top of his collar and I kissed him several times. "It means I don't have to worry about looking like a raccoon...only a clown with a red nose!"

Amras sucked air into his lungs at the feel of my lips and hummed deep in his throat. "I don't know about the red nose...but if you continue to do that Princess it will not be our only problem." He assured me.

I ran my hands up his chest and wrapped them around his neck pressing my breasts against him. "Don't you know by now, I enjoy your kind of trouble?" I teased him while his hands held my waist and back and he danced me across the floor toward the darker side of the room.

He smiled down at me and pressed the long hard length of himself against my stomach. "It has been too long."

“Yes it certainly is long.” I agreed and he flashed me a smile that lit up his beautiful eyes and he threw back his head and laughed. The clear tone caused every woman within hearing to turn and stare at him.

“It is good to laugh.”

I ran my fingers through his pale hair and brushed a lock back behind his ear taking my time to trace the delicate tip down to his lobe. “Kiss me Amras.” I whispered and the humor on his face melted into something so intense it nearly curled my toes.

His eyes searched mine and he smiled...hungrily. “Not here Princess.” He replied. “Though I want to very badly.”

“Why not?” I asked tilting my head to the side and pushing out my lower lip.

He took a deep breath and splayed his hand across my back. “Because I want to make love to you, and kissing you now...would not be a good thing.” He informed me. “I am not certain I could restrain myself. You are that tempting.”

“Hmmm.” I replied. None of my men had ever refused me before and it was...novel.

“Do not think of it as a refusal Princess...think of it as a...rescue.” And he released me and stepped back bowing from the waist as he turned and left me standing there on the edge of the dance floor across the room from my other men.

“I believe this dance is mine.” Bodark informed me and I jumped and turned to see him push away from the wall. “You did ask me to dance...yes?” He replied while I pulled air into my lungs and tried to control myself.

“Sorry, give me a moment.” I replied and he lifted an eyebrow and flared his nostrils.

“I think...” He replied and pulled me in against him. “I think you smell...very intoxicating. And perhaps your elf should be taken to task for delivering you to me in such a...state. I am after all...mortal. Do you think your men will notice if I dance you out the arch behind us? And have my wicked way with you in the hall?” He leaned down to whisper.

“I think...it would be best if you would just dance with me and not say anything.”

“Ah...but what would the fun be in that?” He teased while he tucked me in against the long length of him and made pleased noises in his throat. “Tell me what you did the other night when your Dragon...is it true the little black and silver Dragon is the same as the tall man with the red eyes and black hair tipped in silver?” When I nodded he continued. “Tell me what you did when he was on the table and looked like he was going to attack Alan.”

“I breathed lust at him. It spilled over onto you.” I replied and smiled when he cursed under his breath.

“Lust eh? Yeah that would explain...everything.” He replied. “Can you do it...whenever you want?” He asked, his voice sounding curious and maybe a little daring.

“Yes but all you got was a little spill over.” I warned him. “Its just one of my many talents.” I replied flippantly.

“Really? What else can you do?”

“Stuff.” I replied and chuckled when he growled softly.

“What kind of stuff.”

“Oh you know...this and that.”

“You aren’t going to tell me are you?” He replied his voice sounding disappointed.

“I like you Bodark.”

“Hmmm that’s nice.” He replied and held me closer.

“No, I mean I just like you.”

“Oh God that’s the kiss of death.” He replied with a grimace and I chuckled.

“Now don’t be like that...I’m way too high maintenance for a guy like you. You need a nice ferocious little she bitch all your own. I’d only make you miserable. But we can be friends.”

“You really know how to tear a guy’s heart out don’t you?” He grumbled.

“Don’t take this wrong, but I think you are very sexy. I’d very much like to see you happy....”

“Just not with you eh?”

“No...did I mention I’d make you miserable?”

“Yes you did say something like that. You know it’s sometimes okay to find these things out through trial and error. Are you sure we couldn’t...you know try a little first?”

I laughed and hugged him tight. “You are just so cute.”

“I’m cute and sexy and friend material. Oh God when did this happen to me?” He mumbled and I laughed again.

“You know Bodark...I don’t have many friends. Lovers I have in abundance. But I can count my friends on one hand and have lots of left over fingers.” That seemed to impress him and he appeared to think about it for a moment or two.

“Really?”

“Uh huh. Scouts honor.”

“So who is it you wanted to introduce me to?” He looked down at me and asked.

We were near the stairs and I glanced around but couldn’t see Margie over the crowd. “Let’s go up the stairs a ways...I can’t see her in the crowd.”

“Why did I know it was going to be a her?” He muttered under his breath and I clasped his hand and dragged him up to the platform. Head’s turned in our direction but I ignored them and finally spied Margie standing at one of the tables talking to...Alan of all people.

“There she is...come on.” I urged him and nearly bounded down the stairs dragging him behind me. I waved my fingers at Gareth and Jace who were frowning up at me with curious looks on their faces.

We did the whiplash thing through the crowd who actually parted for me. Poor Bodark was left to apologize behind us as I nearly pulled him into several couples. I

had to smile at the memory of Margie doing the same to me in the Salty Dog. It just seemed appropriate.

Alan turned to watch us approach and beside him Margie's eyes widened as I bore down on her dragging Bodark behind me. I smiled and she glanced from my hand up over my shoulder and I noticed her cheeks turn slightly pink. "Hi Margie." I told her, dropping Bodark's hand and reaching out to give hers a squeeze. "I wanted to introduce you to my friend."

Margie's eyes widened in alarm as Bodark stepped around me and used his chest and body to back her into the wall. Ah...that wasn't what I expected and I glanced in horror at Alan who was looking nearly as surprised as me.

Bodark's hands hit the wall on either side of Margie effectively trapping her there while he leaned down and buried his face in her neck. I could see Margie's eyes go large as saucers just before they closed and she seemed to sigh. "Oh well...okay then. I'm just going to...ah." And I glanced at Alan who quickly offered his non injured arm and jerked his head toward the dance floor.

"Wow what was that?" I asked once we were in the midst of the rest of the dancers.

"I'm not sure, but if your intent was to steer him toward a potential mate...I think you just did a very good job of it. You didn't...breathe on them did you?" He asked his voice sounding curious.

"No did you?"

"No...maybe it was just lust at first sight." He chuckled and held me gently. His sling made it awkward and I sighed and bit my lip.

"Is there some reason you didn't shift to heal yourself?"

"Yes...I wanted to make sure you saw your familiar's handiwork." He replied with a twinkle in his eye. "And I admit, I was hoping you'd feel sorry for me and want to fix the damage yourself."

"If I do heal you, will you behave yourself and not steal my Dragon again?" I demanded.

He lifted an eyebrow at me and shook his head. "I can't make any promises." He replied. "You are just too tempting by half. By the way I have the contract." He told me wincing as he reached for it.

"Oh for Goddess sake!" I hissed and placed my hand on his chest closed my eyes and thought...*heal* at him. He smiled and pulled his arm from the sling forgetting for the moment the contract as he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me into him. "Were you looking for a second beating?" I demanded in a huff.

He pursed his lips and shook his head but refused to give us some room. "Your person...whatever he is, caught me off guard had I been expecting him he wouldn't have gotten away so easily."

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. Men were such pains in the bottom sometimes.

"Speaking of men..." He remarked and I sighed realizing he was picking my thoughts. He flashed me a grin and continued. "Who were all those men in the picture in your bedroom? I recognize some of them...and I suspect the dark haired man you told us not to bother is one of them. But who are the rest of them?"

"I don't know them." I told him truthfully.

"Yet?"

"Yet."

"I see...well actually I don't. And what happened earlier on the dance floor with your dark Elf?" He asked.

"He pledged his fealty to me."

"Really?" He replied, his eyebrow lifting in question. "And that God awful shriek afterwards...was that supposed to happen?"

"No....I don't know." I mumbled. "I think he's in trouble with is Uncle."

"His Uncle is a banshee?" He asked in surprise.

"So it wasn't just me that thought it sounded like a banshee?"

"No...though I'm not sure they actually exist. It was just the first thing that popped into my mind."

“No his Uncle is not a banshee and it probably wasn’t a banshee, what it was I have no idea. Whatever it was wasn’t happy or maybe it was since it had really juicy news to tell.”

“I think we should change the subject. This one is much too confusing.”

“Fine.”

“Soooo your Dad’s a Dragon eh? I didn’t see that one coming.” He told me softly then held me tighter when I jerked. “Now calm down. I didn’t mean that in a bad way.” He replied, his soft voice thrumming against my inner ear. “You’re so feisty. I like that in my women.”

“Ugh.” I told him and stepped on his foot.

“Ouch you did that on purpose.”

“Yes I did.” I told him sweetly. “You deserved it.”

“Perhaps...but don’t do it again or people will think you are clumsy! Or worse, that I am.”

“Is the Mayor a leech or what?” I asked abruptly and smiled when Alan nearly missed a step.

“What?”

“Is the Mayor always so...you know does he always put his hands all over women?”

Alan leaned back and stared down at me in shock. “Are you saying the good Mayor placed his hands upon you inappropriately?” He asked while his own did some roaming around my back and waist.

“I’m saying...is he a playboy normally or am I just the lucky girl he seems to be interested in?”

“Wow...” Alan breathed softly. “I think it’s safe to say...it’s just you. The man hasn’t been laid in centuries.”

“Oh great!” I sighed. “Laid? Gee that’s a romantic term.”

“Sorry, you just surprised me. Are you sure he was...interested?”

“Well let me think....he hasn't had time to send me flowers yet or ah...visit me in my bathtub...but I'm fairly certain he'd like to.”

“Well....he could visit you in my bathroom.” Alan offered with a twinkle in his eye. “Of course I'd then be forced to kill him.”

“Really, all that for a free peep show? Imagine how my men felt.” I remarked tongue in cheek. “You're lucky Kit went alone.”

“Well it's not like you leave their den. Damn difficult to get you alone in public and I needed to talk to you. Besides...it was very...educational.” He breathed against my ear his words causing me to flashback on my love making with Cursed and Kit.... “Mmmm yes that was...I don't usually go in for voyeurism but...the force of your passion...was intoxicating and very inventive. It brought even me to my knees.”

“I'm so happy I could entertain you.” I told him stiffly. “If you don't stop poking around in my head I'll raise my upper shield and my men will be over here in half a second. They don't like it when I do that...” I warned him.

“And here I thought I was behaving admirably. I haven't even put my hands anywhere they don't belong.” He teased. “Though I'd like to...very much. Shall I tell you what I'd like to do with you?” He asked and my hair stood up on my neck and waved in the breeze.

“No, unless you'd like to cause a riot? I don't think the Mayor would appreciate being fined for conducting an orgy in City Hall.”

“Let me guess....you were responsible for what happened at the Salty Dog last week?” And he chuckled when I nodded. “You are so very fascinating.”

“Hey Alan...give me the contract.” I told him glancing over his shoulder at Gareth who was looking this way and frowning. Another few minutes and he'd be headed our direction. “Unless of course you want to become Dragon meat.”

He reached into his pocket and withdrew a slim envelope. He passed it to me and I turned us so my back was to Gareth and Jace as I slipped it down my bodice where it crackled and poked me for the first minute or so. “Hmmm.” He muttered

watching me closely. “That’s the second time you’ve slipped something I’ve given you into your top.”

“I don’t exactly have pockets in this dress.” I told him bluntly.

“Your dress is divine. And I’d enjoy removing it from you.” He told me and this time he leaned into me and breathed it against my skin. I felt the force of his passion sink into me and my own breathing increased.

I made a low sound in my throat and licked my lips while my fingers curled into his coat. “That was not wise.” I told him softly as I watched Kit’s eyes flash from the edge of the floor. He’d come around to the side closest to us and his black eyes were watching me intensely. “Look behind you.” I told him and slipped from his arms and into the crowd while he turned to look at Kit who was standing with his hands on his hips his legs spread shoulder distance apart. I made it nearly back to Jace and Gareth when Courday appeared out of nowhere his body blocking my escape while his arms turned me back onto the dance floor.

“Ah...here you are.” He told me happily. “I was beginning to think you had forgotten your promise.” I sighed and glanced at Gareth over his shoulder. Courday must have sensed my look because he turned me, effectively cutting off my view.

Chapter 19

Courday's hand slid over my waist and around my back while he cupped my hand with his other one. "Are you having a good time?" He asked while he moved us farther away from Jace and Gareth.

"Yes." I told him, still struggling to get my heart beat back under control from Alan's little shenanigans. The last thing I needed was for Courday to think my heart was racing because of him. "This was very kind of you."

"Well my dear, it isn't every day a Princess turns up in my town, especially one as exquisite as you. I hope you won't think me forward if I tell you that I am fascinated by you?"

"No, but I would ask why?"

His hazel eyes stared down into mine and his lips turned up in a small smile. "For one thing you meet my eyes without fear. That pleases me. For another you are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen...and I have lived a very long time. The color of your hair is like spun golden flames. And your eyes excite me. I have known

many Dragons in my time, but never one as perfect as you. I was not aware there was such a thing as a Gold Dragon.”

I let his comment go and asked instead. “What did you mean by your comment earlier about being carried on your shield?” I asked while my fingers played with the collar of his tuxedo. Unlike Valentine he was dressed in a perfectly tailored black tux with a gold and cream paisley vest and tie. The color looked very good on him not cliché at all.

He smiled and replied. “It is what Spartan mother’s told their sons when they went off to war. Either come back with your shield or upon it. It means to be brave and die well. It is what my mother told me.” He replied and my eyes widened in surprise. He said he had lived a very long...if that was true...it meant he’d been alive centuries before Christ was born. That made him...very old indeed.

“Yes very old indeed.” He replied and settled me more firmly against him while we danced for several minutes in silence. His cheek brushed my temple and he inhaled deeply. “Your skin is intoxicating...a mixture of Elf and Dragon and perhaps cinnamon with just a hint of cloves. It is quite heady.”

To me Courday had no smell at all, only the faint scent of his soap and perhaps a touch of colon to let me know he was there, his skin was odorless.

“One of the hazards of being a child of the night.” He murmured against my skin and I tensed slightly while he made soothing noises and brushed his hand across my back. “I do not care for Valentine’s side burns either.” He told me softly. “And there have been many times I would have loved to strangle him and watch his eyes pop out of his head. Children can be so trying.” He breathed. “Shall I kill him for you?” He asked. “Would that please you?”

I swallowed and my fingers stilled on his collar. “He has something of mine. I want it back. He has my Red and has set his sights on all of us. He attacked me here tonight. He will try to take my Green and Blue and will go after my father. I cannot allow him to harm what is mine. If he dies then so be it. He is not well...you must see that?”

“Hmmm.” He replied and I felt his lips brush my hairline. “Dragons are immune to my virus. Did you know that? Just as Elves are immune. My ichor only affects humans. Do you think that is because you are already non-human...immortal?” He asked.

“I do not know, perhaps.” It was true that Vampirism did not affect either race in terms of becoming undead. But we still bleed and can become connected to the Master psychically though the link was nothing like it was between human and Master or between Master and their children. For us it was less a controlling and more of a sharing.

“Sharing...yes I like that.” He replied.

“And have you...shared before?” I asked, curious to know.

Courday didn't respond at first and I wondered if he'd heard me. “Yes.” He finally replied. “But I was not strong enough to save her. The changes....she could not handle the Everlasting. It tore her apart. She was beautiful...like you. Strong and fierce, but oh so fragile, and I could not save her.”

My heart actually ached for him and in that moment I felt a deep sorrow, to have loved someone you could not save. How terrible would that be?

“It was a very long time ago.” He replied softly and I felt his lips press against my temple.

“I am sorry.” I told him. “Do you think...do you think that Valentine's connection to Belinda was an attempt to share?”

Courday took a deep breath and leaned back so that he might look at me. I stared up into his hazel eyes and realized there was a pale green ring around his pupil and tiny green lines throughout the pale brown, almost like miniature lightening bolts. Very unique, beautiful really.

“Thank you.” He told me his voice sounding surprised. “I can't remember anyone ever thinking that before.”

I blushed and glanced down feeling...odd. He rumbled in his chest and I glanced back up at him surprised to find his face had taken on a more intense quality.

“You are quite tempting.” He told me softly. “All the more so because you do not even realize...” His breathing became deep as he worked to calm himself. “To answer your question, no I do not believe that was ever Valentine’s intent. Sharing is...beyond him at this point.”

“Courday, what do you want from me?”

“Please call me Claudius it is...disconcerting to hear you call me by my surname.”

“Claudius...what do you want from me?”

“Hmmm.” He replied as we moved to the music. “An easy question for such a complex answer.”

I let him think about it for a few moments, keeping my thoughts open just enjoying the music and the way we danced together. He was very light on his feet which I suppose was not surprising.

“I like that you do not rush.” He replied candidly. “I imagine you would make a superb negotiator.”

I couldn’t help but smile at that. Patience had only been a problem for me in past six or seven months. Only since I’d reach sexual maturity and even now as long as I remained satisfied it wasn’t an issue for me.

“That is...quite amazing.” He remarked softly his voice sounding not quite shocked but very close to it. “I did not realize...”

“What?” I teased surprised to find I felt comfortable in doing so and wondering at the oddness of that. Either I was beginning to enjoy danger or my sensors were off.

He cocked his head to the side at that. “Do you think? Perhaps it is that we will become great friends.”

“Is that what you want? To be my friend?”

“It is a place to start.”

“And what would it mean for us to be friends Claudius? What is it you believe I can offer you?”

He smiled and twirled me out and then back into the shelter of his body.

“Much.” He replied. “I think you could offer me much.”

“And what will it cost you to be my friend?” I wanted to know.

“What an odd question.” He replied and looked into my face his eyes searching. “You do not ask what the cost will be to you...only to me. And you do not run screaming from me...as many would. It is quite refreshing really. You do not fear me at all.”

I gave him a lopsided smile and shrugged slightly. “I’m just funny that way.”

“I think if you were not so charming...I might be offended.”

“I don’t know you...but I sense your ego can handle it.”

Claudius actually scoffed at that. “What is ego but the grand delusions of a mad man? Were I to base my existence upon ego I would have lost my sanity centuries ago.” He told me rather abruptly and I wondered at the emotion behind his statement. “Excuse me...it is a sore subject.” He replied more calmly and I couldn’t help but think of Valentine which caused him to shake his head. “To start...perhaps the answer to the question posed by that slip of paper pressing against your skin beneath the satin of your bodice.” He remarked casually and I raised my eyes to his again.

“How could you know...?” His smile reached his eyes and I caught the flash of incisor.

“This is my city. Not much occurs here that I am not aware of.” He replied. Except I’d lived here a year and no one seemed to have noticed that. I couldn’t help thinking. He tilted his head to the side and replied. “I overlooked the poaching because your motives were pure, and I admired your skill.” He whispered against my ear and I nearly went numb from shock. I couldn’t help wondering if everyone knew. “No, your secret is quite safe.” He assured me and I breathed again. “Needless to say...I am most pleased you have dropped your disguise.”

“Plain Jane.” I told him with a grimace.

“Ummm yes how...appropriate. Can I tell you something?” He asked and I nodded. “When I first discovered you slinking about my city...I was curious. I

thought here is a huntress with skill and precision. Something I admired very much. I watched you for months following you home at night because you enchanted me...excited me. I used to sit on your windowsill and watch you sleep. Can you imagine?" He asked softly. "A man of my age and experience pining over someone that didn't even know I existed." And he shook his head. "And then one night...you dreamt of flying and Dragons and you...shifted into the most beautiful creature, and your hair..." He breathed his voice sounding awed. "I've missed you this past week." He told me softly. "Missed our nights together. And I am definitely not a leech." He added as the song ended and he slipped away from me and into the crowd leaving me standing there dazed.

I blinked several times and discovered I was facing a very large chest. Inside me Goldy sat up abruptly and looked very interested I think she might have rubbed her hands together if she had any. Where it had come from I wasn't certain. I sighed and lifted my eyes to Dane's face wondering what other truths I might discover this evening.

"Tis an open book I am." He replied. "Ask me anything."

His arms came round me and I realized I'd been pressed to one body after another tonight. I didn't think there had been more than five minutes when I wasn't plastered to someone. Taking a deep breath I told him. "I was warned that you will harm me." I told him bluntly and felt his body tense under the hand I had on his shoulder.

"Tis a lie." He rasped angrily while his eyes shifted and whirled in agitation. "Nae I'd never...ye are my Queen. I wilna be harming ye never."

"Well umm you might want to let up on the pressure then...cause you're about to break my fingers." I told him skeptically and he jerked and adjusted his hold on my hand immediately.

"Pardon." He told me and pulled air into his lungs. "I do not know me own strength at times." He blinked and set his eyes back to normal.

"Dane how long have you been looking for me?"

His smile turned roguish as he leaned forward and told me. "All me life Lassie...all me life." Oh good heavens! I thought and rolled my eyes while he chuckled softly.

"Gareth and Jace think you're a thug." I continued. "Is it true? Are you?"

He raised an eyebrow and shook his head. "Tis never easy to invade another's territory...especially in search of a mate. To be sure I may have seemed a wee bit brash. But tis not easy to want something so badly and have the devils own time finding it. Especially knowing ye are so close."

"Hmmm." I replied not sure what to think about that. "How did you get in here tonight?"

"Dwarf name of Dten it was." He told me. "We keep in touch. He called me yesterday claimed he'd found who I was searching for. I came immediately I did."

"And where are you staying?" I asked.

"Would ye like to be seeing?" He asked his voice sounding eager.

"Ah...don't take this wrong...but I am a little worried about you."

"Fang boy?" He asked softly and I nodded. "Dten warned me Lass...though it's pleased I am that ye care." He told me and his voice sent gooseflesh up my arms.

"Hrumph." I replied while Goldy tilted her head and eyed him eagerly. "Down girl!" I growled while Dane tried to smother a smile and failed miserably.

"It seems you're wee little one might be interested. I'm thinking tis her I might have the luck with."

"Apparently she's a hussy." I informed him dryly and he laughed softly.

"Fortunately she doesn't make all our decisions for us."

"Still...tis encouraging." He admitted while I grimaced and squeezed my eyes shut. "So may I take ye to dinner tomorrow? I'd very much like ta spend time with ye I would."

"I'm going to be busy tomorrow. In fact I'm probably going to be busy for the next several days." I told him, thinking I wasn't certain how long it was going to take

to convince my Grandma to see things my way and worrying suddenly over Cursed's actions earlier and what they might mean to me.

"Going somewhere are ye?" He asked then replied when I nodded. "I'll just come along then to be keeping me eye on ye."

"What...no wait...you can't." Jace and Gareth would kill me.

"Really?" He inquired with a lifted eyebrow. "Tis not their choice I'm thinking. I am yours and that makes you responsible for me. In fact I'm thinking I'll be leaving here tonight with ye."

"Are you mad?"

"Aye and ye are ta blame."

I tried to pull out of his arms but he held me fast and I was forced to grit my teeth or cause another scene on the dance floor. I groaned and dropped my head to his chest wondering what I'd done to deserve this.

Dane chuckled then gave my waist a squeeze. "Good living I'm thinking."

"Fine if you can convince Gareth and Jace to allow you to come along then feel free to do so."

"I do nae need their permission Lass. I already have the Silver's."

"What?" I asked in dismay while my eyes scanned the floor and found dear old Dad dancing not that far away from me. His silver eyes met mine and he gave a brief nod. I swallowed heavily and turned to find Gareth and Jace standing with Cursed. All of them were watching me intently. I felt just a little ill. Since when did Dad become my social secretary? I thought with a touch of anger while my eyes swung back to him. He merely lifted an eyebrow and gave me a stare that made me feel like a kid again. Gee, how many girls could say their Dad set them up on dates? It was...disturbing was what it was.

"Now Lass...I promise to behave."

"Yeah sure...today you want to ride along, tomorrow you'll want...other things. I'm not ready for other things." I told him rudely. "And this isn't going to go well. I don't see you fitting in with my men...not at all."

“You need me to be sure.” He replied calmly. “The Red is of no use to you and the Blue and Green...may not be enough to be keeping ye satisfied aye.”

“Oh my God!” I breathed in horror. What exactly had Dad told him?

“The truth I imagine.” He replied with a smug smile. “And more than I’m thinking any of the others would have offered.”

“But I don’t know you! I can’t just be dragging home strays willy nilly! What the hell was he thinking?”

“That Father knows best perhaps?” Dane offered and I growled sharply and felt like hitting something.

“This is intolerable.” I muttered under my breath. “He’s probably just getting back at me for sending him the three guards! I am so going to yell at him later. Do you hear me Dad?” I continued muttering while Dane pressed his lips together and held his tongue, likely not having a clue what I was ranting about. It didn’t matter because I turned and looked at Dad again and gave him a dirty look. He merely grinned and turned his back to me completely unimpressed with my outburst. Where is Kit I thought angrily and stopped dancing while I called him to me.

Dane jerked slightly when Kit appeared at my elbow with a delighted expression on his face. “Yes Mistress you bellowed?” He asked calmly.

I stopped dancing and glanced between Kit and Dane my eyes nearly whirling from agitation. I turned to look at Gareth and Jace my eyes searching theirs for several seconds until Jace reluctantly nodded and Gareth just frowned and crossed his arms over his chest. “He wants to go home with us.” I told Kit angrily.

“Yes Mistress so I heard.”

“Take him home and stick him...somewhere.” I told him sharply. “Not my bedroom.” And when I would have pulled myself out of Dane’s arms he held me fast and yanked me back against his body.

“Not so fast Lassie...” He rumbled and his mouth crashed down upon mine for the space of a heartbeat and then he was gone, disappearing from my arms in a black

haze. I turned to glance at Kit who had a nasty smile on his lips and a wicked look in his eyes just before he too disappeared.

“I don’t know about you two but I’ve had about all I can stand!” I hissed when I finally made my way back to Gareth and Jace’s side. “I’d like very much to go home now.” Actually... that wasn’t where I wanted to go at all. “Send the other’s home and come fly with me?” I asked suddenly my eyes swinging between Gareth and Jace. “Please?”

“A spectacular exit to a very trying evening?” Gareth asked with a wry twist to his mouth.

“What? Oh I hadn’t...” And my eyes widened thoughtfully. “From the red carpet? Shall we?”

“Hang on a moment...I think...where is Owen?” I asked suddenly and glanced around to find him moving toward us through the crowd. When he reached us I pulled him to the side and whispered in his ear. “We’ll be right back.” I told the others and I pulled Owen through the crowd and out one of the archways behind the stairs then down the hall. When I was certain we were alone I shifted my neck and back to Dragon and waited while Owen removed the harness he had given me several days earlier for Amras to use when we had been overrun with furry black balls of teeth. If we were going to make a spectacular exit I wanted to make sure I was free of the harness.

Owen looked thoughtful as I shifted back and pulled me into his arms while he cradled my head against his chest. I hesitated for a moment then wrapped my arms around his waist. He waited half a moment then tilted my chin up with a finger. “Lexi.” He breathed against my lips and then he was kissing me and I held him and kissed him back urgently, my chaotic thoughts spilling over into passion as they often did.

When he let us up for air I felt light headed and very...umm...needy. “That.” He informed me. “Was for the caress earlier on my backside while I was trying to work. You are an incorrigible minx.” He chided and I smiled and slid my hand over

his bottom for real, giving him a squeeze and a pat that raised an eyebrow. "I'm sure I can find us a broom closet." He informed me bluntly. "Or shall I simply create one for us right here?"

"Tempting...but I doubt you could finish in time for us not to be missed."

"Did you require fast?" He teased. "I can be quick."

"I think that...ah how fast?" I asked, my curiosity getting the better part of my judgment.

Owen's dark eyes went sly and he snapped his fingers and I found myself naked lying on my bed with him poised above me. "Fast enough?" He asked and slid his body into mine. I wrapped my legs around him and lifted my hips off the bed pulling him down into my core. He felt...perfect and I ran my hands up his arms and over his shoulders while he pulled himself nearly out of me. "Hold on." He warned and his body drove into mine over and over again until I threw back my head and screamed while I contracted around the hard hot length of him. I cracked open my red door and coated him with my desire while he gasped and pummeled my body into the bed. The veins in his neck stood out and I felt his release deep inside me.

When I opened my eyes Kit was leaning on his elbows next to us his dark eyes amused. "Had I known you required...sustenance I would have brought you home myself and left the Drake at the party."

"Umm...sorry this just happened. And I need to get back." I told Owen while I ran my fingers through his hair and pushed a lock back from his face. His smile was adorable and he crossed his eyes which made me laugh.

"Give me just a moment Lexi. I don't believe I've ever been that fast." He replied in an amused tone, his breath coming in small pants.

"Where did you leave what's his face?" I asked turning my head to Kit.

"On his hands and knees in the front room, gasping for breath almost like this one." He teased pointing a finger at Owen. "I believe he stained his pants." He chuckled. "Newbies." He scoffed then smiled at me.

“Really...well Owen...when you’re ready? Before he comes looking for the source of his...ah...yeah before he comes looking for us?” I leaned over and kissed Kit. “I’ll be home late. We’re going flying...although suddenly I don’t feel the need so badly.” I told them both and giggled. Owen shook his head and snapped his fingers and we were standing back in the hall completely dressed. I swayed slightly on my feet and grasped his arm. My cheeks turned bright pink when I looked up and found the hall surrounded by not just my men but several others too. Claudius was there as were Bodark and Alan. Both my parents and all three of their guards looked relieved at our return. Gulp I thought, while Owen struggled to keep from laughing.

“Hi, sorry we didn’t mean to alarm anyone.” I muttered shamefaced while Gareth and Jace glared at me. “We just... umm. We’re fine.” Oh God could the floor open now and swallow me whole? Owen gave me a hug and gently pushed me toward Gareth and Jace who looked like they wanted to strangle me. “I was feeling...itchy.” I muttered and they both sighed and rolled their eyes while Amras and Cursed glanced at Owen their faces a bit wistful.

“Itchy?” Alan asked...then choked slightly.

Bodark’s nostrils flared as he pulled a deep breath of air into his lungs and his eyes narrowed. “I’ve never...heard it called that before.” He told me with a straight face, his grey eyes nearly dancing with amusement.

“We think it’s actually a medical condition. Lexi did you get that note from your Doctor?” Owen offered from behind me and I groaned and pressed my fingers to the space between my eyes. His comment was just...too much and they all burst out laughing while I stood there mortified. Even Claudius looked amused. I glanced at Owen and gave him a dirty look. He spread his hands and told me. “I promised quick not unnoticed.” And I closed my eyes and took a deep cleansing breath.

“Remind me to be more specific next time.” I grumbled under my breath which caused them all to laugh that much harder. “And pick someone more discreet.” I added a little louder causing Amras and Cursed to perk up while Claudius lifted an eyebrow and smiled smugly. I ignored my men and turned to Claudius and asked. “If I

send my parents home without us?” And I waved my hand and indicated Gareth and Jace. “Will they be safe from Valentine?”

His eyes searched mine for several seconds before he finally nodded. “Where do you go?” He asked quietly and the laughter ceased abruptly.

“With your permission...we thought we might leave...enflight...off the red carpet.”

His eyes widened and he shifted from foot to foot while his brow creased. “You would...announce your existence in such a manner?”

I turned to glance at Cursed and his dark eyes met mine while he straightened his shoulders and stood just a little taller. “It seems I’ve no choice.” I replied softly and turned back to Claudius with a small smile. “To protect myself I must stop hiding. Gareth and Jace are free to decide.”

Dad stepped forward and glanced first at Mom who looked up at him and nodded. “I will fly with you child.” He replied in his deep voice.

Claudius turned to Gareth and Jace and raised an eyebrow. “Where Lexi goes we go.” Gareth replied softly and Jace gave a nod. I took a deep breath and turned back to Owen.

“If you would see everyone makes it home safely?” I asked and he shook his head.

“One way or another.” He replied. “But not I think until we witness your departure?” And he glanced around to the rest of the group and who were already nodding and smiling.

“Then I officially declare this party over and I’ll send the key to you.” He told me with a grin. “Shall we go make history?” He asked and held out his arm to me. I glanced at Gareth and Jace and walked to Claudius. He was after all our host and it seemed only right that he should be the one to escort me to the red carpet.

Chapter 20

Our entourage drew the crowd who spilled out the double doors behind us. Cameras flashed and the crowd yelled questions at us. “I think here is good.” I told Claudius and gave his arm a squeeze.

He kissed my cheek and stared into my eyes smiling softly. “Fly well.” He whispered then turned and held up his hands to the crowd asking them for silence. “Ladies and Gentlemen.” He began in a voice that somehow carried to the farthest edges of the sidewalk yet still managed to sound refined. “I give you Princess Lexi Helyanwe....and hope that you have film in your camera.” Then he bowed to me and stepped back several feet. I looked over the crowd then behind me at the others.

Gareth and Jace took up positions slightly behind and to my sides while my Father stood some distance behind. All of us giving enough room for our change. I dipped my head to the crowd and closed my eyes. When I raised them they were golden and multifaceted and I breathed and shifted into a seventeen foot long golden

Dragon with two sets of horns and spikes running down my spine. The crowd went wild as I sensed the others change and spread my wings.

“Mayor.” I replied and dipped my head then sprang into the air and swept my wings down sending a breeze that blew the hair of those closest back from their heads. I opened my mouth and my roar was echoed by not three but four voices. I turned my head to see that Marcus had somehow joined us, his fire engine red wings spread wide behind my Father’s huge Silver body. I led us once around the dome of City Hall then flew straight up and into the clouds hovering on the other side as the others broke through behind me. “Marcus!” I cried when he swept through the mist and hung suspended before me. “What are you doing?”

“Flying!” He called back to me as his whiplash tail flicked left then right and he was off like a dart across the sky.

“Should we follow?” Jace asked and I shook my head.

“I’ll go and make sure he returns safely.” My Father called as he banked and was gone his huge silver wings flashing against the stars.

“Where to?” Gareth asked and I turned us toward the Bay and the Berkley Hills beyond.

I landed in a large meadow with a small natural lake and curled my tail around me as I watched Gareth and Jace’s aerial antics above me. They were both excellent flyers and I felt a hunger rise in me as I watched them dive and swoop over the meadow. I wanted them I could feel the need growing in my body, tingling through my very skin. I lifted my head and bugled out a call that caused them both to hesitate and as one they dove to the ground landing to either side of me. Gareth had a gleam in his eye and Jace snorted as he moved next to me, his body pressing in against mine, rubbing himself along my length. Gareth entwined his neck with mine and pressed me with his chest forcing me onto my back legs. “Lexi?” He rumbled and I growled low hissing at them both softly.

“I want you.”

When he reached for me I shifted and found myself in his strong arms, my body molding itself to his as Jace worked the ties down my back and freed me from my dress. When it slid to the ground Jace ran his hands over my naked skin pulling me back against his chest while Gareth stripped his clothing off and laid them on the ground. "Hurry." I whispered moaning softly as Jace's fingers slid between my legs. He released me to Gareth once he was as naked as I, and we went to the ground in a tangle of arms and lips. Jace joined us and I found myself on my knees straddling Gareth's lap his cock buried deep inside me facing Jace who knelt between his legs. My hands gently cupped Jace while I slid my tongue down the length of him pulling him into my hot mouth. Jace's hands braced against my shoulders while Gareth's guided my hips upon his lap.

Jace's fingers slid into my hair sending pins flying every direction as he released my curls and they flowed down my body and onto Gareth's chest. Beneath me Gareth made a humming noise and raised his hips to me. I reached into my mind and shoved open the door coating us all with my desire. Jace cried out and his fingers tightened on my shoulders while I held his hips and he worked himself in and out of my mouth. Gareth sat up behind me and wrapped his arm around my body pressing himself to my back as he held me tightly and lifted us both off the ground with the force of his thrusts. His voice was hoarse as he called my name and I felt myself tighten around him while my body exploded and I moaned and held on to Jace's hips.

Jace pulled himself back, when I reached for him he knelt and lowered his mouth to mine kissing me, his tongue slipping in between my lips while he explored my mouth. "I want to come inside you." He whispered when he pulled back and I stared up into his whirling green eyes. Beneath me Gareth stilled and his body tensed. The three of us turned as two dark figures skimmed the trees and glided in to land not ten feet from us shifting to human. A third figure came to rest farther back, closer to the trees and I made a strangled sound in my throat.

"Don't move." Gareth growled as I tensed to lift myself off him. I bit my lip and settled back onto my knees, reaching up to pull my hair forward to cover myself.

“What do you want?” Gareth demanded and his voice made a chill run up my spine. In front of me Jace edged closer somewhat blocking my body from view as he straightened his shoulders. The tension was thick in the air as we all stared back at Marcus and Dane.

Dane made an amused noise then chuckled. “Ye know the laws.” He replied. “Tis our right.”

I had no idea what he was talking about but Jace and Gareth apparently did because they both reacted badly. I think if I hadn’t been seated on Gareth he would have gone for his throat. Jace hunched closer to me and growled low as if denying Dane’s words. “This is not Seriscari and Lexi is not Queen.” Gareth replied in a deadly soft voice. “You cannot claim the Right of Meranne here!”

Dane crossed his arms over his chest and stared back at the three of us, his dark eyes beginning to whirl slowly. Beside him Marcus held his tongue his arms loose at his sides a vacant expression in his eyes. “She is already Queen her breeding has seen to it. It matters not which world we stand upon, I can and do claim the right of ascension. Until she is fertile she can nae turn any true claimant away. Ye do not have the right to refuse me nor does she.” He replied calmly.

“What is he talking about?” I demanded suddenly and the sound of my voice caused Marcus to shift where he stood. None of the others moved a muscle.

“You must decide.” Jace told me finally.

“Decide what?”

“Our future.”

Dane snorted softly.

“Do I need to do this right this second?”

Gareth pulled me back against his chest and I twisted my neck so I could see the resignation in his face. “Lexi...will you be Dragon or Elf?” He asked me softly.

“Queen or Princess...you must decide.”

“Why must I decide?” I demanded my eyes flicking around at them all. “Why must it be this minute and how can I be expected to make a decision that obviously has

ramifications I am completely unaware of? I won't do it and you can't make me!" I told them, feeling my temper start to rise.

"Your agreement is nae necessary." Dane informed me bluntly.

"I'd be quiet if I was you." I told him sharply. "One I'm not happy about this interruption, and two I'm starting to not like you very much." That got me a squeeze from Gareth and a wry look from Jace. "Even Marcus seems to have more sense than you as least he is keeping his mouth shut. You on the other hand appear to be working very hard to irritate me."

Dane looked thoughtful for a second and then he chuckled. "I like yer spirit Lass. Perhaps it's just that I'm cursed with an honest tongue."

"I wouldn't know about that, but your timing really sucks."

"From where I'm standing me timing seems perfect."

I glanced at Jace and raised an eyebrow but he shook his head. "Okay I give up what exactly is that supposed to mean?"

Behind me Gareth made a rumbling noise in his chest which did not sound happy at all.

"You'll be telling her or I shall." Dane informed us.

"He's claimed the right of ascension...it means." Jace began in a strangled voice. "It means he's entitled to join in or observe whichever he chooses...anytime he chooses. Until you are...fertile. It is the first law." He finished while I nearly fell over in Gareth's lap I was so shocked.

"Any Drake?" I breathed, while spots danced before my eyes.

"Any suitably potential mate that invokes the right." Gareth grumbled next to my ear. Oh God why hadn't someone stopped me from leaving the red carpet as we had! Gareth rumbled again in his chest and the sound was not soothing. "It had to be done." He replied bitterly. "And now you must choose."

"And if I choose Elf?" I demanded harshly and Jace sucked air into his lungs and sat back abruptly onto his legs.

"You doom us all." He whispered.

“How do you know that? Perhaps my sisters?” I began and Jace shook his head his eyes distraught.

“None are gold.” He replied in a broken voice. “We would know.”

“Fine then we are done here.” I replied angrily. I’d be damned if I’d perform in public like some monkey on a leash.

“Lexi...” Gareth began softly his voice a gentle warning.

“I’m fine...for now.” I snapped.

“But not for long.” He warned me. “It is just over twenty four hours now...it will get worse.” My head dropped forward and I felt sick to my stomach.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I finally asked from beneath my hair. Behind me I felt Gareth take a deep breath.

“At first we assumed you knew. You accepted us both and...made a point of telling us they were not to be harmed and we must accommodate them. It seemed that you knew.” Gareth whispered against my hair. “And then when it became clear that you did not...it is an old law...and there are very few elder Drakes. We hoped...”

“That they would not know.” I finished for him. “But...there is just one thing.” I told them softly and raised my head, my eyes turning to Marcus. And I rose slowly shrugging off Gareth’s hands as I stepped toward him, my eyes searching his face while he stared back at me vacantly. I rolled my hips, pushed back my hair, and opened my little red door forcing desire before me on the slight breeze like eddies in a calm pool. When it brushed him his head snapped back exposing his throat and I was on him in an instant my body striking his, bringing him down to the ground while my hand shifted and my claws gripped his neck tightly.

Gareth and Jace yelled and Dane was clearly shocked as I wrapped my legs around Marcus while he struggled in my embrace. My teeth found his neck and I sank them into his skin cutting off the air to his lungs as he gasped and bucked beneath me. I held him tightly until he went limp in my embrace then I released him and leaned back, my gold eyes turning on Dane in anger. “You fool!” I hissed at him while he stared at me in awe. “If he declares, he gives Valentine access to us all anytime,

anywhere! Kit!" I yelled and was licking the spicy flavor of Marcus' blood from my lips when he swirled into existence beside me.

"Mistress?" He breathed, his eyes taking in the scene and widening slightly at the sight of Marcus passed out beneath my naked body, blood smeared across my cheek.

"This hold Valentine has over him....would a trip to Hell break it?" I demanded softly and he shook his head vehemently.

"Can you...remove his vocal cords?" I demanded and he stared at me as if I'd gone mad.

Gareth stepped up beside me. "That will not work." He told me.

"We must put him somewhere...someplace Valentine cannot control him. If what you say is true, and he declares I cannot deny him and Valentine will have us all!"

"Kill him." Dane muttered his dark eyes intense.

"I...cannot...he is like this from love of his foster mother. This could be you." I told him harshly. "Mi!" I yelled and turned to Kit. "Bring me my Mother...quickly." And he snapped his fingers. Mi appeared in a swirl of tan and grey and simply shook her head at me.

"Lexi child...what ever are you doing?"

"No time for that now." I told her as Mom appeared wearing a bathrobe and no slippers.

"Lexi!" She breathed. "Danu protect us what is happening?" She demanded her pale blue eyes shocked at the sight before her. Dad ran to her and pulled her in against him as he stared between Marcus and myself.

"He is controlled by a Vampire. If he wakes and opens his mouth and declares for me he endangers us all. Please you must take him to the Sidhe where Valentine cannot reach him. I cannot kill him and to simply send him there would be worse than death. You are responsible for him you must take him and keep him safe for me."

Mi shook her head and glanced at my Parents. "Well at least she's never boring. This ought to entertain the Queen." She commented then flicked her tail and

all four of them disappeared while I found myself kneeling on a patch of uncomfortable meadow grass.

“Ah can I assume from your hi jinx that we have progressed to the stage of declaring for ascension?” Kit asked dryly. His gaze sliding between Dane’s still clothed body and the rest of us.

“Yes.” I spat back at him. “And nearly killed us all! Remind me when we get back home to strangle you Kit!”

“Me Mistress?” He asked in surprise.

“Yes I believe I requested loyalty.” I growled at him.

“Loyal and brave.” He replied with a grin. “Did you also wish to pet and scratch me now?” He asked.

“I don’t think you want me anywhere near you at the moment.” I warned him softly. “But I would very much enjoy you sharing the finer points of Dragon lore with me so I don’t have to keep finding these things out the hard way!” I growled then launched myself into the air shifting immediately. I heard Kit yell then sensed the others take wing beneath me as I flew like a bullet over the tree tops toward the bay and the lights of San Francisco in the distance.

I landed on our roof shifting as I did so. Through my feet I could feel the vibrations from the music below. “Kit.” I growled and stared at him so not amused when he materialized in front of me. The others landed behind me and shifted. “We seem to have left without our clothing.” I told him and lifted an eyebrow as his eyes took their time skimming my body. “Today would be nice.” I growled and he sighed and snapped his fingers.

“Will you be angry with me for long?” He asked then winced when I hissed at him. I didn’t bother answering, simply turned and headed for the stairs. No one said anything as I led us down the back way and to the elevators. When the doors opened on the third level I swept out in front of them heading down the hall. I stopped dead in my tracks at the living room which looked as if a tornado had hit it. Couches and chairs were upended everywhere and pictures hung in tatters on the walls.

“What in the world happened here?” I demanded glancing around in surprise. “Were we attacked? Are the others okay?”

“Your new friend threw a temper tantrum when I wouldn’t let him out.” Kit told me sarcastically. Then he snapped his fingers and everything was put back where it belonged. “I just thought you should see it. So you weren’t angry at me for simply letting him run amok. Apparently he sensed you take flight and...his Dragon got the better of him.” He replied with a grimace.

I turned to look at Dane who wouldn’t quite meet my eyes. “My apologies. Tis a bad temper I have when caged.” He replied by way of answer.

“That way.” I told him pointing down the hall in the opposite direction. “Now that my parents are gone I believe that side of the hall can be yours.”

“No.” He told me a stubborn look on his face.

“Yes.” I replied sweetly. “Or it’s the Sidhe and a long nap for you too.” I warned him.

He sucked air into his lungs while beside me Gareth and Jace suddenly looked less dejected and a little more hopeful.

“But the law...”

“Doesn’t say I have to sleep with you only let you near me while I have sex with other Dragons. And since I won’t be doing that tonight...” I told him abruptly while Jace and Gareth grumbled and looked like they might want to say something but thought better of it. “Besides you’ve already had release tonight.” I hissed at him and watched while his face went dusky. “Which is more than either Jace or Gareth can say thanks to you! So I suggest you back off before I do something both of us might regret. In the meantime...I’m going to bed.”

“Ah Mistress....shall I join you?”

“What do you think?”

“That you are still angry with me and I’ll be sleeping alone tonight too.” He replied with a grimace.

“See I knew you were smart.” I replied then left them all standing there as I marched down the hall toward my bedroom. Areth helped me undress and I asked her for something...similar to what she had given me the night before while I went and soaked in my tub. When I was done I donned my nightgown...a beautiful creation in pale yellow with matching sheer robe. The material was silk and clung to my damp skin. I tied the robe at my breasts and moved to the door, the skin of my legs flashing through the long slit.

Lira and Roral were standing guard outside my door and I frowned at them realizing without my parents here they had obviously reverted back to me. Their auras slid to orange-red at the sight of me and I bit my lip and wondered if I was going to be in trouble.

“Good evening Princess, you look...well.” Lira made a point of telling me while he took a moment to look me over. I nodded as I crossed the hall opening the door to their quarters.

“May we assist you?” Roral asked softly as he reached to hold the door above my shoulder. His voice caused gooseflesh to skitter across my arms. It sounded low and sexy and curious. I stared up at him while his eyes glided over my hair and his fingers twitched. His body leaned into mine and I had to wonder at the sincerity of his sudden interest as I glanced up into his pale green eyes.

“No, I’m fine.” I told them and felt a questioning pressure against my mind. They filed in behind me so close I could feel them brush the back of my robe and as I turned toward the first door on the right, Lira slid in front of me, his body blocking the doorway. I stopped, looking up at him and slowly raised an eyebrow as I did so. His stance wasn’t threatening, but his eyes told a different story. I supposed they were still angry with me and sighed softly deciding the least I could do was give them the courtesy of expressing themselves. Better just to let them have their say than let it fester inside them.

“Your departure from the event this evening was...quite spectacular.” Lira informed me while Roral hovered at my shoulder. “It has been a very long time since either of us has seen Dragons and never one so beautiful as you.”

I took a deep breath and stared into his unique eyes. “My Mother hasn’t even been gone an hour.” I informed him in a cool voice and watched as his eyes narrowed slightly and his nostrils flared. Roral shifted next to me his chest actually brushing against my shoulder. “I’m not sure if I should be insulted or not.”

“Far be it from me to criticize Princess, but had you looked closer you would have realized it was not desire we feel for your Mother...though I admit she has always held a certain fascination given her position.”

I tilted my head and considered his words. He was correct. I had not searched their hearts or minds. I had merely let my eyes draw conclusions. Honestly though, how could I poke about when their shielding was as fierce as Amras’ and Cursed’s ever was?

Lira considered my thought and told me softly. “You could have asked.”

“I was to say...drop your shields I wish to muck around in your minds?” I asked my voice sounding skeptical even to me. “And you would simply have laid all that you are bare to me?” And I shook my head and smiled grimly. “I would not have presumed, nor been so rude. And now you claim I was mistaken...yet you provide no proof to convince me otherwise.”

Roral made a soft noise and replied. “Then see us.” And the wall surrounding their minds slid away and I was swamped in their emotions. Anger and frustration poured over me coated with a bittersweet desire. I staggered slightly and Roral’s fingers clasped my arms drawing me against his chest. The pleasure he felt when his hands touched my skin nearly took me to my knees and I trembled slightly while their minds rolled me. Lira hummed deep in his chest and I raised my eyes to his again. This time I truly saw him as I had never done before. His desire was like a raging forest fire and I wondered how he managed to keep it hidden so well. The skin over his cheeks tightened as I stared up at him in amazement.

“You couldn’t be more wrong.” He informed me and I swallowed as he shared with me the memory of his arrival here and what my actions with Marcus had done to him. And how he felt each time I had taken pleasure in another man. Roral’s mind joined his and it was like viewing a movie in stereo. One that left me gasping for breath and fighting the need to take us all to the floor in a tangle of lust crazed body parts. Roral’s fingers gripped me tightly and I could feel the hard length of him pressing into me through the thin material of my nightgown. I licked my lips and held perfectly still knowing how very close I was to losing control. I needed help.

“Lexi?” Owen called to me and I slowly turned my head to see him standing just down the hall. Across from him both Kit’s and Cursed’s doors were open their eyes intent as they watched me struggle to control the flood of desire coming off Lira and Roral. My gaze fused to Cursed’s and it gave me the strength I needed to step away from Roral.

“You may remain here.” I rasped and pushed past Lira and through the doorway closing it firmly behind me. I placed my back against the portal dragging a huge lungful of air into my chest while I tried to still the frantic beating of my heart. My eyes closed and I took a moment to try to calm myself. When I opened them again I glanced around at the beauty spread out around me, my mind focusing on my surroundings like a life preserver.

A huge orange moon hung above me and stars lit the night sky, so large they looked as if I could reach out and touch them. There was nothing but sky and forest as far as my eyes could see. I inhaled deeply and realized as I had the last time I’d been here that somewhere in this place were pine trees, for their sharp scent teased my senses though I could not see them from where I stood.

I leaned against the door and spoke the name of the man I had come for. The trees were slender, their bark white with leaves that shown silver in the night air. At the sound of Amras’ name they rustled and murmured softly. There was a flash of movement within the trees just as Amras stepped out. His chest was bare as were his feet, his only clothing his leather pants and in his hand his curved blade still in its

sheath. “Princess, how may I serve you?” He asked and my heart contracted at the sound of his voice.

Behind me the door vibrated suddenly as if something very large struck it and I could hear the faint sounds of yelling while the door shook again. Amras tilted his head to the side as if listening. “Perhaps you should come away from there just now.” He urged me.

My feet moved me toward him and his arms opened to draw me close. “May I sleep with you?” I asked against his chest and felt his surge of pleasure wrap around my mind just as his arms held me to him.

“I would be honored...come.” He replied and drew me into the trees along a well worn path. He held my hand, while we walked silently through the trees which whispered and sighed above our heads, though there was no breeze. He brought me to a small meadow and drew me to a bower at the opposite edge of the trees. His bed was lined with the softest of lichen and blankets that looked to be Elven they were so finely woven. He placed his blade on the ground within reach and turned to me. My fingers spread across his stomach and down to the top of his pants into the lacings which I loosened quickly. My hands slipped inside, cupping him gently. I stared up into his eyes and licked my lips while he grew long and hard between my palms.

His hands moved over my shoulders and up my neck then his fingers slid into my hair. He tilted my chin back with his thumbs and moaned softly just before his lips brushed against mine. His mind, usually so controlled, opened to me and I was overwhelmed by the chaos of his thoughts. “This is what you do to me.” He whispered against my lips. “What you have done to me since I first came to be with you.” My hands slid around to his sides and I eased his pants over his hips. He continued to kiss me stepping out of the legs then drawing me in against his body. I purred deep in my throat at the feel of him and his fingers released my ties so he could ease my robe off my shoulders. My straps slid down my arms and we stood naked together in the moonlight, our bodies touching while my heartbeat echoed the pleasures to come.

Amras lifted me into his arms and held me against his chest while I slipped my arms around his neck. He turned and laid me upon his bed, following me down and covering my body with his oh so gently. I opened my legs for him and he positioned himself between them. When he pierced my body my eyes fluttered closed and I reached for him, holding him to me, pulling him in and drowning myself in the feel of his pleasure.

Chapter 21

I dreamt I was riding a Unicorn with huge purple eyes and a long silky mane and tail. We raced the sunrise along the surf to the sounds of hoofs and crashing waves filling the air. Salty spray covered my naked body and dripped from my lashes as I held onto the beast with my legs while the wind's fine fingers plucked at me. In that in between place where light and darkness vie for control we ran. I clung to my beast and realized it was no longer a pale Unicorn but something dark as midnight with red eyes and long fangs. The fur on its back was as smooth as velvet between my legs and I buried my hands in its silky mane and held on as it turned us into the water so that it was soon over my knees and rising fast. When the water was at my waist I pulled at the mane, trying to steer my beast back to the water's edge. It shifted yet again and I found myself astride a grey beast of bones and tautly stretched skin. It turned on me and grabbed me pulling me under the water and holding me there while I struggled and swallowed mouthfuls.

“Lexi! Hear me.” A voice commanded the tone urgent. “You must wake, release the dream...take my hand...come back to us.” Then fingers appeared before me and I reached for them clutching tightly as I felt myself drawn from the water into the light.

I could hear my ragged breathing and cracked open an eye moaning at the pain in my head. I lay on the bed of moss and beside me both Cursed and Amras were slumped as if in a faint. Roral and Lira stood next to Kit and Owen their eyes worried faces pale.

I gagged and coughed while a vile smelling fluid spewed from my mouth. Owen plucked me from the bower and turned me so that the fluid was released from my lungs into the grass of the meadow. Where the clear fluid touched the grass it turned black and withered. Kit held my hair back from my face as I vomited up every last ounce from my lungs.

When I was done Owen carefully lifted me into his arms and seated us on the meadow floor away from the charred ground. Lira and Roral assisted Amras and Cursed who were moaning and clutching their heads while trying to sit up.

My head rolled against Owen’s shoulder and my body felt as if it had been deprived of oxygen and was just coming back to life. Pins and needles stabbed through every limb and I moaned and shifted in his lap wanting to scream but somehow managing to restrain myself. The feeling lasted several minutes, long enough for Amras and Cursed to be helped into a sitting position where they remained, heads held in hands their posture unsteady.

When the worst of the pain had fled I tried pushing myself to my feet only to be held firmly by Owen. “I need...to help them.” I breathed and sighed when he rose and carried me across the distance that separated us. He went to a knee, balancing me so that I could place a hand on each of them. I pulled air into my lungs and forced the healing out of my body and into theirs. And then sweet bliss rose up to enfold me and I felt Owen grab me as I slipped sideways.

“That was not wise My Lady.” Cursed chastised me when I came around the second time. I smiled wanly up into his healthy face and reached a shaky hand to his cheek.

“Were hurting.” I whispered my throat feeling like sandpaper.

He reached for my hand and bit me softly his sharp teeth leaving indentations in my skin. “I am sorry.” He whispered when his tongue lathed the pressure marks. I sighed and curled into a ball in Owen’s lap struggling to keep my eyes open.

“S’okay.” I rasped and rubbed my cheek against the soft hair as I wrapped myself around Owen’s arm. “Feels good.”

And then Amras was there and his fingers pushed back my hair from my face. “Princess you must not sleep.” He told me firmly and plucked me from Owen’s lap. “You must wake and change.”

“Mmm already naked.” I rasped as I looked at him from beneath my lashes. He smiled and shook his head his hair spilling around him so that it brushed my cheek and hand. I moved my fingers slightly and grasped a lock. “So beautiful like silk.” I breathed.

“It’s like she’s drugged.” I heard Owen remark.

“Or drunk.” Kit offered as I moved my body suggestively against Amras.

“I’ve never seen her like this before.” Owen muttered while I ran my tongue over Amras nipple.

I blinked then stared in wonder at the strobbing lights reflected on Amras’ chest murmuring softly. My finger traced the lights across his smooth skin for several seconds and then I turned my head and stared at Cursed and my nostrils flared as I pulled the scent of him into my lungs. The lights increased and I struggled suddenly my body leaning toward Cursed. My eyes narrowed and soon I was fighting Amras in my attempt to reach Cursed a low hissing noise filling the air.

“Stay back.” Owen growled when Cursed lifted his hand toward my outstretched fingers.

Lira and Roral reached for me and Lira cried out as I raked him with my nails. They dragged me to the ground where I continued to struggle trying to reach Cursed who stared in horror at me.

“Get Gareth and Jace.” Owen told Kit harshly. “She’s been poisoned and needs to shift.”

Voices filled the air while I clawed and bit anything within reach in my attempt to get to Cursed. It was like a burning in me excluding all other thought. I had to have him. Smoke leaked from my nostrils and Kit cried out sharply.

Then minds pressed in on me and I screamed and choked from an internal pressure, my body feeling like it was tearing itself apart. More hands held me while alien thoughts forced themselves into my mind. I screamed again and something was inside me coaxing, wheedling, and I writhed and my scream turned into a roar as I shifted then shifted again. I found myself at the bottom of a pile of six or seven people all smelling of blood and fear.

“Can someone please get their knee out of my kidney?” I asked politely while bodies scrambled off me. I grunted at the force some of them used to disentangle themselves but finally found myself still naked. My hair a rats nest wrapped round my neck and face, as I stared up at everyone. Everyone including Lira and Roral, and much to my chagrin, Dane too. “Gee that was fun.” I replied and then was yanked off the ground and into Jace’s arms as he went to his knees on the grass.

“What the hell happened here?” Gareth demanded.

“Well let’s see.” I started. “I was sleeping and then I was riding a Unicorn which turned into something black that ran into the water then turned into a bag of bones with dried grey skin which dragged me under. Then I was here and suddenly felt an itch for Cursed. And now I’m here again...and it would be nice to have some clothing?” And I looked at Kit who widened his eyes and snapped his fingers. I grimaced when I looked down, then sighed. It would have been better to have asked Owen I thought, trying not to grit my teeth. Apparently Kit had found my pale yellow bathrobe...the see through one, and figured that would suffice. “Ah..thanks.” I

muttered and put my legs together with as much modesty as I could muster. “I’m not sure...but I think you might have been right when you said your Uncle was going to be mad at us.” I told Cursed as I glanced at him over Jace’s shoulder. He looked pale and nearly as shaken as I felt.

“Who’s his Uncle?” Dane asked when no one else spoke.

I sighed and shook my head burying my face in Jace’s neck. Mmmm he smelled good, I thought to myself and tensed when Jace shifted beneath me. “Let me up.” I whispered knowing that being this close to him was doing things to me.

Jace spread his hand across my back and stroked me gently causing me to suck air into my lungs. Of course it only excited me more since I managed to pull a lot more of his scent into my body. Around me the others were speaking but I’d lost my ability to concentrate. I struggled to maintain my control by breathing shallow and trying not to move. It didn’t help...the heat from Jace’s body seeped into me sending fireworks off as mini electrical currents jumped between his skin and mine. Much more of this and I’d be stuttering.

“I’d like to go now.” I said in a small voice and was completely ignored. Biting my lip I debated my options and tried not to fidget in Jace’s lap. I tried counting blades of grass and then trees which didn’t help in the least since I couldn’t seem to remember what number I was on. “Lira come here!” I demanded sharply which caused him to jump. Everyone stopped talking and stared down at me.

Lira turned his wide two tone eyes on me and immediately sank to a knee in front of Jace. My breath was coming in short gasps when I reached for him and Jace growled beneath me causing me to shift slightly. I stared at the fresh gashes down his cheek and bit my lip. Lira also had bruising around his eye and scrapes on his knuckles. “Um...sorry about that.” I said and placed my palm upon him healing him in a matter of seconds. Roral looked at me and held up his forearms and I winced and motioned him to the ground. Like Lira he also looked more battered than our recent struggles would have accounted for and I eyed his split lip and abraded chin knowingly. When he was all better I turned to Amras who was covered in nasty bite marks across

his upper chest and neck. Apparently he'd been closest to me when I'd started in with my teeth.

He smiled softly and knelt before me. "Twice in one day Princess." And I nodded while gritting my teeth and trying to ignore the feel of Jace beneath my lap.

When I was done with him I glanced around and my eyes found Dane who was looking at me strangely. He held up his shirt and I sucked in another breath as I caught sight of his superb abs and the three deep gashes. I wasn't sure what bothered me more, his body or the wounds. He moved toward me and I whimpered softly, pressing back against Jace which caused Dane to hesitate. Everyone held their breath while he stared back at me and I felt the same itching sensation I'd experienced yesterday spread like a heavy blanket over my body.

"No no no no no." I muttered under my breath. "Help me." I begged Jace while I buried my face in his neck. My fingers clenched in his shirt as shudders wracked my frame. I knew it wouldn't be long before I was screaming and the thought scared the hell out of me.

"Hush." Jace whispered and his clothing was suddenly gone. He lifted me onto his lap and positioned my legs to either side. The feel of him sliding into me immediately stilled my tremors but couldn't stem the tears which flowed like rain from my eyes. He held me while I cried brokenly against him. The soft words he murmured lost in my hair. My sobs had long since turned to sniffles then dried up altogether when he gently began moving his hips beneath me. "Do you remember what I said to you last night...in the hills?" He whispered against my cheek and I nodded. "Lexi...I need you...please." He whispered.

I nodded and pulled myself together. Feeling sorry for myself wasn't going to change anything. Jace needed me and he'd given so much to me I couldn't deny him. Leaning back I ran my fingers over his widow's peak and kissed the tip of his nose. "I'll do better." I told him and gave him a lopsided smile. His eyes looked worried but nodded and smoothed the hair down my back.

“It hurts me to see you looking so tragic.” He admitted. “And yet I can’t be sorry that you need us. Is that selfish of me?”

I leaned my forehead against his and sighed. “Perhaps a little, but I forgive you.”

“Please?”

I nodded and closed my eyes, allowing myself to savor the feel of him within me. I lifted my hands to his shoulders and began rocking my body in time with him letting go of all the worry and hurt and concentrating on Jace. “Let me in.” I whispered and his shield dropped away and I slid into his mind and reveled in the passion and tenderness he felt for me. His aura shifted to light red and I breathed deeply and blinked, feeling my eyes being to whirl for him. His hands cupped my breasts and I dropped my head back while his lips nibbled and teased me. He made low pleased noises against my skin and I felt my pulse increase.

“Oh Goddess!” I whispered and took him by the hand and showed him my door. Together we opened it and my passion spilled out over us both. Jace cried out as well as another voice behind me and I ignored it, my mind and body focused on Jace. And then Gareth was with us, his mind sliding in as he wrapped himself inside our passion and fanned the flames even higher. Jace picked me up and laid me on the grass, his body coming over mine, sliding deep inside and I held on to him while his hips pressed me into the grass and he rode me hard. I reached for the door again and fanned my desire over him. His back arched and he cried out again his body shuddering while he brought us both in a heart stopping moment of complete fulfillment.

With his face buried against my neck I wrapped my arms about him and held him to me. We stayed that way for several minutes and then he kissed my lips and lifted himself from me. I opened my eyes and murmured softly as Gareth slid over me his body hard and hot, his eyes urgent. “Open for me Lexi.” He whispered and I reached for him while he released his shield. I arched my back and came as he slid inside me. The combination of his desire and the feel of him in my body sent me over

the edge and crashing down the other side. Gareth wasted no time, his strokes strong and nearly brutal as he slammed himself into me until I felt the pressure building inside me again, spilling out and over and arching me off the ground again as I came.

My eyes were wild, my breathing erratic as I looked up at him and realized he was nearly frantic in his desire. The skin over his cheekbones tightened and his eyes whirled madly. “Now Lexi...please!” He groaned while I shoved open the door once again. His body jerked and his head flew back, the veins in his neck standing out while I felt him explode inside of me and clenched around him in response. His lips came down upon mine and he rolled us over draping my body across his while I sucked air into my lungs and collapsed against his chest.

A low moaning sound caused me to crack open an eye and I glanced in surprise at Dane who was on his hands and knees, his head hanging down between his arms. He looked...exhausted. I tipped my head back and looked at Gareth who licked his lips and winked at me. And I smiled and then laughed silently against his chest. Beside us, Jace was resting on an elbow, his legs slightly bent, and a devilish look in his green eyes. “Youngsters.” He replied with a smile as he waggled his eyebrows at me.

We didn't spend much time cuddling and it was only minutes before my legs were steady enough to stand...with a little assistance from Jace who brought me my nightgown and robe. I wasted no time in getting dressed nor did Gareth or Jace.

“Should we leave him here?” Jace asked his green eyes dancing. He couldn't seem to contain his glee over the fact that Dane was still wobbling on his hands and knees while the rest of us could have gone another round. And Gareth wasn't much better. I couldn't say that I blamed them if it kept him out of my body. He might have claimed the right of ascension but I wasn't under any obligation to stand around waiting for him if he couldn't perform.

“Tis clear this will take some getting used to.” Dane muttered then pushed himself up onto his knees. It seemed he was going to be a sport about it. “An I'll be

needing ta change me pants again.” He remarked his voice sounding amused. “This the third time in nae even twelve hours!”

I’m not sure why I took pity on him but I called for Kit who snapped his fingers and Dane was all dry again. I grinned at Gareth and Jace and asked Kit for some coffee which he supplied immediately the mug accompanied by his wicked grin and an evil laugh.

The mug had a picture of me with red horns and a pitchfork on it with the saying, “Dragons do it often but Demons do it best.” I grinned as I read it and turned it so both Jace and Gareth could too.

I blew steam across the top of the mug and my eyes flicked between Gareth and Jace and I lifted an eyebrow in challenge. Jace grinned and nodded while Gareth ran his hand over his face and braced himself. Kit’s red eyes nearly glowed with pleasure as I pulled the first taste into my mouth and rolled it oh so slowly over my tongue. Kit leaned in toward me, his body vibrating as he pulled the satisfaction out of the air surrounding me. Jace lost his smile and his eyes turned intense while Gareth swallowed and tried to breathe normally. Dane made a strangled sound and lifted his face to me while I slid the sweet yummy goodness down my throat. I closed my eyes and took my second sip pleased when Gareth rumbled low in his throat. His hands reached for me and my mug was lifted from my fingers my body plastered against the front of Gareth. Kit snapped his fingers and we were naked again. Jace’s hands reached for me and the three of us went down in a happy pile to the meadow floor.

When I finally lifted my head I looked around and found Kit seated Indian style with a proud expression on his face. He snapped his fingers and handed me my coffee and I grinned and reached for it while Jace and Gareth both groaned. Dane was passed out on his back snoring softly his pants stained again. I just had to laugh. I was lying across Gareth with Jace plastered to my back. The three of us had gone at it like kids in a candy store and I wouldn’t be surprise if I was sore later. As an object lesson it had been a doozie.

“Okay boys...I think fun and games time is over. I need to go workout now.” I told them tongue in cheek. My comment got me a chuckle from Kit and a swat on the bottom from Gareth who growled and made a face at me.

“Yes by all means we need to get up because if he wakes to find our tongues hanging out it will defeat the purpose entirely.” Jace replied in an amused voice. “Just give me a moment to remember where my limbs are.”

I swallowed the last of my coffee and handed the mug to Kit who snapped his fingers and disappeared it back to wherever it had come from.

We peeled ourselves apart and looked around for our clothing. Kit sighed and snapped his fingers and relieved us of the dubious task of getting ourselves into them without falling on our faces. Kit glanced at Dane and then eyed me thoughtfully. “If I leave him like that it’s going to hurt when he dries.” He told me with a smile.

“Hmmm dilemmas dilemmas.” I replied.

Jace winced in sympathy but Gareth grinned and remarked. “If you want to fly with the big Dragons, that’s the price you have to pay. He’ll be fine.”

No one was at the door when we made our way there. “I sent them off to rest.” Kit explained while we filed into the hall. “The Black wasn’t the only one you exhausted.”

I shook my head and smiled. “I’m just going to shower and head up to the training room.” I told Jace and Gareth and went up on my toes to kiss one after the other. “Did you want to come along?”

“We need to check in with Nick. The Press set up shop again last night and I think I’d like to see the morning papers.” Jace replied.

“I need food.” Gareth told me with a grin. “Need to keep my strength up. Make sure she eats something.” He told Kit then gave me a squeeze and headed down the hall.

I opened the door and found Amras leaning back against my pillows looking pleased. Cursed was sprawled across the foot of the bed with his head propped up on a couple of pillows. Both of them looked very relaxed and I sensed my recent

lovmaking with Jace and Gareth had put everyone in a mellow mood. Kit propped himself up on my bed too and looked at me and then at the picture across the room. I turned following his glance, then wandered over and stared at it in dismay. Before the picture had only shown Jace, Gareth, Owen and my Dad in detail. With Kit, Amras, and Cursed partially in shadow. Behind me and closest to the group in the foreground was Marcus and Dane. Behind them spread out in various poses around the picture or room, were my other eight potential mates, their faces all in deep shadow.

Since I'd last looked at the portrait it had changed, my four were clearly visible as were Marcus and Dane. The shocking thing was that the light seemed to have shifted and now where the order had clearly been Red, Black, and then White. Both the Copper and Bronze were arranged next to the White as if the three would arrive at once.

I reached up and brushed at something on the frame. I thought it might be a spider but it hissed at me and I yanked back my hand starring in horror at a little black...monster with red eyes and sharp teeth. "Do not touch me Princess. I would not hurt you unintentionally." It lisped and Cursed was suddenly in front of me, his body blocking mine while Amras' hands pulled me backwards out of danger. Kit swirled up and leaned forward, his red eyes glowing.

"Explain yourself Spriggins?" Cursed demanded harshly his fists braced on his hips while he spread his legs and drew back his shoulders. His face looked harsh, poised...decisive. I'd never seen him look so...well...he looked like royalty at the moment. It was most impressive. The little...I wasn't certain what it was. It had a deformed body and glowing red eyes. Cursed called it Spriggins but I wasn't sure if that was its name or its race.

"Greetings O Mighty Prince of Air and Darkness. King Tdem Stoneshadow sends salutations." The little being hissed unpleasantly.

"Get to the point Uendt." Cursed told him bluntly.

Uendt if that was his name stood up on his hind feet and glanced between Cursed and myself. “You are commanded to bring the Princess before the King for formal introduction.”

Cursed took a moment to answer while his face and body gave nothing away. “The King cannot command the Princess.” He replied dismissively. “She has been recognized by the Queen of Light as a royal heir of the Seelie. It is for the Queen to determine if she will be presented.”

“As the Princess has accepted fealty from the Prince of Air and Darkness who is the heir and subject of the King of all Slaus, she has aligned herself with the UnSeelie. Therefore she is commanded to present herself before the King just as you are commanded to accompany her.”

“Were she merely Princess of Light to the Seelie that would be true.” Cursed told him calmly. “But the Princess is also a Dragon and therefore cannot be commanded by the King.”

Uendt hissed and glared at Cursed. “You have sworn fealty to a Dragon without permission from your King.”

“The Dragons have ever been allies to the Elves both Seelie and UnSeelie. Even before the destruction of Seriscail. I would hope the King would welcome the renewed alliance, and rejoice.”

The little monster considered Cursed for a moment and blinked his little red eyes. “She is fertile?” Uendt asked his voice sounding curious.

“She is...in Fecundty.” Cursed replied and I frowned wondering what that was supposed to mean. Apparently it excited Uendt for he chattered softly and nodded. “I will take your message to the King.” He replied once he managed to get himself back under control. “And we shall see.”

Cursed nodded once. “One more thing.” He added his voice sounding as cold as chipped ice. “Harming her will be seen as an act of aggression against the entire Dragon race. I do not need to remind you that I am sworn to protect the Princess with

my life. This morning she was visited by Nixies...I suggest you inform the King that he has a traitor amongst his people.”

“A traitor? What nonsense is this?” Uendt scoffed.

“Who else would dare attack the Princess in such a manner? Inform the King that should she be harmed again by any of the UnSeelie I will make a point of hunting down the traitor myself.”

Uendt glared back at Cursed then flicked his glance to me. I looked back at him and gave him my most haughty Elven expression. “He will be told.” And I watched in shock as a rent appeared in the very air and he crawled through it.

When the tear had healed itself I looked at Cursed. “You didn’t tell him we will go to the Sidhe?”

He nodded and turned to me, a worried look in his eye. “It is my desire to get you in and out quickly. The Drakes will not allow a lengthy stay and the Sidhe is a dangerous place for you.”

“When?” I asked calmly.

“My Lady?”

“When will we go? Amras’ risks the Queen’s wrath by extending his stay yet I have not been summoned. When will we go?”

Cursed glanced at Amras. “Soon, before The King learns of your plans. Cursed is right we need to get you in and out quickly.”

“All of us!” I replied stubbornly. “All of us out quickly.” And he pursed his lips and refused to meet my eyes. I sighed but turned and headed for the bathroom. “I’m going to shower and we can go to the training room. Afterwards we will chat with Jace and Gareth and I will call for Mi. Perhaps she can give advise us what would be best.”

Chapter 22

Dane was in the living room when we wandered down the hall. “Have a nice nap?” I asked sweetly and he lifted an eyebrow in response. Owen rose from his chair and moved to join us as we crossed to the hall.

“May I join ye?” Dane asked politely and I glanced first at Cursed and then at Amras but it was Kit that made the response.

“Oh please do. We’d love to see what you’re made of.” And he snapped his fingers and Dane was dressed in tight leather pants and lace up vest similar to Cursed and Amras. I had to bite my cheek to keep from laughing at the look of disgust on his face. Judging by the amount of hair on his chest...those pants weren’t going to be comfortable.

I had to give him credit though he simply sighed and rose gingerly from the couch while Kit eyed him closely as did we all. “Don’t even think it.” Owen growled when Kit turned his red gaze on him and eyed him up and down. Owen snapped his own fingers and changed to his normal short shorts and no shirt. I smiled and dipped

my head when Dane glanced at him and sighed again. Kit simply shrugged and led us down the hall his own shorts showing off his long muscular legs and cute bottom.

“Does this mean you are no longer angry at me?” Kit asked over his shoulder.

“I’m thinking about it...in the meantime it means I think you have nice legs and a cute butt.” I told him dryly while the others chuckled.

I spent the ride to the second floor thinking about Valentine and wondering what he might do to us now that we’d taken Marcus from him then fretting about the White, Copper, and Bronze from my picture. Life used to be so boring before I came here. No running or screaming or....

“Sex.” Kit finished for me. “No sex, no earth shattering pleasure, no mind altering can’t get enough of it right this second sex!”

“Only because you made it impossible for me to have had any before now!” I muttered pushing my way out of the elevator as I led us all down the hall.

“Yes thanks to me! You might notice that there wasn’t any convulsing on the floor either...of course you probably just think that’s a coincidence.” He grumbled while I turned and stuck my tongue out at him. “And by the way...I have the contract you left it in the meadow!” He raised his voice and called after me. I stopped dead in my tracks and turned to look at him. “Ha thought that might get your attention.”

“You better not have opened it.” I warned him.

“What’s that saying...loser weeper...finder keeper?”

“I prefer the one that goes...what’s mine is mine and what’s yours is mine too. You belong to me, I told him shaking my wrist and setting my Dragons to jingling... therefore anything you have is mine. I’ll expect it back when we’re done here.” I told him crisply then turned and trotted down the steps toward the track.

When I glanced back I found that Amras and Cursed had joined me as had Dane. Kit was over watching the wrestling and Owen was chatting with one of the other guards. I slowed down and brought myself even with Amras who was glancing around and looking like he was out for a Sunday stroll. I enjoyed watching him and Cursed run, they were both so light on their feet. My eyes slid to Dane and I realized

he wasn't doing so badly himself for such a big guy. He flashed me a grin and spread his hands and I picked up the pace. On the sixth lap Kit loped up from behind us in wolf form which caused Dane to make a strangled noise and veer sharply on the track. I suppose if you didn't know it was him the sight of a four foot tall wolf with big red eyes might be somewhat alarming.

"Hoping his heart might burst?" Kit asked as he lopped along beside me. I gave him a dirty look and glanced at Dane who was in fact breathing harder than any of the rest of us. But then he had a good forty pounds on Cursed and was about two and half times bigger than me. It wasn't like I was lolly gagging us around the track either.

"No just seeing what he's made of." I replied with a grin and broke into a sprint. Cursed let out a yip behind me and he and Amras flashed past in a blur that made me smile. My braid swung wildly behind me in the breeze and I felt something tug on it then Dane pulled up next to me his long legs eating up the distance in several strides. Up ahead the others had come to a stop and were watching us. I glanced at Dane and kicked in my after burners...which got me to Amras and Cursed about half a step behind Dane.

I stood on the track with my hands on my thighs bent over sucking air into my lungs while Dane did the same. Owen wandered over and eyed me thoughtfully. "Had the finish line been three feet closer you might have won." He teased me and I nodded and pulled myself upright.

"Next the floor." I muttered and dragged myself off toward the mats. Dean and Nate were there and both took their places at the front row.

"Loved your exit last night." Dean told me when class was finished. "Have you seen the papers today?" He smiled when I shook my head. "You do photograph well." He informed me. "Who's the new guy?" He asked his eyes flicking to Dane who was standing at the edge of the mats eyeing me...not unlike Gareth and Jace did sometimes. Nate joined us and he too glanced in Dane's direction.

I sighed and shrugged. "Just a stray we dragged in from the party last night. He'll be staying with us."

“Hunter?” Nate asked while his dark brown eyes assessed him. Dane stood just a bit straighter and narrowed his black eyes, a clear sign he wasn’t happy with us looking him over like a piece of fresh meat.

“I doubt it.” I replied. “I haven’t asked.”

“He smells...odd.” Nate remarked.

“Hmmm.” I replied. “Are you two up for a little hand to hand?” I asked.

“Swords, or were you thinking something along the lines of yesterday’s practice session. Because I have to tell you I was hoping you might ask.” Dean replied with a grin while Nate nodded.

“Both but not with me....with him.” I told them and turned to point at Dane who was giving me a dirty look. Both men turned to glance at Dane with almost gleeful expressions. “Come here Dane.” I urged him and crooked my finger while he frowned but dropped his arms and moved in our direction. “I tell you what.” I offered when he reached us. “How about you three against me with swords?”

“Are you sure you wouldn’t prefer practicing your projections instead?” Nate asked with a grimace while Dane looked at me oddly. I reached out mentally and patted Nate on his butt and he jumped and chuckled.

“How about we do both?” I told him then looked around for Owen. “One thing, since there is three of you and just one of me, you get to fight fair while I get to...play.”

“Like you just did to my bottom?” Nate asked and licked his lips.

“Yep.”

Dean suddenly looked very interested and glanced around for Owen who was already heading in our direction. Perhaps he felt my sending and was coming to make sure I didn’t get myself into trouble.

“I dinna agree just yet Lassie. I’ll be knowing first what sort of play is this, and why would it be getting ye into trouble.”

Owen reached us and wrapped his hand around my arm and pulled me to the side. “I don’t think this is a good idea.” He warned me.

“They all have excellent hearing you know.” I replied in a normal voice and gave him a lopsided smile. “Look I need to practice my skills to improve. And if Dane’s going to stay he needs to fit in. Besides...what’s the worst that can happen? I break a bone and heal them...they break a bone and I heal me. I’m an excellent sparring partner. And like Kit said last week. Not everyone that comes against me is going to fight fair.” Then I smiled and shifted to Elvish. “And just look at them...they are all huge...which means they can’t come at me at once. Three is better that way than two.”

Owen grumbled while behind him Cursed and Amras nodded in agreement. “She’s right you know.” Amras told him.

“Fine.” Owen said and snapped his fingers and held out my sword to me. It was light and slightly curved and blunted along the edges.

I reached up and kissed his cheek giving his arm a squeeze. “You might want to keep everyone back. Some of my sendings might go astray and I’d hate to pull someone’s chest hair by mistake.” I finished loudly while Dean and Nate laughed and Dane looked confused. “I suppose I should give him a taste of what he might expect so he won’t have a heart attack in the middle of our session.” I told Owen and he tipped his head to the side.

“Let me get him armed first.” He told me and went to chat with Dane. Meanwhile Dean and Nate were warming up by practicing with each other using their blunted swords.

When Owen came back Dane was leaning on a long broadsword with a black and gold handle. The sword was about two and a half feet long and probably weighed five pounds. Note to self, slip the blade. I was not going to want to take the force of that monster.

“Okay Dane are you ready?” I asked stepping out to the middle of the mats and holding up a palm toward Dean and Nate. “In all fairness you should know what you might expect during our little game so here goes.” And I leaned on my sword and sent him the feel of my hands sliding down into the front of his pants while my fingers

teased into the curls at the juncture of his thighs. Behind me I heard Kit snicker but kept my eyes focused on Dane who looked like he wasn't sure what to think. His cheeks flushed and his eyes narrowed while he dragged air into his lungs and gripped his sword tighter. "Did you...get that?" I asked. "Would you like me to ah... demonstrate some more?" And this time I sent him the feel of my teeth at the soft flesh on his neck just behind his ear. He growled and blinked slowly. "Or how about this?" And I rocked onto the balls of my feet while I sent him the feel of my fingers sinking into the curls of his chest and pulling sharply. He yelled and lunged for me and I turned and parried his blade. His eyes were very angry as I smiled up at him and sent him a caress on the bottom.

"Pull my hair will ye?" He breathed as his blade slammed down against mine. I slipped it along the edge of my sword and swept his feet out from under him as I passed turning in time to catch Nate's blade with a force that vibrated up my arms. I danced out of grabbing range of Dane as he climbed back to his feet and found myself facing Nate and Dean. "Now boys..." I teased then sent Dean the feel of my fingers burrowing under the bottom of his tight shorts and he made a strangled sound and lunged for me. When one of them would get too close I'd send them the feel of my fingers tugging leg or a chest hairs. At one point I had Nate on the ground yelling from the feel of my fingers pinching his nipple. I would have been gentler but I knew he was enjoying it too much.

Dane became more wary of me and my antics when he lunged for me and I sent him the feel of me yanking his pants down over his hips. He actually reached for them thinking they were leaving his body and I swatted him on the bottom with the flat of my sword as I swept by which made him growl at me from the indignity of it all.

Nate pulled himself off the floor and together with Dean the two of them attacked me, forcing me backwards as I struggled to keep their blades from my person. Dean over extended himself and I grabbed his forearm and slid behind him tripping him as I went. He teetered off balance while I blocked Nate and shoved the same sense of ecstasy into him that I had given him at the end of our session yesterday and he flopped

onto the floor with a sigh. Nate glanced at Dean and leapt at me his eyes sparkling as he hammered away at my sword. I wasn't sure if he wanted to claim his prize from beating me or expected me to disarm him as I'd done with Dean.

We swept past Dane who was standing there watching the two of us and I mentally reached out and yanked his hair getting him moving again. Apparently he had an issue with ganging up on me. He'd refrained from doing so since we'd started. My hair pulling seemed to do the trick as he circled behind me while Nate hammered away on my sword. I figured if I didn't put one or both of them down soon I was going to be in trouble. Nate made an ah ha noise as he backed me over Dean still sprawled on the floor and I tripped and nearly went down myself. Dane reached for me and got the feel of my fingers gripping his unmentionables which caused him to choke and drop his hand immediately.

"Yaiiiiiee....Lassie that's nae fair!" He yelped at me and I would have smiled but I was a little busy keeping Nate from knocking me senseless.

"No grabbing and I get to play that was the deal." I told him breathlessly. Nate was really pressing me. I took a blow to the shin that made me yelp myself and I struggled to keep my concentration while I hopped backwards.

"Had enough yet?" Nate gasped his own breath sounding quite ragged. I guess if you were going to wave a six pound sword around for any length of time it might wear even someone in as good a shape as Nate out.

"Have you?" I asked him back and sent him the feel of teeth at the back of his knee. He shuddered and went down to one knee nearly dropping his sword and I reached for him flooding his senses with fulfillment and he slumped sideways onto the floor.

"What have ye done to them?" Dane demanded his eyes wide as he glanced between the two prone bodies on the floor, concern clearly covering his face.

"She gave them what they wanted." Kit told him then laughed at the confused look on Dane's face.

I put the tip of my sword on the floor and leaned on it, dragging air into my lungs and wiping the sweat off my brow with the back of my left arm. “They are fine Dane. A few bruises are all.” When he continued to look at me skeptically I wandered over to Dean and knelt beside him my fingers brushing at his hair. He opened his slightly glazed eyes and smiled up at me. “Hi there.” I said to him and he made mmm mmm noises in his throat and brushed his cheek against my hand. “How you feeling big guy?”

“Perfect.” Dean replied and closed his eyes again.

“See?” I told Dane. “He’s just suffering from really good afterglow. Kind of like you earlier today when you were snoring on your back in the middle of the field.” I told him and Kit laughed when Dane’s cheeks turned dusky. “Aren’t they cute?” I asked. “They’ve been assisting me with practice.”

“Tis this how ye reward them then?” Dane demanded his voice sounding.... annoyed.

“Well it was that or leave them all heated up with nowhere to go. That hardly seemed right. It’s not like I can practice this on myself you know. And if I tried it on one of my men we’d only end up...not practicing. These guys both volunteered and we aren’t harming anyone.”

“I dinna volunteer.” Dane reminded me. “I hardly call pulling my wee hairs sport. An if ye hadn’t noticed, I’m not flopped on the floor meself an tis fairly heated I am at the moment.”

“Did you want to be...flopped on the floor that is?” I asked, turning my head and glancing up at him.

“Not alone.” He informed me firmly and stared down at me with a frown. “I’ve had more than enough of that already I have.”

“Well I’m not having sex at the moment so you can either join the boys or grin and bear it. Your choice entirely.”

“I do nae care much for either.” He replied.

“Then I can’t help you.” And I got back up on my feet and went to check on Nate. “Nate you okay?” I asked and smiled when he wave his fingers at me.

“It’s all good.” He muttered.

“Great then I think I’m done here.” Owen got rid of our swords and I spied Nick talking to one of his men over by the weight benches and waved him over. “This is Dane. Dane this is Nick who runs things around here for Jace and Gareth. Dane is...staying with us for a while.”

“What are you?” Nick asked sharply his nostrils quivering. Dane ran his eyes over Nick’s body and then glanced at me.

“He’s like me...only without the special ingredients.” I told Nick and caught the surprised look on Dane’s face from the corner of my eye. Apparently no one had told him I was more than just Elf and Dragon.

“Lust Demon.” Kit leaned over my shoulder and wrapped his arms around my waist pressing his chest to my back. It seemed to annoy Dane even more. “And maybe a few other things we aren’t quite sure.”

I ignored Kit and told Nick. “There may be others joining us soon. You might look for men that...smell like Dane. Just as he’s black...we’re expecting White, Bronze, and Copper in case anyone shows up while we’re gone.”

“What about the Red?” Nick asked while he eyed Dane. “He’s on the front pages with you this morning. Is he here too?”

“No he won’t be joining us anytime soon. I sort of...gave him to my parents to watch. I needed to get him away from Valentine so they took him to the Sidhe.”

“If they do show up what would you like me to do with them?”

I chewed on my lip and put my hand over Kit’s running my fingers over his wrist distractedly while he pressed against me and made pleased noises in his throat. “Good question. I’m not sure how to answer it. If you send them away...we need to make sure they don’t fall into Valentine’s hands. If you keep them here and they cause problems.....see this just sucks. I have no idea what these yahoos are going to be like. For all we know they could be mass murderers or escapees from the loony bin! I just

don't know Nick...do whatever you think best. Hopefully it won't be a problem and no one will show up while we're gone. Although after my little stunt last night, I suspect it won't be long before the lot of them descend on us." I grumbled while he shook his head and frowned at me.

We piled into the elevator and Dane turned toward me. "Where are ye going and what tis the meaning of 'other things'?"

"The Queen has sent for me." Amras replied and the Princess plans to accompany me to the Sidhe for a short visit.

I glanced at Kit and eyed him thoughtfully while he stared at the floor and mumbled under his breath but it was Owen that added. "We think her Father's familiar, a Demon by the name of Knight, added a few other ingredients at conception or shortly thereafter which included Lust Demon, and we aren't sure what else. At the time he had access to her Father's lab which contained nearly every type of non-human and immortal DNA sample."

Dane thought that over and nodded. "Cloves an cinnamon." He replied. "Tis a heady combination."

The elevator doors opened and I headed down the hall. Gareth and Jace were in the living area chatting and I went to Jace who was closest and gave him a kiss then crossed to Gareth and did the same. His arm snaked up and he pulled me into his lap. "You taste...salty." He informed me as he nuzzled my neck. "Have you eaten?"

"No...not yet. We just finished upstairs." I replied while the others flopped down on the couches around us. Dane grimaced but seated himself and I glanced at Owen taking pity on him. Owen nodded and Dane sighed as his leather was replaced by a soft pair of worn jeans and a T-shirt that hugged his body nicely.

Jace pushed himself off his chair and headed to the Kitchen while we made small talk. He came back with a plate full of the four basic food groups and took a seat next to Gareth. I leaned back in Gareth's arms and curled my feet into his lap while I let Jace feed me. The others discussed the morning papers strewn about on the coffee tables. From where I sat I could see several shots of us as we took flight as well as one

or two of us coming down the carpet when we first arrived. From the next couch over Dane eyed the three of us from beneath his lashes but kept his comments to himself. He didn't seem to be a big talker and I appreciated that.

I was just finishing my breakfast when the elevator dinged and there was a knock at the door. Cursed was closest and he went to answer it, standing back and giving me an irritated look while I glanced over Gareth's shoulder in surprise as six of Nick's men carted in stacks of brightly wrapped presents and several floral bouquets.

"There's more upstairs." One of the men whose name I didn't know informed us. "We could use some help getting them down here."

I glanced at Kit who rose from his chair. "Where?" He asked and the guard told him they were stacking them on the landing in the club upstairs. Kit disappeared in a swirl of black and silver then reappeared seconds later with an amazed look on his face. "Wow." He said and snapped his fingers and a pile of presents nearly as tall as Owen and about ten feet wide appeared between the Kitchen and the living room. The flowers he spread around the room on the end and coffee tables and the room immediately began smelling like a florist shop.

"Wow is right! What is all this?" I demanded, crawling out of Gareth's lap and reaching for the card in the nearest bunch of flowers. "This one's from Channel 10 News." I muttered and waved the others at the cards.

"Channel 3." Amras informed me.

"The San Francisco Daily." Owen advised us as he too held up a card. The others reached for cards and all of them appeared to be from news outlets or businesses around town. I had them toss the cards in a pile in the middle of the table and then had Owen get rid of the flowers. He didn't say where they went and I didn't ask, but I suspected the local hospitals might be wondering who their benefactor was.

With the flowers all gone I turned and looked at the stack of presents and wandered over to the pile. "Areth?" I called and smiled when she appeared sitting daintily on a box with a big blue ribbon.

"Princess?" She asked and glanced around in wonder.

“Hi there I’m going to require...help. I need some way of keeping track of what came from whom. I think I’m going to have to send thank you cards.” I told her frowning at the pile and shaking my head.

“I can assist you.” She told me and waved her hand. In the air next to her a feather pen and scroll appeared much like the one the little man had used when we had invoked Kit’s contract. “Simply state the article and whom the gift is from, and it will be recorded.” She advised me while Dane muttered across the room. I couldn’t tell if it was Areth or the scroll and pen that surprised him more.

“That will work.” I told her and she disappeared with a smile. “Now who wants to help me open presents?” I asked and Cursed was the first to volunteer.

“I do, My Lady.” He replied with a frown. “To ensure there is nothing in one of the boxes intended to harm you.” That pretty much got the others moving and soon we were ripping paper and I was wrapping bows and ribbons round our necks. It was like Christmas in May. When every last box had been opened I sat on the edge of the couch and looked around. There were mugs, platters, stuffed animals, kites, jewelry, clothing, shoes, and purses. Someone had even sent me a bike. It was like every shop in the town had chipped in something.

“I think you just became the town’s mascot.” Jace told me adding when I frowned at him. “People are going to flock to the city to see you. I think this is our town’s way of saying thank you for the future business. I imagine in a few days you’ll be on mugs and posters in every store.”

I glanced at the coffee table and this morning’s newspaper. The top half of the paper was a picture of the five of us circling City Hall. “Actually...I think we’ll all be.” I told him then laughed when he grimaced. “Just think of it Jace...your very own fan club.” And laughed again when he rubbed his hand over his face and shook his head.

I made sure I named off all the floral arrangement donators and got them onto the list. When I was done I called for Areth again and she promised to get thank you cards out to everyone. Owen got rid of the garbage for me and when he would have

snapped his fingers to get rid of the rest of it...I asked him to put the jewelry, clothing, purses and shoes in my room, which he was kind enough to do. Hey, some of those purses were worth a lot of money and the shoes...well a woman never turns down shoes.

Chapter 23

I went to shower and when I came out of my bathroom naked, drying my hair with my towel, I discovered Dane laying across my bed watching me. He was wearing jeans and a black button up shirt with the sleeves rolled back. He looked like he'd already showered and had been waiting a while. By the time I noticed him it was too late to escape back into the bathroom and I while I wasn't happy about walking around naked in front of him, screaming and pretending maidenly airs seemed extreme. Especially since he'd already seen me in the altogether earlier. Instead I simply wandered over to the bed and the clothing Areth had laid out for me.

"I'd ask what you're doing in here but that seems pretty obvious." I told him while I reached for a pair of lacy panties lying on the bed. His hand flashed out and wrapped around my wrist and I glanced down at his fingers then slowly up into his eyes.

"Leave them." He told me and slowly tugged me toward him. I dug my heels in and frowned at him.

"What do you think you're doing?" I demanded.

“I’d very much like ta be tasting ye.” He replied in a coaxing tone. “Tis a kiss I’ll be wanting.”

“Do the others know you’re in here?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I’m here I am.” He told me while he pulled me against the bed. “Walked right past them did I not?” Which meant they were all in the other room listening in and how special was that?

“Look Dane.” I tried while he continued with the pressure and I found myself bending over the bed. “I don’t have anything against you personally...it’s just that it’s all a bit sudden.”

“An it’s worry over others perception that concerns ye?” He added and I nodded and lifted a knee onto the bed while he slowly continued the pressure on my wrist. “Believing its no natural for yerself to be entertaining so very many different men are ye?”

“Well...yes actually it isn’t. Is it?” I asked as my other knee came up onto the bed.

“Tis not something ye need concern yerself with. Are ye not a Queen aye? An tis it not yer right to be taking as many Drakes to yer bed as ye can? Tis our duty to serve ye is it not? So where be the shame in that I’m asking.”

“You think I’m a Queen and the rules for other women don’t apply to me?” I asked while I chewed on my lip and knelt on the bed. He was sitting up now his fingers still locked around my wrist and I could feel his black eyes caressing my skin.

“Aye they do not. To be sure ye need strength. Tis our attendance upon ye that ensures the powers continue to grow so ye can become a proper Queen. Tis the natural order of things ye kin?”

I wasn’t certain I agreed emotionally, but what he said made sense. Mi had told me my powers would grow with sex. According to Dane the Drake’s were duty bound to support me in growing my powers. “Why so many?” I asked then tried again when he just looked at me in confusion. “Why does it have to be so many Drakes...why isn’t Gareth and Jace enough?”

He sighed and his thumb stroked across my wrist. "Can ye deny the power in yer pleasure is a force to be reckoned with?" He asked and I thought about it and shook my head. "Then believe me when I say...twill only get stronger, an tis the power that draws Drakes to Court. The stronger yer power the larger yer Court ye kin?"

"My Court?" I asked and turned my head to look at him. "You Drakes are my Court and your job is to pleasure me so I can grow stronger?"

"Aye."

"And I need lots of you because I'm getting stronger and therefore will need more of you to...ah serve me?" I asked, my eyes widening at the thought. "I need you to feed off like some sort of Vampire?" I asked feeling a little nauseous at the thought.

"Nae ye need us so ye can become fertile."

"I'm very confused." I replied and flopped down on my side then rolled onto my stomach propping my chin into my hands and staring down at the comforter. His fingers stroked my hair worrying at the knots in it while I struggled to get my mind around what he had told me. "I need you to make me fertile and you need me for what?"

He chuckled and gave my hair a tug. "Why would any man be needing a woman?" He teased and I frowned.

"So...you make me fertile and I give you sex?"

"And wee ones." He replied. "Tis the greatest gift of all an tis why we share."

"Because I need more of you to help me reach my power and become fertile?" I asked and he smiled and nodded.

"Aye ye kin now."

"The more of you I have sex with the better my odds of increasing my power and becoming fertile so I can produce offspring. You act as my Court and protect me while providing me with...variety." This time he drew the back of his finger down my cheek and over my lips while my eyes widened and I met his eyes.

“Variety ensures your continued good health. Tis why the rules dinna apply to ye. Why I would very much like to join the Court so I may perform my duty an assist in keeping ye healthy and...dare I say happy?”

“Hmm...you almost make it sound...like a chore.”

He leaned down on his side next to me bracing himself on his elbow and moved my hair to the side so he could run his fingers over my shoulder and down my back. “Would it help if I were to speak of yer beauty? Or tell of how I’ve been searching to find ye since the first morning I woke and had shared yer dream? That I am in love with ye Lass?” He admitted and I turned my head toward him and he dropped his shield revealing his mind to me. A forced calm coated his emotions controlling them with an iron fist. I could sense the layers boiling and churning underneath and it occurred to me that he was much older than I had guessed...he was perhaps the first. There was about him a quiet hint of growing excitement at being so close to me...to the possibility of us. A need to be accepted and...wanted. Take me he offered, and use me his mind whispered, while I licked my lips and felt my heartbeat accelerate.

“Can you...take off your shirt?” I asked and his eyes widened and he sat up, and in one smooth motion he pulled his T-shirt over his head. His fingers went to the top button on his jeans and he hesitated then eased himself onto his back and turned his head toward me. My eyes swept his upper body and once again I felt myself quicken at the sight of his abs. His chest was deep and covered in a light patch of inky black curls that stretched from nipple to nipple and arrowed down the center of his body in a fine line that disappeared under the waist band on his jeans. The three gashes I had given him earlier were still there and I made a surprised sound in my throat and sat up abruptly reaching for him. My palm met his flesh and my body actually arched at the shock that passed from his skin to mine. Biting my lip I forced myself to maintain contact while I pushed the healing into him and felt his skin knit beneath me.

“You fought me with that under your leather.” I scolded.

“Tis nae but a wee scratch then.” He told me with a small smile.

“You can heal yourself can’t you?”

“Aye...but tis not like yer healing.”

“I mean...you heal when you shift don’t you?” I asked and had a bad thought. Marcus hadn’t healed himself either. Was it that they were unable to during shift?

“Dinna fash yerself Lass, I heal. Tis just that it takes great effort to shift to be wasting it on such a minor thing.” His comment made me wonder just what kind of an injury he’d consider major enough to shift for.

“How great an effort?” I asked and trailed my fingers over the ridges on his stomach in fascination.

“Not enough to be leaving me banjaxed to be sure. Tis no unreal bad.” He advise me and I turned my head sideways trying to decipher his meaning.

“That’s quite the accent you have there.” I told him. “Where did you pick that up?”

“Me mum.” He replied distractedly. His control was holding but my fingers running over his skin was causing a strain.

“Really tell me about your Mother.” I asked him and moved to the head of the bed and eased my back onto the pillows. Dane watched me, his eyes following my body and I patted my hip, inviting him to come with me and use me as his pillow. He lifted himself gracefully and when he was settled with his head resting on my hip he closed his eyes while my fingers slid into his hair, massaging his scalp.

A picture of a very small black haired woman with pale grey eyes, creamy skin and lovely features flashed across his mind and I murmured softly. “You mother was a Pixie?” I asked in wonder looking down at his huge body in awe.

“Aye that be the truth an originally from the Isle of Green.”

“And yet...you are so big?” I told him and he chuckled and laced his fingers together over his stomach. When I made an unhappy noise he opened his eyes to find me frowning at the view he had suddenly impeded and quickly removed his hands. I smiled and he flashed his teeth.

“The Gentry come in all sizes for sure.” He told me. “Tis the way of it Lass.”

The Gentry? Who were the Gentry?

“Fey, Faerie, those that dwell in the Sidhe.” He told me.

“And is your Mother living in the Sidhe now? Is that where you grew up?” I asked and traced his rounded ear with a finger tip.

“Nae, twas the countryside above New York where I grew to manhood. Far from the mounds.”

“Hmmm...and do you have any special talents. Aside from being Dragon that is?” I asked and he flashed me another smile and blinked and was all of two and a half feet and standing next to me on the bed. He had gossamer wings that shimmered in the light a vibrant black and orange yellow color with white dots and I sucked in my breath and stared at him. He was still wearing his jeans and he climbed onto my lap straddling my waist...his beautiful wings fanning across my thighs tickling my skin. His wing coloring was that of a monarch butterfly and I was enchanted.

“Ha an how would this be?” He asked his voice surprisingly deep to be coming out of such a little person.

“That is...amazing.” I told him quite impressed with his ability. “And do you find it taxing to shift to this size?” I asked wondering if it was just his change to Dragon that required energy.

“Tis easier than going Dragon.” He informed me with a sly grin then shifted once more to full size and was straddling my body, his legs to either side of me. He leaned over pressing his hands into the pillows next to my shoulders. “Will ye meet me then?” He asked and I frowned up at him while my hands rose and pressed against his chest.

“Meet you?”

“Kiss me, will ye kiss me then?” He whispered against my cheek while he brushed his lips over my skin in a gentle caress that ended at my mouth. He kissed me, his lips gently exploring, tasting me and when I opened for him he slid inside gently so that I wrapped my arms around him and pulled him closer. He eased his body down onto mine and I made a pleased sound in my throat letting him know it felt good. My fingers slid up into his hair and I held him to me, feasting at his mouth.

My bedroom door opened and slammed into the wall with a loud bang. I jerked and broke the kiss, turning in alarm to see Jace and Gareth stride into my bedroom and stalk to my bed. I watched in wide eyed fascinated horror as Jace crawled onto the end and seated himself there, his green eyes narrowed as he stared down at me. Gareth walked right up to the head and crossed his arms over his chest staring down at me with a lifted brow.

Dane pressed himself closer and I glanced sharply at him, just managing to tear my eyes away from Gareth's intense face.

"It occurred to us that we haven't yet officially declared ourselves." Jace told me his voice sounding annoyed. "So we thought we might remedy the oversight immediately. I declare."

"I too declare." Gareth added as I glanced between the two of them. "You may proceed with butterfly boy while we...observe."

"For now." Jace offered and stretched out across the foot of the bed propping himself up on one elbow.

Dane made a low angry sound and I glanced down at him to find his eyes were whirling and his mind shuttered once again. Talk about your performance pressure. This was the first time either of them had offered to watch let alone threaten to participate. Aside from trying to protect me neither had come near me while I had occupied another intimately. Gareth gave me a look that said my thoughts weren't worth replying too and I suddenly felt more than a little uncomfortable.

"Please don't let us stop you." Gareth urged us and I bit my lip and dropped my hands to the bed.

"And I'm supposed to do that how?" I asked pushing up slightly against the pillows and slipping several strands of hair behind an ear.

"Concentrate?" Jace offered his green eyes offering no humor or sympathy.

"You're kidding right?" I asked while Dane buried his face in the side of my neck and began placing soft kisses across my jaw and down to my collarbone. Jace lifted an eyebrow his eyes flicking to Dane as he shook his head. No apparently he

wasn't kidding. Beside the bed Gareth reached for the button on his cuff and slowly undid first one then the other. When his fingers started on the buttons down the front of his shirt, Dane had moved on, sliding lower so that his lips moved across my upper chest. I sucked in air and stared at Gareth in shock when Dane lifted a hand and cupped my breast. At the foot of the bed Jace made a low threatening sound and the tension in me jumped a notch as he sat up and pulled his own T-Shirt over his head. When I glanced back at Gareth his shirt was gone and his pants were sliding down his legs. My eyes went to the juncture of his thighs and widened at the size of him. Apparently he was excited and not afraid to show it. The bed rocked and Jace's jeans went flying to the floor drawing my gaze back to him.

Jace's finger reached out and stroked my foot and I jerked. A slightly strangled noise escaped Dane and he pressed his hips against me while I bit my lip and gripped the bed covers in both hands. "Not as easy as it sounds is it?" He asked politely.

Personally I didn't think there was anything easy about any of this and might have said so but Dane's lips covered my nipple while his tongue lathed across the tip and coherent speech was momentarily impossible. Gareth choose that moment to slide his hip onto the bed putting himself within reach of me as he settled back against the pillows and stretched out his leg next to my hand. His other leg was bent at the knee which put his lap....almost even with Dane's head. It would have been hard for Dane not to notice given the less than a foot and half or so separating them.

Jace shifted from the foot of the bed, moving himself parallel to me so that his chest was level with my hip and his legs curved in against my calf. He trailed his fingers up my skin starting at my knee and tracing the outline of my thigh and hip up to my waist. Dane made another growling noise which caused Jace to lift his eyes to me and raise both eyebrows. "Now now...share and share alike." He said and I had to stifle the urge to say something nasty.

Gareth lifted my hand to his mouth and gave me a knowing look just before he sucked my index finger between his lips and into his mouth. Shockwaves coursed up and down my arm while he stroked me with his hot tongue and teased me with his

teeth. His actions caused Dane to shift slightly and I glanced down into his inky black eyes and felt his barrier give way. My back arched as his need slammed into me and he murmured something soft and low while he shifted about on the bed reaching for the buttons on his jeans and shoving them down his legs. He gave them a final kick and I watched distractedly as they slipped off the bed and out of sight.

Jace's hand gripped my thigh and Gareth released my finger, leaning over to slide his hand into my hair so he could turn me toward him. His lips came down on mine as Dane moved down my body his lips burning a pathway to my red gold patch of curls. Jace slid higher on the bed and guided my hand to his hard length. He pressed himself against my palm making pleased noises in his throat when I wrapped my fingers around him and gently squeezed.

Dane's tongue slid between my folds and onto my nub. I moaned at the pleasure and was echoed by hums from all three of them. Gareth dipped his tongue into my mouth while Jace lowered his lips to my breast and my mind stuttered at the sensory input from their bodies as well as their thoughts pressing in on me, arousing my desire. I wrapped my arm around Gareth's neck and raised my hips to Dane while I continued stroking Jace with my other hand.

At some point it became a game of who could distract me the most, as each of them tried to keep my focus by pleasuring me best. I was soon writhing on the bed their efforts keeping me primed as I came for them time and again. My breathing was ragged and spots danced before my eyes when I decided I'd had enough and did something about it. The door in my mind was shiny and oh so red as I flung it open, much as Jace and Gareth had stormed into my room earlier, flooding us all with my desire. Gareth and Jace both growled while Dane became frantic quickly rising to his knees and positioned himself over me. His hands reached for my hips and raised me onto him. His first stroke brought a scream from my throat which caused him to nearly purr as he pulled back and then shoved himself deep inside me again. He was not small and it took me a moment to accommodate him.

Gareth slid his body up onto the pillows and I turned to him, pulling him into my mouth while my other hand continued to touch Jace. Gareth's tempo synced with Dane's rhythm and they worked in and out of me in long sure strokes. Through the doorway I fanned desire again and Dane cried out and slammed against me, his body taunt as a wire, head thrown back while he exploded deep within. Jace and Gareth both hesitated and when Dane would have slumped across my body, Jace grabbed his shoulder and firmly guided him off me. With a shove, Dane rolled onto his back next to me and Jace slid down my body and in between my legs. Had I been thinking clearly I'm sure I would have been shocked but neither Jace nor Gareth gave me time to clear the passion filled haze I was in.

"Watch and learn." Jace informed Dane, his body covering mine while he filled me. His strokes were deep and strong and I felt a tightening as he and Gareth invaded my mind drowning me in their hunger. A burning sense of possessiveness I'd never felt from either of them wove itself into my psyche, enveloping my sense of self and immersing me in their needs. I moaned and shuddered beneath the onslaught and felt my control disappear. Gareth's mind stormed my door and it felt as if he inhaled my desire, taking it into his body and feeding it to Jace who thrust it back at me. It felt as if I'd grabbed a live wire.

I arched off the bed, lifting Jace who slammed me back down again riding my passion overload and feeding more into me. Gareth sucked air into his lungs and growled low and frantic, his body tensing as he plunged into my mouth and came for me. Jace cried out as Gareth's pleasure filled him and spilled over into me causing a mini loop that fed between the three of us. Jace buried himself and the feel of him exploding arched my back.

Beside us Dane moaned and came again, the force of our pleasure causing him to spill his seed a second time. At least this time he wouldn't have to change his pants, I thought then fluttered my eyes closed as Gareth slipped from my body and curled around me on the pillows. Jace settled his body over mine and I wrapped my arms

around him holding him and stroking my palms over his back while he pressed his lips to the sensitive skin behind my ear.

Chapter 24

I was seated on a chair in the living room working the tangles out of my hair. I had once again showered and managed this time to actually get into my panties, red halter dress and heels without out being distracted. Of course I'd had to do it under the supervision of all three of my Drakes which was more nerve wracking than I could have imagined. The tension in my room was high and I'd escaped with my hair still dripping down my back just to get away from it. Apparently none of them wanted to be the first to leave and thereby concede the floor to the others. Nimble fingers plucked the comb from my hand and Amras slid his body in behind me on the chair to assist me. I leaned forward and rested my elbows on my thighs to give him space.

The others were seated around the room and Nolls had even decided to join us. I hadn't seen him much in the past day or so. I assumed he'd been sent to guard Dane and had been sleeping when we'd left Amras' room this morning. He looked about as happy as he ever did while Lira and Roral, having already stated their intentions, both looked like they were pleased to be in the same room with me and...perhaps hopeful that I might notice them next time I was in need. Their interest had not gone unnoticed

by anyone in the room since neither had bothered to shield their minds. It seemed to especially irritate Cursed and Amras. Amras muttered low and gruff about people not learning their lessons and my eyes flicked to Roral and Lira who both shrugged and smiled slyly.

“Lexi...you are stalling.” Jace chided and I sighed and leaned back into Amras who spread his legs a little wider and scooted me back against his chest then wrapped his arms around me. His chin came to rest on my shoulder and I closed my eyes briefly leaning my head against him.

“Call her.” He breathed against my ear and I sent out a mental call for Mi.

“Are you ready Lord Amras?” Mi asked from the coffee table in front of us.

“No.” I replied sharply then pursed my lips and placed my hands on Amras’ arms at my waist. “I have not received a summons yet but I’m going too.” I told her in a voice that brooked no argument.

Mi eyed me thoughtfully then shook her head. “I didn’t bother giving you the summons because I assumed you would want to.” She informed me while the tip of her tail flicked sharply. “It would have been redundant.”

“Oh.”

“Is that what you’re wearing to meet the Queen?” She asked and I swear she raised an eyebrow.

I glanced down at myself and the dark red halter dress I was wearing which left most of my chest and a good portion of my thigh exposed. Not to mention it was backless. “I’m not sure. What does one wear to meet their Grandmother the Queen?” I asked.

Mi sighed and told me. “I love the dress it’s very...charming. But you might wish to remember the Queen’s husband is suspended in stone and has been for a very long time. You and your...entourage are going to take some getting used to. Especially if you broadcast while within the Sidhe. The Fey are not prudish...but you and your sex drive are....uniquely accelerated.” She told me wryly.

I turned and glanced between Kit and Owen my gaze settling on Owen while Kit looked somewhat offended. “Owen could you please?” And I waved my hand at my dress. He studied me for a moment and snapped his fingers. When I looked down at myself I wasn’t certain if Owen had been the appropriate choice. The dress he’d provided me with was the same color, the only difference being that it started just below my chin and ended past my feet and wrists. It looked like he’d wrapped me up like a blood red mummy. The material was sheer and the ends like gossamer wings. In several places on my body my skin could be seen beneath the fabric and only the repeated wrappings over the most...intimate locations kept me from being completely exposed. Around the room I heard several of the men pull breath in through their lips and in my mind it sounded like a riot had broken out.

Kit smiled and snapped his fingers and my bracelet turned to a band of blood red rubies still with the jaguar and key attached. He frowned at that and snapped his fingers again and my hair was piled onto my head and I felt an unfamiliar weight on my brow as well as long heavy earrings tugging at my ears.

“I did something to deserve the earrings?” I teased Kit. He’d told me the other day we could discuss earning earrings, just as I’d earned the bracelet by fulfilling my piece of our contract.

“Consider them loaners.” He told me while his eyes went speculative.

Mi stared at me and in her eyes I could see my face reflected...complete with a ruby red tiara and long ruby earrings. “Well that’s...interesting.” She replied then looked around the room at the others. “I assume everyone is coming?” She asked and looked at Jace and Dane who were wearing jeans. She turned to Owen with a look that had him snapping his fingers. Suddenly everyone in the room was dressed like royalty except the three guards who pretty much looked the same in their black on black guard outfits though they were wearing their swords at their hips. Lira and Roral shifted to accommodate the blades while Knolls stood. For once everyone was dressed to match me instead of the other way around. Even Gareth and Jace wore shades of red beneath

their brocade jackets of gold. It almost looked like the British were coming and I smiled at the thought and gripped Amras' wrist.

Jace got up and left the room, his long legs carrying him quickly down the hall. He returned in under a minute and was carrying my blade and ring which he slipped onto my finger as he knelt in front of me. He pushed my dress up my leg and assisted me in strapping on my blade while the others looked on in surprised approval. I wasn't certain how I would reach it if I needed to, this dress was...worse than the black one Areth had provided me to go out with my parents. There just wasn't room for anything in here besides me and my skin, not even undergarments. I sighed at the thought while chuckles erupted around the room.

"So will we see the Queen immediately?" I asked conscious of Cursed and Amras desire to get me in and out quickly.

"No one sees the Queen...immediately." She replied and shook her head. "We will go and you will wait...patiently while her Court gets a good look at you. And she will decide when and if she will see you. Though I suspect it will not take her long as you are...her first Grandchild and she is pleased to have learned that your Mother is once again with child...or is that with children." She told me and smiled flashing her fangs. "One more thing." She said and flicked her tail and in my hands was my golden flute. "You will want to bring that with you. The Court will wish to see you play."

"So they can throw rotten apples at me?" I teased. "A little pay back for the dirges?"

Her large amber eyes widened slightly then narrowed. "No...between the flute and the throne they will test your worthiness. The Queen has indicated her wish to name you heir....but the thrown and the Sidhe will make the final decision."

Well that was cryptic. I didn't realize the Sidhe was able to vote? And what was this about the throne I wondered while I glanced around the room. No one met my eyes and I swallowed painfully. Usually that wasn't a good sign.

"If we're ready?" Mi asked and flicked her tail and I found myself standing in a rocky outcropping on a smooth trail in front of a huge boulder that shimmered slightly

in the bright overhead sun. Mi was next to me on the ground while my men spread out behind me. Mi seated herself on the trail and glanced up at me. “Child you must ask entrance.” She told me.

“How do I do that?” I asked.

“You must say....Ayae Ed' i'ear ar' elenea assa sina annon.”

Hail by the stars and seas open this door. Okay I could do that. I thought and stepped forward and in a clear voice I repeated the phrase in Elvish. There was a high musical sound and the rock vibrated then a doorway appeared through a shimmer.

“After you.” Mi told me and I stepped forward and crossed the threshold into the Sidhe for the first time ever. Inside several guards came to attention and stared at me in shock while the group streamed in behind. The guards looked speechless, their eyes wide, hands on the pommels of their swords. When we were all in Cursed stepped forward and crossed his arms over his chest while they eyed each other carefully. Behind us the door closed with a soft explosion of air.

“The Princess Lexi Helyanwe.” Cursed told them abruptly and the four glanced at me and dropped immediately to their knees, their heads bowed while around us the Sidhe seemed to sigh and murmur joyful greetings. The guards gasped and glanced up at me in surprise while behind me my own guards muttered softly. I glanced at Cursed who was looking at me in wonder his dark eyes pleased for some reason. “The Sidhe recognizes you and welcomes you.” He replied softly and bowed his head to me while I raised my eyebrows and nodded.

“Greetings Princess.” One of the guards on the floor called to me and I turned back to them.

“You may rise.” I told him and they moved to their feet gracefully. The lot of them were fair with varying shades of blond hair and pale eyes. The one who spoke stepped forward and I assumed he was in charge.

“We were not expecting you.” He informed me and his eyes slid behind me hesitating when he glanced at Amras who I knew stood to my left then on to Lira, Nolls, and Roral who his eyes recognized before he turned his head and looked at

Cursed. His face tensed but showed no other sign of emotion and I felt my own gaze narrow protectively and reached for Cursed's arm. He didn't hesitate this time, merely stepped closer to me, holding out his forearm to me while I placed my fingertips upon him. My clear show of favor caused all four of them to widen their eyes slightly.

"Well we are here now Sellion so perhaps you could run ahead and let someone know we're coming?" Cursed told him his voice sounding bored but with a steely thread of command underlining the request. "Although as you clearly heard, the Sidhe has already announced the Princess' presence."

The man nodded and glanced over his shoulder giving a nod to one of the men who quickly went to a knee, rose and turned, setting off at a lope while his long legs carried him quickly down the tunnel and out of sight. "If you will but wait a moment." Sellion replied turning back to us. "I will send for someone to escort you to the Grand Hall."

Lira and Roral stepped forward. "No need Sellion." Roral informed him. "We were sent to escort the Princess home." Sellion nodded and stepped back making room for us to pass. He and the other two went to a knee again while Lira and Roral moved out in front of us and Nolls dropped to the back of the pack.

"That went better than expected." Amras muttered and I glanced at him in surprise.

"Worried the door wouldn't open for me?" I teased and he shook his head.

"No that they would have arrested me on sight." He muttered and I nearly stumbled at his words. Cursed assisted me and we moved on down the tunnel...corridor or whatever it was. I glanced around me at the finely marbled veins in the walls and the torches burning in their holders. The hall didn't look...used though it wasn't in disrepair. I assumed Sellion and his group must have drawn the short straw to have been given guard duty at such a remote location.

"The door hasn't opened in over fifty years." Lira informed me softly, his eyes searching out the hall in front of us. "Sellion recently found himself in some minor trouble and has been given the duty as a show of disfavor. Though to guard the door is

no shame, merely is it seen as unnecessary as the Queen's own onus is on the door which prevents it from opening on this side and there are none...except you Princess that have managed to open it from the other side since it was closed."

Apparently Mi and my Mother had been sneaking around through the backdoor. I thought then smiled when Mi gave me a haughty look. Amras and Cursed had come to my call...the whole flute ripping tears in space making that possible. My guards arrived via Mi so why was it necessary to come through the front door?

"For all the obvious reasons Child." Mi informed me. "You are no thief in the night to be sneaking around. If you were unable to open the door on your own..." And she trailed off but I got the gist of the message.

I glanced down at the flute still gripped in my hand and nodded thoughtfully. It was a test. Mi nodded and I stopped in the middle of the hall and glanced around me bringing everyone else to a halt too.

"What is it?" Lira called and I shook my head and glanced at the wall.

"I'm not sure." I said and lifted my hand from Cursed and moved to the wall. The others watched me as I hesitated then placed my flute under my arm and both palms flat against the smooth surface. My head fell back as voices flooded my mind and memories washed across me like crashing waves. Around us the Sidhe burst into song echoing up and down the hall. A low vibration started beneath my feet and behind me the men murmured softly. When I opened my eyes I stared in shock at the wall, swallowing as I stepped back and gazed at the portrait carved into it which spread out from where my hands had rested.

"The Sidhe has welcomed her indeed." Roral remarked his voice holding a note of wonder.

"It is very...realistic." Lira added as he stared at the lifelike portrait of me as I had been last night in my dress at the moment I'd shifted to Dragon. The wall chronicled the shift from my human form to Dragon in a series of pictures that spread down the hall for nearly forty feet ending in a full length carving of my Dragon self in flight, wings spread wide, and mouth open as I roared.

“The first female offspring of Elf and Dragon.” Owen whispered as the song of the Sidhe echoed and one last time and then fell silent.

A movement in the hall caused the guards to turn and place palms to sword hilts while the others pulled me into their midst creating a wall of shoulders and chests. Amras lowered his head and crossed his arms over his chest, while Cursed dropped to a knee and bowed his head allowing me to see the man that had stepped into the hall and his escorts.

Three beings covered in pitch black armor covering their bodies and faces leaving only a red glow from their eyes staring back at us. Their swords hung at their waists, huge things that must have weighed ten pounds or more. They stood behind another man dressed in very fine clothing. The man they flanked was both Tall and fair with large intelligent black eyes, eyes that flicked from the wall to me where I stood directly behind Cursed’s kneeling form. Before him the other guards were also kneeling while Gareth, Jace, and Dane simply stood with their arms crossed. Amras was the only Elf still on his feet and even he had bowed his head.

No one spoke as the Lord of Air and Darkness, King Tdem Stoneshadow ran his eyes over me and I in turn, took my time looking him over. Behind him one of his guards growled low and I ignored him and stood calmly under his gaze. Inside me Goldy slowly sat up her nostrils quivering as her head swung around in Tdem’s direction while his eyes widened and he stared at me with an odd expression.

I wasn’t sure what the protocol was for introductions and it didn’t appear anyone else here knew either. Beside me Dane shifted slightly his black eyes flicking amongst the men facing us. And I mentally reached for him and soothed him with the feel of my palm cupping his cheek. He breathed and settled.

“Ahh.” The King murmured his dark eyes sharpening upon me. “That was...interesting Princess.” He remarked. “It seems you have taken from me something I value.” He replied and I forced myself to not look at Cursed.

“King Stoneshadow?” I replied, making my response a question. He flicked his own eyes to Cursed and then to the wall.

“And you’ve altered my hallway. Quite the feat that.” He remarked as he eyed it thoughtfully.

To the side Mi sat quietly her amber eyes narrowed thoughtfully as she watched the interaction between us. Even her tail was still as if she did not wish to draw any attention to herself.

“Our door has not been opened in more than five decades.” He continued his voice thoughtful. “And these halls have not sang in welcome in more centuries than I care to admit. Nor can they boast the sight of Dragons and yet here stand two and a half Drakes before me. And more reside close by.” He remarked and tilted his head to the side as he stared thoughtfully at Dane. “I think...” He whispered and Dane moaned and slid to a knee on the floor while my eyes widened and I glanced between Tdem and him. “You belong to me.”

“No!” I told him sharply and pushed past Gareth and Jace, placing myself in front of Dane’s kneeling form. Cursed hissed at me and Amras would have reached to stop me but I avoided him and faced the King my gold eyes flashing. “The Drake is mine and has claimed the Right of Meranne.” I challenged him. “You may not interfere here.” And I sent a mental nudge to Dane urging him to stand.

Tdem seemed to expand about two feet as his eyes narrowed while he watched Dane climb to his feet. Behind him the three guards shifted and one moved his hand to the hilt of his blade. “The right of ascension is only invoked in pursuit of a Queen. I did not realize you aspired to be Queen, Princess?”

I eyed him carefully before I opened my mouth and committed myself. It seemed he had come to force the issue once and for all and in this instance Dane and my future men would be hostages if I refused to declare. “I am already Queen.” I told him simply and tried to ignore the sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. While in my mind I felt the surge of joy from my three Dragons.

At my words he murmured softly and a secretive smile spread over his lips. He blinked and glanced at Cursed then back to me. He dipped his head acknowledging me as he formally announced. “Then Geetings Queen Lexi Helyanwe Mal’Oki from King of the Slaus Tdem Stoneshadow, Lord of Air and Darkness.”

At his introduction I took a breath and gave him a slight nod then turned to my men. “May I present my men?” I asked and at his nod I proceeded to introduce Gareth, Jace, Dane, Owen, Amras, and Kit. Owen and Kit raised the King’s eyebrows but he said nothing merely acknowledged each with a blink of his eye. Amras got his full attention for several seconds causing me a moment of concern but he said nothing. “And of course, Cursed.” I replied while the King’s eyes narrowed as they rested on Cursed still kneeling to my side now.

“Arise Sister’s Son, blood of my bone and heir to my thrown.” He told him, his voice velvet encased steel. I felt the hair stand up on my arms at his tone and Cursed arose warily to his feet his face void of any emotion.

“My King.” Cursed responded and dipped his head again.

I took it as a good sign that Tdem still considered Cursed family and had made a point of calling it to our attention in his greeting. “If it will not offend you King Stoneshadow, may my guards rise?” I asked and the King looked like I’d managed to surprise him but nodded and Lira, Nolls, and Roral all climbed carefully to their feet.

“Please he offered, call me Lord Tdem.” My own eyebrows rose nearly to my hairline and I dipped my head while I schooled my features back to normal and nodded.

“My pleasure.” I replied not quite sure what he should be calling me. Beside me Amras looked pained then wiped his expression blank and I wondered if I’d done something wrong.

“So what brings you to our Sidhe?” The King asked as he moved toward me his black eyes searching my face. I wasn’t certain if he was trying to intimidate me but he moved in a stealthy manner, his feet silent upon the floor. He looked like a warrior and I could see the family resemblance to Cursed in his facial features, powerful shoulders

and deep chest. His body was pleasing and his hair was like a golden cloud of waves that swayed as he walked and looked to be nearly of a length with mine.

I held my ground watching him as he neared me like a rabbit might watch a snake. What do you want from me? I thought and noticed his lids lower to hide his eyes while his full lips tilted upward in a sly smile. It took me a second to recall his question so intent was I focused on his stalking of me. “The Queen has requested my presence.” I replied quietly as he moved to within several feet.

He nodded and glanced at the flute in my hand his eyes flicking between the flute and my face. “I see you carry the Mirel Flute. And may I say...you play quite well. Your music...has been a welcome distraction over the years. It was a surprise to find your mother had removed it with her from the Sidhe. Perhaps it was Danu’s wish as you play more...passionately than your mother ever did.”

“Thank you.” I murmured while the weight of his dark eyes fell upon those standing nearest to me making it clear that he wanted them to move away. All of them stepped back leaving an empty space around me. Cursed was the last to go, and it took a lifted eyebrow from the King to force him to back up. When he’d moved, the King edged around me. I remained still while he circled me like a tasty morsel he might like to chew upon. It was not the first time I’d been looked over and I waited calmly while he took his time. If his intent was to rattle me, he was in for a disappointment.

“You are composed for one so young.” He replied and I couldn’t help the small smile. “And quite lovely.” He replied as he moved past my right shoulder, nearly done with his circuit. “More lovely in fact, than your Mother who is very beautiful indeed.”

I tilted my head to the side and looked at him inquiringly. “Lord Tdem you are too kind.” I told him softly. My voice even and calm just as I was.

“My....people tell me you are talented also.” He offered and again his dark eyes searched mine. In my mind I felt the touch of his and smiled again.

“What is it you wish to know?” I asked, coming straight to the point. If he wanted to poke around in my head I felt it was only fair I should know what he was searching for.

“And just that easily you will tell me?” He asked with a small smile of his own.

“Elves do not lie.” I informed him and again I tilted my head slightly thinking that I should not have to remind him of this.

“Ah...but do Dragons?” He murmured and I couldn’t help the flare of anger which seemed to amuse him.

“Is it your wish to provoke me Lord Tdem? Or merely enjoy a game of cat and mouse to entertain yourself? Come, if you have questions, ask them. I will either tell you the truth or not. You must take your chances.” I informed him while behind me Amras shifted and Cursed made a low strangled noise in his throat. I didn’t think either of them was happy with my choice of words, but then I had never been one for playing these types of games.

The King’s face went blank for a second as if he couldn’t quite believe what I’d said to him. It must be difficult indeed if people only ever told you what you wanted to hear for fear of being punished or worse. I did not think I needed to worry all that much about it. I doubted he was a fool and for what reason would he wish to harm me? In the grand scheme I was nothing to him. A mere novelty.

The King turned to Cursed and both his eyebrows dropped threateningly. “Is she always this...indelicate in her thinking?” He demanded and Cursed glanced back at him and hesitated before nodding briefly.

I sighed and raised my Dragonsward while Gareth and Jace shifted uncomfortably and the guards made shocked noises which were immediately cut off. The King’s three guards shifted, their bodies tensing, hands grasping hilts. The King’s dark eyes swept back to my face immediately and he looked as if he expected me to have disappeared yet there I stood before him. “My apologies Lord Tdem,” I told him. “I did not realize my thoughts would distress you. Is this better?” I asked sweetly and lifted an eyebrow when he frowned at me.

“What have you done amin vanima mal-er?” He asked softly his eyes curious, his words translating literally as my or mine beautiful golden one. His aura bled from the steady purple haze it had been up to this point to something tinged with red.

My gaze focused around the cornea of his head and I raised both eyebrows at his term of endearment and replied evasively. "I'm not sure what you mean." Perhaps he didn't know I understood Elvish. *Tis having you is what he's after...can ye nae see?* Dane's voice whispered across mine and I sighed and shifted slightly realizing even here my thoughts weren't my own. The King looked at me oddly as if he knew something had just occurred but wasn't sure what it was. It didn't appear to make him happy either. Behind him one of his guards made an odd noise and shifted from foot to foot. All three of them had turned to glance at Dane before moving back to me.

"I mean," he told me strongly. "That you were there a minute ago and now it is as if you do not exist. It is disturbing."

"It seems I cannot please you Lord Tdem. Perhaps it would be best if I and my men were to proceed to the Great Hall to await the Queen's audience. It is not my intent to offend you." I told him then dropped my Dragonsward and watched while his eyes narrowed upon me.

He ignored my bid for freedom and turned to glance at the wall. "So the Queen has called you home to take your place with her at Court?" He asked his voice deceptively even.

I considered his question for a moment. "I could not say, as I have yet to meet my Grandmother."

"Yes, yes. But her intent is to keep you here as her Mother before you. Are you prepared to take your place at Court?" He demanded of me, a sly note having entered his voice.

I moved to the wall, my steps careful on the floor of the Sidhe and when I would have touched the outline of my Dragon the King made a small noise in his throat and I hesitated letting my fingers drop to my side. "I am prepared to take my place with my Court." I told him softly my eyes turned away from him as I spoke, my mind focused on the beautiful detail of the Dragon scales before me to keep him from realizing I spoke...the truth, just not the truth he sought.

His shoulder brushed mine and I turned to look up into his eyes. “And if you do not find the Court of the Seelie to your liking?” He asked softly while his eyes caressed my face just as his mind caressed mine.

“Do you know some reason it would not?” I asked keeping my mind free of clutter by concentrating on the shape of his chin and the sweep of his brow.

“Only that you are....unique.” He told me. “And unique is not a quality highly prized by the Seelie.”

I smiled and nodded. “You worry I may have issues with the consequences of my birth. That is...sweet.” I told him.

He looked shocked, then like he might have swallowed his tongue and finally replied. “I am...charmed that you think so. Are you not worried it may hold true?”

I dropped my gaze and stared at the wall for a moment. “It is not my only option.” I replied. “And prejudice is not new to me.” Growing up shimmered had seen to that. “Were it my only choice perhaps I might find myself more worried. I am who I am.” I told him my hand motioning to the wall. “If this does not work out for me I will simply continue being that someone.... elsewhere.”

I don't think he knew what to think about my statements and I took the opportunity to try to move us along. By now folks might be wondering what was taking us so long. The runner we'd sent ahead had surely arrived by now with word that we were right behind him. “Lord Tdem.” I murmured. “It has been a pleasure meeting you.” And I turned to him and smiled. “If you will excuse us...I do not wish to alarm my Grandmother.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and stared down at me and I raised an eyebrow. “Is there something else you wish to discuss?” I asked quietly.

His eyes moved to my men and back to me and he nodded. “How close are you?” He asked and raised his own eyebrow when I frowned up at him in confusion. “My servant informed me you are in Fecundty, how close are you? You did say to ask my question.” He informed me.

I swallowed and glanced at Gareth who looked like he was ill but shook his head. "I do not know." I replied. "It is not something that has ever...occurred to me before and therefore I am unsure how to...gage." I admitted. I honestly had no way of knowing and I wasn't certain any of the others did either. Perhaps my Father might know but he wasn't here at the moment to advise me and I hadn't had the chance to speak with him about it since I'd discovered it myself. Perhaps I should have simply squashed the damn Spriggins earlier then I wouldn't be answering this question.

He frowned thoughtfully and then nodded. "I declare." He replied and I blinked and gave myself a mental shake. Surely I did not just hear what I thought I heard.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"I declare." He replied and his hands came down upon my shoulders and he pulled me into his chest while my mind whirled and I tried to understand why he would do such a thing. "Because," He told me, "I can." And his lips came down upon mine while I struggled, mostly from the shock, in the circle of his arms.

Chapter 25

Tdem's lips brushed at mine, coaxing gently, urging me to pay attention and participate. I moaned softly, my mind struggling to absorb what was happening and he pulled me closer and deepened the kiss.

When he finally pulled himself off me, I raised my fingers to my lips and looked at him in near horror. "You are no Dragon." I told him bluntly. "I thought only Dragons could declare! This cannot be happening." And I turned accusing eyes on my Drakes. They all looked as shocked and horrified as I felt.

Tdem made a low sound in his throat...an unhappy sound and I turned back to him warily. His eyes looked jealous and the aura surrounding him had shifted from red to a yellow-green indicating I wasn't mistaken about his eyes. Somehow he'd learned about ascension but someone must have failed to inform him of the sharing part. He didn't look like he was inclined to and I wasn't about to accept him if he didn't.

"You said suitable. A suitable potential mate!" I hissed at Gareth my eyes swinging back to him, and he looked pale but nodded. I waved my hand at Tdem and

glared at him. “What do you call this?” I demanded my temper exploding proportionate to the circumstances.

“The law does not state Dragons only.” He told me in a harsh voice and his dark blue eyes whirled as he turned to glance at Tdem. The guards hissed across the room and I turned on them and hissed back. Above me my superimposed tail flicked and they each took a step back while next to me Tdem crossed his arms over his chest and smiled.

“Close indeed.” He murmured and I turned my golden eyes on him and glared.

“You!” I murmured and turned my back on him. “We’re leaving now.” I informed the group and Lira and Roral were torn between kneeling to the King and scurrying out of my way. In my mind I yelled for Kit and he jumped and moved next to my side. I wasn’t sure why, but my anger always seem to startle him.

“Yes Mistress?” He asked as I strode toward the hall and the three guards standing in my way. When they refused to move I glanced back at Tdem who was watching me closely his arms still crossed over his chest a smug smile on his lips.

“Move them or I will.” I informed Tdem abruptly.

“It isn’t wise to threaten me Your Majesty.” He replied calmly.

“King Stoneshadow that was not a threat! That was a request for action, or a statement of fact. You, I believe, are now part of my Court. It is your job to see to my... satisfaction. Do I look satisfied? I asked abruptly and he shifted, an uncertain look entering his eye. “Perhaps you didn’t think I would take you seriously? Or did I misunderstand your earlier declaration?” I asked sweetly and he stared back at me but didn’t respond.

“Move them.” I informed Kit and he glanced at me like I’d grown another set of horns but snapped his fingers. The guards disappeared and reappeared behind their King unhurt and no longer blocking my path. I smiled at Tdem who wasn’t smiling and whose arms were no longer crossed. The others fell in behind and around me as I strode down the hall as quickly as my dress would allow.

Behind me I heard Dane mutter under his breath and looked back to find the King tagging along behind Gareth and Jace in front of Cursed and Amras. His guards brought up the rear of our little tango line and I had to bite my tongue to keep from screaming. Another fifty feet and I stopped suddenly and turned to face Tdem. “What do you think you’re doing?” I asked as calmly as I could.

He frowned then glanced around him at the others. “You said it yourself your Majesty. I am part of your Court now. As such, I will accompany you to the Great Hall and be introduced to your Grandmother. I am quite looking forward to it.” He told me with an evil grin. My gaze slid to Cursed and he looked both pale and ill. His eyes burned as he glanced back at me, his mouth pressed into a tight line. Next to him Amras looked like a strong wind might blow him over he appeared so unhealthy. This so wasn’t right. I thought and sighed, thinking how much worse could it get?

“Much.” Owen murmured and I rubbed my temple with my finger.

“Just another day in paradise.” I muttered and glanced down at Mi who was staring up at me with wide eyes. “Did you want to wander ahead and warn someone... like Dad?” I asked and she shook her head and glanced at the King behind me.

“No...I don’t think I want to be the one to deliver that news.”

“What about the Queen...do you think she might want to be warned before we drop this in her lap?”

Mi tilted her head to the side as if listening and shook her head again. “That won’t be necessary.” She said. The Queen of Light is already aware of the situation. These halls are, after all, communal.”

“Shared public access eh?” I asked and glanced at my Dragons. Dane looked irritated his black eyes annoyed. It was probably a delayed reaction to his being forced onto his knees earlier. Jace appeared to have overcome his initial shock and was quickly sliding into annoyance also. Gareth seemed to be taking it the worst and his dark eyes were still whirling softly as if the agitation inside him could not be contained.

“Lord Tdem?”

“Yes?” He responded.

“What did you hope to gain by this?”

He hesitated a moment then looked like he might answer, but thought better of it and his black eyes went flat while his lips pressed together in a thin line. No wonder my mother had fled the Sidhe I thought and turned my back on him. I have no idea how long we walked for, but my feet were starting to hurt in my heels long before we faced a huge set of gilded double doors and Lira and Roral halted and glanced over at me. Lucky for us the foyer in front of the doors was huge and I turned to my men and held out my hands.

“Gentlemen if you please? Lord Tdem you may wish to move back so you do not become jostled.” And around me everyone that had come with me shifted except the guards Lira, Roral, Nolls, and of course the King and his men. We had discussed my entrance earlier and the men had decided it would be most impressive if I were to arrive alone amidst them in such a manner. It certainly would get their attention. Mi sat by my feet and glanced around at my little group. Cursed had sifted to a huge black panther, Amras a large wolfhound, Owen a huge creamy yellow timber wolf, and Kit to his normal black wolf with silver tipped hair. Dane, Jace, and Gareth shifted to Dragon and Dane was eyeing Tdem with a gleam in his dark eye that had me a little concerned. “Dane?” I called to him and he turned his multifaceted eye to me. “Please stop doing that, the King is not a snack food. He commands the Raging Host...and could, no doubt, rip you into tiny pieces.” I warned him while Tdem lifted an eyebrow and looked at me with humor sparkling in his dark eyes.

Kit came to my side and bumped my hand with his nose. “Mistress...be careful.” He warned me and he bit me gently on the fingers. “Please remember I do not wish to return to Hell.”

“I will....do my best.” I told him and stroked his head while I gazed into his red eyes. He turned after a moment and went to sit in front to my right waiting.

Owen came to me next and stood in front of me his dark brown eyes searching my face. “They say pride goes before a fall Lexi....but Elves do not prize humility. It

is seen as weakness. For all our sakes...try not to be humble.” And I nodded and gently tugged his mane before he turned and took his place to my left even with Kit.

Cursed came to me next and brushed his soft muscular body against me. I stroked his back and cupped his chin in my palm as he blinked up at me. “Do not look sad...night has been good to me.” I told him. “I do not fear the night Cursed...and you will not lose me to it.” I bent down and kissed the top of his head and he blinked and went to stand behind me even with Owen. Amras came next and I knelt on the cool marble and wrapped my arms around his neck inhaling the scent of him into my lungs. “I do not wish to cry.” I whispered as I held him tightly and struggled to keep my fear of losing him under control.

“Arwenamin amin mela lle.” My Lady, I love you, he whispered and pulled himself away from me while I swallowed and tried to breathe. I squeezed my eyes tightly shut wondering at the pain in my heart. Love wasn’t supposed to feel this way.

“Get up child.” Mi told me softly and I rose in one smooth motion and turned to my Dragons. I stepped past Amras and Cursed and held out my hands to Gareth and Jace. Their heads moved toward me and they made soothing noises in their throats. No please I thought...I cannot bear it.

“You must.” Gareth grumbled and I nodded and took a deep breath.

“Lexi,” Jace spoke to me, his deep voice vibrating my arm where it rested against his head. “Remember who you are and what you represent.” I pulled more air into my lungs and straightened my shoulders.

“Thank you.” I told him and he blinked his large green eyes and moved back from me as Dane swung his black head toward me.

“Danu guide ye.” He rumbled and I turned ignoring the King who stood watching me closely. I would have preferred not having his audience at this moment, but had little choice in the matter. He was here and he was coming in with us.

“A moment.” Tdem commanded and I turned to him slowly keeping my emotions in check.

“Yes?” I asked and watched as he smiled and then shifted into a huge black beast that resembled a Dragon but with differences. Nolls was closest to him and he looked as if he was having a hard time not passing out from fear. I glanced between the two of them and motioned Nolls forward. He came gratefully and moved to stand near Roral at the front. My eyes tracked him as he moved out of range and then focused on the differences between Tdem and my others. Most notable was that he only had one set of horns which looked...like those of a bull. In the place of a symmetrical spine down his back he had what looked like sail fins attached to huge spikes and his skin appeared as smooth leather which gleamed, reflecting the light. His wings were powerful and I wondered if he knew how to use them. Under his chin were three protrusions, resembling a long beard. His forearms looked human in shape and were very muscular. He wasn't much smaller than Dane and was black as night. Gareth and Jace turned to glance at him while Dane hissed and whipped his tail in agitation. Owen had said worse...I suspected he might be right. “Interesting.” I murmured and wondered if this was his normal shift or if he'd created it just for us.

“Ask me nicely and I might tell you.” He replied in a deep rumbling voice that vibrated the floor beneath my feet. I smiled tightly and watched as he took his place next to Dane the two of them eyeing each other in a manner that was somewhat disturbing.

“I'm ready.” I told Lira and Roral who stood nearest the doors gripping my flute tightly. Each reached for a handle and pulled his door open easily though they stood at least fifteen feet high and must have weighed several hundred pounds each. The sounds of the Great Hall spilled out over us, music and voices crashing against my skin like waves. I held my ground and nodded to Owen and Kit who got our not so little procession moving. Mi skipped in ahead of us and moved easily through the crowd disappearing in a matter of seconds. I took a deep breath and stepped through the doors while heads turned and the voices stilled.

Roral and the others moved ahead of us, clearing a path down the hall as we made our way to the dais opposite the doors. The room was huge, about three times the

width and packed with the most beautiful Fey of every Seelie race. Whispers and mutters followed us down the carpeted aisle and gasps of wonder and outrage whispered past my ears. I assumed that King Tdem had entered behind us and that some of them might have recognized him. Minds pressed in on mine, prodding my shield and slipping in between crevices. One, a male of significant power, circled my funnel and pressed tentatively against it while his clever mental fingers searched for the doorway. I sucked air into my lungs and my men erupted in howls and screams of outrage. The pressure increased and I nearly stumbled from the force then felt a back draft of air and glanced over my shoulder to see Jace and Gareth had raised their wings, their eyes searching the crowd. I stopped in the middle of the floor, closed my eyes and focused on the pressure. In my mind I could see a fine thread and followed it to its source turning my head to do so. When I opened my eyes I was staring into two tone blue eyes, the outer ring a pale cornflower while the inner was closer to baby blue. The man was large, well made and painfully beautiful with long pale hair. Judging by the haughty demeanor and fine Elven features I couldn't help thinking...Royalty, and that I was seeing my first Duke or perhaps a Marquess. His eyes widened as I stared back at him and thought *you do not want to do that*. Then swept past him while his mind slid from mine, I believe I'd managed to surprise him. Given the way today was going, I was guessing that would cause me problems later.

My Grandmother waited for me on the dais seated on a huge throne that looked...like a carved Dragon wrought in gold. My eyes widened as I stared at the thing and couldn't help thinking...it looked like me! Behind her two large men one fair the other dark as night stood with folded arms, their matching pale green eyes watching me and my men as we approached. The pale guard stood next to...my Grandfather and I licked my lips and dragged my gaze away from his naked and...excited form.

Shaking myself mentally I forced my eyes to the woman seated on the throne and felt my heart race at the first real sight of my Grandmother...the Queen of Air. Beautiful was the first word that came to mind. Beautiful and...welcome. Her lips lifted barely at my thought and I felt myself flush and answered her with a small smile

of my own as we reached the base of the seven stairs that led up to her chair. To her right my Mother sat on a much smaller seat and behind her my Father stood, his arms resting on the back of her chair while at their feet Mi sat watching me. I smiled at my parents and glanced back to the Queen who was observing me from large golden eyes, nearly the same shade as mine.

The Queen was dressed not as I expected, but more conservatively though it was clear that her form was lovely. Her gown was long and flowing and covered her from well up her chest to the bottoms of her dainty feet. The dress was pale...shimmery and seemed to move with the light. Her hair was...a golden halo that surrounded her face and flowed down to her hips. I had her eyes, not just in the color, but the shape and tilt, while my Mother had her lips and chin. Upon her brow sat a platinum crown which glowed like pure light. Her lips were pink and lush her body tall and willowy with small high breasts and a tiny waist. She was...all that the Court of Light might aspire to be.

Cursed moved closer to me and I placed my free hand on his back and gracefully lowered myself to my knees while around me my men paid similar homage in varying degrees of submission.

“Rise child.” The Queen told me. Her voice was musical and nearly as beautiful as she.

I stood and lifted my eyes to her waiting to be given permission to speak. She smiled again. “Greetings Lexi, daughter of Shaylee, and most precious Grandchild of mine.”

I dipped my head and replied. “Well met Your Royal Highness.”

She seemed pleased with my response and her eyes moved to those around me. “Who have you brought with you today? Introduce them to us.” She urged.

“Ma’am?” I remarked and turned first to Cursed and then the others who shifted as I spoke their names. The last person I introduced was Lord Tdem and his shift caused several shocked gasps while the Queen merely lifted an eyebrow and neither smiled nor frowned.

“Lord Tdem, it is...interesting to find you amongst my Granddaughter’s... attendants.” She told him in a deadly sweet voice. She might as well have replaced the word attendants with lovers as that was clearly what was implied.

Tdem’s eyes narrowed but he forced a smile and replied. “To win a Queen one must take chances. I trust the child will be worth the effort.” He replied and I nearly swallowed my tongue at his words.

“To claim the right of ascension is a risk indeed. Should your efforts to satisfy my Granddaughter not be sufficient, you will be expelled from her favor and banished from her Court.”

I glanced at the Queen in surprise while mutters spread out across the floor. Interesting that none of my men had bothered to inform me of that small tidbit. I had the sudden urge to rub my hands together and yell ‘ah ha!’ My look brought an answering smile to her lips. And I was suddenly very thankful she seemed to like me.

“Be careful Lord Tdem that you do not misstep. A fall from favor could well endanger your Court should you wish to retaliate and anger the Dragons who are, of course, allies of the Seelie.”

I found myself holding my breath as I stared at no one, simply letting the words she had just spoken sink into my consciousness. I was almost afraid to look at Tdem but my eyes found their way to his face and widened at the smug smile he was wearing. Apparently his ability to please me wasn’t one of his concerns and I felt a shiver run up my spine while I dragged my eyes away from him and turned back to the Queen. I only hoped my face didn’t look as ghastly as I was feeling at the moment.

Tdem responded with. “An event which is not likely to occur. As I do not plan to lose my sole Prince and heir. Whom I might add, has already pledged her his fealty.”

The Queen nodded then turned to eye me with speculation as she replied. “You have brought before us a Demon, a Minor-God, a Prince, my Earl, two Elders, a Miracle of Science, and the Lord of Air and Darkness. “Quite impressive child.” She remarked then allowed a pleased look to cross her face as she turned to my mother.

“You have done well Shaylee. I am pleased.” Around the room there were sighs and I felt a weight lifted from my shoulders.

“Come sit.” She offered indicating the vacant smaller chair set on her other side. I glanced around me at my men and back up to her. “Bring one, child...” She advised and nearly all of them stepped back except Amras, Tdem, and Dane, Tdem and Dane were farthest from me. I wasn’t certain if they held their ground because they didn’t need to move or if they simply weren’t team players. Although in Tdem’s case it wasn’t hard to guess which it was. The movement of my men left a space between themselves and Amras who was suddenly standing nearest me. He glanced at me, his large violet eyes carefully neutral as he offered his arm. I placed my fingers on him, bent slightly to lift my skirts and we navigated the steps. The Queen’s eyes narrowed and beside me Amras paled but handed me into my seat then moved to stand at my back placing his hands upon the top of my chair. I settled my flute in my lap and took a deep breath while Amras fingers brushing the skin at my nape. I sensed he needed the contact and leaned back to be closer to him.

“Interesting choice.” My Grandmother told me. “My Earl does not occupy a place in your Court yet you allow him to attend you?”

“Yes Ma’am,” I replied carefully, having been schooled on the proper form of address by my men. Apparently a member of the family addressed the sovereign the first time as ‘your royal majesty and thereafter by the term, ma’am. While everyone else got to address her only ever as your majesty. I appeared to have got it correct as she didn’t even blink so I continued with, “Lord Amras...pleases me.” I did not know her well enough to determine if my admission would annoy or placate her, but felt the need for her to understand how important he was to me. In spite of her use of the phrase ‘your court’ which nearly caused me to stop breathing. My eyes dropped as she smiled tightly.

“Hmmm, are you aware that the Earl has disobeyed his Queen in leaving the Sidhe without permission?”

I hesitated then dipped my head. “So I was informed just recently.” I replied.

“That is something.” She muttered as if to herself. “Lord Amras come here.” She commanded and I sat up so straight I felt my spine might crack, while he moved from behind me and went to both knees before her. He bowed his head and simply knelt there looking much like a martyr just before having his head lopped off. The thought got me a frown from the Queen and I bit the inside of my cheek and squashed my thoughts.

“What shall I do with you?” She spoke quietly. Her musical voice was completely at odds with the severity of the subject under debate. “You openly defy me by leaving the Sidhe then proceed to add insult by making free with the daughter of the Princess to whom you are engaged. My daughter! My granddaughter!” She breathed and her voice was no longer light, nor musical. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

“My Queen,” He replied in a quiet but steady voice. “I love her.” Around the room a shocked murmur built as if the court could not believe they had heard him correctly. While the Queen hissed air through her teeth in annoyance and leaned back upon her throne her long delicate fingers gripping the arms and her eyes flashing dangerously.

“Lady Linwe.” The Queen called and a fair haired woman stepped forward followed by an equally fair haired man. Both were beautiful and I saw Amras’ features in the woman’s eyes and the man’s body shape and facial structure.

“My Queen.” The woman spoke in a reserved voice while the man behind her placed his hands upon her shoulders in support.

“Your son has brought dishonor upon your family. I cannot allow my subjects to disregard my will. What say you?” She asked her words draining the blood from the woman’s face.

“Amras has ever been a loyal subject My Queen. I fear it was the Princess’ call that overcame his good sense. He did disobey, but she herself claims he pleases her, and I am certain he has not dishonored us in his service to her.” The woman spoke calmly as she stared not at the Queen but me. Her eyes were a darker shade than

Amras' and though her face was composed and her voice steady, in her eyes was the love of a mother sick from fear for a child in mortal danger.

The Queen did not respond for several minutes and then she spoke to me. "Is this true Lexi? Has his service been honorable?"

I glanced at Amras' mother and smiled, while my eyes swam with tears at the heartache she tried so hard to conceal, and the hope she had that I would not fail her and thereby condemn her son. "Ma'am I do not know how to tell you of his service.... may I show you?" My comment brought her forward in her seat and a slight frown to her eyes. "He has saved my life, more than once...he saved nearly all of us." I told her softly my eyes resting on his bent head.

"Show me." She commanded and I closed my eyes and dropped my shield reaching for the memory of the day we battled the black fuzzy creatures starting from the moment Kit had flown off to find Spot and ending with Amras' horribly charred hands as he fell away from the wall taking us both to the sand. I skipped ahead to the night we'd been attacked and Jace had been injured, showing her how Amras had assisted Cursed in teaching me to siphon off the pain from healing and to use my shields more effectively. Then to the day I'd returned from Hell with Kit and how it had been Amras' courage and skill that had assisted me in building the shield around the funnel in me that could easily have torn us all apart. I fast forwarded again to last night...how I had gone to Amras for solace. I did not hold back, but showed them how well he had loved me. There was no shame in sharing with them the memory of my feelings and my fear at losing him. I hesitated for a second, taking a deep breath and opened my eyes as I turned to glance at Lord Tdem. His eyes met mine and I blinked then moved forward to this morning and the dream I'd had, letting them see that it was Amras' hand reaching for me, he and Cursed's power calling me back from the nightmare where the Nixies held me under water, and would surely have killed me. I led them through awakening to find Cursed and Amras slumped next to me, forcing them to see how he had held me back from Cursed, risking himself to keep me from harm. I ended with the look in his eyes and the sweet trusting smile he had graced me

with as I reached to heal him from the damage I had done to his chest while under the spell of the poison within me.

I raised my shield and glanced at Lady Linwe who had tears running down her cheeks, a look of such pride upon her beautiful face. Behind her Amras' father looked stunned. I turned my head back to the Queen who was glancing at Amras with a look that made her face...radiant. "Would that all subjects could serve their sovereigns so well." She whispered and raised her eyes to me. "Danu works in mysterious ways." She offered softly. "Lord Amras you are released from your engagement to the Princess Shaylee. And while you have disobeyed your Queen, I cannot think but that it was at the urging of the Goddess that you left us to go to Lexi's side, for surely she had greater need of you than this Court. And it was the Goddess herself that created the very flute she called you forth with. Therefore it is my will, that you be released from your oath of Fealty to me, for the crime of having disobeyed your Queen." She informed him and around the room soft gasps were heard.

To be released of one's fealty was....a sign of disfavor that could well mark his family forever. My eyes shifted back to Amras' parents who looked as if they had received a blow to the heart.

But the Queen wasn't finished just yet, she continued with. "As you no longer owe me Fealty I cannot command you. Therefore I offer this advice, go to my Granddaughter who is also Queen. I offer this with a Grandmother's hope that you will continue to serve her well and that she will keep you near her. For it is clear to me that you are meant to be at her side. And know this Lord Amras; your family will not be injured in any way by this decree." She added and Amras pulled a deep breath into his lungs and raised his head for the first time since he'd gone to the floor.

"Your Majesty, I welcome your punishment and thank you for your trust." And she waved her hand at him and he rose swiftly coming back to my chair while his smile lit up the room. This time he went to one knee in front of me and the entire court.

"Your Majesty, Princess Lexi Helyanwe of the Seelie Court of Air, and Queen of the Dragons upon this Earth. By the Goddess, I pledge my fealty and swear to

protect you with my very life. As I have been given to you, so shall my heart remain in your care forever. Do you accept?"

His eyes were like drenched sparkling amethysts as I gazed into them. "Yes Lord Amras I accept." I whispered and he bent his head over the hand I held out to him, kissing my knuckles and then pressing it to his wet cheek. Around us the Sidhe responded with a soft sigh as if it had been holding its breath and waited only for my response to begin breathing again.

Chapter 26

“Lexi will you call the Prince forward?” My Grandmother asked and I turned to look at her as did Amras. “I believe he has sworn Fealty to you also and is therefore yours to command?” I nodded while Amras rose to his feet and moved to the back of my chair.

My eyes moved down to Cursed who stood with his legs shoulder width apart one hand holding the other wrist. “Prince Cursed?” I called and he was moving toward me before I finished speaking his name. He went to a knee as he reached the top step bowing his head to my Grandmother, myself, and then my Mother. Apparently he was well versed in etiquette, I’m not sure I would have known the correct order.

“It seems this court owes you an apology.” She started and beneath his lowered head I spotted Cursed’s eyes widen in shock. It has recently come to my attention that you were guiltless in assisting my daughter to remove herself from the Sidhe. As for your having unlawful interactions with the Princess....I believe the relationship you have with my Granddaughter speaks for itself, in that I’m certain she would never have

accepted you into her affections had that been the case. Therefore I offer you a boon of your choosing in recompense for our poor treatment of you this past half century, as well as this Queen's personal apology."

Cursed raised his head and glanced at the Queen and then myself. My smile lit his eyes with wonder and he glanced back at the Queen. "Your Majesty I accept...but would like to consider your offer carefully before deciding."

She smiled and nodded. "Of course." She told him and looked at me. I stared back at her for a second before realizing she wanted me to dismiss him and I turned back to Cursed who was watching me with a sly smile. I waved my fingers at him and he rose and went back down the stairs. My eyes followed the pleasing sway of his hair about his trim bottom as he walked down the stairs, and he glanced over his shoulder flashing his pointed teeth at me, letting me know he sensed my gaze and was enjoying it.

"Now," The Queen informed me. "Your Mother and Father have been telling me about your other...attendants." And I had to bite the end of my tongue so I wouldn't smile. "I have never met a Second Level Chaos Demon of the Order of Limerence before." She told me her golden eyes showing a keen interest and I turned back to Kit and held out my arm giving him a nod. He shifted to a black haze from which he exploded into flight, his black and silver Dragon form flying straight to me and landing gently upon my arm. I moved him closer so he might rub his head against my cheek. His rumbling purr of pleasure could be heard in the utter stillness that enveloped the room. I kissed and petted him for a several seconds then turned to my Grandmother with a smile.

"Ma'am, may I present Kit, my Lust Demon?" I asked and she looked like she was torn between laughing and being shocked. On my arm Kit stood to his hind legs then dipped his head, while his small wings fanned out to assist with his balance.

"Your Majesty." He murmured. "It is a pleasure to meet you." And he leapt from my arm and flew toward my Grandmother, landing at her feet and blinking his

large red eyes up at her. The guards behind my Grandmother flowed around either side of her chair and stood glaring down at Kit, hands gripping sword hilts.

My Grandmother ignored them and leaned forward so she could stare back at him and he shifted to haze and was suddenly sitting cross legged at her feet his beautiful face lifted to hers. The guards growled threateningly and Kit grinned and leaned forward. She surprised me by reaching out and brushing his cheek with the back of her hand causing Kit to smile and lift an eyebrow. “Mmmm.” He murmured and she removed her hand and I swear she flushed while he chuckled and turned to glance at me.

I nearly rolled my eyes and pointed to the arm of my chair and he shifted and winged his way back to me, landing gracefully and settling himself by wrapping his tail about the arm. I stroked him gently and he settled in to softly purring for me. My gaze moved back to the guards and in my mind I scoffed at them thinking how foolish they were for believing I would allow any of my men to harm my Grandmother! Their reaction to my thoughts were as disparate as the two of them. The dark one glared at me, his lips a fine line of anger which I dismissed, completely unimpressed. The pale guard stared back at me a look of interest in his fine green eyes. Hmmm I thought, and turned my attention to my Grandmother to find she had an almost wistful look upon her face.

“Owen?” I called and he glanced at me and nodded. “Ma’am?” I asked and she shook herself and turned to look at Owen.

“Ve.” She told him with a curious note in her voice. “It has been....a very long time. Where have you been keeping yourself?”

He bowed from the waist and replied. “Here and there Your Majesty. Mostly here, and never there.” Then he flashed a smile that made his dark brown eyes light up and she chuckled softly.

“Still as charming as ever I see.” She replied and he bowed again.

“I am sorry for your loss Your Majesty.” He told her more seriously. “The King was a good man. And I wish that I had the power to assist you.” He finished his dark eyes shifting to me then quickly away.

She sighed and glanced over her shoulder at her husband while the court held its collective breath. “Thank you.” She told him, her face thoughtful as she turned back to him. “It pleases me that you have joined my Granddaughter.”

He bowed again and glanced at me. “It is...pleasing to me also Your Majesty.” He told her and chuckles broke out around the room while my cheeks turned pink.

The Queen just smiled and gave him a nod as he stepped back. Her eyes went to my Drakes next and I sat forward and smiled at them. “If it pleases you Ma’am?” I asked and she smiled while I called them forward. The three stepped around Owen and the guards and I watched them come toward me while my heart swelled with pride. They stopped on the second to the top stair and dropped their heads to the Queen then turned to me and all three went down to a knee on the carpet much to my surprise.

I rose from my chair with a murmur and walked to them my eyes searching first Jace’s then Gareth’s face. Their eyes held the riches of their feelings for me and I closed my own and sent each of them a soft kiss. Gareth rumbled deep in his chest while Jace hummed for me. I held out a hand to them and they stood. My fingers squeezed theirs and then I stepped away with a smile, turning back to my chair and seating myself once again. The Queen sat quietly her golden eyes watching me intently. When I was once more comfortable as before, she moved her eyes back to Jace and Gareth then finally to Dane whom I’d left kneeling on the steps.

“Sirs.” She began eying them thoughtfully. “I have heard much about you, though I have never had the pleasure of your company till now. From the first moment you stepped foot upon this world you have shown the fine characteristics that set your race apart from all others. It is an honor to have you here.” She smiled when they both dipped their heads. “This Queen is most grateful for your care of her Granddaughter. I am aware that she has turned your lives upside down and yet you seem pleased that it is

so. The doors of this Sidhe welcome you Sirs and know that you have this Queen's favor."

Jace and Gareth both bowed from the waist much as Owen had done and turned to me dropping once again to a knee while I smiled at them. They rose as one and went back down the steps taking their places, leaving Dane still kneeling where I'd left him.

I turned and looked at the Queen who stared first at me and then Dane. "He is half Pixie Ma'am." I told her softly and her eyebrows rose in surprise. "His name is Dane Elensar his mother was Seelie, his sire was Dragon and is....no more." I told her softly. "He has...declared." And then to Dane I said. "Rise Dane you are mine." He pulled himself to his feet his dark eyes glancing toward first me than the rest of us seated on the dais.

"Your Father told me he had assisted with his birth. I did not realize..." And she fell silent her eyes searching Dane's face. "May I?" She asked me and I nodded and turned back to Dane.

"Go to her." My mind whispered and he stepped onto the dais and crossed to her stopping several feet before her chair and dipping his head.

"He is...unique." She told me her eyes flicking to me then back to Dane. "Different than you or anything I have ever sensed." Dane stared down at her and smiled, his dark eyes filling with humor.

"Tis the Irish in me, yer Majesty it is." He replied and I bit the inside of my cheek at the look on Grandmother's face.

"Ah..." She breathed. "The black Irish." And nodded her head once then turned to look at my Father who had a pleased smile on his face. I don't think he could have been more proud of Dane if he'd been his own son. That thought got me a raised eyebrow from Dad and I fought not to roll my eyes as that would have been completely inappropriate. "What is your age?" She asked and I sat forward, wondering myself.

"Two score and eight I am." He replied.

"Older than the other that sleeps." She replied thoughtfully and I got my first clue what Marcus was up to. "You are quite handsome for such a youngster." She told

him and glanced at me with a smile. “As are they all, I could almost envy you Granddaughter.”

I dipped my head to her. “I am most fortunate Ma’am to be blessed with so many pure hearts to attend me.” She raised an eyebrow and I added. “Yes they are all wondrously handsome and each knows full well how that pleases me.” On my chair arm Kit snickered while the rest of them...except Dane and Tdem chuckled. The Queen glanced at Dane and raised her eyebrow again. Tdem she completely ignored.

“He is newly come Ma’am. It has not yet...occurred to him.” I informed her while Dane turned slowly and pinned me to my chair with the smoke filled look in his inky black eyes.

“Go sibh cead cainte a fháil mo banríon.” He replied and dipped his head to me. I tilted my head to the side and raised my Dragonsward. He sighed and whispered, *as you say my Queen* and I dropped my Dragonsward once again, noticing that the room had suddenly gone still.

“Lexi child...what did you just do?”

“My pardon Ma’am. I did not mean to alarm you.” I thought then gritted my teeth for having been so foolish. “I simply...lifted my shield.”

“Oh.” She replied and glanced at my Mother then back at me. “I was not aware you had the power to sciath an intinn amach is amach. Dane looked surprised and glanced back at the Queen. I supposed he knew what she’d said and rather than raise my shield again I simply nodded. After all, there were few things she could have finished that sentence with. I was betting it was something to do with my ability to shield my mind from the Fey.

I dismissed Dane and he returned to the floor with the rest of them while my eyes followed. I couldn’t help being slightly annoyed but would take that up with him later.

“Will you stay?” My Grandmother asked. “Her voice neither a command nor too eager.”

I looked at Gareth and Jace then turned to her. “For a day or two only. My men have commitments, and as you say, I have already turned their lives upside down. But we would be pleased to visit for a while.” I told her while out of the corner of my eye I watched Tdem shift and frown. My gaze moved to him and I leaned back while his black eyes pinned me to the chair. Behind my head Amras’ fingers slipped into my curls and rubbed gently at my scalp. Obviously that was not what Tdem was expecting to hear, nor did he seem happy that my Grandmother had not commanded me as he had assumed. I smiled at him, realizing as King with a full Court of his own, it would be difficult for him to get at me often once I left the Sidhe. In fact I didn’t think it was going to be easy for him here in the Seelie Court either, and watched as his three guards shifted beneath their armor.

“That would please me.” She told me with a smile. “Now I’d like very much for you to meet my Court. And they, in turn, are most eager to meet you. I believe Amras and Cursed can be your guides.” And she sent me off with a wave of her hand as she turned to my Mom and struck up a conversation with her. I smiled and held out my arm for Kit who hopped on then moved to my shoulder and wrapped his tail loosely about my neck, gripped my flute and off we went.

“Try not to tear the dress would you?” I whispered and felt his tongue reach out to tickle my neck.

“Maybe later when we unwrap you.” He replied and I smiled and took Amras’ arm so he could lead me down the steps. Kit left my shoulder and went to mingle...I think he was enjoying the...sensations he was picking up and wanted the freedom to move about. Amras meanwhile, steered me directly to his parents while my men spread out amongst the crowd who quickly encircled them neatly separating us. When the introductions were over Amras was speaking with his father and his mother turned to glance down at me....odd everyone here seemed to be taller than I even in their flat slippers and I my heels.

“Your Majesty, I cannot thank you enough.” Amras’ mother told me, her lovely voice sounding as if it might break from emotion.

My hand reached out to grasp hers and I leaned in to whisper. “He is a fine man, a good man. It is an honor for me to meet his mother.”

At my words a tear slipped down her cheek and she took a deep breath and slid her arms around me giving me a quick hug. It was a rare show of emotion for an Elf to touch someone in a familiar manner who was not immediate family. “Lle en’ amin corm.” Daughter of my heart, she called me, and I felt my own eyes moisten in response.

I hugged her back and promised. “I will try not to get myself killed as he seems to delight in risking his life to save me.” It was the best I could promise given it appeared I had a propensity toward trouble. From where he spoke to his father, Amras eyes brushed my face and he smiled shyly and grinned. Linwe released me and I let her go to Amras who looked like he’d be tied up for some time. Parents were just funny that way.

The area in front of the dais was suddenly crawling with Fey and I turned back toward my men and found my way blocked by a tall man with two tone blue eyes who reached out to steady me when I swayed on my heels in my attempt to keep from mashing my face against his chest. “Your Majesty.” He murmured and I glanced up at him and lifted an eyebrow when he failed to remove his hands from me promptly. His eyes were cool as he stood there for a moment, before releasing me slowly. His intent must have been to show me that it was his choice to do so. I suppose since no one was attending me at the moment he felt free to take liberties with my person.

“Excuse me.” I told him and would have swept past him but he neatly stepped into my path causing me to halt once again. I took a deep breath and glanced up at him with an accessing look. “You must be the welcoming committee.” I told him and he frowned down at me. “Here to tell me your kind don’t like my kind and if I know what’s best for me I’ll beat feet out of town or you’ll call me out at high noon, or some such nonsense?” I hazarded a guess. His frown turned to confusion and then irritation. “Oh yeah, that’s the look I was waiting for.” I told him then held up my hand when he would have spoken. “Don’t bother it doesn’t matter to me anyway.” And I went to

move past him again only to have him once more step in my path. This was getting old and I glanced back up at him and placed my hand on my hip. Now people that know me...know this is not a good sign. Of course...this yahoo didn't know me so how could he possibly realize he was treading thin ice?

“What is a yahoo and why would I tread thin ice?” He asked in a deep lovely voice that went with his painfully beautiful face.

“I could tell you...but then I'd have to kill you.” I told him tongue in cheek as he stared down at me in distress.

“I think you enjoy yourself at my expense.” He murmured his tone not very happy. “But then I have not understood a word you've said since you first opened your mouth.”

Hmmm...well that was rather abrupt. I didn't think Elves were supposed to be that...rude. “I'm sorry perhaps we can start over...without you prying into my mind, and you might introduce yourself to me as I have not the vaguest idea who you are.”

He drew breath into his lungs and looked irritated again.

“Look you don't need to worry. I won't ever be your Queen that will be my Mother's job not mine. So you don't have to give me the speech about how I don't belong here or warn me away from delusions of grander since I don't have any. I came to meet my Grandmother and keep Amras from getting into trouble because of me. So if that was what you wanted to tell me...you need not bother.”

He lifted a hand and ran it through his hair. He looked like he might be pulling it out by the roots and I actually winced in sympathy while I watched him. He growled softly so that I lifted an eyebrow and by some miracle managed to keep my mouth shut long enough for him to say. “I've no idea why you would think...” And he waved his hands at me. “Any of that as I have...had no intention to say any such thing. I merely wished to apologize for my earlier rudeness and explain that I was fascinated by your....what did you call it...your funnel. I have upon occasion, been known to have a curious nature and I did not wish for you to be...annoyed with me. And I thought, if

you were willing that we might discuss your healing abilities as I am very interested in understanding the mixing of Elf and Dragon blood and how it has affected you.”

“Oh you’re a doctor.” I muttered and nearly bit my tongue off.

“A healer...yes. I am also...your Mother’s healer.”

“And with her carrying my four sisters....” I muttered and he nodded his eyes searching my face intently.

“Yes we need to ensure she has the best care.”

“I have it on good authority that all five of them will be fine.”

He looked at me in surprise and I shrugged.

“I also happen to know that none of them are gold...like me.” I leaned in to tell him. “But I’m not sure my parents know that. Although Dad should be able to....” I trailed off, giving myself a shake. “Do you have a name?” I asked giving him a lopsided smile. “You didn’t say.”

He looked flustered and told me, “Maglor Mithrandír.”

“Seriously? You don’t carry a title around with that do you?”

He looked pained and replied. “Lord Maglor Mithrandir, I am the seventh Earl of Massessl.” He told me waving his hand as if it was of no importance.

“So shall I call you Lord Maglor?” I asked and tried not to smile when he frowned.

“If you must.” He told me with a grimace.

“What can I assist you with that the Keeper of Knowledge cannot tell you?” I asked quietly. Then raised an eyebrow when he flushed and glanced anywhere but my face. Oh this should be interesting I thought, and smiled up at him patiently waiting for an answer. What did the most attractive Elf in the place want with me? Let me rephrase that...what did the absent minded professor type who also happened to be the most attractive Elf in the place want with me? Goodness he must cause a lot of frustration in the locals.

He swallowed and his eyes flicked to me then away again. His voice was barely a whisper when he asked. “You...you think I’m attractive?”

My eyebrows nearly climbed into my hairline at his question. “Have you never looked in a mirror?” I asked wondering how surreal this conversation was going to become.

He made a rude noise. I wasn’t sure what shocked me more...his response to my question or that such an odd noise had actually come out of someone so beautiful. “With your permission...I’d very much like to know what’s...behind the red door.” He muttered and shifted from foot to foot where he stood.

“Lord Maglor exactly how old are you?” I asked wondering if he was...capable of handling what was behind my red door. My thought earned me a strange look.

“I am...nearly a millennia.” He replied stiffly and I realized I might have offended him by asking a personal question. However he had started it by asking me questions first so technically I should be the offended party here.

“Hmmm and have you never...” And I glanced around to see that no one in particular seemed to be paying us any attention. “Been ah...intimate with um...anyone?” I asked, feeling my cheeks and the tips of my ears turn pink. His lovely eyes stared down at me in shock and I think he actually grew a foot or so from outrage and I winced and glanced back at him. “Okay yes well...what’s behind my door...is what got you that way.” I told him then took a deep breath.

“Got me which way?” He demanded his brow creasing in a frown.

“Intimate.” I leaned in to whisper. “What’s behind my door is lust. And no I’m not going to open the door now because it would only cause an uncomfortable scene, so please do not bother asking.” I told him when his eyes turned speculative.

“But you can open the door?” He demanded.

“Yes, of course I can and do...often, I created it didn’t I?” In fact sometimes the damn thing seemed to swing in the breeze I thought and pulled myself together when he stared down at me with an odd expression. “Excuse me.” I muttered.

“And do you think...the others will have need of this...funnel?” He asked his voice sounding pleased at the thought.

“Noooo....they definitely will not.” I replied while he frowned again and lifted an eyebrow at me. “Trust me on this...I know for certain.” I told him.

An arm slid around my waist pulling me back against an unfamiliar chest and I went from nearly purring, thinking it was Jace or Gareth, to stiff and unyielding in about half a second. “What do you think you’re doing?” I growled tilting my head up to look at Tdem who was looking at Lord Maglor like he would have liked to strangle him. For his part Lord Maglor wasn’t looking any more pleased with the King and I thought uh oh what is this?

“Lord Mithrandír, it is unexpected to see you out and about mixing with the Court. But then I suppose my new Queen is enough to draw even you out of your workroom.”

Maglor looked like he’d swallowed something wrong but managed a fairly polite response as he barely dipped his head. “Your Majesty, how kind of you to say so.”

Tdem narrowed his eyes and looked the other man over. “You are not boring Her Majesty with talk of your fanciful ideas are you?” He nearly growled and I stood there uncomfortably with the King’s arm still wrapped around me and tried not to distract either of them. This was starting to sound interesting.

“Sir, I hardly call ensuring our race’s future a fanciful idea.” Maglor informed the King in a tense voice.

“Far be it from me to disagree, since it’s clear that our women are no longer capable of having children.” The King told him with a grimace. Inside me Goldy rolled over and blinked her eyes as she pushed herself into a sitting position and made a scoffing noise low in her throat. I placed my hand over my stomach, below Tdem’s while he tensed behind me.

Maglor’s eyes nearly popped out of his head as he stared down at me. “Your Majesty?” He choked out while I grimaced and glanced back at him.

“Apparently Goldy does not think much of Lord Tdem’s comments.” I told them.

“Who is....Goldy?” Maglor whispered while his eyes stared down in the general vicinity of my stomach.

I sighed and tried pulling away from Tdem again only to be gripped tighter against his chest and, hmmm....other parts. “My Dragon.” I replied calmly.

“Your Dragon?” He whispered his eyes nearly crossing he was so surprised and Tdem spread his hand across my waist and hummed softly.

I leaned forward and glanced up at him. “Lord Tdem could you please not do that?” I asked and he frowned slightly and restrained himself from rumbling against my back. I turned to Maglor and nodded while behind Maglor I caught sight of Gareth stepping through the crowd. His blue eyes ran over me, taking in Tdem’s arm and a frown twisted his beautiful cupid bow lips. I reach out for him and mentally cupped his cheek in my palm then brushed my finger across his lips my own lifting at the corners when he froze then narrowed his gaze upon me.

At my back Tdem hissed and I shifted tilting to the side ever so slightly so that he moved and I was forced to take a step....right onto his foot with the spiked heel of my shoe. His hiss turned to a growl and I reached for his hand, my fingers delicately digging into the nerve between his thumb and first finger. His growl turned to an even more displeased noise as he yanked his hand off me while I smiled and stepped out of the shelter of his body past Maglor and into Gareth’s arms. His humming made me smile and I reached my arms around him and held him tight. He glanced over my head and tensed. I didn’t need to look behind me to know he was looking at Tdem and that the King probably wasn’t pleased. Oh well, if he wanted to be part of my Court he was going to have to get used to seeing me in Gareth and Jace’s arms as I liked it there very much.

“Who’s the other one?” Gareth whispered while his lips brushed my temple.

“My Mother’s physician.”

“You find him attractive.” It wasn’t a question.

I pushed back and looked up at him. “Who wouldn’t?” I asked with a mischievous smile. “Definitely pin up material.” I added much to his annoyance. “Just look at him, he’s every school girl’s dream of the perfect Faerie Elf.”

“Shall I kill him then?” Dane asked casually from beside Gareth. He’d arrived so quietly I hadn’t heard him. I glanced over my shoulder at Maglor who eyed Dane with a mixture of interest and concern and his cheeks were flushed again from my comments. Beside him Tdem looked like he could chew nails and his aura was yellow-green again...so not a good color on him I thought and he flared his nostrils and made unhappy noises in his throat.

“Now why would you want to do that?” I asked as I rested my cheek against Gareth’s chest getting comfortable.

“The man made ye blush.” Dane mumbled and I smiled then laughed softly against Gareth.

“Oh I see...and you thought that meant I was attracted ‘to’ him not that I thought him attractive?”

“And were ye not?” He replied still staring at Maglor or perhaps the King, from where I stood I couldn’t tell without turning my head again and I was presently enjoying the beating of Gareth’s heart beneath my cheek too much to want to move.

“Hmmm...stop teasing him Dane, the poor man’s a healer. Any interest he has in me is purely...scientific.”

“He’s no dead from the waist down Lassy.”

“Dane, Dane, Dane.” I muttered. “Such a complex you’re developing.” I teased him. “Not everyone here wants to be you.”

Dane turned his dark eyes to me then flashed me a grin. “No, I’m thinking at the moment...they’d like to be him.” He replied using a jerk of his chin to indicate Gareth.

“Very funny.” I replied and pushed out of Gareth’s arms. “Has anyone seen Cursed? I’m supposed to be meeting the Court and Amras is still busy with his parents.”

“I can assist you.” Tdem informed me and I turned and leaned back against Gareth’s chest.

“That is very kind of you Lord Tdem. But I believe the Queen’s intent was for me to converse with them, not chase them screaming before me.” He frowned and pulled himself upright at my comment his eyes narrowing on me. “Look around you.” I added, waving my hand at the space surrounding us. “There must be over five hundred people in this room and yet there you stand as if upon a small island.” Tdem turned his eyes upon Maglor as if to disagree. “Lord Maglor is hardly the appropriate person to gage by.” It made all four of them look askance at me while I lifted my hands and gave a delicate shrug. “He is as determined as he is beautiful.” I told them, my words seeming to irritate all of them except Maglor himself who simply raised an eyebrow at me. “He wants something only I can give him. And his single minded determination is the only thing keeping him standing there. A trait, I might add, I’d find admirable were he my tax collector.”

Gareth leaned forward and brushed his cheek against mine then told me with a sardonic note in his voice. “So it is for all of us.” His words brought knowing smiles to the other men’s faces.

I nodded thoughtfully. “My point exactly.”

“How so?” Dane asked.

“If everyone in the room wanted me as you claim, there wouldn’t be any space surrounding Lord Tdem, now would there?”

Tdem frowned and replied thoughtfully. “Her Majesty’s logic is...sound.”

“Do not take it personally Lord Tdem, perhaps it is merely the fierce nature of your bodyguards that is off putting. In either case you must agree were I to drag you and your entourage about the room with me I will only be meeting those with motives similar to your own. Or was that your intent?” I asked, tilting my head to the side.

“Similar to my own?” He repeated his dark eyes turning calculating. “It would be...enlightening.” He told me and I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes.

“For you perhaps. Personally I would much rather not know.”

“For what reason would you not wish to know?” Tdem asked me and I felt Gareth’s silent laughter against my body.

I sighed and looked him over. “For the reason that I am currently in a good mood and do not wish to change that by worrying. I leave that to you.” I told him and pulled away from Gareth after giving his hand a squeeze. “Now if you’ll excuse me? I’d very much like to get on with meeting the Court.” And I stepped away from Gareth and into the crowd.

Chapter 27

I went at it with a vengeance for the next several hours meeting as many of the Seelie as possible. It was what I had expected although as the Queen's Granddaughter the slurs against my mixed breeding were pretty much kept to a minimum. When I could see it was a problem for someone I simply moved on as quickly as possible, careful not to become annoyed.

At one point I found myself alone, standing near the wall thinking to myself, these people were a proud race and had every right to be protective of it being diluted out of existence. And that it was not for me to convince them their fears were unimportant. Especially since being here with them like this, I actually believed they were right. It would be tragic if Elves intermingled to the point of extinction. Had I the ability I would have healed them so they could reproduce. *Can* Goldy whispered inside me and I nearly went to the floor in a heap, but was instead, caught by my arms and helped into the nearest chair by one of the guards who must have been standing near me although I hadn't actually noticed him. It seemed Nick's guards could take lessons from these Elves.

“Breathe Your Majesty.” He murmured from his knee where he knelt next to my chair.

“Thank you.” I muttered settling my flute in my lap and dragging air into my lungs as quietly as I could. “I just...needed to sit down for a moment.”

“As you say.” He replied and I glanced at him and realized I was looking at the dark Elf who had been standing behind the Queen earlier. The one I’d irritated then dismissed.

“Oh.” I replied and bit my lip when he stood and crossed his arms over his chest.

“The Queen sent me to...ensure you came to no harm.” He replied and I winced and nodded.

“That was...thoughtful of her.” I muttered and glanced down at my hands which were laced in my lap. Working hard to not think about the irony.

“Your men are...not quite alarmed.” He told me curtly. “But it would ease them were you to lift your head and smile so they do not think I am...annoying you. Although perhaps that is redundant since I happen to be standing next to you.” He finished his voice sounding almost caustic.

I jerked my head up and glanced about the room forcing a smile when I caught sight of several of my men glancing my way. They must not have seen me stumble or they would have been over here already.

“I believe your...misstep was for the most part, unnoticed Your Majesty.”

“Would it help if I apologized?” I asked softly and glanced back down at my fingers after giving Gareth a nod to let him know I was fine.

“For what reason would the Queen wish to apologize to this lowly guard?” He replied after several minutes of silence.

Ouch...I thought and winced. “Perhaps because I was rude?”

He made a soft sound in his throat and shifted slightly. I turned my head and snuck a glance at him. He was staring out over the crowd his dark eyes restless. “Your men appear...well mannered.” He replied and I took that to be an acceptance of my

apology. I dipped my head and glanced back down at my hands. “Earlier when you shared your experiences with the Earl I could not help but notice that the Prince was also with you in many of the...sequences.”

The Prince? Oh he meant Cursed. “Yes the...Prince arrived the same day as Lord Amras. Also brought to me by the flute.” I told him, wondering at his question though I suppose as a Queen’s guard it was more than possible that he would know Cursed.

“And does he also please Your Majesty?” He asked, his deep voice going curious.

I leaned back in my chair and glanced up at him. One thing I had been told by Amras during our little session at Spot’s pond, was that Elves did not ask personal questions without first being invited. To do so was...very rude indeed. His eyes tightened at my thought and he flushed slightly. I thought about his question for a moment and why he might be asking and finally replied. “Yes, Cursed pleases me well.” I replied and then thought about my words, taking a deep breath while I struggled to not share just how well he’d pleased me last time we’d been together! Yet my thoughts would not be restrained and I skipped back in time to the other day at the heated pool. The guard slowly lowered his head to look down upon me, while I fought the blush that crept up my neck. Nothing seemed to be working at the moment and I winced mentally as highly inappropriate images flashed across my mind in a quick succession. I think I groaned and his pale green eyes widened and he looked stunned. In fact he looked a lot like...I cut the thought off abruptly and smiled weakly.

“Truly.”

“How do you know Cursed?” I asked softly when I was able to get myself back under some mediocre measure of control. I turned my head, glancing out over the crowd while still keeping him in my peripheral vision. He tensed and then relaxed and I bit my lip. “You didn’t say.”

I wasn’t sure he was going to respond he took so long, but he finally replied. “I trained him.” At his words I nodded. Yes that would make sense.

“And have you been in the Queen’s service long?” I asked calmly.

He nodded, his eyes going back to scanning the crowd. “A very long time.” He replied.

“You must be proud.” I told him and watched as he tensed beside me again. “To have trained the Prince I mean.” I added and watched as he slowly unclenched. “He is a very special man. I am pleased to be the one to assist him through his...issues.”

He turned back to me slowly, his light eyes piercing as he stared down at me and seemed to puff up in indignation. “What issues would those be Your Majesty?”

I tilted my head to the side and gave him a searching look. “Chained to a wall for a quarter of a century while being forced to watch others engage in...pleasure and unable to do so himself was difficult. Surely you can agree that that might cause... issues?”

In his eyes rage and pain suddenly burned, though his face remained immobile and he blinked and brought himself back under control very quickly. “Perhaps.”

“Cursed was not treated kindly by my family. And now the sins of the mother have fallen upon the daughter to correct. I am...well suited for the task.” I assured him with a small smile. “And consider myself most fortunate in that he has sworn to me his Fealty. Would you like to see?” I asked my golden eyes staring up at him. “Lord Amras is not the only man to whom I owe my life. Nor is he the only one that holds my heart.” He seemed to struggle with my question and finally shook his head.

“It is nothing.” He told me striving for an offhand tone. “I would not embarrass him in this way. And he would not want you to.”

I nodded acceding to his wish. “He is worried you know.” I told him and he shifted again but didn’t respond. “He argued strongly against my coming, anxious that I would be...lost to the night.”

His eyes moved across the floor and I turned my head and followed his gaze to Tdem who was standing on the other side of the room watching the crowd, his three

guards behind him. "He has held his position for many a long century." He replied softly. "And is accustomed to taking what he will, however he might."

I thought about it for a moment. "What man is not?" I asked and smiled when his eyes dropped to mine. "However I believe he like the rest, still pulls his pants on one leg at a time." His eyes went wide at my comment and then he threw back his head and laughed. It was...delightful and it drew gazes. In fact Cursed came nearly at a run while those closest to us turned to glance at the guard as if he'd grown a pair of horns.

He was still laughing when he lowered his head and caught sight of Cursed moving quickly through the crowd toward us. His laughter died but in his eyes there was a hint of pride which he quashed with a quick blink. "Stay?" I asked, reaching for his hand and glancing up at him my eyes holding a challenge. He looked at me and I could see the struggle going on in him but he settled and rocked forward then back again on the balls of his feet.

"As Your Majesty commands." He replied and lifted his gaze from me to Cursed who came to a halt before us.

"My Lady." He greeted me and I smiled and drew him down for a quick kiss which he seemed to enjoy more than I thought...appropriate. He stood back up and glanced at the guard his eyes narrowing as they stared at each other. "Captain Telrun, or should I call you Your Grace Duke Aerandir?" He asked his voice sounding cold and...deadly. My eyes widened and I swallowed heavily. "What do you here?" He demanded.

"The Queen sent him to guard me." I answered for him, dismayed at the tension between these two. "I took a bad step and he was kind enough to assist me into this chair. He has been keeping me company while I rest." Cursed glanced down at me and his dark eyes shifted to concern.

"Are you well?" He asked, going to a knee before me so he could search my face. I reached out to cup his cheek and nodded.

"I am." I told him, drawing my thumb over his lips in a gentle caress. "Yet I'm confused as to why you seem so... unsettled." I told him leaning forward in my chair

as I watched the play of emotions skitter over his face. “Is there something between the two of you I should know about?” I asked softly. Cursed nipped my finger hard and I widened my eyes. “This is a day of new beginnings Cursed...perhaps it would be wise to... speak your mind and get it off your chest?”

Cursed dropped his eyes to my lap and when he raised them I pulled air in through teeth at the savage look burning in their depths. I would have reached for him but he glanced up at Duke Aerandir and informed me in an icy voice. “The Captain was responsible for my arrest and ensuring my stay in the dungeon was never...lonely.”

I slumped back suddenly in the chair. My body going limp with shock. “Duke Aerandir ...was your entertainment?” I asked in a shaky voice.

Cursed glanced back at me and looked confused at my question. “No.”

“He never...ah...he did not participate in your punishment...merely ensured that it occurred?” I asked, wanting to be certain.

“It is as you say.” Cursed responded.

“He is married?”

Duke Aerandir made a harsh sound while Cursed shook his head. “No.” He answered his eyes confused.

“And before my Mother escaped?” I asked and he drew his brows together in a frown. “What was your relationship prior to then?”

Cursed shook his head and shrugged. “He was my Captain.”

“And?”

“And what My Lady...?” Cursed asked harshly, his dark eyes flashing.

I sighed and took his hand in mine. I sat there quietly for several minutes then spoke softly so that they both leaned in to hear my words. “When I was little we lived for a brief time, near a family with two daughters who were mere years apart in age. The older... seemed to run wild, do whatever she pleased. Yet the youngest did not have the same set of rules. When she was naughty she was scolded and punished severely, for even the most minor offenses.” My fingers drew soothing circles on the back of his hand as I continued. “I could not understand the injustice of it and often

complained to Mi, as the younger girl was near to my age and I thought her a good person. I struggled over the unfairness for several months, until Mi tired of my ranting and finally explained it to me.” I told him and glanced into his eyes.

“What did the cat tell you My Lady?” Cursed asked me calmly.

I smiled sadly and brushed back a strand of hair, gently placing it behind his ear. “She told me that the parents had given up on their oldest daughter believing that she was too wild to save. Therefore they had turned their hopes and dreams upon their youngest so that she might become something more. It was their fear of her faltering that had overcome their good sense. That their strictness was based upon their deep love for her, and their need to ensure that future harm did not come to her.”

Cursed considered my story for a moment and nodded. “He was more to me than Captain.” He told me softly and I reached for him and pulled him into my embrace while I glanced up at Duke Aerandir who looked...most distraught.

“I beg you to forgive him Cursed for the crime of wanting to protect you, because perhaps...you were more to him too.”

“I cannot My Lady. I do not know how.” He whispered and his voice sounded strained...nearly broken.

I held him gently and asked. “Was there not an alternative punishment?”

Cursed actually shuddered in my embrace and I looked to Aerandir for my answer. “Yes Your Majesty...many. The most common is...gelding. It is what the Court called for since they believed his offense was against the Princess.” I gripped Cursed tighter and did a little shuddering myself my eyes staring up at him in horror. “I...could not do it.” He told me his voice nearly breaking. “I begged the Queen to spare him, to allow me to personally see to his punishment, promising it would be worse than simple castration.”

Cursed drew back in my arms and stared up at Duke Aerandir his face showing his surprise and a glimmer of...gratitude? I wasn't exactly certain but knew it was time to leave these two alone.

“I think my ankle is much better now.” I told them and Cursed stood, his eyes sliding back to Duke Aerandir who seemed to be holding his breath. “You do not need me to...work this out. I’m just going to go stand next to Owen right over there so you can still see me from here.” And I got up from my chair and kissed Cursed’s chin. “It was a pleasure to meet you Duke Aerandir.” I told him and he went to his knee before me though technically it was not required.

“Your Majesty, you are most wise for one so young. The house of Telrun is in your debt.” And I smiled and placed my finger under his chin, lifting his face so that I might place a kiss upon his brow.

“No Duke Aerandir, I am in yours.” And I turned and fled back out to the floor clutching my flute as I moved toward Owen who turned to watch, his dark eyes considering me as I gracefully navigated the crowd without tripping once. Ohhh I was getting good at this I thought. And in high heels!

“You look pleased with yourself.” Owen told me as I hugged him and smiled up into his rich brown eyes.

“Yes I am.” I replied and then blushed when my stomach rumbled...loudly. He chuckled and gave me another squeeze.

“We should do something about that soon.” He leaned down to whisper and I nodded then pulled his jacket away from his chest and glanced inside. “What are you doing?” He asked his voice sounding amused.

“Checking to see if you have a candy bar or a drink or something on you.” I teased then let go of his jacket with a pout.

“Minx.” He whispered and kissed my nose.

“Seriously Owen I’m hungry.” I told him then rolled my eyes when he looked at me and raised his eyebrows several times. “For food, I’m weak with hunger! I couldn’t possibly think about anything else at the moment.” I pouted and he shook his head and glanced around. “We’ve been here for hours. Don’t they ever eat?” I asked and he grumbled and gave me a look that warned me to be quiet. “Fine when they find

my shriveled up body expired on the floor you can explain. Or maybe I should just chew on my flute?”

“Open your mouth.” He told me and I lifted an eyebrow at him and tilted my head sideways.

“Next you’ll be telling me to close my eyes.” I grumbled and we both know where that will lead I thought.

“You are so...refreshing.” He chided me. “Now open your mouth.”

“Fine but if this causes a riot I’m blaming you.” I warned him and he sighed and waited patiently while I dropped my lower jaw and opened my lips. His hand reached up and popped a grape into my mouth and I bit down and made mmm mmm noises.

“Want another?” He asked and I tilted my head sideways and told him.

“I don’t believe I’ve ever refused you.” I told him and he thought about that for a moment.

“Yes you did...that first day on the work out room floor when you had the Keeper freeze me in place.”

“Oh, well besides then.” I replied and he smiled and proceeded to feed me several more grapes.

“You know I’m going to need some protein soon.” I told him. “I’m a growing girl and need sustenance.”

“If you keep talking like that, you’re going to get more substance than you can deal with.” He whispered against my ear and I shivered and laughed softly.

“Promises, promises.” I teased and he grinned.

“Technically I’m not supposed to be feeding you.” He told me in a hushed voice.

“Why not?”

“Because you my sweet, are supposed to play for your supper.”

“I am?” I asked while he slipped me another grape. “Is that what Mi meant earlier?” And he nodded. “What about the throne? What was that comment about?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“This is tedious.” I told him and swallowed. “Am I just supposed to start playing here in the middle of the hall or should I go back to the dais? Which would get me food quicker?” I asked and he winced.

“Here is fine. But let me just get you a chair. I’d hate for your legs to fall asleep and have you fall down.”

Yeah that could happen. “Okay but hurry up, I’m really really hungry.” He shook his head and snapped his fingers while a padded foot stool appeared in front of us. It was the perfect height for me to sit on and did not have arms or a back to get in the way of my playing. I was just about to seat myself on the stool when Jace wandered over his eyes worried. “There you are.” I greeted him and went into his arms while he held me close and kissed my temple. I pulled back and his lips met mine in a sweet kiss.

“Are you...going to play that?” He asked.

“If I want to eat it seems I must play first.” I told him and he glanced at Owen who nodded. “It’s not going to...bring anything here is it?”

“She is within the Sidhee, it will only bring what it is intended to bring.” Owen replied as if that answered that and Jace sighed and kissed me again then his arms opened and I seated myself and lifted my flute.

“Wish me luck.” I whispered then closed my eyes and began playing softly. The song I played for them was a proud one meant to stir the senses and fire the blood. I fused into the music the beauty and courage of an immortal race and filled the bars and lines with grace and intelligence and the fierceness which I sensed within them. And when I was done with that I moved to a the love of a mother for her child as I had sensed in Linwe for Amras, and the love of a father for a son, as Aerandir had shown me the terrible lengths one might go to protect and keep from harm. And then my song turned to one of hope and new beginnings because within me might be the answer to their yearning for children and a way to end their heartbreak, if only I could understand

and use that power. And finally my thoughts turned to hunger and the ways in which one might feed the hungers of the heart, mind, and body.

I'm not sure how long I played, but my arms were tired by the time I lowered my flute and my brow felt as if someone had spritzed me with mist. Owen had said, do not be humble and I had not been. My men had gathered around me and behind them the Court stood in silence their faces intent upon me. I glanced around and my eyes widened at the bounty of food that lined the hall. Table upon table stretched down the side all covered in food. The aroma hit me and I pulled it into my lungs and smiled up at Owen who had a pleased look on his face.

"Dinner is served Your Majesty." He told me and I nodded.

"Could someone just...bring me a plateful?" I asked. "I'm not sure my legs will work if I try to stand just yet." Those nearest me chuckled but it was Tdem who went to get my food for me. Frankly it shocked me, and my eyes followed him as he crossed the hall.

My Grandmother swept through the room and the people parted for her. "Lexi," She told me as I glanced up at her. "That was most beautiful child. Thank you."

"Ma'am." I replied. "I'd get up but I'm not certain I can just yet." I told her honestly and she smiled, her golden eyes twinkling.

"There is no need. After that performance you deserve to stay seated." She told me. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Yes very much." I agreed.

"And what do you think of our people?" She asked her eyes curious.

"They are...wonderful." I replied and she smiled and nodded once. "Ma'am?" I asked and she glanced at me and tilted her head to the side.

"Ask." She told me.

"Is there something I need to do?" I asked and she frowned slightly.

“Tomorrow is soon enough.” She told me. “For now, eat and drink. I imagine this has been a long day for you. If you feel tired one of my guards will show you to your quarters.”

“And my men?” I asked wanting to ensure they would be near to me as I would have need of them before morning. She smiled, her eyes lighting.

“Your quarters can accommodate them all.” She advised me. “And more... should you feel the need. Feel free to...enjoy yourself with anyone...not already spoken for.”

“My thanks.” I said, my cheeks burning under her amused look.

“You may wish to reserve judgment upon that.” She told me and I frowned up at her, my eyes confused. “The Seelie are...quite competitive. You have played the Mirel Flute for us and the Sidhe has welcomed you.” She told me her hand motioning to the food laid out behind us. “You are the only Queen of Dragons upon this world, and you are my Granddaughter, therefore also a Princess of the Seelie Court. Do not be surprised should you find yourself being vied over for their attentions. It is...most natural.”

I swallowed and stared back at her, wondering just how many single males were in attendance.

She smiled, her golden eyes laughing down at me. “Too many to count.” She replied then cupped my cheek in her palm and leaned forward to kiss my temple. “Now you should eat. You will, without a doubt, require strength.”

“Ma’am?” I stopped her, biting my lower lip and lowering my eyes briefly. “I need to...apologize.”

She turned fully back to me. “For what reason would you need to do so?” She asked softly, her eyes clear.

“It seems that I am in... Fecundty.” I told her softly and she nodded.

“Yes that is not a surprise child.”

“Which means that...I require...frequent...interactions.” I told her, feeling my face flame as those around us listened intently and I felt a host of curious minds press in upon me. “It seems during these...interactions, I tend to...broadcast.”

“Broadcast?” She repeated her eyes confused.

“My pleasure.” I finished and peaked up at her from beneath my lashes. “It can be...quite powerful.”

“How powerful?” She wanted to know her brow creased in concern.

I glanced at Gareth and then Kit who were closest to me my eyes asking for assistance. Kit stepped forward, drawing her attention and he bowed from the waist. “Your Majesty, my Mistress has been known to bring men to their knees in release... through several hundred feet of stone...regularly. As well she can render a man...satisfied with a mere touch. Should a man not please her...”

“Kit.” I gasped my eyes widening in horror.

My Grandmother turned to look at me and then back to Kit. “Should a man not please her...what?” She urged him.

“She might render him...decreased in size.” He told her and I swear he’d swelled three inches from pride.

“Decreased in size?” She repeated and glanced at me to see if this was some form of joke.

“Permanently.” Kit added with a sly grin.

“It has yet to happen Ma’am.” I assured her and her eyes widened thoughtfully. “Perhaps it would be best to leave the Sidhe during our rest?” I offered and she frowned and shook her head.

“No I think not. We will manage.” She told me.

“Ma’am?”

“Yes child?”

“We will require...a large bed.” I told her glancing around at the number of men I’d brought with me.

She looked like she might choke then forced herself to smile. “It has already been arranged.” She informed me. “Is there anything else?”

“Just this...I do not know what affect, if any it will have on...the women.” I told her softly. “Perhaps none. I cannot say.”

“Hmmm.” She replied then turned to the King who was standing near us holding my plate of food, his dark eyes watching me intently. “And will you be staying with us Lord Tdem?” She asked him and breathed deeply when he nodded. “You may keep your guards Lexi, as I assume they have already been exposed to this. In addition I will send you several more to ensure the King’s safety.” She added then when she would have turned away she hesitated and swung back, her eyes pensive. “A mere touch?” She asked as her eyes flicked to Kit who nodded vigorously.

“A mere touch.” He confirmed.

“I think...I think I would like to see this.” She told me her voice brooking no argument.

I glanced at Kit and felt like smacking him but refrained. “Ma’am, shall I choose someone then?” I asked.

She considered me for a moment and shook her head turning to look over her shoulder at the tall blonde whom had shared the dais with Duke Aerandir. “His Grace, Lord Camthalon will suffice.” She informed me as he stepped around her and in front of me, his pale green eyes glancing between the two of us. I didn’t doubt that he’d heard every word we’d spoken and there was a pleased smile upon his face, an eager look in his eye.

“Are you certain Ma’am?” I asked. “He is your personal guard.”

She looked at me and raised one eyebrow. “What is it you fear?”

I took a breath and shook my head. “It is...nothing.” I replied and looked at Camthalon.

“Shall I kneel Your Majesty?” He asked in a lilting voice that caused the hair upon my arms to rise. I motioned to the floor in front of me and studied him as he dropped gracefully to his knees.

“You are not...spoken for?” I asked softly and nodded in relief when he hesitated a moment and flashed me a sly smile as he shook his head. I took a deep breath. “May I touch you?” I asked, not wishing to alarm him. His response caused me to smile too and those around me to shift. I did not look at my men, knowing that they would not be pleased with this display. Not because it took anything away from them, but because it would be one more thing to draw attention to me. And I already had enough.

Chapter 28

Camthalon watched me closely his eyes calm as I reached for him. My palm slid over the smooth skin of his cheek and I let it rest there for several seconds. “Well met.” I said and filled him with the sense of contentment I had felt that morning after my second session in Amras’ room with Gareth and Jace. The force of my pleasure dropped him to the floor as if he’d been hit in the temple and I caught his head as he went down lest he strike it for real upon the marble floor. I eased him onto his side and smiled down at him. “Are you well?” I asked and he dragged an eyelid open and blinked up at me in a daze while in his throat he made pleased noises. I brushed his cheek and sat up looking to my Grandmother.

“Goddess! Is he well?” She asked her eyes wide.

“He is...suffering from afterglow Ma’am.” I assured her. “He will be himself again in a short while.”

“Should we move him?” She asked and I shook my head feeling responsible for him though it had not been my choice.

“I will watch over him.” I told her with a wry smile and my response seemed to please her immensely.

“Thank you.” She told me. “I am sorry if this distressed you.”

I smiled and glanced down at Camthalon and replied. “We shall see.”

She gave me an odd look then said. “I will have someone arrange for more guards.”

Kit bowed to her again and she glanced at him. “Have them bring spare trousers Your Majesty. They will need them.” Her eyes widened and she looked at me and nodded as she moved away.

“Remind me to strangle you later Kit.” I told him softly and he sighed and tossed up his hands grumbling under his breath.

“Your dinner.” Tdem offered, his deep voice drawing my eyes up to him. He looked down at the Duke stretched out on the floor at my feet in a stupor and smiled. He had a very pleased look in his eyes. “Talented indeed.” He told me.

“Would you like a taste for yourself?” I asked, my hand stilling as I reached for the plate.

He glanced down at Camthalon and then back to me. “I prefer the real thing...but as you say, we shall see.” He replied softly then stepped back and folded his arms over his chest while I considered my food and realized I wasn’t hungry after all.

Gareth rumbled deep in his chest and I lifted my eyes to his. He looked, worried. “Loss of appetite?” He asked me softly. “Are you well, otherwise?” I closed my eyes and did a self check realizing I was starting to feel a little sluggish and shook my head. “The grapes Owen provided you will not sustain you.” He warned me and turned to look at Jace. Gareth reached out and lifted me from my seat allowing Jace to slide in under me on the small bench so Gareth could place me in his lap. “See that she eats at least half of everything on that plate.” Gareth growled then pushed through the people surrounding us.

“Where is he going?” I asked as Jace raised a forkful of something I did not recognize to my lips.

“To find a guard that can direct us to our rooms since you have rendered this one...a problem.” He told me.

“Oh.” I mumbled and took the bite he offered, chewing thoughtfully while I tried to identify what it was I was eating.

“I have no idea.” Jace muttered. “Nor do I care as long as it gets inside you. Though I doubt anything here would be offensive, since you conjured it with your playing.”

“I did?” I asked after swallowing.

“Where did you think it came from?” He asked and I took another bite and shrugged one shoulder.

“Faeries?” I told him when my mouth was no longer full. He just snorted and then chuckled. I dodged the next forkful to ask. “Can I have something to drink? I think I’m dehydrated. And shouldn’t you all be eating? I’m not the only one around here that will need my strength.” That comment had them all heading to the table to fill their own dishes. Owen snapped his fingers and handed me a large glass of ice cold water before he too went for food. “Share my plate with me.” I offered Jace as I swallowed down half the glass. “It is way too much food for me alone and I’m concerned you will not eat once I am done. I can’t have you fainting on me in the midst of ensuring I don’t end up in convulsions on the floor.”

He smiled and kissed my ear. “You say the sweetest things.”

We sat there eating in relative peace for several minutes before I asked. “How long do you think it will take him to recover? I’ve never stayed around to find out.”

“Normally I’d say not long. But you were very satisfied this morning so...it might be a while.”

“I did not want to do this.” I told him.

“Worried he will follow you around like a puppy when he comes to his senses?”

“The thought had occurred to me. Mostly because he was already showing signs before I even left the dais.”

“Your scoffing at him did not help Lexi.” He chided me softly.

“His arrogance annoyed me.”

“He was merely doing his job. And yet you had a much worse reaction to the other, the darker one.” He remarked. “I noticed he searched you out much faster than this one.” I chewed my food and did not respond immediately.

“His concern was for Cursed, not me.” I replied and my tone informed him I did not wish to discuss it further.

“You did a good thing.” He whispered against my ear. “Gareth and I are very proud of you.” I turned my face into his neck and pulled the scent of him into me.

“I want to take my hair down.” I told him while my lips nibbled at his neck. “It is starting to give me a headache.”

“Is it your hair or something more...urgent?” He asked his voice catching.

“It is coming.” I told him. “Let us finish dinner. I am not yet in distress. But you smell...very good to me, and it is difficult to think about food being this close to you.” He hummed for me and we quickly finished the rest of the food on my plate.

The stool we sat upon was short enough that my feet touched the floor near where the Duke was currently resting. The others had returned and were chatting and eating while I sat quietly in Jace’s lap enjoying the feel of him beneath me and the smell of his skin which was exquisite. I shifted in his lap and made a low pleased sound for him.

“Lexi sweetheart...please.” Jace groaned and I pulled my face from his neck and glanced at him. He had an intense look on his face and his eyes were softly whirling. I looked around and realized none of my men were eating. All of them were staring down at me, their faces.....eager.

On the floor below me a cool hand slid under my dress and wrapped around my ankle then moved slowly up my calf hesitating at the knife strapped there. I leaned forward and searched the pale green eyes of His Grace Lord Camthalon who looked

like he just had...really good sex. At my thought he growled low and soft and slid his fingers over my bare leg. His eyebrow rose slightly as his fingers found my hilt and slid the blade from its sheath an inch or so then back home. The look in his eye told me he was pleased. Perhaps he enjoyed a woman that came prepared. Or maybe he had a knife fetish. Either way my blade seemed to amuse him. "Shouldn't you be getting up Lord Camthalon?"

"Call me Cam." He replied softly then informed me. "I like it here just fine." His words were bold indeed and might well have earned him retribution had I been so inclined. He gave me a sly grin and curled his fingers round my leg shifting his body closer.

"Lord Camthalon...Cam." I started switching his name to the shortened version when the look in his eyes turned expectant. "I'm going to need that." I told him indicating the leg he seemed to have become attached to and was currently stroking under my gown.

"Yes." He agreed. "So am I." I swallowed and glanced up at Jace who was still struggling with his own needs.

I took another breath and tried again. "Shouldn't you be guarding the Queen?"

One corner of his mouth lifted and he blinked slowly. "I am yours." He informed me bluntly and I pulled air into my lungs and stared down at him in surprise. "She has given me to you."

I could not believe this. I had not heard her say any such thing. "Are you certain?"

"Oh yes the first time you played, the same as the Prince, all those years ago." He murmured, continuing to run his long graceful fingers over me. "One dark Prince of the UnSeelie, and a former Seelie Prince of light, our purpose...to tempt you. She did not realize you were also Dragon." I turned to glance at Cursed who looked nearly as surprised as I did, his black eyes glancing between the two of us, his head shaking while his eyes filled with confusion. Poor Cursed was having a hard day, so many new truths to wade through. I sighed and turned back to Cam.

“If that is so, why did you not come when I played my flute when...the Prince did?” And why was he not in my portrait as all the others were?

“Pride.” He murmured in a relaxed voice. “I wanted you to come to me.” He informed me then smiled and I finally realized that I had seen him once before. His pale eyes lifted to mine and he blinked slowly. “You were a lovely child. And now you are...so much more.” And then he sighed, his fingers stilling on my leg. “I see the way your eyes follow the Prince and I wonder...did I wait too long My Lady?”

The use of that term hit me like a blow or perhaps it was just that I’d been ignoring the warnings in order to learn more from Cam. In either event I suddenly realized I had waited too long. I felt the air leave my lungs and clutched at Jace beneath me. My eyes widened in alarm and Gareth was suddenly there before me lifting me into his arms. “Gareth I need you...” And I buried my face against his neck and shuddered.

“Hang on.” He told me and then the swirling sensation and the sound of voices and I was naked beneath Gareth, my legs and arms opening to welcome him into my body with a sigh. “I should turn you over my knee.” He murmured as his lips nuzzled my neck.

“Mmmm but this feels so much better than that would.” I moaned and teased him while he chuckled and moved his hips for me.

“Lexi you must not wait so long to let us assist you.” Jace chided from beside us.

I turned to look at him and reached my hand out to stroke his thigh. “Don’t be mad I got distracted and it just...snuck up on me there at the end.” I told him as my fingers slid up his leg and he shifted to give me more access to his naked body. I purred and wrapped my legs around Gareth placing my heels at the inside of his knees.

“Shall we do this?” Gareth asked his voice sending gooseflesh skittering over my skin when he leaned back and stared down at me.

I turned my head and looked up into his dark blue eyes and felt my breath catch at the beauty of him. “I would enjoy that very much. I believe you have the helm Captain.” I teased and he grinned and kissed my nose.

“Hold on wench, I believe we’re headed for rough waters.” He told me while Jace chuckled and rolled onto his side next to us. His fingers trailed up my arm and over my ribcage and I turned my face to him.

“Kiss me Jace.” I whispered and his lips pressed to mine in a tentative kiss which quickly became much more. Gareth lowered his mouth to my breast and I arched my back for him while my fingers slid into his hair. Gareth lifted his hips and began stroking me gently causing me to moan and hold him tightly with my legs. He whispered my name and I shuddered and dropped my lower shield so I might let them see the way I felt with them. I started with the pleasures of their body above me. Sharing how I enjoyed the feel of their skin against my palms as they pressed me into the bedding. How their size had always made me feel small and delicate and that their weight settled between my legs excited me. In my mind I pictured how the hair on their chests teased my breasts and heightened my sensitivity.

Gareth made an exited noise, growling softly while his hips stroked me. I fed him the exquisite feel of his length buried inside me. Showing them just how fulfilling it was to cradle him within my body. How right it felt to be beneath them while they made love to me. And then I pushed back the pleasure they brought to me and showed them my cravings, how I could not be near either of them without wanting to touch and taste. How my body yearned for theirs, and that they had always satisfied me emotionally and physically.

And when I was done, they both dropped their shields and I was swept up in their excitement and passions while we made love. Jace wrapped his arms around me and pulled me onto his heaving chest. Beside us on the bed Gareth was propped up against the pillows, one leg bent at the knee. He had a satisfied smile on his face and reached out a hand to idly brush back a loose tendril of hair from my face while I rubbed my cheek against Jace’s chest and purred.

Fingers trailed up the arch of my foot and I froze, my eyes cracking open in surprise. I slowly lifted my head and looked toward the end of the bed and pulled air through my teeth. Oh no! I thought, my eyes going round in shock. Dane and Tdem were both seated upon the end of our very large bed while behind them standing on the floor were the rest of my men...and Cam. In addition, Tdem's three guards were spaced about the room their backs to the walls, faces aimed in my direction. The rest of my men were all still clothed, and I pressed myself tightly against Jace horrified to realize I hadn't even known they were there.

"That was...enlightening." Tdem remarked while Dane continued trailing his fingers over my foot and stared back at me from his black eyes. He looked hungry and I couldn't help wonder why he wasn't more...limp like he usually was.

"Ye no cracked open the door I'm thinking." He replied with a twinkle. "Tis sweet loving ye was after no lusty crazed sex ye kin?" And I blinked at him and swallowed. My eyes shifted to the King and he grinned and reached for the buttons on his jacket.

"I believe what the Drake is implying." He told me as he shrugged off his coat and tossed it to the floor behind him. "Is that I'm about to show you the difference." His comment brought a frown to Dane and his eyes narrowed dangerously while his fingers stilled on my foot.

I glanced at Cursed who was standing with his legs braced shoulder width apart. He had a worried look in his eyes though there was no emotion on his face. If it came to it he would defend his King and I might lose a Drake. I glanced back at Dane who looked like he wasn't going to take being preempted in stride, and raised both my shields while beneath me Jace jerked and Gareth turned to look at me in concern.

Dane! I yelled in my head and at the end of the bed he jumped and turned to me. I slid off Jace's chest so I might kneel upon the bedcovers facing him and glanced at Owen whose eyes had moved to me. "Owen?" I asked and he eyed me curiously while I pointed a finger at Dane. "His clothing, get rid of it." He looked surprised but nodded and Dane was suddenly naked while the King was in the process of removing

his shoes. *Come to me hurry.* I urged Dane and he went down on his hands and knees while the King growled low and threatening. I moved toward Dane and slid my body between the two of them pressing my back to him while he molded his chest to me and wrapped his arm about my waist.

Lassy I do nae need ye to defend me but tis pleased I am that ye would try. His mind whispered and I looked at Tdem and informed him. “This is my bed and these are my men. I will not tolerate dissension or jealousy amongst my Court. When you are here, you are not a King...you are merely a man, my man. And if you wish access to my person you will share or you will leave.”

My words enraged him and he struggled to keep his temper in check. “And will Your Majesty play favorites? Will I always be last?” He asked, his voice nearly vibrating with anger.

I considered him for a moment and dropped both of my shields so that he might see the truth in my words. “I cannot force my heart in one direction or another Tdem.” I told him softly, deliberately leaving off his title and watching as the skin over his cheeks tightened. “Consider this....there will be more after you. If you wish a place in my heart...you must earn it. Harming my men will certainly earn you a place, but it will not be one you enjoy. I am....a difficult woman. But I promise you I will be fair, if you but meet me half way. I am aware of my duty Sir...are you?”

He crossed his arms and leaned back as if settling in to wait and I tilted my head and looked at him. “You will not share?” I asked and he frowned back at me, his dark eyes searching my face.

“I will wait.”

“For what Tdem?” And again he seemed disturbed by my use of his name.

“That one to finish.” And he pointed at Dane behind me.

I took a deep breath and shook my head. “For what reason would you need to?” I asked simply, and watched as Tdem’s eyes widened. While behind me Dane sighed heavily. “Dane will share or he will remove himself from my bed... immediately. The

rules apply to all Tdem, I have not singled you out simply because you are not Drake. To think so is to insult me.”

“Then come to me.” He challenged and I knew if I did so it would set a bad precedent.

I smiled and stroked Dane’s arm where it rested against me and licked my lips while in my mind I cracked open my red door and gathered a handful of my desire and softly blew it toward him. “I think not.” I told him while his body arched as if he’d been shocked with electricity and behind him Cursed and Owen grabbed for Cam who lunged forward before he could control himself.

Dane rumbled in his chest and slid his hand up to cup my breast while he buried his face against my hair and inhaled deeply. “Mmmm Lassy, sweet loving would have been welcome. But if its lusty sex ye need tis what I am willing to give I am.” He whispered and I lowered my eyelids and settled more firmly into Dane’s lap. His other hand slid down my body and into my curls and I smiled at Tdem while he flared his nostrils and ran his eyes over me. His cheeks flushed as he followed the path of Dane’s hand and a low rumbling noise echoed out of his chest when Dane’s fingers slipped into my curls and began stroking me so that I murmured softly and shifted my hips for him.

At the end of the bed Tdem clenched his hands and seemed to struggle to hold himself in place. I smiled at him and sent him the feel of my hands sliding over his chest then down to the waist of his pants and he growled and lunged for us. The weight of him knocked us over and I found myself sandwiched between them with Dane below, Tdem above.

Tdem’s mouth fastened to mine and I opened for him, murmuring as his tongue invaded me and his hands roamed my body while I reached for his shirt. I ripped it in my eagerness to feel his skin next to mine and made an irritate noise. Tdem pulled back slightly allowing Dane’s hands to slide around me again and over my waist. He edged me up his body until I was straddling the hard hot length of him at the juncture of my thighs. He reached for himself guiding his length into me while Tdem lifted his

hands to unbutton the cuffs of his shirt and I closed my eyes to savor the feel of Dane in me for a moment before sitting up. I brushed Tdem's hands away from his buttons so I might assist him. He growled again and wrapped his arms around me, sliding his hands into my hair and sending pins flying as he released the mass down my back.

My lips found his neck and I bit him softly while I worked at the ties on his pants. When they were loose, I slid both hands down the front against his body. He wore nothing beneath the cloth and the hard length of him was soon cupped within my palms. He was long and thick and I growled soft and low. Under me Dane raised himself and I rolled my hips while Tdem tilted my head up and kissed me once again.

Releasing Tdem, I slid my hands around to his backside and rubbed my palms over his smooth skin kneading gently while he made noises for me. He dropped a hand and shoved at his pants pushing them over his hips and down his thighs. He struggled for a moment and pulled back, resting his forehead against mine as his pants slid off the bed and I opened my eyes and glanced down at his body. The air left me in a whoosh as I jerked back from him and stared in wonder. He hummed and leaned back on his knees between Dane's legs so I might see him better in the dim light, and Dane lifted his head and eased himself up onto his elbows glancing around me.

I lifted a hand to trace the image of myself in Dragon form across Tdem's chest and stomach. The tattoo was beautiful and fierce, my form lifelike with the wings spread wide as if I had reared back in mid flight and hung motionless upon his body. My jaws were open as I roared. My tail wrapped round his belly button ending with the spiked end at the base of his penis.

"Does it please you?" He asked in his deep voice.

I glanced at him curiously and nodded once. "Why would you do this?" I asked my voice filled with amazement.

Tdem ran his fingers over my cheek and down to my chest his black eyes staring down at me and the hunger in him burned brightly. "I did not." He replied and I frowned and tilted my head to him so that he added. "You filled my Court with your song, and I dreamed. When I awoke....I was as you see me." He replied and he

reached around behind me and grasped a handful of my hair, letting it flow through his fingers like so many golden coins. “I believe you were not quite three at the time.” He added and I felt as if someone had pulled the air from my lungs. “Needless to say, I found myself somewhat...consumed with interest.”

“And your Queen?” I whispered then bit my lip and stared up at him in horror.

He grimaced. “Was not amused and...turned elsewhere when I became...distracted. It was a fatal mistake upon her part, and a welcome one on mine.”

“I will not be faithful to one only...I am not made for it.” I told him softly and he appeared to struggle with my words but finally nodded.

“So be it.” He growled and reached for me.

Chapter 29

Someone was snoring softly. I lifted my head blinking open my sleep filled eyes. I felt the arm wrapped around my waist grip me tightly, gently tugging me back against a wide chest. In the dim light I could just see that my bed was covered in bodies and I was surrounded by a feast of bare bottoms and deep chests. It was...mind boggling. Yet I couldn't think of a more exciting way to wake than amongst such power and beauty it made me...hungry. I laid my head back down and rolled toward the chest, inhaling the familiar scent of cloves and pressing my lips to Kit's neck. He spread his hand across my bottom then lifted my leg over him slipping inside my body in one sure thrust. I bit my lip to keep from crying out at the feel as he grew longer and thicker within me while his lips nuzzled my temple. His arm pulled me onto his chest as he rolled to his back and I found myself pressed against his front with him still buried inside.

"Use me Mistress." He whispered against my ear so that I pushed myself up upon him and braced my palms to his chest while seating myself more firmly. My head

dropped back and I felt the ends of my hair brush my bottom and across our thighs as I began to move for him. I started slowly, but the exquisite feel of him within me was intoxicating and I was soon riding him...hard. When he called to me I opened the door and flooded us with the force of my passion and around us voices growled and several cried out sharply. Kit made an "ahhh." noise in the dark his arm snaking around my back and I was suddenly under him, his hips pinning me to the bed while I reached for his forearms and held on.

"Come for me Mistress." He urged and I exploded causing more growling and shifting around us. Hands brushed my legs and breasts while Kit called to me again and my back bowed with the force of my orgasm. His tempo increased and I shoved my desire at him once more. He cried out and I felt him spill within while I clenched and came shuddering and gasping.

He kissed me deeply and slid from my arms and strong hands reached for me and pulled me against a hairless chest. My lips tasted Cursed and I purred and pulled him up onto me, lifting my hips and rubbing myself against him while he rumbled and kissed me in the dark. My fingers plunged into his hair and I grabbed a handful and applied pressure which he responded to by growling and going up onto his knees, his leg forced mine apart and he pinned my pelvis to the bed and then was...joined to me. When we finished he kissed me deeply holding me to his chest with his arms wrapped around my shoulders and his hands against the back of my head. "My Lady...good morning." He murmured slipping from me. I turned to Amras who pressed his chest to mine as he gathered me against the full length of him.

"Quel re amin vanima ai'loki, amin mela lle." Good day my beautiful Faerie Dragon, I love you. He whispered as our lips met and I moaned and held him so tight I feared I'd crack a rib. His loving was soft and sweet, filled with whispered endearments and tender caresses which left me breathless, and my heart full of joy. I snuggled in his lap, curled there in the dark for several minutes catching my breath and savoring the feel of his skin beneath my fingers. Beside us the bed shifted and I felt

Amras sigh. "Thank you." He whispered and kissed my brow then lifted me off his lap and into Owen's arms as they reached for me.

"Good morning little one." Owen greeted me.

"Mmmm yes it is." I replied and he chuckled while his hand brushed down my back and into my hair. I reached around him and ran my fingers through his too, and we sat there for several minutes simply enjoying the feel of each other.

"Is there something I can...do for you?" He asked softly and my mind flashed to the first time we'd made love when he'd held me in his lap. He chuckled and somewhere in the dark someone groaned at the image that flashed across my mind. "Hmmm, I think we can arrange that." He told me, picking me up and shifting me so that I was straddling him on the bed. In his arms I felt small and protected, and he hummed for me, kissing my lips while his hand slid down to my ankle and urged me to wrap it about his waist. My fingers reached between us to guide him to my opening. "Hold on." He warned, lifting my hips and pulling me onto him as I flooded him with the feel of his hard length penetrating me, his head sliding into my body.

"Don't stop." He growled and raised me up again by my hips sliding me to the tip of him and slowly drawing me back. I made strangled sounds of pleasure in my throat at the feel of him, and moved my hips silently asking for more while he chuckled and drew me up his length again. My mind focused on each sensation letting him feel what he did to me.

"Please Owen." I whispered clutching at his shoulders and kissing him where I could reach. He growled then, and positioned one arm behind my upper back, the other at the base of my spine, then bent me back as he moved to kneel upon the bed. His teeth came down on my breast and I shuddered and moaned while he slid me up his length then wiggled my hips for him just before he released me, allowing gravity to do our work. I cried out and flooded us both with lust as my pelvis slammed into him and he was forced against my cervix. He yanked me up him and released me again and again while I writhed and came crying out his name.

He was breathing heavy, his seed within me when he gently placed me upon the bed and covered me with the solid length of his body. I wrapped a leg around him holding him to me, simply enjoying the weight of him while he rained butterfly kisses over my face and neck. His voice was a low rumble as he whispered to me of his pleasure and I shivered and moaned while gooseflesh covered my skin. The bed shifted and dipped beside us and we both turned to glance at Cam who had made his way across the bed to our side.

“Oh.” Owen mumbled and glanced down at me. In the dim light I could see him lift an eyebrow like the top half of a question mark. I glanced back at Cam and thought about it for a moment.

“My Lady?” Cam breathed softly his lilting voice causing a tightening in my lower regions. Owen shifted slightly and made a startled sound in his throat.

“I think...that was a yes.” He whispered and leaned down for a kiss then lifted himself off me.

I pushed up into a seated position and glanced at Cam who was watching me quietly his light eyes giving nothing away. “I would very much enjoy...a bath.” I told him. “Would you care to join me?”

“I would be honored.” He informed me and moved himself back toward the edge of the bed. Bodies parted for us and I followed him, leaning down to kiss Jace thoroughly as I passed. Gareth’s fingers stroked my calf and I turned to him next. Dane rumbled and I raised my head and leaned over Gareth to stroke his brow then kissed his lips. He settled back onto the bed with a pleased sigh as I turned to glance around me in the dark.

“Tdem?” I called and several feet away I saw his shadow sit up. “Join us?” I offered and he hesitated a moment then flowed to the edge of the bed and stood. I moved to him, placing my palms upon his chest and tilting back my head. “Good morning.” I whispered and his lips found mine in the dark.

One of Tdem's guards as standing in the shadow next to the bathroom doorway and I glanced at him realizing he'd be going in with us and couldn't help my heavy sigh.

The bathroom was a huge affair, bigger even than the one at home and had a huge tub which I'd noticed last night when I'd staggered to the restroom before returning to bed to pass out. The lanterns that hung about the room flared to life as we entered just as they had done the previous evening. Apparently Faerie magic was well and alive and working in my bathroom. I so needed a bath...and then maybe some coffee. Cam got the water flowing while I went to the other end and used the private facilities.

When I returned both Cam and Tdem were already seated in the water, their hair slicked back while steam swirled around them. One good thing about being underground, you could always count on an even temperature range. I'd noticed last night the Sidee ran about five to ten degrees colder than the den with the temperature here being in the low sixty degree range which made it perfect for taking a nice hot bath, but not so good for moving around naked on a cold marble floor. I shivered as I entered the water, sighing as the heat invaded my toes and soles of my feet. Perhaps it was the Dragon in me that preferred it just a wee bit warmer. Of course the coolness of the Sidhee had been perfect earlier when I'd been generating more than enough heat to keep me warm.

Glancing around the room I realized I'd been wrong, not one but two of Tdem's men had accompanied us into the bathroom. One was standing near the door, the other against the wall on the other side of the room. They had their arms crossed over their chests, black armor and helmets still in place though their red eyes tracked me as I moved across the floor. "Do your men never sleep or eat?" I asked Tdem who was watching me move toward him.

"Not while on duty." He replied flashing his teeth at me then assuring me. "Not and hope to live to tell of it." He like Cursed had smooth blunt teeth at the front of his mouth while from his eyeteeth back they were, something else altogether. I'd

noticed last night while kissing him and had been careful not to slice my tongue upon them. Cursed was merely one quarter Goblin. Tdem was one half. After experiencing Cursed's reaction to my blood, I wasn't certain how Tdem would respond and did not wish to alarm my other men by finding out amidst the group. With Tdem's men in attendance I was concerned our love making might have become something much more frightening. Yet he had managed to restrain himself from blooding me which I appreciated.

I slid into the water and dunked myself under, slicking my hair back from my face when I rose and seating myself across the tub from them. "I thought we might spend a little time getting to know each other. Since I find myself at a disadvantage in that you both seem to have been aware of me for most my life while I know next to nothing of either of you."

Cam glanced at Tdem who pursed his lips and stared back at me thoughtfully. "What would you like to know My Lady? Please ask me anything." He told me quietly his fine voice causing me to smile.

"Your voice is...different, more lyrical than any other I have heard." I told Cam. "Last night you mentioned you were a former Prince. What exactly did you mean? How does one become a former Prince?"

He smiled and gave a nod then leaned back against the tub and placed his arms on the rim. His pale green eyes were calm in his face as he spoke. "I am more recently come to this land than any other here in this Sidhe." He began and I raised a knee and leaned my forearms upon it getting comfortable so I might hear his tale. "My people come from the Storm Isles and my mother was Queen there once upon time not so very long ago. When her Consort died she was distraught and stepped down, naming my younger brother to the throne."

My eyes widened at his words and he smiled tightly. To have your younger sibling chosen over you, that must not have been...enjoyable. Why would she do such a thing?

“He was my half brother, her Consort’s son. One does not question the decision of a Queen and High Priestess of Dananira.” He replied calmly his pale eyes cold. “I found it easier to simply relocate.”

“I know of Danu, but I am unfamiliar with Dananira? Is this a God or Goddess?” I asked while his eyes widened and he glanced at Tdem in surprise. Tdem merely shrugged a shoulder.

“She was not educated in the ways of the Fey, except that she can speak our tongue with a charming accent.” Tdem replied with a sly grin while I raised my head and stared at him in surprise, thinking I was not aware I had an accent, hmm must have got that from Mi. “Her mother did not think it necessary for her to know our history. I believe she felt it might lead to uncomfortable questions that the Princess of Light was unwilling to discuss. In all fairness, she failed to inform Her Majesty of her Dragon heritage too. So that she is equally unaware of that side of her nature as she is her Elvish.”

Yes I thought in disgust, I’m equally ignorant of both races. And the lack of knowledge had caused me some uncomfortable moments in the past two weeks. Obviously I needed to go to Elf and Dragon school. I’d have to get right on that when we got back to our den I was getting tired of appearing the fool. My thought caused Tdem to frown and shift where he sat and Cam to raise his eyebrows slightly.

“I did not mean to imply I thought you foolish.” Tdem told me calmly. “There is a vast difference between ignorance and stupidity. Ignorance can be corrected while stupidity... would have been dealt with at birth.”

Dealt with at birth? What the heck did that mean I wondered and Tdem’s eyes widened while Cam glanced cautiously between me and the King who merely sighed.

“Surely you have heard of changelings?” He asked and I tilted my head to the side and nodded.

Changelings were purported to be Faerie children that had been exchanged at a young age for beautiful human children. It was believed that the Faeries took the human children and raised them to be their servants. Pale beautiful male children were

usually the targets. It was said that the Fey left in their place ill-featured, malformed, ill-tempered beings that might be given to biting and screaming. Folklore used this story to describe unaccountable ailments. Now with the advancement of medicine those ailments would be described as any number of conditions including autism, and developmental delays. Yet at Tdem's words I had to wonder if this was merely a Fairy tale or something that actually occurred.

"It is how the UnSeelie have always dealt with our...unacceptable young."

Tdem informed me with a lifted eyebrow and I swallowed.

"And the Seelie?" I had to ask, thinking about the comment Cursed had made to me once upon a time.

"Are not so forgiving, I believe suffocation or striking the youth's head against a rock until they expire is the preferred method of dealing with their...misfortune."

Gee this was a fine way to start my day. I thought and grimaced at the horror his words caused me. He nodded thoughtfully. "I admit it is barbaric. But as you yourself realized last night, the Seelie are proud and quite fierce about protecting their bloodlines."

Yes while the UnSeelie could afford to be less selective. And again Tdem nodded while Cam frowned and his pale green eyes seemed to glow at the censor in our comments. I glanced at him and asked. "Have you ever killed a child in this manner?" My eyes intent upon his face which suddenly looked shocked.

"No." He replied quickly. "I have never even witnessed such a thing." I pulled air into my lungs and nodded.

"That's good." I replied thinking I might have had to toss him back to the Queen if he had. I wasn't sure I could stomach being around someone that was capable of killing a baby. His face went pale as he stared back at me and in his eyes I could see a glimmer of relief. "I think we got off track." I muttered. "You were going to tell me who Dananira is?"

Cam took a deep breath and nodded thankfully. “She is our Goddess.” He told me in a referent voice. “Pale and beautiful, it is from she that my people inherit their magical aptitude. Her symbols are the swan and ninnach.”

“What is a ninnach?” I asked.

Cam looked confused and turned to Tdem who shrugged. “It means bands of light. I believe you might call it a rainbow and that the humans believe we keep pots of gold at the end of it. Of course in some places the humans believe we are all leprechauns too.” He replied with a wry smile. Cam apparently thought that was funny as it caused him to chuckle.

“Interesting.” Cam replied. “To us the end of a ninnach is the pathway to Numendor. The West.” He told me when I raised an eyebrow. “But mostly it is our gateway between the Storm Isle and the here. Though I suppose it could literally be translated to the port of gold or golden Isle. It could have simply been mistranslated to have arrived at pot.” He told us with a smile.

“And have you...traveled the ninnach?” I asked, actually quite curious.

He nodded his head, his smile vanishing from his eyes. “It was that or kill my brother in his crib. I felt it was...the more honorable thing to do.”

He sighed when I looked at him in disbelief. For what reason would he kill his younger brother. A brother that was still in his crib?

“For the reason that I gave earlier.” He replied tightly and I stared back at him trying to understand how a youngster in his crib related to the death of his Mother’s consort and her passing him over for his...she had passed him over and stepped down, turning her kingdom over to an infant still in his crib? Wow what kind of woman would do that? And what had Cam done to make her choose his infant brother?

Cam shook his head as if he was trying to dislodge something within. His eyes appeared pained as he glanced back at me. “It is...odd speaking with you My Lady.” He admitted. “I am not used to...” And he trailed off and lifted his hands.

Tdem smiled and chuckled while I glanced between the two. “It takes getting used to but I am finding it quite charming for you never know what she will think next.

I have not determined if she broadcasts because she lacks training or she simply cannot prevent it...due to her unique nature.”

Oh that, I thought and grimaced. “I have never been shown so I do not know if I can or not.” I told them. “I apologize if it distresses you. I could shield but then you will not sense me at all and that will bring the rest of my men in here. Perhaps one of you might show me how this is done?”

Cam went to open his mouth but Tdem gave him a look that caused Cam to hesitate and something passed between them that I was not able to follow. Cam immediately shut his mouth and flicked his eyes to me but it was Tdem who answered. “I have a question for you.” He replied and I moved my eyes to him...wondering what it was that Tdem had just prevented Cam from saying.

My eyes narrowed but Tdem continued looking relaxed his eyes clear of any deception...in fact he almost looked...too innocent. That thought made him smile slyly while his black eyes twinkled. “What is it?” I asked abruptly.

His smile turned to a chuckle and then he asked. “How is it that you travel with a Demon? The one who woke you this morning.”

Kit hadn't woke me this morning whomever was snoring had, I thought then had to wonder at the knowing looks on both Cam and Tdem's faces. “How do you know he woke me?” I asked my curiosity getting the better of me.

Cam glanced at Tdem who answered. “Because he shifted and flowed over the rest of us to get at you. And when his body materializing next to yours did not wake you, he started making noise.” Yep that sounded like something Kit would do, I thought then smiled. I could see how he would enjoy the opportunity and be unable to restrain himself given the...bounty surrounding me. He must have known what would happen, had probably encouraged it. If he wasn't so damn...ah....yeah if he wasn't him. I might have been tempted to be angry with him for manipulating me like that. Besides he was a creature of his own nature. Getting upset with him when he was merely being Kit would have been foolish indeed. Should I wish to not be used in such

a manner it would be best to send him from the room prior to letting him sleep amongst me and my men.

“You do not....I mean, this was not how you normally wake?” Cam asked his voice sounding confused. I glanced at him and burst out laughing which caused him to flush slightly. Tdem looked amused too.

“No, I usually sleep with only Gareth and Jace.” I told him then smiled. “Kit was very bad this morning. Yet I find myself unwilling to scold him or the others who obviously felt the need to make a point this morning.” I told them. “It was after all, a unique way to begin my day.”

“They were...making a point?” Cam muttered and frowned while his brows lowered slightly.

“Yes I think you just got it.” I told him with a wry glance. “And perhaps I have just spoiled their fun.”

“I doubt that.” Tdem told me and chuckled again. “After all, they did have you.” Hmm...I thought and turned my gaze upon Cam who actually shifted where he sat as if in dismay before I waved my hand and gave myself a shake.

“He was negotiated for at my birth by my father. Actually it is more complicated than that but in the end that was what occurred. Last week our contract was finalized and he is now mine for all eternity.” I replied to his earlier comment, changing the subject before I became annoyed thinking about what my men had done.

“It does not bother you to be familiar with a Demon?” Tdem asked while Cam tried hard to keep his features neutral.

“No, should it? Kit is quite the perfect Demon for me.” Of course I was fairly sure he just heard that and I hoped his head didn't swell and fall off his shoulders.

“My people pay tribute to the Demon Dantalion during Feywalks which occur one moon cycle after each equinox. It is how we thank the Goddess for our powers.”

“Your Goddess was a Demon?” I asked in surprise.

“No, but her lover was a mighty Jinn and a powerful Great Duke of Hell. It is said that he granted her unlimited power. She in turn shares that power with those she favors.” He told me then frowned.

“And has she shared her powers with you?” I asked wondering at the reason for his frown.

His eyes went flat and the skin over his cheeks taunt as he stared down at the water and lifted his arm from the back of the tub to place his palm several inches above it. As I watched, the water roiled and miniature waves appeared while above the water tiny clouds gathered and thunder rumbled across the bathroom. My eyes widened as I watched our tub become as rough as a stormy sea. Had there been miniature boats upon it they would have been tossed about like so many leaves in the wind. It was... most impressive and I wondered if was only bathtubs he could do this in or if the seas around his Storm Isles had taken their name from the gifts from their Goddess.

“Once.” He told me harshly and I glanced at Tdem who raised his eyebrows and shook his head. Once what? Once his homeland had been the site of massive storms or once he could do this in places other than bathtubs? Cam made a low noise in his throat and turned his eyes to me. In their depths I could see...I wasn't sure what it was, but they appeared to roll much like the water and he blinked and gave himself a shake. “Once.” He told me in a flat voice. “I could raise the seas as I have here, but I angered the Goddess and she has all but stripped me of my power.”

What I thought, was worse than having thoughts of fratricide? Had he killed his Queen's consort to begin with?

Cam looked as if I'd slapped him and the storm died as quickly as it had started. “No I did not kill my mother's lover.” He growled at me and I lifted an eyebrow at his tone while he seemed to struggle to bring himself under control. He took several deep breaths and I waited while he got himself under control. “Pride.” He told me in a soft voice. “Pride has ever been my downfall.”

Oh, and here the Queen had given him to me. Just like Cursed. I thought and watched as he twitched at the thought. “So I am to be your lesson in humility?” I

asked, feeling my own temper start to rise. “Because just as with Cursed you thought I was a half breed human? Tell me did you guard my Mother also?” And nearly ground my teeth when he nodded. His eyes went wary and I think he started to understand just how irritated I was becoming. “Loved her perfect little self did you?” I asked softly and his face went blank. “Have sex with her?” I asked in a deadly tone and watched as he blinked and shook his head again. “I see...you just worshiped her from afar and now you’re stuck with me? Is that about the gist of it?” I asked, my voice starting to vibrate with rage as I glared at him. “And now that she’s brought home a mate and is pregnant again you’ve decided... what? That you couldn’t escape your lesson this time though you’ve put it off for twenty three years just as Cursed did?” He didn’t seem to know how to respond to that and simply stared back at me. My eyes flicked to Tdem who had leaned forward and was watching me intently, his black eyes nearly glowing.

I pulled air in through my nose and dropped my knee as I leaned back against the tub and stared through narrowed eyes at Cam. “Pride eh? And you are mine now is that it?” I asked my voice barely above a whisper. I smiled grimly when he nodded his head warily. “You do not want to be here do you? Stuck with a half breed who will never be Queen to the Seelie.” He inhaled sharply and I watched as agreement flickered in his eyes and was quickly quashed. “Yet you will lower yourself to accept a place in my bed out of spite or is it revenge? Did you think it would matter to my Mother to see you with me? That she would care if I took you as lover?” I demanded and the blood left his face while his nostrils flared.

“Get out of my bath.” I growled softly. “You may go kneel over there.” I commanded him and pointed my finger at the corner farthest from us. “Do not move until I tell you to.”

He hesitated and I felt my temper snap and focused my rage upon him so that his body was dragged toward the edge of the tub and he went under gulping water. “Go!” I hissed and his pale green eyes widened and he forced himself to stand while I remained seated. There was but a moment when I thought he might attack me and I smiled and actually purred which caused him to hesitate. “I would not advise it. But

should you wish to try Lord Tdem and his men will not stop you.” I breathed up at him while he pulled himself up stiffly and glared back at me. I pointed to the corner once again. When he still failed to move I cracked open my door and attacked him with my lust so that he let out a strangled cry and fell to his knees his face going under while I sat calmly watching him swallow our bath water and struggle to breathe. Stormy waters indeed I thought, and reached out with my mind grabbing a fistful of his hair and yanked his head up. He let out another cry and coughed up water while I used the force of my will to drag him to the side of the tub and over the edge. He crawled upon his knees to the corner where I gave him one last yank and dropped him to the marble in a heap.

Chapter 30

Tdem looked excited when I blinked and released the breath I'd been holding. My body was flooded with adrenaline and it took me a moment to bring my heartbeat back under control. Thank the stars for all those years of martial arts practice I thought, feeling my pulse rate dip back to normal.

"I never cared much for your mother." He told me in a carefully neutral voice. "She has always been much to cold for my taste. In fact I am pleased she seems to have finally found someone worthy of her." And he smiled while I laughed sharply.

The door opened and Gareth walked in, his dark blue eyes locking to mine as I turned to glance at him. He was carrying a cup of what I assumed was coffee and had a concerned look on his face. "I thought you might need this." He told me, handing me the mug and leaning down to kiss the top of my head. His fingers soothed my hair and curled around an ear.

"I am fine." I told him while he continued to search my face with his eyes and I held my coffee without drinking it.

“Your anger is....disturbing.” He admitted softly. “I wished to make sure you were not in distress.” I closed my eyes and poked around inside myself. No I did not sense anything out of the normal, just a slight irritation that my mother had once again caused me to lose my temper, albeit vicariously.

“Truly I am fine.” I told him and kissed his wrist. His eyes moved to Cam who was upon his knees in the corner, his pale body nearly glowing in the soft lighting. Gareth glanced at Cam and then back at me though he offered no advice nor did his face show any emotion which might lead me to believe he either approved or disapproved of my actions.

“Will you drink that or simply hold it?” He asked.

I sighed and took my first sip closing my eyes as I was not in the mood to see any reactions to my emoting. The coffee was hot and sweet just as I liked it and I did my customary rolling of it around on my tongue. Muffled sounds came from around the room and I grimaced and squeezed my eyes more tightly. Gareth’s fingers slid onto my shoulders and gently kneaded my tense muscles while I drank the rest of my brew. He reached for the empty mug, leaned down and kissed my temple and I opened my eyes at the sound of him placing it on the counter as he crossed to the toilet.

“The others need to use the facilities.” He told me when he came back out. “And you’re hogging the only bathtub. So unless you’d like to entertain us all in there...” And he gave me a look that made the hair stand up on my arms and caused me to purr in my throat. “You need to think about getting out soon.” He told me this as he crossed back to the tub and climbed in.

Tdem glanced at him and then at me and sighed when Gareth lifted me into his lap and reached for what I could only assume was the shampoo. He lathered my hair, his strong fingers massaging my scalp so that I clung to his chest and made pleased noises for him. I had my eyes closed tightly when I felt the water level rise again and sensed that Jace had also joined us. Gareth pinched my nose and dipped me under the water his hands urging the suds out of my locks while I held my breath. When he pulled me up his lips came down upon mine and I held his shoulders and kissed him

deeply. Jace's hands slipped around me and I found myself being lathered thoroughly in between kisses and caresses.

The other's filed in and out, each stopping to give me a kiss and a longing look at the water. Kit went so far as to prop his chin on the tub. "You think I'm perfect?" He teased and I grinned and tweaked his nose.

"I think I said nearly perfect for me...which is much different than my saying you are perfect!"

"Since you are mine and I am perfect for you....it is even better." He assured me then growled indignantly when I splashed water in his face.

Cursed seemed to be the only one bothered by Cam in the corner. His dark eyes searched my face thoughtfully as he glanced first at Cam and then myself. I lifted an eyebrow at him and he pursed his lips and shook his head, giving me a look that fairly screamed censor. I couldn't tell if it was for me and my temper or for Cam. "He is what he is." Cursed told me calmly.

I tilted my head from where I sat in Jace's lap and stared back at him. "You think I placed him there because I am angry that he lusted after my Mother?" I asked softly, and then frowned when he hesitated before finally nodded. "Is it that you worry I will also become consumed with Pride?"

"I worry that your jealousy over you mother affects your decisions." He told me calmly while beneath me Jace stilled, perhaps thinking Cursed's comments might cause another eruption.

"And is that the only reason you can devise for my actions?"

He looked unsure for a moment and then nodded.

I glanced up at him and gave him a sad smile. "I am sorry that you would think so badly of me Cursed." I told him in a quiet voice and he looked as if I'd kicked him in the stomach. "I admit his feelings for my mother irritate me as you well know. But it is his reason for being here that set him in that corner as far from me and still within sight as I could get him. I did not send him there because of my jealousy as you believe. I put him there to keep him safe."

“My Lady?” He replied his dark eyes confused and I glanced from him to Cam who was looking at me from beneath his lashes, his face pale.

“He is here for revenge and intends to use me to get it, because his pride is wounded.” I explained and Cursed’s face went slack with surprise while I continued. “And when he does not get the reaction he seeks? You yourself know how little the Princess cares for the feelings of other men. What then? Shall I gamble the fate of the Dragon Race and perhaps more because I wasn’t strong enough to do my duty? Would you prefer I risk myself or one of you for the sake of one Seelie’s wounded pride? Is it not better to help him understand now that I will not tolerate his machinations? Or would you prefer I allow one or more of us to be injured in his quest to feed his vanity? The Queen has given him to me Cursed. I may not return him, but I’ll be damned if I allow anyone to force me to take an adder to my breast! I will kill him before I allow him to harm any of us. And I would think you of all of my men, could appreciate the fact that I put him there to prevent myself from doing him bodily harm or worse, for his treachery.”

Cursed went to his knee and reached for the hand I held out to him. “Forgive me.” He choked out, his face filling with remorse.

I stroked his hair back from his face and replied. “I think....it would be best if I put him in your care. You will be responsible for ensuring Cam does not cause dissension amongst us.” There was a moment when he looked pained and then his face smoothed out. “Keep him away from me Cursed.” I warned. “Until or unless he can show change. I do not require his love. But I will have his respect. For him to think he could use me thus....” And I struggled to keep from vibrating in Jace’s lap. “Just keep him away from me.” I finished.

“As you say My Lady.” He replied and climbed back to his feet. His gaze turned to Cam in the corner and hardened in disgust. I watched as Cam flushed under Cursed’s gaze and his body jerked slightly. It was one thing to be put in the corner by a woman who was Queen. Quite another to be judged by a peer. I imagined Cam would get on board quickly or find himself beaten to a bloody pulp often. My men would not

tolerate any threat to my health or well being, and I had just tossed Cam upon their not so tender mercies.

“Get up Cam.” I called to him and he arose slowly his pale green eyes watching me while he was careful to keep his face blank. “From now on....you are forbidden to shield your thoughts from my men. Should I find out you have disobeyed....it will not go well for you. Do I make myself clear?” I asked in a voice gone deadly serious. From where I sat I watched him swallow and nod. My gaze flicked to Cursed who growled softly his eyes widening. From across the floor I sensed Cams roiling emotions and told Cursed. “I trust you will ensure this does not become a problem.” He nodded once and motioned for Cam to join him and the two of them left the room while I watched.

I sighed and buried my face in Jace’s neck while he made soothing noises and stroked my back.

“That was....well done Your Majesty.” Tdem stated from the other side of our tub. His voice sounded both surprised and impressed. Gee that was nice, I thought I’d managed to punish the both of them and win the King’s approval. I’d dance for joy but just didn’t feel like it at the moment. Instead I groaned and held Jace tighter.

We made it out of the tub finally and Owen was kind enough to provide us all with clothing. Though after looking at the dress he provided me with I had to wonder yet again if Kit might be the better choice. “Owen!” I growled. “It is morning...I think. Is there some reason I need to be dressed like a slattern?”

Owen sighed and shook his head. “You are dressed as is fitting Lexi. Do not argue with me, I know what I’m doing. And you look lovely.” He told me while the others nodded and tried not to laugh at the chagrin on my face. The dress was a full length tangerine color made from some type of material that seemed to cling in all the wrong places. It left my entire back open starting somewhere near my tailbone and had a two inch wide gold edge that rose up the sides past my breasts over my arms as sleeves and came around and under my breasts. My chest was bare and the triangles of cloth barely covered me. It was for sure everyone could tell I was chilled as my nipples

pressed against the material like they were trying to escape the dress. My shoes were golden sandals, my undergarments...non existent. At least he didn't pile my hair on my head again. That would have been...enough to send me into hypothermia. He did however give me earrings and a crown both with stones that matched the color of my dress. I kind of liked those and thought I might keep them around when this was done. The crown would look nice on my bookshelf at home, maybe next to my flute. Which reminded me. "Owen can you send my flute home for me? Unless you think there is some reason I need it? I'd prefer not to have to carry it around all day." I wasn't worried about having to play for my food since Owen had arranged for our breakfast while Kit had provided the seating arrangements.

"No you will not need it." He assured me and my flute disappeared from where it lay upon the bed. If only all my troubles were so easily dealt with I thought and glanced toward Cam who was seated farthest from me at the table. His eyes had been on me since I'd entered the room and it had caused frowns and a growl in Kit's case. I had no idea what he was thinking, and probably didn't want to know anyway.

By the time my hair was dry, everyone had bathed, eaten and dressed themselves in clothing provided by Owen. We were just finishing up when Lira knocked and entered his eyes scanning the room until they landed on me. He looked...hard used as if he'd had a rough night and I bit my lip and stared back at him, my cheeks flushing slightly. "Lira?" I asked and he went to a knee.

"Your Majesty, the Princess has requested a private audience."

"Lira did you stand duty at the door all night?" I asked and he raised his face and nodded. "And is Roral out there with you?" I asked softly and again he nodded. "Are you well?" I asked tilting my head to the side and staring at him.

"I am...fine Your Majesty, thank you for asking." He told me though it was clear to me that he was hard as a rock and not fine at all.

"Who else guards the door?" I asked.

"There were ten." He told me hesitantly.

I gave him a lopsided smile and asked. "And now?"

He chuckled and rose when I motioned him to do so. “And now there are only Roral and I.”

“And the others?”

“Have been unconscious for some time.” He added with a sly grin while I glanced at Kit and frowned.

“Mistress I only meant to pleasure you.” Kit replied with a mischievous grin.

“I think...” I told him softly. “I might disagree but am not inclined to do so at the moment.” Then I turned back to Lira and bade him. “Go and get Roral would you?” I asked and he nodded and left the room only to return with Roral in tow. Roral went to a knee and glanced at me from under his lashes. I could see the desire he struggled to contain and like Lira he was also hard as stone. I rose from my chair and stood looking at the two of them. “Get up Roral.” I told him and he stood next to Lira staring back at me from his pale eyes. “I cannot offer you what you want. But I can offer you...what you need should you choose.” The words had barely left my mouth when Roral was nodding and it only took a second for Lira to also. I pointed to the bed. “Go and lay upon it.” I offered and they nearly sprinted for the huge bed which would have taken up half my room back at the den. “You will rest now and Kit will watch over you while you sleep since it was his efforts that caused you such distress. I can think of no better way for him to apologize than to ensure you are well tended.” I told them while Kit grumbled under his breath and shot me a disgusted look.

Roral and Lira made themselves comfortable and I crossed to Roral first, placing my hand upon his chest. His fingers clenched in the bedding and his eyes dilated. “Just breathe.” I whispered when I realized he was holding his breath and leaned forward and kissed his brow, sending him into oblivion with the pleasure I fed into his body. He tensed on the bed and then relaxed completely. He was smiling softly and his eyes were closed when I moved to Lira.

Lira was up on an elbow watching me. His eyes focused on Roral and widened slightly when I pushed my satisfaction into him. Perhaps he felt it...I wasn't certain. But he watched me walk toward him with an eagerness I had rarely seen, and Cursed

hissed softly as I approached. Lira remained leaning on one elbow his two tone eyes straying to my nipples as he licked his lips. When I reached to place my hand upon his chest, his fingers wrapped around my wrist like steel bands. Not squeezing just locked upon me. “Lira?” I demanded in a soft voice. He rumbled deep in his chest while his shield slid away and I was swamped by his desire. As before, my mind was rolled under by his passion and I cried out as his arm wrapped around me. It felt like his arm was electrified and sparks passed between us where he touched. He pulled me onto the bed and against his chest then quickly placed me beneath him. His mouth covered mine and I felt him press his hard length into my stomach. My mind stuttered from the lust pouring into me and I arched against him. His body moved over me, sliding his hard length to my tender flesh so that I nearly cried out again. Lira’s hand upon my bare thigh caused me to moan but when his palm spread over my curls and the heat invaded me, it shocked me into opening my eyes and pushing back the haze enough to fill him with satisfaction.

Lira groaned and slumped upon me. He turned his head slightly and close to my ear he whispered. “Almost.” And then he made a pleased noise and buried his face against my shoulder. I lay there for a moment trying to bring myself under control. Lira had really done a number on me and it had been difficult to refuse him what he’d made my body crave. Something would have to be done about him. I just wasn’t certain what that something should be. I sighed and wiggled and pushed my way out from under him. He was like a limp rag spread over me and incapable of helping.

My dress was bunched almost to my waist by the time I freed myself and I sat up on the bed and tried putting myself back in order. My glance went to my men who were bunched together and appeared to be holding themselves in check through no small effort. All three of my Dragon’s eyes were whirling and Tdem appeared flushed. The others looked...intense except for Cam who almost seemed to be in pain. Cursed stood next to him and I could see his fingers digging into Cam’s shoulder as if he’d been keeping him in place.

My eyes moved to Amras who smile wanly. Kit looked...like he normally did when lust was the topic so I turned to Owen and asked. "Is everyone okay? A little assistance would have been nice." He watched me for a moment and I observed him swallowing before he replied.

"There was some...concern that should we attempt to aid you, your difficulties would have been compounded." He told me and I shook my head and sighed. He was probably right. I'd been caught in a three way loop with Jace and Gareth before when their shields were down and the lust was running high.

"I see, no good deed goes unpunished isn't that what they say?" I sighed then pushed off the bed and yanked my dress over my hips. Thank goodness the material didn't seem to wrinkle or I'd be in the process of changing again. Now where was I? Oh yeah had a private audience with Mom, wonder what that's about.

"Owen might I have my knife back from wherever you put it when you stripped me of my clothing last night?" I asked then plucked it off the bed next to me and crossed to the table where I lifted my leg to a chair and proceeded to strap it on my calf. I didn't need to look up to know they were all watching me closely. "Owen and Amras can accompany me." I informed the group when I put my foot back to the floor and smoothed my dress again. Everyone else frowned and Jace stepped forward before Gareth could.

"We need to go." Jace informed me.

I signed and frowned. I was just going to see my Mother, I didn't need to be dragging an entourage along with me. "Fine Dane can come too." And Dane perked up and stepped forward with a smug smile. "But only because I don't wish to alarm anyone, not because I think I'll need him. Besides Owen is with me and Kit is only ever a mental shout away."

"And what would you like us to do while we wait Your Majesty?" Tdem asked with a wry smile.

I glanced at him and threw up my hands. "I have no idea. What is there to do in a Sidhe? Hopefully this won't take long."

Owen grimaced and crossed his arms over his chest. “Just long enough to upset you again no doubt.” He muttered under his breath.

“You have no guards.” Cursed reminded me softly and he looked particularly annoyed probably because of Cam and having to remain behind. “Who do you suppose will direct you to the Princess?” Hmmm good point and I turned to look at Amras who flushed slightly and stepped forward.

“I...am familiar with the Princess’ quarters and can take you there.” He replied calmly his violet eyes not quite meeting mine.

“Shall we then?” I asked and moved toward the door. Gareth stepped in my path and I went up on my toes and kissed him.

“Be careful.” He warned me and I nodded. Jace was next and he too received a kiss. Tdem cut me off nearly at the door and I glanced up at him in surprise. His dark eyes captured mine and his arms went round me and under my hair.

“Hurry back.” He whispered and kissed me like I was going off to war instead of down the hall to visit my Mom. When he released me I swayed slightly and licked my lips which seemed to please him.

Dane’s hand on my back got me moving and I turned to glance at Cursed just as I was about to step through the door. He looked...angry and I couldn’t tell if it was his Uncle or my reaction to him that annoyed him most. I hesitated a second, reaching out to give him the feel of my lips pressed sweetly against his. His eyes widened and he seemed to settle.

The hall in front of my room looked like a combat zone with bodies spread everywhere. I stopped dead in my tracks and glanced around me in awe while Amras bent over the closest one and gave him a shake. The man muttered in his sleep and shifted slightly but did not wake. “It makes you wonder just what is under the helms of Tdem’s men.” I whispered glancing over my shoulder toward the door.

Owen glanced at Amras and something passed between them. “They are nulls, Lexi.” Owen finally told me as we started down the hall after a last glance at the men.

“Nulls...you mean they can't feel emotions?” I asked rolling that thought around my mind for several seconds.

Next to me Amras frowned slightly. “I believe it means they cannot sense emotions. Whether they can feel them is...unknown since most Fey tend to avoid them. They are unsettling.” He told me.

“And can others sense them?” I asked, my brow furrowing in a frown.

No one said anything for several moments until Amras finally replied. “No Princess, no one can hear them. They do not sense other's emotions and we cannot feel them. It is as if they do not exist. As if the space where their mind should be is...simply not there.”

Really? I thought, sensing a similarity here that none of them chose to speak about. I wondered...yesterday in the front entrance hall where I'd first met Tdem...there had been a reaction to both Dane and myself. It had occurred when I'd raised my Dragonsward. Beside me Dane glanced sharply at Amras his dark eyes intent.

“Nae one?” He asked softly and Amras looked at him then his eyes widened as he shook his head. Dane pressed his lips together thoughtfully. “Sure tis nae so.” Dane muttered.

“They are very dangerous.” Owen admitted his dark brown eyes searching Dane's face. “Especially to Lexi who could not control them as she did Duke Camthalon this morning. My advice is...do not find yourself alone with them at any time. They are of the Gorias or Svartalfar family who are Hunters. They are also the King's Lords of the Raging Host.”

Svartalfar translated as Dark Elves. “What do they look like under their armor?” I asked.

Amras shrugged while Owen thought about it for a moment. “I have seen other Svartalfar and they look much like any other Elf. I suspect though that these are not pure Elf, because they would have been killed at birth. It is likely they are some mixture of Elf and...Ogre but I am merely guessing.”

“I have nae seen an Ogre before.” Dane told us. “Are they ugly then?” He asked while we walked along.

“They are every bit the nightmare Mothers use to frighten their naughty children with.” Amras replied. “I have never seen a true Ogre that was pleasing to the eye. If the King’s men are part Ogre then they would have to take after their Elven side, because they are much too small to be full blooded Ogres.

We walked along for several minutes in silence before Dane asked. “Do ye think this will be about the Healer then?”

I shrugged and thought about Lord Maglor. The man was very interested in me and I suspected he might have gone to my Mother and requested this audience. “If so, it’s why I brought you.” I told Dane with a smile. “I was hoping you’d distract him for me.”

“Ahh tis like that it is.” He replied with a twinkle in his black eyes. “An I being the lamb for the slaughter.”

“Well I would have gone with lab rat.” I teased him while he gave me a mock growl. “But in this case I’d settle for hybrid.”

“Nae...tis Immaculate Conception I am. As me mother nae slept with yer Da’s partner. I no doubt that makes me a miracle.” And he laughed while I smiled up at him.

My thoughts turned serious for a moment and I placed my hand on Dane’s arm. Amras had moved ahead of us to guide us down the halls and Owen was pacing along on the other side of me. “Dane, are you interested in learning about your Father?” I asked. “Because it would be an easy matter to find out.”

Dane thought about it for a moment and nodded. “Sure an it might be worth the time. Though I was no lacking for a father while growing. Me Mum married a fine man and he raised me up as his own.” I smiled and gave his arm a squeeze and he reached for my fingers, placing his other hand over them.

“Too bad Marcus can’t say the same.” I told him and shook my head while his lips compressed into a thin line. “You do realize...he might be your half brother?” I asked softly and Dane appeared surprised then finally nodded.

“I no considered it before. But ye are correct. Perhaps I’ll be having that conversation with ye Da sooner rather than later.” He told me. “Tis curious I am now.”

“We have arrived Princess.” Amras informed me. He’d stopped in the hall and turned to face us. He seemed to still be struggling with the correct form of address for me. We had talked about it last night and I’d told him to call me what he felt most comfortable with as it mattered little to me.

We had met no one else in the halls on our trip and I glanced around to find we were standing in front of a large wooden door with intricate carvings of flora and fauna. Two guards stood at attention to either side of the portal their eyes glancing over the four of us and settling on me with that...ummm hmmm look I was getting used to seeing. I ignored them and concentrated on the door which was massive. The center was an entire meadow scene and I stared at it in surprise, recognizing the glen from my painting where I sat playing the flute. Amras leaned over my shoulder and an arm slid round my waist at my thought. His other hand reached to trace the log I sat upon in my portrait. “You are correct.” He muttered and brushed his lips across my cheek before stepping back. I tilted my head and glanced up at him wondering at his sudden show of affection. He grinned and pulled a lock of my hair and I shook my head and turned to the guard on the right.

“I believe my Mother the Princess, has requested my audience?” I asked calmly and the guards both went to a knee then stood. They looked...much like Lira had earlier and I wondered just how far my pleasure had reached. At least they weren’t passed out on the floor. That would have been...bad. My thought caused the guard on the left to shift slightly while the one on the right made a low noise in his throat.

“Your Majesty she is expecting you.” Replied the brown haired man on my right as he moved to open the door for me. “The others will remain here.” He replied

while his light brown eyes shifted over me and hesitated for a brief moment on my nipples still pressed firmly against my dress.

Owen's fingers brushed me as I moved to follow the guard. "Call for me if you become distressed." He told me softly and I nodded and swept into the room behind the guard. He turned to close the door and...his body brushed mine so that I took a step back while he stared down at me, his eyes hungry.

"Excuse me Your Majesty." He whispered softly, his voice having gone deep with a hint of...something quite inappropriate. I bit the inside of my cheek and endeavored to remain out of his direct path, although he managed somehow to touch me twice more as we walked down a short hall toward a room at the end. He announced me, then went to a knee and arose slowly merely standing there while his eyes roamed my face and then he was gone and I took a deep breath and turned to my Mother seated across the room at a beautiful desk. She glanced up at me and frowned.

"Must you seduce all my guards?" She complained and I raised both eyebrows and stared at her in surprise.

"Excuse me Mom, it wasn't intentional." She waved her hand at the couch behind her and I took a breath and crossed to it while looking around her room in wonder. "Did you decorate in here or did someone else?" I asked while my eyes studied the gilded look of everything. It was without a doubt the most opulent room I'd ever seen. As a kid growing up Mom had liked nice things but obviously nothing had ever compared to this. The room was decorated in creams and pale blues with richly carved furniture of some light blonde material. Gold was everywhere and the bedding was indescribable. On the whole it was very different than the room I'd occupied last night which upon comparison seemed...masculine or perhaps utilitarian. I couldn't help wondering if Dad felt out of place in here.

Mom's lips tightened slightly as she watched me. "I did not invite you here to discuss your Father or the decorations within my bedroom." She told me sharply and I leaned back against the couch cushion and folded my hands in my lap. Gee I wonder what I'd done now, I thought and stared back at her waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“Young lady you are...quite impertinent.” She told me and carefully put down the pen she was holding. My guess was so she didn’t snap the quill in half.

“Okay Mom what’s the problem? Did I do something to embarrass you last night at the party, or are you mad at me for some other reason?”

She looked at me like I was pulling her leg and she did not appreciate it in the least. “You know full well what you did!” She replied angrily then made a rude noise in her throat when I simply stared back at her innocently.

I lifted my hands from my lap and reminded her. “If I knew what I did I wouldn’t have asked.”

She stood abruptly and began pacing while she muttered under her breath and I watched her in amazement. I hadn’t seen her worked up like this in some time and hoped Dad didn’t walk in on us and scold me for having inadvertently riled her.

“Your Father is....incapacitated!” She growled at me. “As are nearly all of the men within the Sidhe. And I have never been so embarrassed in my life! Fire and flood Lexi you caused a....a scene in the Great Hall last night!”

“Oh...” I said, and felt my cheeks flame.

Chapter 31

“Is that all you have to say for yourself?” She demanded and I winced and struggled not to shift on the couch.

“Was it...bad?” I asked in a small voice.

She rolled her eyes and clenched her hands into fists at her sides and I closed my eyes briefly, while my cheeks heated even more. “It was an...orgy!” She hissed at me. “And were it not for the fact that you warned the Queen within hearing of all there...” And she let that threat trail off so that I was left to wonder what my fate might have been.

Oh the Queen? I thought and nearly swallowed my tongue wondering if she had been caught in the...licentious revelry.

“No she was not, thank the Goddess.” My Mom huffed. “At least not in the Great Hall!”

Well that was something and then I couldn't help asking. “Was it just the men or...were you affected too?” I asked my curiosity getting the better of me. Apparently

from the way her eyes flashed and her lips tightened...I hadn't only managed to affect the men. I sighed again and asked. "So do you want to tell me about it or am I just here to be yelled at for being me?"

My question pulled her up short and she flopped ungracefully back into her chair. Her look slid to haggard and she stared back at me from hollow eyes. "How can you live like this?" She asked in a shaken voice. "Your father was...." And she swallowed again. "I can not imagine what it must be like for you."

I stared at her, my eyes widening in surprise. She actually felt bad for me! Perhaps that was the most shocking thing she'd ever said to me. "Mom...don't pity me, it isn't an affliction." I told her leaning forward on the couch and staring back at her with concern. "I like it." To which she shivered slightly and glanced down at the floor while in my brain I felt a surge of minds suddenly pressing in on me and sat up straight in my chair in alarm. Goodness, I hadn't realized I had such a large audience, and then winced as I realized...uh oh, this wasn't going to be good. In fact I think I needed to get out of the Sidhe soon, before I ended up in serious trouble. Judging by the guard at her door and remembering what the Queen had said...this could get ugly quickly. Maybe I should just slip out now.

"You can't." She warned me her eyes becoming more distressed. "You mustn't insult the Queen." And I signed and nodded while in my brain there seemed to be a gleeful choir singing.

"Was there anything else?" I asked then pushed myself to my feet when she shook her head at me. "Are you and my sisters well?"

"Yes aside from a little soreness..." She gave me a lopsided smile. "Your Father was...most vigorous." She told me baldly and I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing at her disgruntled look.

"You are supposed to enjoy it Mom." I teased. "It's not a duty you know." Well it could be...and in fact it was for me. But I was happy in my work and didn't view it that way at all.

“Yes I know.” She replied with a frown. “It is just...a lot to deal with. Your Father has been gone a very long time and I...am used to being alone. He snores.” She muttered and this time I did laugh which caused her to wince.

“I’m sure you’ll get used to it. After all, Mi snores too.”

She replied with a humm and gave me a nod which I took to mean I was dismissed. I turned to the hall to go and her words stopped me in my tracks. “Be very careful Lexi. You may be Queen to the Dragons, but to many here you are still a half breed Princess who caused...considerable discomfort last night. I believe your actions may have earned you enemies. Not everyone was satisfied. Several of the women were not pleased. And some of the men...did not appreciate being manipulated.”

“The women weren’t pleased because they were forced to please the men, or because they enjoyed it?” I asked wanting to be sure I understood the reasons behind their anger with me.

She thought about it for a moment. “Both. Although I suspect it will be more that you have earned the interest of our men.”

Ahh...jealousy that made sense. “How soon will I see the Queen?” I asked wondering how quickly we might get back to our den where I didn’t have to worry about this type of problem. Plenty of other problems but not this one.

“Not until later this afternoon. She has other commitments until then. In the meantime you will want to keep your men close to you if you go out. And you might have Amras or Cursed show you the caverns, they are worth seeing.”

I nodded and waved my fingers at her as I strode down the hall. I nearly made it, my hand was reaching for the handle when it opened and I jumped back so it wouldn’t hit me. Either the guards had really good hearing or I was going to have to think more seriously about shielding.

Dane was speaking softly to Owen while Amras leaned back against the wall with his ankles and arms crossed. His violet eyes were narrowed and he looked very angry. I swallowed and tried to edge through the doorway past the brown haired guard who once again managed to brush up against me before I was free and quickly out of

his reach. Amras pushed away from the wall and met me more than half way and I slid into his arms and hugged him.

“We need to go.” He told me softly and I nodded and wrapped my arm around his while we set off down the hall. We turned the corner and I hesitated nearly dragging us to a halt as I stared in disbelief at all the people. There were men everywhere and I paled and glanced at Owen and Dane.

Owen flicked his eyes to the men and back at me and whispered softly. “Now would be a good time to...raise your Dragonsward.” And I nodded and lifted my shield into place. My actions caused everyone in the hall to turn and stare at me while beside me Amras placed his hand over mine and squeezed gently. “We could...take the express.” Owen informed me and I shook my head and pushed back my shoulders. I wasn’t going to run from these people, cowardice was not a good trait.

‘Nae but there be times when it’s a wise one.’ Dane’s voice whispered across my mind.

I’ll not be bullied I thought and he lifted his hand and shrugged.

“Everyone watch your temper, losing it will only endanger the Princess.” Amras warned and we all took a breath and moved forward. We’d taken maybe ten steps when the first group descended upon us and Amras was forced to perform introductions. Grandma wasn’t kidding I thought and forced myself to smile while I was fawned over and petted like a prized breeding mare. Dane and Owen did their best to keep the men off me, but it was difficult and on several occasions I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from saying something I would definitely regret. Of course my inner dialog was no longer being heard by anyone there except Dane who seemed to be having problems keeping a straight face in spite of several offhand comments that had been made about his parentage and lack of social standing, none of which seemed to faze him. Owen managed to stay above it all, and why wouldn’t he? Since he was a minor god and even the rudest of Elves didn’t feel brave enough to insult him. This only left Amras, who seemed to be taking the brunt of the slurs, although his own parentage was superb. Actually judging by the rainbow of auras scattered up and down

the hall, their reaction to Amras spanned mostly from jealousy. There was plenty of orange-red, brown, light blue, purple, and several very intense individuals covered in black up and down the corridor, but my eyes were drawn to a man leaning against the wall who's aura was coated in a very dark red which I'd never actually seen before except that one time on Marcus. Dark red was not a good color as it represented all sorts of nasty things, not the least of which was rage and malice.

My eyes flicked to Owen and realized he had already seen the man and was watching him closely. Dane also turned slowly and his eyes settled on the man who was watching me through eyes which were two different colors. His left was a pale blue while the right was a shocking yellowish color. I'd never seen anyone with that color of eye and I shivered slightly. Amras tensed next to me and lifted his eyes glancing about the room. He made a low noise in his throat when he followed Owen's gaze and spied the man who was about twenty feet away from us. "What is he doing here?" Amras growled then dropped my arm and headed in his direction, leaving the rest of us standing there watching him in surprise.

Can you tell what he's saying? I thought at Dane and he tilted his head slightly and narrowed his eyes before he shook his head in the negative. Amras moved up to the other man and their conversation started off low but quickly escalated so that nearly everyone in the hall glanced in their direction. I watched the faces of the men around and noticed that most of them either didn't like the man or seemed to hold him in contempt at least that's how I interpreted the looks on their faces.

A commotion started down the hall and people parted to allow a beautiful raven haired woman to pass. The men stepped back for her and their eyes began shifting between her and I. She was tall and graceful, dressed in a silver dress that had very little to it and showed off her figure while still somehow managing to appear decent. She made a beeline for Amras or perhaps it was the man leaning against the wall. In her wake she had four other men, all beefy and tall and extremely good looking. All of them had hair the same color as hers. All of the men were covered in a dark orange haze while the woman was coated in one of the darkest green auras I'd ever seen.

Hmmm the men were coated in deceit and distrust while the woman was being eaten by ambition, greed, and jealousy. I couldn't tell if it was Amras or I that was their problem but it was for sure Amras was the one about to be caught in their cross hairs.

I looked at Owen and my feet just started moving. Dane made a rumbling noise and crossed to the side Amras had just vacated, while we walked toward them.

I slipped up beside Amras and slid my arm though his and he turned his face to me. His beautiful violet eyes were filled with an emotion I'd never seen in him and I widened my gaze and stroked his arm with my fingers in a soothing motion. "Introduce me Amras." I told him calmly while his eyes narrowed and it looked like he might actually disagree with me. "Your friend reminds me of my dear friend Valentine...introduce us so I might know him." I informed him with a sweet smile that showed nearly all my teeth. Amras' eyes widened then humor spread over his face and he turned back to the man who was watching me through narrowed eyes.

"My Queen." He acknowledged and dipped his head. "Let me introduce you to Aikanaro Lossehelin, excuse me...Lord Aikanaro Lossehelin." He corrected himself and I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing at the look on Aikanaro's face at the oversight.

"And is this his wife?" I said turning slowly to glance at the raven haired woman who was standing about three feet away, her sky blue eyes focused on Amras with an intensity that nearly had my hackles on alert. My comment caused Amras face to go slack and the woman to stop staring at Amras long enough to give me an enraged look. Aikanaro simply laughed and I knew my comment had struck the nerve I'd been aiming for.

Amras leaned down and kissed my cheek which seemed to piss off the woman even more. I smiled and looked at her innocently while her aura seemed to vibrate around her. "No Your Majesty this is Lady Laure Telrun."

"Ah you are related to Duke Aerandir? I enjoyed meeting him last night we had a very nice conversation. Such a lovely man." I gushed and watched as her face tightened and had to force myself not to laugh at her. Having my shield up was proving

most helpful this morning. Several of the other men from the hall wandered in our direction. Probably hoping for a little hair pulling. Or maybe not, these were after all, Elves.

Her blue eyes flashed and she smiled tightly and dipped her head in the barest nod possible and I tilted my head to the side and lifted an eyebrow at her while continuing to stroke Amras' arm with my fingertips. She flushed at my censor and behind me Owen made a low noise in his throat while Dane chuckled softly. *It's ripping yer hair out by the roots she'd like to be doing. Followed quickly by a knife through yer heart ye ken.* Dane informed me and I grinned and leaned my cheek against Amras.

"Aerandir is my Cousin." She informed me in a frigid voice then finally added. "Your Majesty." As if it pained her to do so.

"Truly?" I remarked. "I would not have guessed, he seemed so kind." Then dismissed her to glance up at Amras, while she pulled air through her teeth at my intentional insult. "We need to get back. I believe the King is expecting us." I told him and he stared down at me for a moment then nodded. She made an outraged noise in her throat when he turned us and I couldn't help smiling. "Well that was fun." I commented while Dane chuckled again and Owen simply shook his head. "Old lover?" I asked Amras who grimaced and shook his head.

"Not likely." He replied. "Though not through lack of effort on her part."

"Ahhh I see. Hell hath no fury... I just loved the way she warmed right up to me. I bet she doesn't much care for my Mother either. Am I right?" I commented and Amras nodded as we moved down the hall while between my shoulder blades I felt a twitch as if someone was sticking an imaginary knife in me.

"No she does not care for the Princess. They have always tolerated each other, but then, I never loved the Princess." He replied softly. "The knife in your heart thought was... disturbing."

"We will be gone soon and it is good that she revealed herself so I know who not to turn my back on." I told him softly. "Her intent was to upset us. Let's not let

her have her way. Besides if I think about it too much I might turn around and beat her to a bloody pulp for looking at you like that.” A smile lifted his lips and then his eyes lightened and he laughed.

“Truly.” He told me and gave me a quick hug.

“About time.” Owen muttered and I glanced up from the twentieth introduction I’d had in the past half hour. The man was...most annoying in his sly persuasion and I was struggling to smile and make polite conversation when all I really wanted was to escape this corridor. We’d only made it about a hundred yards from where we’d met Laure and I was pretty sure if I turned around she’d still be standing there watching us. I could feel her icy stare between my shoulders.

I followed Owen’s gaze and breathed my own sigh as I watched Kit leading the others who were spread out like a phalanx and cutting a swath through the hall in our direction. I dropped my Dragonsward and reached out to my men with my happiness at seeing them while around me a mental roar went up and every eye in the hall turned to me.

Kit elbowed his way through the crowd and stopped in front of me, the others flowed around me forming a circle. “There you are.” I told them and turned slowly my eyes taking in Gareth, Jace, Cursed, Cam, Tdem, his three guards as well as Roral and Lira. Apparently they’d waited for the last two to come around before joining us. My eyes narrowed on Lira who glanced up at me from where he knelt with a smug smile. Yes, something was going to have to be done about him. I thought and motioned for both he and Roral to stand.

The King looked annoyed and his dark eyes were fairly snapping. “We expected you back sooner.” He informed me.

“My pardon Lord Tdem.” I replied wryly. “I did not realize the halls would be so busy at this time of day.” And I turned to Owen and asked. “I believe I’d like to take the Princess’ advice, if you would be so kind?” I asked and he nodded and we found ourselves standing at a huge doorway. The guards to either side of the portal jumped and reached for their swords. Cursed stepped forward and they calmed and

glanced around the group. Like all the others that morning they focused on me while I simply ignored them.

“Their Majesties would like to view the caverns.” Cursed prompted the nearest guard who pulled himself up sharply and reached for the door handle. After the customary nodding and kneeling we made it through the door which closed quietly behind us while we stared out at the most beautiful site I’d ever seen. My Mother had said caverns and I had envisioned stalactites and stalagmites but what spread out before me made Amras’ room back at the den look like a city park. A warm sun shown down upon a lush meadow that stretched for miles, and abutted a forest of thick tall trees made up of every shade of green imaginable. A stream wound through the meadow feeding into a large lake that shimmered in the distance, it’s crystal clear water visible from where we stood. The ground sloped down slightly so that it appeared we were looking into a huge canyon. In the distance snow capped mountains could be seen. Down in the valley a herd of white horses grazed and a hawk soared above us while birds sang in the nearest trees.

Kit looked around and whistled softly then set off down a magical trail that seemed to appear beneath his feet. I glanced around me at the tall oaks which fanned out from either side of the door and started after Kit while the rest of the men followed along behind. Tdem stepped up beside me and offered me his arm which I took smiling as the trail widened to accommodate the two of us. “What is this place?” I asked in wonder watching as the local fauna poked their heads out of the grass to watch us stroll past. The masked eyes of a raccoon peered out on my side of the trail and I stopped and stared down at the cute little bandit while it stood on its hind legs and looked back at me. I could have sworn it was as curious about me as I was of it.

“Drop your shields, your Majesty.” Tdem urged and I did so. In my mind I heard *Greetings to the Dragon Queen* and glanced around wondering who had spoken. Tdem’s eyes widened and he looked at me curiously. While the voice whispered it’s greeting once again and I finally turned back to find the raccoon staring at me intently and holding up its paw at me.

“And greetings to you Master Raccoon.” I replied in an awed voice then dipped a curtsy which seemed to please the raccoon as he flashed his teeth at me, dropped to all fours, then scooted off into the tall grass. A gentle roar rose up in my mind as I was pressed in on by the men. I turned back to find them all staring at me in wonder. “What?” I asked my smile dimming somewhat as no one spoke. I swallowed and turned to look where the raccoon had gone and then back at the men. “You didn’t hear the raccoon did you?” I asked and to a man they all shook their heads. “Oh well ah...he said, greetings to the Dragon Queen and I was just um...replying.” I told them and forced myself to smile.

Tdem smiled and shook his head. “I did not think...it is a rare gift indeed.” He told me. “It is usually only found in Hunters who have the gift to charm the beasts of the field.” Oh I thought wondering if it was something new from my excessive sex drive or something I’d been able to do for a while. I didn’t tend to hang out in meadows and had spent the majority of my life shielded anyway. Sighing I turned back to the path and noticed that Kit was nearly to the meadow floor and we strolled along after him. I stopped several more times along the way to greet various animals much to Tdem’s amusement. “They seem charmed indeed by Your Majesty. Let us hope they do not attempt to follow you home.” He teased and I glanced behind us to see several faces peeking out of the tall grass behind us. “I think you are a novelty. It has been a very long time since we entertained a Dragoness in our Sidhe, and I do not believe this Sidhe has ever boasted a Queen.”

Hmmm I thought. “Tdem, where are we?” I asked glancing around at the landscape spread out before us.

He tilted his head and glanced down at me as we walked. “I do not know what you mean.” He told me. “We are in the Seelie caverns within the Sidhe.”

“So this is not part of the UnSeelie’s lands?” I asked and looked up at him while he pressed his lips together and his eyes became veiled.

“No Your Majesty. The Seelie are a people of light. The UnSeelie....are more comfortable with the night.” He replied evasively.

“So if I were to visit the UnSeelie?” I asked and within my mind a rushing of voices cried out and then fell silent.

“You would not find our caverns as...charming as these.” He replied softly.

“And who is minding your kingdom while you are here with me...strolling the Seelie caverns?” I asked curiously.

Tdem glanced down at me and frowned then replied. “No one but I mind my kingdom. To think otherwise would be...dangerous.”

Obviously a sore subject I thought and winced as his nostrils flared and his eyes nearly glowed. “I did not intend to insult you Tdem. I have been told next to nothing of the UnSeelie court and was merely curious.” I replied and he seemed to struggle with his rage for several seconds before conquering it.

“My pardon Your Majesty.” He replied in a calm voice that was in direct contrast to the look still simmering in his eyes. “I know you did not mean to challenge my authority. It is difficult at times to remember just how unfamiliar you are with our ways.”

“Tell me, does your court resemble this one?” I asked him and gave him a tug so that we might start walking again.

“In which way Your Majesty?”

“Does it have Dukes and Earls and royal families?” I asked. “How is a King chosen? And do your people decide law or is that something only you can do?”

Tdem considered my words quietly before answering. “The UnSeelie court is similar in many ways to the Seelie, however my court is less politic and more... strength. To become a power you must be strong. Weakness is not a trait that will earn you a place at my high table.” He assured me. “Yet unlike the Seelie we will accept anyone, as long as they can earn their place or provide a service. I do not tolerate sloth.” He assured me tightly and I nodded and pressed my lips together. “Our laws are simple, easily learned, and quickly punished if broken. We do not tolerate infidelity, traitors, or unlawful intercourse with humans accept in times of war. Children are precious to us and to abuse a spouse or perform rape of any kind is

punishable by death. Duals are overseen by the court and anyone may challenge anyone at anytime, no matter rank or office. Ours is not a peaceful court, as there is ever one faction or another vying for higher rank. I do not encourage infighting, but I do not discourage it as it keeps the court strong. Simple infractions are overseen by my nobles while I alone have the final say over any arbitration. My court does not hold session daily, yet anyone may call a conclave at any time.”

We reached the meadow where Kit was standing watching the horses a short distance from us. Kit turned to me and smiled his eyes wide. “I have never seen such an animal.” He replied.

“Elven Horses...they are very beautiful.” I called to him and one of the horses threw up his head and glanced toward me out of large champagne colored eyes. I smiled and he snorted and tossed his head, sending his long mane floating on the air. I dipped my head to him, acknowledging his silent welcome.

Tdem gripped my shoulders and turned me toward him he seemed impatient with me, annoyed that my concentration had left him even momentarily. Apparently he was still angry with me. “You asked how we choose a King.” He told me, his eyes narrowing slightly when I nodded. “Then observe.” He growled softly and overhead the sky went grey while storm clouds gathered and the wind howled and I watched as the horses fled before the wind.

My hair whipped around my head and lightning flashed to the ground mere feet from where we stood. This was like Cam’s earlier display only this was not the bathtub. Tdem’s eyes bled to solid black. His face darkened as I watched and his lips opened revealing his teeth while he seemed to grow several inches. Twilight spread across the sky and within the clouds pitch black ooze began pulsing and growing as if something was trying to escape through it and behind us I heard voices crying out. Tdem’s hands tightened on my arms as the ooze split and something spilled out. My eyes were drawn to a creature so hideous that my mind struggled to encompass its form. The wind tore the breath from my lungs while I watched in numb horror as more nebulous malformed creatures clawed their way out of the ooze and circled the sky

above us. Tdem's face and body began glowing an eerie shade of black with a sheen of blue and I tore my eyes from the creatures hanging over our heads to look at him.

"Enough!" I yelled and forced myself to look into his face while he stared down at me with eyes through which I could see....what I suspected might be on other side of the ooze staining the sky above us. When he failed to heed me I did the only thing I could think and reached for him, mentally and physically. My hands rose to his chest and my mind...slid into his.

Tdem's consciousness was like a maze and I fell into it trapped suddenly within. Rage filled every corner, and blood red horrors too ghastly to contemplate crawled and flopped upon the outer edges. I ran from them, forcing my way inward calling to him as I went. Time ceased to exist and I could no longer tell how long I had been searching when a voice echoed through me like a sonic wave, *you should not be here!* It vibrated through me and I turned anxiously searching the surrounding darkness in vain. And then the horror was upon me its wet scaly form sliding over me pressing me down while its teeth bit into me and I struggled but could not escape.

My red door was ripped open and my lust poured into Tdem's mind coating us both with a limitless store of my desire. Red eyes blinked at me and pale fangs appeared in the dark while I reared back fighting to breathe. Some form of intelligence pressed in around me. By stopping I had allowed it to catch me. It had had a taste of my lust and I could sense it wanted more...all and it would kill me to get it. This creature had found me in the dark, something filled with rage, my lust, and now envy. My mind cried out as it flowed over me eagerly and then, I knew no more.

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DRAGON ENVY

By Kelly Armenta

Coming soon

Chapter 1

Awareness crept back into my consciousness slowly. My head hurt, the pain felt like a vice clamped around my forehead. Beneath my cheek the floor was smooth and cool, hard as marble. I cracked open my eyes and groaned at the pain and when I would have reached for my head, I discovered my hands were somehow chained together behind my back. The room I was in was pale grey and I lifted my head and glanced around realizing I was not alone. Everything about this place was grey including the old crone of a woman seated in the corner some ten feet from me. Her hair was stringy, her body emaculated. Pale rheumy eyes stared back at me from a heavily wrinkled face. She was wearing a long grey dress covered in a tattered cloak that was slightly darker. Across her lap was a staff which looked to be made from some form of knobby wood. Tied at her waist was a large leather pouch with a draw string. Her feet were bare and her hair was pooled onto the floor beside her. If she stood it would likely reach the floor it seemed so long.

I used my shoulder and pushed myself up into a kneeling position eyeing the crone cautiously. “Hello.” I greeted her and watched as she blinked at me slowly and tilted her head to the side. “Where are we?” I asked glancing around the room and finding there were bars coving the wall behind me. The other walls were grey marble just as the floor. I lifted myself to my feet and walked to the bars trying to catch a glimpse up and down the corridor without success. Across from our cell was another that held nothing or no one I could see.

My eyes searched the bars and found the door but the lock was not of any make I’d ever seen. I stepped back and bent my knees lowering my hands so that I could step through them bringing them to my front. About my wrists were silver bands linked together by silver chain. I tried my strength but only earned some nasty bruises for my efforts. On my right wrist was a mark burned into my skin almost like a tattoo and I glanced at it curiously, while my mind skittered around my pain and I tried to remember where it might have come from.

“You are in Oiotellad child.” The old crone rasped, her voice sounding like old parchment.

“And where is that?” I asked turning back to the woman.

“It is...everywhere and...no where.” She told me calmly and I frowned.

“Who are you?”

“Morai.” She replied and turned her bird like face up to me. “I am she that is Keeper of all Elven souls.”

“And what do you here?” I asked, turning fully back to her and stepping away from the bars and to the nearest wall where I proceeded to pace off the dimensions of the room. It appeared we were in a fifteen feet square enclosure, actually quite large for a cell. There were no seats or buckets or windows to be seen. Just smooth marble and silver bars. Even the roof was marble.

“It is where I am needed.” She remarked and a chill ran up my spine.

I tilted my own head and stared down at her. “Have we been here long?” I asked grateful that my headache seemed to be easing.

“What is time to an immortal?”

“You are immortal?” I asked and she blinked again and nodded.

“We both are.”

Oh I thought and started searching the walls, looking for a crack in the marble or some sort of hidden doorway. “You do not talk much.” I remarked, coming to the end of the wall after having run my fingers over every line and imaginary crack I could find to no avail.

“Perhaps you have not yet asked the right question child.” She responded with a sly smile.

I turned to the next wall and considered her response. “Why am I here?” I finally asked.

“I believe you angered Kaela Mensha by challenging his Blade.”

Kaela Mensha who was that and why would I have challenged his Blade? Was he incompetent? No obviously not, or I wouldn't have found myself chained and locked away in his prison. I did not remember challenging anyone. Had it been a mistake? It might help if I knew who this person was. Aside from the fact that he was male I had very little to go by. “Can you tell me who he is and do you think he is planning to keep me here forever? I couldn't quite remember, but it seemed there was something I needed to be doing.”

The crone sighed and turned her staff in her lap. “Kaela Mensha's areas are blood and death, just as mine are Elven soul keeping. It is he that enhances war-like qualities. To know him is to embrace rage and use it to increase power. As to your other question, I do not believe even Kaela would do such a thing.”

After having searched all four walls I turned to her and seated myself on the floor some three feet away. I pushed back my long golden reddish hair and realized I was quite naked. For what reason was I naked while she was clothed? For what reason was I here? Apparently this person Kaela was not going to keep me here forever which was a good thing. Perhaps I simply needed to wait a short while and I would find myself free once again. I sensed that patience was not a problem for me.

Morai watched me closely. Her pale eyes steady upon my face as if she was waiting patiently herself. Waiting for me to do or say something. I shifted slightly upon the floor and thought about it. Why would the Keeper of Elven Souls be here with me, locked in a cell in this grey place? “What does Oiotellad mean?” I asked and she smiled and nodded once.

“I believe child, that you might call it...the Everlasting.”