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DRAGON ENVY



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Chapter 1

Awareness crept back into my consciousness slowly. My head hurt, and the pain felt like there was a vice clamped around my forehead. Beneath my cheek the floor was smooth, cool, and hard like 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 bound together behind my back. The room I was in was pale gray. I lifted my face and glanced around realizing I was not alone. Everything about this place was gray 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 gray 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 covering the wall behind me. The other walls were gray marble as was 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 which held nothing, or no one that 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 over the bindings and bring them in front of me. 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 toward the nearest wall, where I proceeded to pace off the dimensions of the room. It appeared we were in a fifteen foot 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 ceiling 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 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. Or perhaps it was only meant to appear so.”

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. However, sometimes even Gods may be used against their will. As to your other question, I do not believe even Kaela would do such a thing. He may have assisted to bring you here, but he has a short attention span and has likely already forgotten you.”

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 reddish golden 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 while and I would find myself free once again. Obviously if he'd forgotten about me already, the chance for escape was very good. 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 gray place? "What does Oiotellad mean?" I asked and she smiled and nodded once.

"I believe child, that you might call it...the Everlasting."

That rang a bell...at least I think it did. I wasn't supposed to be here, I just couldn't remember why. Well aside from the fact that I was chained and locked up. "I feel...I should not be here." I told her. "But I am unsure why. Is this Everlasting a dangerous place?"

"All places hold danger for those not familiar with them. However as you are not wholly here, your mortal self is not in any danger just yet."

"How am I not wholly here?" I asked, glancing down at my body which looked...like it was wholly there to me.

"Do you know who you are?" She asked and I tipped my head to the side and my eyes widened while I searched my memory and was unable to answer her question.

"I...do not know." I breathed and felt my heart rate accelerate. How could I not know who I was? Not only did I not know my name, but I had no memory of where I came from. It had not dawned on me until she asked, but I simply didn't know. "Do you know who I am?" I asked my voice sounding strange to me.

She hesitated before answering and I held my breath while I waited. "I know you child." She finally replied. "But it would do me little good to explain it to you as you are currently lost, and must find your own way."

It was not what I wanted to hear, and I felt my anger surge at her response. "Then why are you here? You said it was where you needed to be. If you know who I am but will not tell me, then why are you needed?" I demanded in a low angry voice.

She smiled and flashed a set of crooked yellow teeth at me. “Because my dear, when you do find yourself once again, you will need me to return you to the world of the living. Until then, I fear you are quite stuck with me.”

I sat there thinking about everything she had told me. There was much to think through and yet, nothing made sense. I could not remember my life. Surely I must have had one. She said ‘back to’ which clearly indicated I had come from the world of the living. So returning must be my goal. Was I Elf then? And I raised my hands and felt my ears which were long and delicate and...pointed. Apparently I must be. So if I was Elf, how had I come to be here in the Everlasting? Had I done something bad? Had my challenging the Blade caused me to be pulled into this place?

My thoughts spread hither and yon throughout the empty corridors of my memory and the only thing I found was a pair of red glowing eyes amidst something black and huge. I did not know what it was and quickly turned from the memory in alarm. “Do you know my name?” I asked hoping to distract myself.

“You are called Lexi.” She replied and her eyes watched me closely as I frowned then shook my head.

“It means nothing to me.” I replied then repeated the name to myself several times. “Have we met before?” She shook her head and continued to watch me from within her tattered robes. “Do you know why I have no clothing?”

“Perhaps you did not wish to be clothed.” She replied and I lifted an eyebrow and stared back at her in confusion. For what reason would my wishing to be naked cause it to be so? That did not make sense to me at all. “Next you will be telling me that I am locked in this cell because I do not wish to be free.” I scoffed and she merely raised her own eyebrow at me in response.

Frustrated, I rose from the floor and walked to the wall. Soon I was pacing before the bars while my thoughts rolled round and round. “Fine.” I growled and stopped suddenly. My fingers reached out to wrap around the bars and I spoke softly more to myself than the old woman in the corner. “I wish to be clothed in what I was wearing

when I challenged the Blade.” I muttered. Thinking if I was doing any challenging I would have been armed at least.

When nothing happened I turned and frowned at the crone who sighed and informed me. “Saying it out loud will not make it so, you must make it so.” And she lifted a gnarled finger and tapped the side of her head softly. My fingers tightened on the bars and I closed my eyes and dropped my head to my hands. How did one go about making something so, I wondered? Taking a deep breath I let it out slowly and tried to imagine myself dressed in...what I had been wearing most recently and added the word *abracadabra* just for good measure. Something whispered around me and my eyes popped open in surprise. I leaned back and glanced down my body and was glad for my hold on the bars.

Tangerine material barely covered my breasts and flowed down my body to the floor. When I moved my foot I discovered I was wearing golden sandals and something swung at my earlobes. Upon my head was an unfamiliar weight and I reached to touch first my earrings and then lifted the crown off my head. My eyes widened at the color of the stones, which matched my dress perfectly. It was not a small thing. In fact it looked like something a noblewoman would wear, perhaps a Princess...or maybe a Queen? I turned the crown around realizing it was finely wrought and quite beautiful, and what was it doing on me? I looked at it and the image of a golden flute flashed behind my eyes. I blinked rapidly and placed the crown back upon my brow turning back to the crone who was no longer sitting on the floor. Morai had pulled herself to her feet and was leaning heavily upon the staff in her hand, her eyes turned up to mine.

“They come.” She informed me and I turned back to the bars as the sound of a door being opened down the hall, could be heard. Booted feet, I thought...counting steps and thinking...six? I released the bars and stepped back, forcing my shoulders straight as I listened to their approach.

“What are they?” I whispered to Morai.

“Mostly Drow.” She replied in a voice I had to strain to hear. I had no idea what a Drow was but the lot of them moved into view and I felt my eyes widen at the sight as they stopped before our cell and stood staring in at us.

Cruelly beautiful was the term that sprang to mind, and alien. I was certain I had never seen anything like them. They looked like Elves but were more muscular, and all were at least six inches taller than my own five foot five height. Two of them had skin slightly darker gray than Morai’s cloak. While the other four ranged from nearly black to one with obsidian skin which appeared to reflect light. They were all male. All had pointy ears and hair longer than mine. Hair, which they wore down the front of their chests, tied in several places with leather throngs. All wore armor covering their shoulders and arms which left their muscular chests bare. They had boots that covered them to just above their knee and their shins were covered in some form of overlapping hardened animal skin with spikes poking through. Blood red material covered their manhood and draped to their knees. I would have called their attire a skirt, except it only seemed to cover the front and perhaps the back, leaving straps of leather visible upon their hips. Their eyebrows and hair ranged in shades of pale yellow to stark white. He of the obsidian skin had hair that gleamed silver in the light, and matched his eyes. Silver eyes I thought, and felt a memory slip away from me. Huge wicked looking blades hung from their sides and I noted several smaller knives tucked amongst their persons.

We stared at each other for several moments in silence. To me they looked like warriors, serious warriors. This Everlasting place must be one of war and bloodshed to have created such a fierce people. I wondered what their women looked like. One of the men shifted slightly and he with the silver hair and eyes glared back at me his face slipping from proud to angry in an instant. Behind him several of the others shifted slightly and one hissed low and soft.

“They have no women.” Morai informed me softly and I nearly jumped having forgotten she was there. I pulled my eyes away from the men and glanced down at her in surprise.

“None...at all?” I demanded and my eyes widened as she glanced up at me and nodded. Standing there, she was nearly half my height and she looked like a strong breeze might blow her over.

My thought seemed to amuse her for she chortled and leaned forward onto her staff. “None that survive.” She replied once she had gotten over her amusement.

I wasn't certain how to respond to that and flicked my gaze back to the men who were watching me through narrowed eyes. “So do they speak? I mean...do they speak a language I will understand? Assuming I understand anything other than what I'm currently speaking that is?” I asked and watched as the silver haired one's fingers clenched upon the pommel of his sword. I recognized that level of irritation and somehow felt I was no stranger to it. Perhaps where I came from I irritated people often.

“With whom do you speak saurar?” Demanded a Drow who was standing next to the silver haired one. The man who spoke had red eyes and I glanced from Morai to them and back again.

“They cannot see nor sense me.” She chuckled softly and I widened my eyes and bit the inside of my cheek. The man had called me ‘foul one’ in Elvish and I had no idea why he would say such a thing to me. Ha, apparently I spoke Elvish I thought, although I might have hoped for a better start to our conversation. Well if that's how they spoke to women, it was no wonder there weren't any here. I told my self silently, and then watched in shock as two of the Drows threw themselves at the bars while hissing and growling. One reached for me and I flowed to my left grasped his arm, and threw my weight against it. I bared my teeth at the loud snapping noise it made as I bent it backwards and fractured the bone. I released him immediately and stepped back out of reach, my hands smoothing my dress as if nothing of any concern had just occurred. Then I watched the Drow drag his injured arm back through the bars. His pale blue eyes stared at me fluctuating between a grudging respect and anger. I couldn't tell if he was more surprised by my actions or if I was.

My gaze slid to the silver haired one whom I sensed might be their captain or whatever they called their head guy. His eyes were narrowed and he watched me with no

visible emotion on his face. I couldn't tell from the look on his face, if he was angry or amused.

“So did you just come to stare or was there something you wanted?” I finally asked after several more minutes of them simply standing there watching me. If Kaela Mensha was eventually going to let me go, maybe we should just get this little party started so I could go back to being whoever I was, wherever I came from. One of the men in the back jerked suddenly and his features twisted in rage.

“You dare to even think my God's name!” He hissed while around him the others looked like they might leap upon the bars again. Oh great I thought...religious fanatics. I sighed heavily and turned my back on them, crossing to the other side of the cell and lowering myself to the floor while Morai watched me silently. Apparently they had only come to stare. Since that was the case, I had nothing more to say to them. Closing my eyes I dropped my head back against the wall and let my mind empty. A task that wasn't too difficult, since there wasn't all that much I seemed to have access to at the moment anyway.

It wasn't working. I was trying for a meditative trance, but could feel eyes staring at me. It was like that feeling you get when you're sleeping, and someone is standing over you, their gaze boring down at you. I sighed and cracked open my own eyes, not surprised to find he of the silver hair staring back at me from the other side of the bars. With him was one of the other Drows who'd managed to restrain himself earlier. He had dark gray skin, white hair, and pale pink eyes. An interesting combination I was certain I'd never seen before. I carefully moved my legs to the side. I'd realized two things earlier, one they could apparently hear my thoughts and two, something was strapped to my person under my dress. I wasn't all that interested in letting them know about the second and managed to keep myself from thinking about it out loud in my mind.

Morai had reseated herself just down the wall from me, and she too was watching me. I wasn't sure if there was something I was supposed to be doing...like maybe screaming for mercy or crying hysterically? Maybe they all just enjoyed watching me breathe. “They are working up their nerve to have you.” Morai informed me.

Have me what? I thought and frowned. I turned my head toward her and watched as she shook her head at me.

“They mean to have you...beneath them child. But they have been forbidden to harm you and are therefore unsure how to go about it.”

“Sex?” I demanded and felt my anger surge while inside me something.... tightened. The two at the Drow jerked as if struck, and he of the silver hair wrapped his long black fingers around the silver bars and stared at me intently. “I don’t think so.” I muttered and moved my eyes back to them, my gaze locking with the silver one’s. Whoever I was, I was quite certain that I did not allow strangers to touch my person. Did a man want me he must first...prove himself worthy else I would not have him. I thought, then blinked and rolled that thought around in my mind. It seemed somehow right...as was the notion that I did not belong to any one man. I felt that they, in the plural, belonged to me. I eyed the men at the bars again, tilting my head to the side and...considering them in a new light.

Chapter 2

The gray skinned Drow shifted under my gaze and my tongue came out to lick my lips. What manner of beings were these? And was this the best they had to offer me? I wondered while my eyes roamed their bodies taking in the tattoo of a blade with a drop of dripping blood on the gray's chest. I could not tell if the black one had a tattoo as his skin was much too dark and I could not see through his silver hair. Did they have names? Would they think to share them before setting upon me like a pair of rabid dogs? And what was it they hoped to gain by having me?

“Domination.” Morai informed me. “They seek to dominate all those they feel are weaker. Should you wish to survive you must be strong.”

“It would be much easier if I knew what I was working with.” I replied in disgust.

“Then I suggest you start doing something about it.” She told me firmly. “Unless you prefer to be raped by these two? And be trapped here forever.”

“I thought they were forbidden to hurt me?” I replied and watched as both men’s eyes widened then narrowed. The silver haired one glanced around the room as if searching for whoever had provided me with that information.

“Yes that is true. But there are other ways to make you participate.” She informed me and my eyes narrowed while my breath caught in my throat.

“Do they know me?” I asked. I was wondering if I had simply arrived here, or if they were somehow responsible for my being in this place.

“No. They had no knowledge of you until they found you...wandering where you should not have been. Kaela Mensha only rouses himself to other worlds when his vassals call forth his...armies. In your case...he is aware of you as any God would be. And his men...have found you of interest.”

“And how is that?” I asked wondering how a God could hold himself apart from his people and yet know about their comings and goings. But then I sensed I knew very little about Gods. Morai sighed again and shook her head.

“I cannot hold you at fault for your lack of knowledge, but it is sorely trying.” She informed me. I thought about her comment and couldn’t help grinning. Irritating and trying...hmmm it seemed a theme for me. “When he brought you here he touched his vassal and...absorbed your life through his servants. You are strong and have denied them access to your...self and it intrigues them.”

Most of what she said meant little to me yet one thing was clear. “Absorbed my life...he killed me? I’m dead? Is this Hell then?” I asked my voice going hollow with a touch of horror laced through it. I glanced around me again, staring at the walls which seemed...a little too straight to be Hell. Hmmm that thought was not comforting, nor was I certain where it came from. Had I been to Hell? It seemed to me that I might recognize it and that this place did not feel...like Hell.

“Were you not paying attention child? I told you you are immortal. And no, this is not Hell, as you well know.”

“But he...this God absorbed my life, all because I challenged his Blade?” Did that mean his Blade was his vassal? I thought then lifted my hands and rubbed at the area

between my eyes. My chain rattled softly when I lowered my hands back to my lap. And if the vassal was the Blade, then who was standing at my cell bars? Were they vassals too, or merely guards. And if they were guards, what exactly was it they guarded? If there were no women here, that meant no families, no children. What was there to guard against? Surely not their God, for what manner of God was it that couldn't protect himself. She had said servants...were they merely servants of this God? They did not look like servants...but then what might a servant of a God of death and blood look like? And even worse, how might they serve him?

"Perhaps they just enjoy battle." Morai offered and I shook my head and tipped it back against the wall behind me.

"Then who do they fight? If this is the Everlasting and it is everywhere and nowhere then do they fight everyone and no one? That doesn't even make sense." I told her. "Unless..." I replied thoughtfully and lifted my head from the wall opening my eyes to glance at the two men who seemed to be paying very close attention to me though they both looked annoyed. "Unless they merely represent battle, in which case they don't exist except as a concept. Which means this is all in my head. I am not here, and soon I will wake and find I'm back wherever it is I belong." I continued and watched as both men appeared shocked by my words. The gray one looked like he might argue but clamped his lips together tightly. While the black held the bars tightly and glared at me.

Morai looked at me and raised an eyebrow. "Interesting." She replied with a sly smile. "And if they do exist?"

"Then they question would be...what is it they guard or how is it they serve?" And I glanced at them again and raised an eyebrow. "Gentlemen what is it you guard?" I asked my voice a challenge.

The silver haired man frowned and stared at me as if I was a bug on his windshield. Hmm, what is a windshield I thought, and my internal dialog seemed to distract both of them. Never mind! I yelled in my head and watched as he with the silver hair jerked and shook his head slightly. What is it you guard, what is it you guard, what is it you guard? I chanted silently and watched as both of them seemed to grind their

teeth. Only get one set of those guys better not wear them down. I thought, and then felt a flash of memory. It was as if...I'd had that thought before. I didn't even bother wondering if they were servants.

Sheesh the two of them were so unhelpful. I groused to myself and tipped my head back against the wall again, closing my eyes and ignoring them. Obviously they weren't going to assist me and were therefore of no use whatsoever. I needed a man that would speak to me...I needed...a host of male faces flashed across my mind...too fast to grasp any of the images. Long pale hair and black hair and eyes the color of violets. Obviously I needed someone I just couldn't see them. And it seemed that there were many that would help me, if I could but remember them.

"Tell me what a Drow is?" I asked Morai. I didn't bother to open my eyes as I didn't particularly care to see either man's reaction.

Morai's voice was low and steady and I relaxed back against the wall to listen. "They are like you child in that they are Elven. However you are of the *Ljosalfar* while they appear *Svartalfar*." Hmm I was a Light Elf and they...were Dark. That made sense especially given the differences in our skin color. Mine was a golden tone while there's...was not. Morai hesitated a moment then proceeded. "Many a long millennia ago they did not appear as they do now. They have always been darker than the *Liosalfar*, their hair and skin closer to the shades found in nature. In fact there are *Svartalfar* in other places that remain as they have ever been with skin that glows with pure light. But they are the true *Svartalfar*, while these before you...are not. In your world there are a few true *Svartalfar*, but mostly there are Drow who intermingled with others until their true nature is once again hidden. The vassal you challenged... Kaela Mensha's Blade is one, however diluted his blood has become by his *Daoine* heritage.

Once all Elves lived harmoniously. But the Ilythir, descendants of Ssri-tel-quessir became dissatisfied. These *Svartalfar* began to covet their neighbor's land and eventually rose up, attacking any who held items of value which they envied. This civil unrest went on until finally they were defeated. But their defeat only served to anger them that much more and they became embittered. Then, one was born into their society

named Lolth. And as she grew, she brought terrible strife amongst the Ilythir such that they began to turn upon themselves in anger and envy once again. Lolth was wicked and called forth a dark God and the strife soon turned to more bloodshed and wars. Until the rest of the Gods of Annwn, angered at her actions, finally rose up and cast out this woman. But by then she had already managed to steal many of the dark God's power through deceit and manipulation.

Lolth's followers were many, and the Gods of Annwn named them *dhaeraow* or *Drow* which means traitors. And the Gods marked her and her followers so that all might know them for their treachery and evil ways. Darkness was the mark the Gods placed upon them, along with sensitivity to light for they were banished from all that is good and bright for their foul crimes. Then the Gods of Annwn drove them underground. Forcing Lolth and all her followers off the surface and into the Underdark where they scattered, living for centuries as scavengers and feral beasts. Eventually Lolth brought them together and they became more civilized, building great underground cities and elaborate tunnel systems. But she could not control the very nature she had foisted above ground. And these *Svartalfar* turned upon each other once again, eventually tearing apart their newly created world. Many became dissatisfied with Lolth and her evil ways and fled the Underdark through the gateway to the Oiotellad.

Within the Oiotellad some lost their way and were disbursed. Many were left to wander alone or in small groups. Some remain, while others went on to different worlds and began breeding with their peoples. Usually the fairest they might find, as they seek to erase the blemish upon their souls. Some turned to other Gods. These before you came to the Oiotellad and for whatever reason, they are here as part of the Host, Hunters who worship Kaela Mensha, the God of the Hunt.”

I pulled my head from the wall abruptly and glanced at her. Something she said tugged at a memory...and then it slipped away and I frowned. “And what is it they Hunt?” I asked in a low voice that nearly vibrated.

Morai looked at me and smiled her crooked smile. “Why...women, of course.” She replied with a chuckle. “For they have none. Yet it is also that many have not

forgotten or forgiven the fact that it was their love and trust in a woman that caused them to be here.”

“And do they hunt often?” I asked and she smiled again and shook her head no. So aside from everything else, I felt it was fairly safe to believe that they hated women. It was starting to make sense.

“No not often, and I would not say they hate women. In fact, it is just the opposite.”

“Really, then what would you say?”

“That they....seek one that is worthy of them, and do not suffer lightly those that do not measure up. Understand child, the Drow turned their back on everything for their love of a woman, and their punishment was severe. It wasn't that they stopped loving Lolth. They simply became disillusioned with her, but only after many long centuries. Elves have ever sought to worship one stronger, more beautiful, or more talented than they themselves. Perhaps it is that they live so very long, and the thought of having nothing to look forward to, to emulate or ascribe to, would be worse than death.

“And do they love her still? If she appeared to them today would they turn their backs upon their new God and follow her once again?” I didn't know why, but that thought did not sit well with me. I was not sure if it was because she had fooled them cruelly and I lacked all respect for a twice fool. Or it was the thought of them believing they might have me, yet turn to another once we were done, that set my teeth on edge. Apparently I wasn't only irritating and trying, I thought with a grimace. A strong streak of jealousy seemed to be inherent within me also.

“Only they can answer.” Morai replied calmly.

“Yes but apparently the cat has their tongues.” I replied with a touch of disgust. “Or perhaps it is that the only one capable of speech already ran away in fear.” I taunted. “Do you think they might coax him back? Perhaps if I stand in the far corner and promise not to come any closer.”

The gray skinned Drow actually flashed a smile at my words though it was quickly removed from his face. He was standing just to the left and a step behind the silver haired Elf who did not look amused at all.

“Taunting them is not a good idea.” Morai remarked. “Eventually you will want to release your hold upon the lock and they will come in.”

I turned to her slowly, my ears trying to adjust to the words she spoke. “I am holding the lock?”

“Yes since first you came to be here. It is all that has kept them from you thus far. As I mentioned earlier.”

The idea was...shocking and I must have missed that bit. “But what about their God?” I demanded my eyes narrowing upon her suspiciously. “Can he not open the door?”

“Hmmm.” She replied. “It seems...to do so would be to cause you harm and as he is loath to harm you...he has turned you over to these two whom I believe are here to coax you out.”

I laughed sharply, I simply couldn't help myself. They were here to coax me? I thought and laughed so hard tears filled my eyes. When one, then several ran down my cheeks and fell to the floor with small plinking sounds I stilled abruptly. My gaze shifted slowly to the floor next to me. There gleaming upon the gray marble, were several golden teardrops. My tears had turned to gold! I reached for one and lifted it, placing it upon my palm and staring at it in wonder. Of one thing I felt certain, Elves did not cry golden tears. I gathered the rest of them up from the floor and held them in my open palm.

I was Elf and something more. I had clothed myself at my will and wore a crown. I was irritating and trying and had a jealous nature. It seemed I was used to having men about me that I thought of as mine. At some point I had been to Hell and back, and had challenged the Blade of the God of the Hunt. My name was Lexi, but I had no memory of whom or what I was. Yet I had somehow managed to lock myself within a cell and was keeping those that would abuse my person out. What then...was I?

“What would you be child?” Morai’s voice brushed over me.

Queen! My mind shouted at me, and I groaned and reached to grasp my head tenderly. I bent forward to do so, and dropped several of my tears in the process. They fell back upon the floor with more plinking noises like so many coins. When the pain had subsided slightly, I lowered my hands and glanced at Morai. “It seems I would be Queen. But of who or what I have no sense.”

“It will come to you.” She replied calmly as she settled herself more firmly upon the floor and closed her pale eyes, a sweet smile upon her face.

I sat there for several minutes not really thinking anything momentous, simply waiting for the last of the pain in my head to subside. When it had, I rose to my feet and crossed back to the bars taking care to stop just out of arm’s reach. I took my time and allowed my eyes to roam the silver haired Drow closely. There wasn’t an inch of his front that I did not study or caress with my eyes. And when I was done with him I turned to the gray, stepping to the left so I might see him better. His body turned slightly to face me and I started at his boot clad feet and made my way up his body. I hesitated at his waist...realizing something was missing. I worried at it a moment, my eyes focused on the area near his belt but finally shrugged and let it go as I continued my upward perusal. When I reached his eyes, I found they appeared...amused. Turn around I whispered in my mind, and he raised a white eyebrow and stared back at me while his arms dropped to his sides and he took a step toward the bars. Turn around so I might see all of you. I whispered again, and his eyes narrowed yet he obliged me while he of the silver hair made a low noise in his throat.

The armor over his shoulders spread out across his back, covering him to where his ribs ended. He had a trim waist and narrow hips. The backs of his thighs were bare except for the red material that covered his well defined bottom down to the tops of his boots. Across his boots I could see the straps which held the animal plating to the front of his shins. There were two additional knives tucked into the waistband of his covering and another strapped to his thigh as well as a small weapon that looked almost like a cross bow only much smaller. My eyes settled on the area covered in red material and I

had the urge to check beneath. The thought brought him around abruptly and had him nearly leaning upon the silver bars. He seemed to be no longer amused, his pale pink eyes focused intently upon me.

“Very nice.” I replied and lifted one corner of my mouth while he pulled air into his lungs and stared back at me. “Do you have a name?” I tried and he blinked and narrowed his eyes. I sighed and turned back to the silver haired Drow and simply lifted an eyebrow. I would have crossed my arms over my chest but with the chains still upon me it was impossible. “How about you?” I asked and got an angry look in response. “Is it that they don’t have names or they are just being insulting in not sharing them?” I asked Morai.

“I imagine you have not impressed them enough yet to feel they need to tell you anything.”

“So breaking their friend’s arm wasn’t good enough? Perhaps I should strangle the darker one with his own hair?” I asked then rolled my eyes when he growled and grasped the bars tightly. And why was it his growling and threatening didn’t bother me all that much? Hmmm, could it be I was used to being threatened? Or that I was I felt confident enough that he did not present a threat to me?

“It might. But perhaps if you were to persuade them.....and maybe a demonstration might work best.”

Demonstration eh? I thought and chewed upon my lip then glanced around the cell. The place was awfully bare and it must not be very comfortable to be sitting upon the floor. I closed my eyes and envisioned a small softly padded chair made of blue and...green with low arms upon which she might sit. And a bed upon which she might lay, small sized just like her, with soft downy quilts and several pillows. For myself I envisioned something larger with bedding in shades of ivory and heaped with pillows. It was a four poster which took up a good portion of one side of the room. In my mind I built these images and placed them upon the room so that when I opened my eyes I smiled and glanced around me, pleased that my work matched my vision perfectly.

“Well done.” Morai commented and lifted herself off the floor and into her chair. “I thank you.”

I nodded in her direction and turned back to the bars. Giving the two a smug smile. “Would you two like chairs too?” I taunted and closed my eyes again, forcing the image of the most uncomfortable chair I could envision, and pushing it into the hall behind them. When I opened my eyes I couldn’t help grinning at the three legged stools that had appeared. There was hide stretched across the tops which formed triangular seats and looked...like they might poke them in all the most delicate of places. I laughed at the look on the silver’s face and turned my back upon them crossing to my bed.

I removed the earrings and crown and placed them upon the floor. Then glanced down at my dress and closed my eyes again....using my will to change my gown from what I was wearing into...the last nightgown I’d worn. When I opened my eyes I stared down at myself in wonder, noting I wore pale pink, not so very different in color from the gray’s eyes. The nightgown was...very feminine. I pulled back the top quilt and lifted my leg onto the bed causing the thing to split nearly to my waist as I crawled in. Across the room the men made low noises which were quickly cut off, and I smiled while I settled the quilt about me. I wasn’t certain I could sleep, but since there was little else to do, I was willing to give it a try.

I dreamed I was standing on a mountain and all around me was blackest night. The wind whipped my hair and brought to me the smell of death, while below me sounds of battle raged. I raised my arms to the night and spread them watching as they shifted and began glowing a soft golden color that split the darkness. A cry rose up from below as light poured out of me and onto the battle field, sweeping it clear of the darkness and washing it in a pure golden light.

In the distance a group of huge winged beasts crested the horizon and arrowed toward me across the sky, their scales gleaming in the light I’d created. Blue and Green, Black and Red, and Silver they were, mighty beasts and they looked beautiful to me. My heart sang out to them, while my body tightened in anticipation. They roared as one in answer to my pleasure and flew ever closer.

A horrified cry went up from the field below and archers turned their bows upon my beasts. They screamed and faltered pierced by arrows, while upon the mountain I dropped to a knee and felt the pain of each quiver as if it had been struck into my very own body. Many were driven back, yet two flew on, though their wings pierced with black tipped arrows. The green and the blue beast screamed defiance at those below, as their wings beat powerfully carrying them to me. And then I watched in horror as the green faltered and fell tumbling to the rocks below. And my heart nearly died within my chest. The blue let out a mournful cry and landed near me, but immediately slumped to the ground his huge dark blue eyes whirling slowly. His mind reached out to mine and his plea was urgent. *Lexi you must come back to me* he called softly, as his lids slipped closed. I screamed and reached for him. Knowing if I could but touch him he would heal. A force pulled me back, wrenching me from my dream and I woke thrashing and screaming Gareth's name.

Sweat covered my body and my breath came in short pants as I stared around the cell of a room I was trapped within. I pushed back the covers and sat up abruptly then had to take a moment to catch my breath as my vision danced with spots.

"Are you well?" Morai asked me and I shook my head.

"I must get out of here." I told her, my voice shaky. The circle upon my wrist burned slightly and I rubbed at it. "Gareth..." I whispered and squeezed my eyes shut tightly remembering the sound of his voice in my mind and the sight of him slumped upon the mountain, his wings and body damaged. The green that had fallen...he was...mine! And they had attacked him. I had to get out, I had to help them. I did not know who 'they' were, but my eyes turned to the two still standing across the room just outside my bars and narrowed. Somehow I sensed they were behind the injuring of that which was dear to my heart.

I took a deep breath, and in my mind I pictured my hands about their throats forcing the life from them. The gray choked and reached for his neck while the black's eyes widened and he stepped back from the bars. I leaned up amongst the bedding onto my hands and knees. My gaze was riveted to them as I watched them go to their knees

on the floor. I crushed their throats beneath the force of my will and watched as they struggled uselessly against me.

The gray gasped and slumped onto his back and I turned my eyes to the silver haired Drow. I watched coldly as his eyes widened then rolled back in his head. Then he too, collapsed onto the floor twitching once then going still.

I slid to the floor and glanced down at myself, anger surging through every fiber of my being. I bent over and undid the knife strapped to my leg and held it in my hand as I closed my eyes and allowed my emotions to rule my dress. When I opened my eyes I was covered in a black one piece of some type of stretchy material that hugged my body and arms tightly. Belted about my waist was a long sword and my forearms were covered in hardened leather armor. Leather boots covered my legs up past my knees, and a stiff leather corset covered my back and cinched in at my waist protecting my ribs and stomach. My hair was braided down my back and swung about my hips. Upon my brow I felt a weight and glanced at the floor realizing my crown had once again attached itself to me, just as my earrings had. I quickly strapped the blade I carried onto my thigh and turned to Morai. "We leave now." I told her and held out my hand to the door. I felt a wrenching inside me and staggered slightly as the door slammed inward on its hinges.

I stepped over the two on the floor and considered them for a moment.

"They are not dead child."

I scoffed slightly and bent down to grasp the silver haired Drow by the feet waiting until Morai had cleared the cell before I dragged him in and went to my knees next to his body. My fingers searched every crack and crevice and finally found the key hanging upon a chain about his neck. I yanked it from him and left him there, pulling the door shut behind me. The door snapped closed and the bolt automatically engaged. I turned back to the gray one, and my eyes narrowed. "Only because I was not certain." I told her. "And dead they can not lead me from this place." Then I reached down and began removing the gray's weapons, tossing them into the cell with the silver haired one. I rolled him onto his stomach and searched him thoroughly my fingers even sliding beneath the red material where he kept more than just his manhood. I grimaced and

tossed two more blades into the cell and leaned back upon my knees. When I was done I used the key I'd found to unlock my chains and transferred them onto the gray. The key went into the cell too. I did not want the gray one relieving me of it and freeing himself at an inopportune time.

Free from both the cell and the chains I leaned back upon my knees and considered him. He breathed, though the sound was more a husking rasp and I suspected I had done him serious damage.

“He will recover.” Morai informed me while I unbuckled the straps that held his shin armor on. I did not wish to have the spikes embedded in me and tossed them in through the bars.

In the cell I heard the first sounds of awakening, and reached down to grasp a handful of white hair then gave it a sharp yank. When it did not wake the Drow, I stood and began dragging his body down the hall using the hair within my grasp to do so. I pulled him across the smooth marble in the direction from which he had arrived. Morai said nothing as she fell into step behind us.

Chapter 3

There were several steps leading up to the door at the end of the corridor. It was not locked and I opened it slowly, surprised to find no one on the other side. Perhaps these Drow did not feel the need to guard their prisoner? Or maybe they assumed the two they'd left behind were more than enough to perform that task.

“Do you plan to drag him all through Oiotellad child?” Morai finally asked when I'd pulled him up the steps and through the doorway. We seemed to be at the end of a corridor that turned some twenty yards from where I stood and I could not see where it led.

I grimaced and glanced down at him, just managing to stifle the urge to kick him. I had no idea why it was taking him so long to wake. “What is wrong with him?” I whispered.

She sighed and leaned heavily upon her staff her pale eyes searching my face. “Child you could heal him if you but tried.” Heal him I? I had just nearly strangled him I thought, and then dropped the handful of hair I had and shoved him onto his back. Fine

if it would get him onto his feet that much quicker! I went to my knees next to his body and placed my hand upon his neck. Heal I thought, and felt a tingling flow down my arm and out my fingers. He arched up off the floor and his eyes flew open. Coughing erupted and he gasped air in while he stared up at me in confusion. I grabbed up the handful of hair again and rose to my feet.

“Get up.” I growled at him. When his eyes narrowed and his lips pulled back exposing his teeth, I gave him a painful yank snapping his head forward nearly into his chest. “Do not make me repeat myself.”

“You will regret this.” He growled and I raised both eyebrows, thinking he wasn’t the first to say that to me.

My hand blurred and I was suddenly holding my knife in my fist. I leapt on him, straddling his body there in the hall, my weight pressing down upon his chest while I walked the blade across his cheek and placed it at the base of his right eye. “I think...” I told him softly. “You might want to keep your threats to yourself unless you’d like me to feed you your own eyes.” And I pressed the blade in just enough to draw a single drop of blood which I carried to my lips. His eyes widened as my tongue flicked out and I took his essence into myself. “Let me be clear. I do not like you and if you cause me problems I will slit the throat I just healed, and then leave you to bleed to death where you fall.”

He held still beneath me as I leaned forward and stared down into his oddly colored eyes. “What do you want?” He finally asked.

“Directions to the door out of here would be a nice place to start.” I told him in a syrupy sweet voice then leaned over and pulled his scent into my lungs. He smelled...like the dark to me. Wild with a tang of musk, it was potent and somehow familiar. His eyes widened as I took another deep breath before pushing myself back into a seated position. “Can you tell me how to return to where it is I came from?”

“I cannot.” He replied.

“Then you are of no use to me.” And I placed the blade of my knife against his neck applying pressure slowly while I watched his eyes.

“You will not kill me.” He whispered and earned a shallow cut from my knife for his trouble. It didn’t seem to faze him and he ignored the pain, though I watched it register in his eyes.

I smiled at him still holding the knife steady. “I do not think you know me well enough or you would not say so.”

“It does not matter...I know you will not harm me.”

I considered him for a moment and finally replied. “Why would you be so foolish as to believe that?”

He lifted an eyebrow and flared his nostrils, pulling air into his lungs while he flashed me a sly grin. The skin over his cheeks tightened and he replied calmly. “Because...you want me.”

I rolled my hips upon his stomach and leaned my elbows on his chest making sure the pointy parts dug into his chest muscles sharply. “Do not mistake my finding your form pleasing to be an undying declaration of love and devotion.” I advised him. “I could take you now, right here and still slit your throat afterward.”

My comments seemed to amuse him. “I do not think so.” He replied and shifted suggestively beneath me. “I think once you taste me...you will not want to leave me at all.”

“And if I told you...while you slept I had your silver haired friend? And that he now resides back in the cell along with the key to your chains?” I asked leaning forward to cup my chin in my hand while I stared down at him. My braid slipped forward and whispered against his cheek and he blinked and narrowed his eyes.

“I would say you lied.” He growled softly.

“But I am Elf and I cannot lie, lest I be forsworn.” I replied softly and noted the way his eyes flickered and would not meet mine for a heartbeat. He knew something... something he did not wish to share. It was something that I might find interesting. “I can guarantee you your friend does indeed lie back within the cell and be assured the key resides with him.”

“But you did not touch him.” He responded tersely and I merely lifted one side of my mouth and stared down at him.

“And what concern is it of yours?”

His eyes flashed and the skin over his cheeks tightened while his nostrils flared. “I am not accustomed to seconds.” He replied sharply and I lifted my head from my hand and leaned up.

“Really? And yet you both seemed intent upon having me. Are you so certain that the silver haired Drow would not have been more pleasing to me and therefore my first choice?” I asked seductively, a challenge in my eyes.

He tensed beneath me and replied in a tight voice. “I am saying he would not have dared touch you first.”

“Then it seems I chose wisely.” I replied, thinking I had netted the more important of the two. And I smiled then chuckled at his shocked look. Just that easy he had confirmed my guess and I couldn’t help feeling just a little smug. “Now, we shall go.” I demanded harshly, my easygoing manner slipping away. “I have more important things to do than waste my time on a traitor.”

He let out a string of words in a language I did not understand yet the look in his eyes was unmistakable. My temper rose and I back handed him sharply cutting his lip on his teeth and managing to shut him up. His eyes smoldered and I stared back at him without flinching then stood in one smooth motion. I bent over and grabbed a handful of hair then proceeded to yank him into a seated position. “You have no idea who you are dealing with.” He growled up at me while I gave him another yank and he bent his knees and eased onto them.

“My guess is some Duke or Earl or maybe a Prince of the house of Ilythir. But hey surprise me if you can.” I replied in a flippant tone. “It doesn’t really matter since you’re nothing to me but a traitor to your race and to your family and for what...envy? Because you couldn’t stand the thought of someone having something you didn’t? And I’m supposed to fear you? You have nothing I want and if I find you’ve harmed my men, you’ll die.” I told him coldly. “Because that is what should happen to all traitors.”

I pulled him onto his feet roughly and used my knife pressed into his back to get him moving down the corridor while I kept my other hand on the chain between his wrists.

“You do not know what you speak of.” He growled softly.

“Yeah well you had the chance to talk earlier, now I just want you to shut up.” I replied as we came to a bend in the tunnel where I yanked him back and shoved his arms up toward his shoulders. I poked my head around the corner and noticed there was no one to be seen. The corridor ran smooth for nearly a hundred yards then seemed to branch in several directions. I turned to Morai who was leaning on her staff and watching me closely. “Shall we?” And I prodded the gray out in front of me with the tip of my blade.

At the branching I glanced at Morai who pointed with the bottom of her staff at one of the tunnels. The gray hissed as I shoved him in that direction but otherwise kept his mouth shut. And so we went for quite some time. At each crossroads I would glance at Morai who would point her staff in one direction or the other and off we would go.

“Where are you taking us?” The gray finally demanded. The truth was I had no idea I simply wanted out. At this point one tunnel looked as good as another. So I was forced to rely upon my guide. When I turned to her and lifted an eyebrow she smiled sweetly and said. “Trust me.” To which I shrugged and prodded the gray into continuing on.

After we’d been wandering around in the semi dark for what felt like several hours I jerked the gray to a halt and turned to Morai with an exasperated look. The crone was fairly spry for one so old and I had to wonder how long this was going to last. “Am I supposed to be doing something?” I demanded. “Or are we just out getting our exercise?”

“Well it might help if you knew where you wanted to go.” She replied with a huff. And I stared down at her with a distressed feeling. The gray hadn’t said a word for the past half hour or more and I began to wonder what he was thinking.

“Please don’t tell me we’ve been walking in circles?” I demanded then rubbed at my head when she nodded. “I thought you said to trust you?”

She chuckled and glanced up at me slyly. “And you haven’t been attacked once have you?” She replied smoothly while I just managed to bite my tongue to keep from barking at her.

“Fine, does this place lead anywhere? Like an exit back to the world I came from?”

“Yes we’ve passed it several times.” Morai informed me and tilted her head to the side while I stared down at her in disbelief.

“Is there some reason you didn’t stop us?” I demanded.

“Yes.”

“And why would that be?”

“Who do you speak to?” Demanded the gray his voice sounding annoyed. I ignored him and continued glancing down at Morai.

“Because child you cannot pass through without knowing where you go.” She told me patiently.

“And I won’t know where I go until I find myself.” I replied in disgust. This was just great. “Okay then who can help me find myself?” I finally asked after several moments of silence.

“I believe you’re holding him by the chain at the moment child.” She replied with a grin.

“Great, why don’t you just take us back to the cell and I’ll just lock myself in with him until I’m done.” I replied sarcastically.

“It’s not a bad idea, safer and more comfortable than these halls.” She replied and I threw up my hand and cursed softly.

“Are you serious?” I demanded.

“I usually am.”

I looked at her for several moments while the gray shifted from foot to foot and finally shook my head. “Do you swear this will work?” I asked frustrated at my lack of options.

“If not, it will certainly put you on the right path.”

“But I don’t like him.”

“Since when has that ever mattered?”

“Since he hasn’t declared.” I told her harshly and then pulled myself up short. What was that supposed to mean? I wondered while the gray turned his head and glanced over his shoulder at me. His eyes were wide, and a sly smile covered his face. “And I’ll not play with the likes of this one while my men are in danger.” I warned her softly.

“For what reason do you believe your men are in danger?” She asked, tilting her head to the side.

“Because of my dream.” I told her then frowned. “Are you telling me they are not?”

“Not all dreams are what they appear.” She informed me. “Sometimes...they are false sendings to manipulate you.” And her eyes slid to the gray meaningfully.

If Gareth and my others were not in danger...then. “You did not say what talents the Drow possessed.” I told her as my knife poked the gray into moving forward. It was clear he wanted to hesitate but I stabbed at him again and he hissed and began walking while I glanced down at Morai. “Feel free to take any shortcuts on the way back, I would not wish to wear our prisoner out.”

Morai nodded and then listed off for me the talents one might find amongst the Drow. “They are dexterous, charismatic, intelligent, proficient with all manner of knives. They have excellent night vision. Some can conjure dancing lights, darkness, and Faerie lights. Many received sorcerer abilities from Lolth and can transform themselves into animal shapes. Some can perform glamour and appear to be something they are not. And some can... dream send.”

“Hmmm charismatic? You are kidding right? And what exactly does the last mean?”

“Drows cannot force a dream upon you. But they can invade a dream and turn or twist it.” She told me as we came to the end of the corridor with the door leading down to the cell.

I reached around the gray and pushed open the door holding onto his chain as we navigated the steps. No sound came from the cell and I suspected the gray was...poking ahead and had already alerted the silver of our arrival. “Well that was certainly fun. I feel much better after having got my blood flowing. Remind your guard he isn’t supposed to harm me.” I told the gray while we walked down the corridor toward the cell.

I walked him to the cell opposite the other and reached for the door. As I did so he lunged at me with his shoulder, knocking me back. I think he was trying to knock me over, but apparently things weren’t going his way. He raced across the room and turned his back, while the silver reached through the cell for him and managed to get a cuff undone. By that time it was too late for me to stop him and putting myself within either of their grasps would have been disastrous. So I merely stood where I was and watched him gain his release.

Apparently the gray had requested a little key service while he was supposed to be reminding his guard not to harm me. I watched him from across the corridor, slipping into a ready position as he pulled his now free hands in front of him and rubbed them. His pale pink eyes seemed to glow in his gray face and he looked... pleased. I smiled back at him and rotated my head on my shoulders, easing the muscles while I waited for him to come for me.

“Now.” He informed me and I reached for my sword.

“Yes?” I replied and held the blade un guard. The silver passed him his own sword through the bars and I watched calmly as he unsheathed it and tested its balance.

“You look worried.” He informed me.

“Do I, perhaps you should have your pink eye checked.” I replied then raised my eyebrows several times when he frowned. “It’s an eye ailment where I come from. I believe you get it from goats and other unclean animals...no wait I think it’s sexually

transmitted. Have you been having sex with a goat lately?" I asked him and he did not look pleased.

"No but you will be beneath me...very soon." He growled while his eyes narrowed.

"We shall see." I told him then shook my head. It was like hearing an echo.

He stepped toward me, his sword held like a mallet in his fist and I raised an eyebrow and watched him come. Morai went to stand down the corridor a little way away and her face looked serene.

His first swing was tentative and I slipped his blade and danced away. He grinned, perhaps thinking that was the best I could do and I rolled onto the balls of my feet and watched him watch me. I had the sense that I'd been in this situation many times and that soon his lovely smile...would not be quite so lovely.

"She thinks my smile is lovely." He scoffed to the silver haired one who was standing at the bars with his arms crossed over his chest, a look of mild irritation on his face. The man seemed to have no sense of humor at all. Too bad he was actually the more attractive of the two. I thought with a wistful sigh and got an angry rumble from the gray in response. He lunged at me and I skipped away again after slipping his sword. "You cannot run from me forever." He informed me. "Why do you not put down your toothpick and do your duty?"

"Duty?" I scoffed back at him. "What would you know of duty?"

"Careful." He warned. "You do not wish to anger me."

"Is this more exercise then?" I asked and this time when he came for me I parried his blade and my hand struck out and a fine red line appeared across his waist, just above his belt. He stepped back and glanced down at himself and I flicked the blood from the end of my dagger, striking him upon his left cheek with it. Behind him in the cell the silver made a low humming noise and shifted from foot to foot.

"You bled me." The gray informed me, his voice sounding amazed. As he wiped his cheek off with the back of his arm.

“Yes do you yield?” I asked, to which he threw back his head and barked out a laugh.

“Do I yield? What nonsense is this?”

I shrugged and stared back at him watching his eyes. “Just thought I’d ask. There is no shame in admitting defeat.” He frowned at my words and rolled his head about on his shoulders.

“Shall we do this then?” He asked and I felt my eyes widen, while my mouth went dry at the words and my body tightened as if in pleasure. The question seemed to echo back at me. His gaze narrowed on my face. His nostrils flared while he pulled breath into his lungs almost as if he was...scenting the air.

I shook myself and gave him a nod while I stood waiting patiently, balanced upon the balls of my feet. “Yes do be more careful, I’ve already had to heal you once today.” I informed him with a wry smile. His eyes met mine and he frowned.

“So you say.” He replied and gave me a look filled with disbelief.

“Oh you do not believe me?” I replied and narrowed my gaze upon him and proceeded to give him the feel of his crushed windpipe I had healed earlier. He choked and coughed sharply and his eyes widened as he stared at me. I held the sending for only a few seconds then released it, lifting a brow while he struggled to breathe normally. “Must I remind you again, I do not lie?” I informed him and he slowly straightened from where he was bent over, struggling to suck in air. And then it struck me what I had just done and my own eyes widened and I glanced toward Morai who was laughing silently.

The gray used my distraction to attack and I found myself on the receiving end of his full swing. The vibration shook my body, rattling my teeth. I was suddenly struggling to move my feet and get myself out from under the force of his sword pressing down on me. My mind seemed to exhale and he yelped and staggered back as the feel of my fingers twisting his unmentionables slipped from my mind unbidden. It was as if this was not the first time I had done that. And I smiled and quickly moved out of his reach while he glared at me. Wherever I was from, this seemed...the natural way for me to fight.

“How did you do that? Your hand was no where near me.” He demanded angrily and I shrugged.

“My secret. Want more?” I asked and stared at him innocently while I sent him the feel of me yanking his pony tail...hard.

“Arrugh!” He growled reaching for his head which surely must have already been hurting, seeing as how I had drug his unconscious body across the room and up the stairs by it earlier.

“Do you yield now?” I asked then sighed when he refused to answer. “Then can we get on with this please? I very much would like to learn whatever it is I am supposed to so I can go home. You may like it here, but I do not.” I informed him impatiently.

“Would you but fight fair we could proceed.” He demanded.

“What you don’t like your man parts squeezed or your hair pulled? Excuse me, for not wanting to be raped.” I informed him dryly. “I tend to be a little irrational about these things. Especially given you are easily twice my weight and have half again my reach with that brute of a sword you are swinging about. You are lucky I don’t just decrease your size permanently and call it a day.” I growled back at him then watched as he took a step back from me in horror. Oh damn...could I do that? I thought as I chewed my lower lip in dismay. As an anti-rape technique...it ranked right up there with castration.

The gray made a strangled noise and I flicked my eyes to him. “So ah...do you yield now?” I asked and he stared at me like I was a contagious disease. He didn’t seem to know what to do. It was clear his man brain was shouting rape, pillage, plunder! While the more feminine side, the side that held the intelligence I was guessing, was begging him to proceed more cautiously. Hey no one wanted a eunuch, and a man with a very small penis was no fun at all.

Laughter erupted from the silver haired Drow who threw back his head and practically howled. I stared at him in shock, as his entire body shook with the force. In fact he grabbed for the bars and bent at the waist and I had a flash back to someone with pale yellow hair doing the same. The gray turned to glare at him and then shifted his

eyes back to me nervously. That nearly made me laugh and I held out my hand palm up as if to say...hey, don't ask me.

So I was wrong...the silver actually did have a sense of humor.

Chapter 4

He laughed for several minutes and when he was finally done he pulled himself up and used his arm to wipe the tears from his face. “Thank you, I have not laughed like that in a very long time.” He informed me and I wasn’t sure how to respond so I just nodded.

“Are we done here?” I asked the gray and he stuck out his hand to the silver who proceeded to bend down pick up a sheath, and hand it to the gray through the bars. The gray sheathed his sword then fastened his belt about his hips. I held on to mine a little longer. It occurred to me I hadn’t actually heard him say the words and...it wasn’t my habit to turn my back on an enemy. I pulled one of the chairs I’d created earlier over and gingerly seated myself upon it placing my unsheathed sword across my lap.

“I am called Roa’.” He informed me and bowed from the waist. My eyebrows shot up and I stared at him in surprise. He turned to the gray and his eyes seemed to bore into him.

The gray finally signed and spread his legs to shoulder width then clasped his wrist with one hand. My heart squeezed at the sight and I struggled to breathe normally. His eyes narrowed but he made no comment, simply replied. "Talon." Which I took to be his name.

"I believe my name is Lexi." I told them.

"And your designation?" Talon demanded softly his gray eyes searching my face.

"I...am not certain." I told him.

"She does not know who she is." Roa' supplied.

"It is one of the hazards of the Everlasting." Talon agreed. "I have seen it before."

"So do you boys live around here?" I asked glancing around at the other cells. "Or is this where you simply wreak havoc upon poor unsuspecting women?"

Talon winced then shifted slightly. "Mostly the latter." He offered.

"Oh...do you come here often?" I asked.

And this time Roa' shifted and shot a glance at Talon. "Not often. Will you release me?" He asked in what I suspected was his most innocent voice.

"Will you swear upon your God that you will not attack me?" I replied back and he hesitated a moment then flashed me a smile.

"I do not wish to be...unmanned." He replied. "I swear upon Kaela Mensha that I will not attack you should you let me out." I nodded and glanced toward Talon.

"And I will have your word too." I informed him and he stared at me and then dipped his head.

"I too swear upon Kaela Mensha that I will not attack you Lexi." He replied and I raised my hand and felt the lock give while the door swung inward slowly. Talon pulled air in through his lungs and watched me carefully.

"That does not seem to draw energy from you." He replied his voice sounding curious.

"No, should it?" I asked while Talon entered the cell and began sheathing his knives, when he flicked the blood red material aside my eyes shifted to him and my lids

lowered slightly. He was not looking at me but his hands stilled and he turned slowly and our eyes met. I stared back at him in silence and felt my body quicken.

“Perhaps if it was sorcery you used.” Roa’ replied softly, his eyes shifting between Talon and myself.

“Mmmm.” I replied. “And what is sorcery? I sense I am unfamiliar with it.” I lowered my eyes and blinked then realized I was stroking the hilt of my sword and sheathed it.

“It is the ability to manipulate things.” Roa’ replied. “As you have been doing. But you do not...invoke or chant, nor did I observe you praying.” He continued a curious note in his voice and I lifted my eyes to him.

“For what reason would that be necessary?” I asked then frowned.

He looked at me and then glanced at Talon who shook his head slightly. “For the reason that you must ask your God to give you power.” He replied and I couldn’t help the blank look on my face.

“I wouldn’t know about that. And I sense that...it is not something I am burdened with. I merely wish something and it...occurs.” I told them then rolled that over in my mind. That did not have the correct ring of truth to it. “I think.” I added.

“Perhaps it has more to do with your nature.” Morai added and I nodded as her words made sense.

“Yes you are probably correct.” I replied and both Talon and Roa’ looked at me oddly.

“She has been speaking to someone not there, since she arrived.” Roa’ told Talon his eyes viewing me as if I wasn’t quite right in the head.

“Perhaps she speaks to her God or Goddess.” He replied. “And she is in fact a sorceress?”

That struck me as funny and I glanced at Morai who winked. She crossed the room and went into the cell. Heading for the chair I had created for her. “May I tell them?” I asked her when she seated herself and was leaning back comfortably. Her pale eyes stared back at me and she nodded once. I smiled and turned back to Roa’ and Talon.

“I speak to Morai who is Keeper of Elven Souls.” I told them and I swear they both paled though how that can be I was not certain. “She has been keeping me company and assured me I will need her assistance once I...find myself.”

Roa’ glanced around nervously and seemed very tense all of a sudden. Talon simply crossed his arms and stared back at me in silence. I couldn’t tell if he didn’t believe me or what. “For what reason would the Keeper of Elven Souls be here with you?” He demanded stressing the words Elven and you.

“I’m not sure. Maybe because I’m Elven and need assistance? She did say this was where she needed to be.”

Talon’s eyes searched my face and he looked...unconvinced. “Yes and you’ve said repeatedly that Elves do not lie. However that means little as you...are not Elven.” He informed me.

I glanced at him sharply. “I am Elven.”

“No, you are Dragon.” He replied softly. “As surely as I am standing here.”

“What lie is this?” I demanded. “Dragons do not have ears such as mine!”

Talon merely lifted an eyebrow and glanced at Roa’. “Truly?” He asked. “And you know this how?”

I rose from my seat and grasped the pommel of my sword, my hand alternating between stroking and clasping it. Inside I felt...confused and...distressed as if my body was suddenly heating up from the inside out. I raised my hand to my head and rubbed at my temple trying to still the slight buzzing that seemed to be growing from the inside. “I do not know.” I breathed, my gaze swinging between the two of them.

Talon’s eyes narrowed on me and Roa’ stepped forward and I turned to look at him slowly, my eyes roaming his chest and it seemed I needed something. My eyes lifted to his, while my breath caught in my throat at the eager look in his eyes. Talon growled low and threatening and Roa’ blinked but did not pull his eyes from mine. He was...familiar somehow as if he was already mine. I licked my lips and took a step in his direction my nostrils flaring. A low humming vibrated out of his chest as my feet moved me in his direction.

I placed my fingertips upon his chest and leaned toward him inhaling his scent into my lungs. He smelled good. I licked my lips and slowly began circling him, trailing my fingers over his skin as I went. He made a low noise in his throat and I smiled. His skin was hot beneath my touch and silky smooth. I moved behind him so my fingers could brush across the skin just above his waistband. His flesh broke out in goose bumps and I made an mmmm noise that caused him to shift slightly and breathe deeply. My fingers slipped lower brushing the red material and Talon made a strange warbling sound that drew my attention. I leaned around Roa' and looked toward Talon who was standing not more than five feet away. He made the sound again, low and coaxing. I tilted my head to the side then stepped from behind Roa' toward him.

Talon's arms dropped to his sides, as he watched me glide his way with a knowing smile. When my fingers touched his chest beneath his hair he placed his own hand over mine, pressing my palm flat against him, trapping my hand. He lifted his other to me and brushed the back of his knuckles down my cheek while I rubbed my face against him and closed my eyes. His touch felt good to me and my body tightened in anticipation. He pulled air into his lungs and growled softly for me.

"You can not wait much longer little one." He informed me in a voice that seemed to caress me from the inside out. "You must choose quickly." His words were like a blur to me as I spread my fingers beneath his hand and moved just a little closer to him. "Lexi?" His voice reached me as I lifted my other hand and sent it skimming over the skin at his waist and lower back.

"Hmmm?" I purred opening my eyes and glancing up at him. My eyes felt...strange and he looked shocked when I turned my face up to his and then a look of wonder entered his eyes and I leaned in to him and pressed my lips to his chest. My tongue flicked out and I tasted him. Talon's hands wrapped around my arms and he set me back from him so that his eyes might search mine. I looked up sluggishly, while inside my body I began to feel...itchy.

"You are gold!" He whispered and I murmured and tried to move closer. "Stars and seas you are...breeding." And he reached for me and plucked me from the floor into

his arms. He carried me into the cell while I buried my face at his neck and inhaled softly making happy noises at being so close to him. He seated me at the edge of the bed and went to a knee to remove my boots. I reached for him, running my fingers through his hair which irritated me because it was bound. I made dissatisfied sounds and he glanced up at me in concern.

“Remove your hair bindings.” I told him and his eyes widened but he reached to comply. When he released his hair with a shake I smiled and sank my fingers into it while he went back to divesting me of my boots. “What do you do?” I finally asked.

He glanced up at me and smiled slyly. “I would make you more comfortable.” Talon replied and I smiled down at him and licked my lips. When my boots were gone his fingers moved to my waist and after a small tug my sword slipped to the floor followed quickly by the blade at my thigh. Next went the lacings on my corset and when he leaned forward to push it down my arms I wrapped my legs about him and pulled him closer.

“Hurry.” I whispered sensing I could not hold out much longer. Something inside of me was building.

“Help me.” He replied and I reached for the straps at his shoulders, becoming frustrated after several moments when I could not release the buckles. I leaned back in distress. I needed to see him, all of him and I closed my eyes and pictured him without his clothing. He made a strange noise and I opened my eyes to find he was standing completely naked before me. With my legs wrapped around him he was pressed intimately against me and I leaned back so that I might see all of him.

My breath caught in my throat and my hands slid down his stomach toward his proud length. I brushed my fingers over the incision I had given him earlier and my eyes fluttered closed while I whispered the word Heal in my mind and felt a tingle spread down my arm and out my fingertips. He made a low noise as my hands slid over the now perfectly smooth skin and down to the base of him. His hands dug into my upper arms and I slipped my fingers around him while he tensed and made a low urgent sound. And then my one piece was sliding down my body and he gently untangled me from his length

to get my arms free. A palm in the middle of my chest forced me back onto my elbows and at his urging I lifted my hips. No sooner had the material slid off my feet than his hands were on me, gliding up my body as I arched into his palms. He crawled up onto the bed straddling me, and then wrapped an arm under my back. He lifted me against his chest then walked us to the middle of the bed so my legs were no longer hanging off the edge.

Talon followed me down, using a knee to nudge my thighs apart and I reached for him feeling the itching inside growing stronger. My breath came in small pants and I wrapped a leg about his, lifting myself to him. "Please." I moaned feeling something tear inside me. My back arched and I screamed and convulsed beneath him. Then he was inside me and my body stilled instantly. Around me the very air seemed to vibrate and then like a rushing it struck my body flooding me with memories and I cried out at the wrenching feeling.

Someone was moaning softly and there was a weight upon my body, as if I was being crushed beneath something. I forced my eyes open and stared up at a finely veined marble ceiling. I turned my head and recognized the image of myself carved into the Sidhe wall showing the various stages of my shift from Elf to Dragon. Silver and white hair covered me and my back was being pressed against the hard cold floor. Breathing was difficult.

My name was Lexi Helyanwe and I remembered.... everything. I lifted my right hand and realized my bracelet was back where it belonged. A surge of excitement filled me. "Kit!" I screamed and nearly cried as black vapor coalesced next to me. He arrived in a swirl of red eyes and black and silver hair and I felt happy tears fill my eyes at the sight of his beautiful face.

"Mistress." He choked his hands reaching to touch my face. "Bless you for scaring me!" This for a Demon was a foul curse indeed. He snapped his fingers and suddenly my men were everywhere. Tears streamed down my face and I reached for Gareth who shoved Kit out of the way in his need to reach me. Jace came down next to him and their faces looked... haggard.

“Lexi.” Gareth whispered harshly and his fingers cupped my cheek. His beautiful blue eyes searched mine. “Are you hurt?” He demanded his eyes flicking to the two crushing me to the floor.

“I am fine. I just. Oh sweet Danu I missed you...I dreamed... and my eyes shifted to Jace who looked pale, his green eyes slowly whirling as he stared back at me. I shuddered and either Roa’ or Talon moaned. Gareth and Jace’s eyes moved to the men on me and neither looked happy.

“How did you get out here? We just left you in your room where you’ve been lying unconscious for six days! And what are you doing here with these Drakes? Where did they come from?”

“Six days?” I replied and swallowed heavily...then more softly. “They are Drakes?” I whispered staring down at the two who were just starting to come around, and I realized what had been missing from Talon...was a belly button. Oh crap I thought, then that meant that Roa’ was indeed one of mine though how that could be, I did not know.

“Let’s just get you...untangled.” Jace replied and I nodded then glanced at him in horror.

“Wait...you cannot. I was...I am.” I winced, and was unable to finish my sentence.

Gareth growled softly and there was an ugly glint to his eye as he turned to look at the two on me. It was Cursed and Cam who reached for Roa’ and pulled him off Talon.

“Careful.” I told them. “If he wakes he will be disoriented and...he is armed.” Cursed stared down at the Drow his eyes burning.

“We should kill him now, kill them both.” He hissed and I turned to glance at him in surprise.

“No Cursed he is not what he appears.” Please...do not harm him. “At least until we can sort this out. I think...he is one of my ten.” My words met utter silence and I glanced at each of them in turn. The only one missing from the group was Tdem. Owen

and Amras were the only ones that would meet my eyes, and both looked unsettled but pleased to see me. Kit was hovering over Gareth's shoulder, a worried look on his face.

Cursed glanced at Cam and the two of them proceeded to divest Roa' of all his weapons then rolled him onto the floor at the edge of the wall.

"Where have you been little one?" Owen asked softly. "Your mind has not occupied your body. We have been... worried."

I glanced at each of them and my hand reached for Talon who I sensed was coming around. I could still feel he was still within me, and if he spooked and pulled from out it was likely I'd go back into convulsions. My eyes turned to Gareth and I felt slightly sick to my stomach as I told him. "The Everlasting."

A roar went up in my head and I realized I was completely unshielded. Not having thought about it since I'd been gone. I did a quick check and was pleased that there appeared to be nothing wrong with my mind. Even my little red door seemed fine, after having been nearly ripped from its hinges when I'd fallen into Tdem's mind. Several growls erupted around me, and upon my body Talon tensed as I raised my lower shield.

"Sush, they will not harm you." I coaxed him and he lifted his head and glanced around himself from beneath his hair. His eyes narrowed upon Jace and Dane, but none upset him as much as Gareth who he hissed at, as he moved to pull back from me. "Talon!" I gasped.

Gareth's eyes narrowed and his body seemed to expand slightly. "Normally I would not say this, but do not get off my Queen." He growled and Talon flicked his eyes between the two of us.

Talon seemed to consider his words for a moment and finally nodded. He pulled his eyes off Gareth and searched about the room. His eyes halted and widened in amazement as he gazed upon the wall and turned slowly to see the progression of me from human to Dragon. After several seconds he blinked and continued looking about until he discovered Roa' passed out against the wall. At which point, his body stilled and tensed as if in preparation of attack.

“He has not yet come around.” I told him before he could do something we all might regret. “He is unharmed.” His pale pink eyes swung back to me and he considered me for a moment his eyes searching my face as if...he couldn't quite believe what he was looking at.

“I am half Elf.” I told him. “And I do not lie.”

“Lexi?” He growled softly his voice sounding odd.

“We are returned to my world. These are my men. I am pretty sure we are in the tunnels near the doorway in the Sidhe.” And I turned my eyes up to Gareth for confirmation.

“Yes. We have not left your side since....you fell.” He finished and he turned his face from me while emotion choked his voice. I reached out to touch him sensing he needed the contact. He took a deep breath and turned back to me. Tears swam in his blue eyes and I felt my own fill in response.

“Kit...please?” I whispered and turned to him. “This floor is cold.” He nodded and snapped his fingers and I found myself naked in the middle of the huge bed in the room provided for me by my Grandmother. Jace and Gareth were with me and both were naked. Talon shook his head, likely disoriented from traveling compliments of Kit. He glanced around then growled threateningly as he caught sight of Jace and Gareth.

“Now you may get off my Queen.” Gareth told him in a voice I'd never heard him use before. Talon responded as if slapped and bared his teeth. Jace went up on his hands and knees and moved to tuck himself around my head and shoulders.

“Yes by all means, get off our Queen.” He too growled and the bed dipped and Dane moved toward us slowly, his powerful body gleaming in the soft light.

“Move, or be removed ye ken.” He growled.

I stared at the four of them silently and felt Talon's body tense as if he might launch himself at them and lay perfectly still. If he attacked my men they would rip him to shreds. Yet there was little I could do for him as he had not declared and was therefore not technically mine.

His pale pink eyes flicked to me and within me his body jerked and I pulled air through my teeth in response. Across the room I sensed Roa' sit up and cautiously look around. "Talon, you were kind enough to assist me earlier. Will you harm me now?" I asked, my voice filling the silent room.

"No, but I will not concede my position."

I sighed and reached to brush back his hair from his face. "My men have not seen me in six days. They are...worried for my welfare and anxious to...be with me."

"That may be." He replied with a touch of steel in his voice. "But I will have my release first."

I glanced at Gareth who lifted an eyebrow at me and seemed to barely restrain himself from doing him bodily harm. "You want pleasure?" I asked, turning my eyes back to Talon watching as he narrowed his gaze upon me then nodded. "Then let me help you." And I reached for him placing my hand upon his cheek. Pleasure poured from me into him and he cried out and arched his back while I felt his release inside my body. I took pity on him and fed him the same contentment I'd given to Cam and watched as his body slumped as if in feint.

His head hadn't even had time to hit my chest when Gareth shoved him off me and positioned himself over me. His body slid home with a sense of rightness and he hummed and buried himself as deep as he could go. He wrapped his arms around my back and rolled me onto his chest putting space between us and Talon. Jace made an annoyed sound and shifted closer. While Talon, already close to the edge slipped off the bed and landed upon the floor with a thud and the sound of limp flesh slapping hard marble.

Roa' yelled and lunged while my men reached to restrain him. In an instant Roa' shifted to silver and my men scattered as he whipped his long slender tale about sending Owen and Amras into the wall. His teeth came down upon Cam who screamed and shifted into a huge white tiger. On the bed Dane shifted and launched himself at Roa'. The rest of us also shifted and the bed collapsed under our weight as we flung ourselves into the fray. In the middle of the room Dane and Roa' were tearing each other apart and

I turned to Gareth and yelled for he and Jace to push Dane back while I stepped in front of Lira and Roral who had charged into the room. My tale shoved them back and they fell against the door, momentarily blocking the rest of the guards from getting in.

“Owen get them out!” I screamed and the room emptied of all non-Dragons while several pools of blood remained, to mark where they had fallen. Dane and Roa’ were tearing at each other, their claws and teeth ripping scales and skin. I threw myself at Roa’ knocking him sideways while Jace and Gareth used their bodies to force Dane back across the room. Roa’ struggled as I pounced on him, using my weight to hold him to the floor. He turned his head to me and our eyes met. “He is not hurt!” I yelled and in my mind I screamed it over and over. Roa’ hesitated and I gasped and settled myself more firmly upon his body, my tail wrapping around his leg and over his back. “Talon is not hurt Roa’.” His silver eyes whirled and he swung his huge head toward Talon who was still lying upon the marble floor, his body completely relaxed. “I gave him pleasure...he is fine. Roa’ you must shift.” I told him, my voice turning coaxing as I slipped off of him and shifted. “Please Roa’, shift and you can check him yourself.”

I breathed a sigh as Roa’ shifted back to his Drow form and I stepped back and pointed to Talon. “I am sorry, I should have warned you first.” I told him and watched as he quickly made his way to Talon’s side, his eyes keeping a close watch on the others. “We are fine.” I told Gareth, Jace, and Dane and they too shifted while I mentally called for Owen. I cried out sharply and fell to my knees as my men appeared before me.

“Cam is in the worst condition.” Owen replied tightly as he stared down at me. I glanced at Amras who had claw marks across his chest and arms. Cursed had several lacerations upon his head which seemed to be bleeding profusely. Kit was seated holding his thigh together. The gash looked long and deep, like it might go all the way to the bone. Cam however looked...like he’d been chewed nearly in half. Roa’ must have grabbed him across the chest and torso and bit down hard. He was barely breathing and pink bubbles could be seen at his mouth.

“No.” I whispered reaching for Cam and placing my hands upon the worst of his injuries. I dropped my shield and imagined him as he’d been in the hall when he’d

wrapped his arm about my leg. I recalled his perfect face and form, and then pushed the healing down my arm out my fingers. His wounds were horrible. The healing rebounded back upon me as his internal organs reknit and muscle and skin flowed together. I took several deep breaths and tried to ignore the pain. Cam arched off the floor and sucked a huge breath of air into his lungs and I turned next to Kit, as he was closest. He moved his hands and his thigh sprang open, exposing the muscle and bone beneath. I struggled not to cry out as I reached for him and again forced the healing out of me. He sighed softly and I turned next to Amras and took care of his injuries. Last was Cursed and he looked at me strangely his black eyes worried.

“I am fine.” I whispered tightly and placed my hands upon him while in my mind I forced the healing once again. When I was certain he was well, I lifted my eyes to him sluggishly and felt my vision narrowing. Hands reached for me in slow motion as I listed sideways.

I woke in the middle of my bed. My head pillowed in Jace’s lap. I blinked and then winced at the pain within my head. Amras’ face swam into view as well as my Mother’s and I glanced down my body, thankful that someone had thought to clothe me in a pale green nightgown. “How do you feel?” Mom asked and I lifted my hand to my head and groaned.

“Weak.” I replied softly.

“It is no wonder, since you have not eaten in a week. And we’ve barely been able to get fluids within you. Judging by the amount of blood on the floor, and the lack of injuries present...might I assume you have managed to overexert yourself?” She asked, her pale blue eyes searching my face. Her fingers reached out to stroke my brow when I nodded.

“Probably.” I muttered then felt her touch sooth my head and sighed softly.

“Thank you.”

She glanced at Gareth who was standing next to the bed, his arms crossed over his chest and told him. “Feed her...but slowly. And...I know she requires...assistance. But go gently.” She added with a grimace. “She’s been in a coma for a week...her body

needs time to heal and rebuild its strength.” And then her face crumbled and she reached for me, pulling me into her arms. Her body shook silently against mine while I held her and patted her back making soft soothing noises. My eyes met my Dad’s over her shoulder and he looked like him might be close to tears too. It must have been delayed reaction because my eyes overflowed and tears slipped down my cheeks to fall amongst the bedding.

“I’m okay, its okay.” I whispered over and over again while she clung to me and silently cried. My men brushed her gently, giving her their strength with a hand on her shoulder or back. It was their way of sharing her pain and offering support. When she finally released me she turned to Dad who gathered her gently against his body and held her tightly.

“Do not do that again young lady.” He growled at me and I nodded and smiled up at him through my own tears.

“I’m sorry Dad....I didn’t mean to get sucked into the Everlasting while I was out walking in a meadow. It just sort of happened.” His eyes widened and he glanced at me in horror.

“You were in the Oiotellad?” He asked me softly and I nodded and leaned back against Jace who had slipped in behind me. His arms wrapped gently around my body and pulled me in against his chest. I could barely breathe from the pressure he exerted but did not take him to task as it felt wonderful to be in his arms. His day old growth brushed my cheek and he hummed quietly.

“Apparently I said something that was a challenge to Tdem, and his God Kaela Mensha wasn’t happy with me. I think I asked him...who was minding his Kingdom while he was out walking in the Seelie meadow with me. Anyway I got pulled in and...can I have something to eat?” I asked feeling a slight tremor in my hands and wrists. “I think I need food. And maybe some water?” A tray with a large bowl of broth and warm buttery bread appeared on the bed next to me along with a large bottle of water. Amras reached for the bowl and spoon while Jace continued to hold me. Normally it was Jace that fed me, but I didn’t think he was going to give up his hold this

time, as he seemed content to allow Amras to have the honors while he held me and rubbed his cheek against my hair repeatedly. I suspected he soothed himself with his actions.

I spent several minutes getting some of the broth into me while I glanced around the room. Talon and Roa' were no where to be seen and Lira and Roral had graduated from hall monitors to inside door duty and both watched me closely. It was as if no one there could pull their eyes off me. Perhaps they feared I might disappear once again if they did.

"Where did you put the others?" I asked quietly, and glanced at Gareth who met my eyes but refused to respond. When it was clear to me that he wasn't going to answer I turned my gaze upon the rest of them and discovered no one was interested in eye contact. When Amras held the next spoonful up to me I dodged it and glared up at him. "What did you do with them?"

Amras signed and put the spoon back in the bowl. "Kit put them somewhere." He finally replied, his beautiful violet eyes hinting at an anger that seemed to simmer just below the surface. I glanced at Kit who folded his arms over his chest and stared down at his still bloody thigh, refusing to look at me. "Dad, the Silver is here. His name is Roa', and he is unlike any of the others. I thought you said that the woman you inseminated were...only Seelie?"

My Dad looked at me curiously and glanced around at the floor then back at me. "A Silver did this?" He replied in a curious tone.

"Yes when he thought I'd killed his...mentor, friend...whatever." I told him waving my hand in exasperation. "By the way...you never said, what color was Dane's father?"

Dad looked surprised at my question. "Bronze." He replied.

"Roa's mother was a Drow." I told him with a raised eyebrow. "Apparently she disguised herself."

"His father was Bronze and...Drow? That isn't possible Lexi. No Drow exist upon this planet."

“Well...that’s not what Morai the Keeper of Elven Souls told me. Apparently Tdem is part Drow too.” I muttered and dropped my head back against Jace’s chest.

Mom seemed to pale then shake herself slightly as she glanced from Amras to me. “Lexi you must eat the rest of this broth.” She told me in a shaky voice. “And then maybe you should rest for a while. Your body has been through a lot this past week.”

“Sure Mom.” I replied in a small voice. The broth in my stomach making me sleepy.

“Lexi?” Dad asked me abruptly. “You said others? What did you mean by that?”

I swallowed the spoonful Amras forced upon me and glanced up at Dad. “He’s got a Gray with him...his name is Talon. And he looks like a Drow too.”

Dad’s eyes widened and he stared down at me in shock. “Lexi...did you see this God? This Kaela Mensha?” He asked, his voice sounding urgent.

I stilled and ignored Amras for a moment my eyes going round in my face. “No.” I told him. “No there was only Roa’ and Talon along with four others that went away when I broke one of the other men’s arms.” Then I thought about his question for a moment remembering how Talon had informed me that Roa’ would not dare touch me first and thought...uh oh.

Gareth made a disgusted noise in his throat, and turned first to my Father then back to Kit. “Bring them back.” He told Kit who looked mutinous and shifted his red eyes to me.

“Maybe it would be best to ah...oh stars.” I muttered and nodded at Kit who glared at me but snapped his fingers.

Talon appeared on the bed lying on his back. He was dressed, if you want to call it that...in a huge t-shirt and ugly baggy plaid pants and I frowned at Kit but didn’t say anything. He turned and slowly rose to a sitting position, his pale pink eyes glancing around the room calmly. He hesitated briefly on my Father before finally settling his gaze upon me. He lifted an eyebrow and informed me in a wry voice. “That wasn’t exactly what I had in mind. It seems I should apologize for my lack of... participation.

However, I hardly think I deserved the charming visit to Hades in punishment, as the choice apparently wasn't mine to make."

Hades...Hell? I thought then bit my lip and glanced at Roa' who was sitting on the bed behind Talon, his head held in both hands. Obviously he'd enjoyed Hell about as much as I had though I doubted he'd been stripped naked and covered in naught but little gold chains. But then...who knew where Kit had put him. And I glanced at Kit in question.

"They were not molested." He growled. "Though I was sorely tempted, I knew it would make you angry. The black one is just being...overly dramatic." He replied with a disdainful look and a dismissive wave of his hand. "You were not nearly as upset by it as he appears to be."

I lifted an eyebrow at him and responded. "Yes Kit...but then I am suited to it and he is not."

My comment caused Talon to still, and then he appeared to have a moment of utter confusion. I looked at them both and wondered...why had Morai sent them with me?

Chapter 5

“Sorry about that. I think it was a bit of a misunderstanding. Roa’ there tried to kill several of my men while you were...recuperating.” I informed him and Talon turned to look at Roa’ who lifted his head and winced.

Talon sighed and raised a knee to lean upon. “Remind me next time you are beneath me to be...more specific.” He replied and grinned when several growls erupted around the room.

“Please...I’m not feeling well enough to put you back together like I did in the cell.” I warned him while behind me Jace tensed and several pair of eyes shifted to me in question. I glanced at Roa’ and could nearly feel the pain coming off him in waves. “Roa’!” I snapped and he jumped on the bed. “Come here.” I told him while Jace hissed and I ignored him.

Roa’ glanced at Talon who shrugged and nodded then watched as Roa’ moved to his knees and crawled slowly toward me. Dane looked like he had to struggle to control himself as the other man passed near to him. Roa’ tensed his shoulder and back muscles

but managed to ignore him and knelt near me his eyes wary. I held out my hand toward him and he flinched back, while I raised an eyebrow and waited patiently.

“Lean forward would you? I don’t have all day.” I told him and he hesitated then bowed his head toward me while I forced the healing into him. He jerked back and stared down at me in surprise. “Do not ever attack my men again.” I warned him softly. “Or you will find yourself truly dead from a crushed windpipe. Understand?” I told him in a cold and calm voice while he nodded and eased back from me. “Stop glaring at me...it had to be done.” I muttered to the rest of my men who looked angry at my actions. I leaned back against Jace and closed my eyes for a moment.

“Your Majesty you must finish your food.” Amras replied and I cracked open my eyes and glanced at him curiously. Since when had he called me that I wondered, and watched as his eyes narrowed and the skin tightened over his cheeks?

“Since you elected to drag home a...a...those.” He hissed back and literally flung the tray across the room. He leapt from the bed and was gone in a swirl of pale hair and black leather. The crockery and tray shattered while silverware clattered against the marble. I sucked in air and sat up straight then turned my eyes to Cursed who looked equally irate. When I would have pulled myself from Jace’s arms he grabbed me and held me fast.

“Let me go!” I told him angrily then struggled weakly until my hair covered my face. Amras had never acted this way and I needed to find out why he was so angry with me.

“Lexi leave it.” My Father told me. “We’ve all been under strain this past week. He will return soon and you can discuss it then.” I glanced about the room noticing that once again no one but Talon and Roa’ would meet my eyes. Well Lira and Roral too but that wasn’t surprising. I made a harrumph noise and crossed my arms over my chest.

“Talon you aren’t also known as Kaela Mensha are you?” I asked baldly watching him out of the corner of my eye as he jerked and his face went blank. He stayed that way for perhaps a second or two, then humor lit his eyes and he threw back his head and laughed...much as Roa’ had before I’d released him from the cell.

“Oh you are delightful!” He told me when he had got himself back under control. I continued to stare at him, as did the rest of the men until he finally frowned and became serious. “No...I am not Kaela Mensha.” He replied and in my mind I heard his voice as it whispered. “I am he that hunts.” And in my mind his eyes shifted to red and his face turned black and nebulous while I cried out and once again lost consciousness.

This time when I woke the room was dark and I sensed my men sleeping upon the bed near me. I rose slowly and moved to the edge needing to use the restroom. I felt eyes on me in the dark and I bit my lip as my feet hit the floor, the cold seeping into me immediately.

“Your Majesty?” Lira whispered softly. And I thought the word ‘bathroom’ as I shuffled toward the doorway. My body felt...stiff and shaky. Apparently laying around for days on end was harder than one might think. The lights came up as I closed the door behind me, the Faerie magic nearly blinding me. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror as I passed and stopped dead in my tracks. Holy crap I thought, and winced at the reflection staring back at me. I looked...like death warmed over. No actually, I just plain looked dead! My skin was pasty, nearly translucent. My hair seemed brittle and was a rat’s nest. My body looked like I’d taken up anorexia as my newest hobby and was really enjoying it. Even my eyes looked dull. Shifting hadn’t helped and I shuddered to think what I might have looked like before. I stared back at myself and slipped to my knees on the floor, bending my head to my thighs, and sent up a silent thank you from the depths of my soul to Morai who had surely saved my life.

When my eyes finally stopped leaking all over me, I pushed myself to my feet amidst the circle of golden tears and went to use the restroom. The bath was running when I came out and a tray of food had been left for me. I bit the inside of my cheek and forced myself not to cry again as I slipped into the tub and reached for the shampoo. The simple act of washing my hair exhausted me, and I had to rest several times before all of the soap was finally gone from me. Then I set to eating everything on the tray. I had always been lean, but it was obvious my body had been feeding upon itself for the past week as there was little left to me but parchment and sticks. Not exactly pin up material I

thought, as I drank the rest of the bottle of water that had been left for me. I tipped my head back against the rim and let my mind empty.

When I opened my eyes Amras was staring back at me, his face pale, eyes huge. Apparently I wasn't the only one that had missed some meals. He looked thinner and...tragically beautiful. "I watched you die and could not prevent it." He whispered brokenly. "And the only thing that gave us hope was that Kit...stayed. I thought as long as Kit is here...you would come back to me. I love you more than life itself, and I should not have let you come here."

His words choked me, squeezed my heart, and caused my eyes to fill again. "No." I told him softly. "This was meant to be." And I closed my eyes and repeated what Mi had told me the night I had met Jace and Gareth. "Beware the red and the white who are like thieves in the night and will steal your very essence. And the black will attack to take you back into the Everlasting. But the green and the blue shall be your friends true...that is what Mi told me weeks ago. Amras...this was not your fault. This was no one's fault. It merely is."

His face lost some of its pallor and a look of...relief slipped into his eyes. His body seemed to unclench and he shifted from one foot to the other. "May I join you?" He asked shyly and I smiled and he slipped into the bath with me. He gathered me gently into his lap and I curled there placing my head against his shoulder. "It is good that you ate everything on your plate." He whispered while his lips brushed my forehead and his fingers slowly stroked my arm.

"I would have earlier but it seems my tray took flight and shattered itself against the wall." I teased him and he muttered and hugged me carefully.

"I am sorry. It was wrong of me to lose my temper."

"I don't know if it was wrong, but it was...shocking." I replied and placed my hand on his chest just above his heart. The gentle beat soothed me and I snuggled closer and yawned.

"Amras what happened in the cavern?" I asked and stroked him lightly when he tensed. "Please, I'd like to know."

He kissed me once or twice upon the brow. More for him I suspected, than for me. It was several minutes before he replied. "From where I stood, the King asked you a question and you turned to him. Then the sky went black and the Wild Host began spilling out upon the air and I think you shouted something and then you....collapsed." He muttered softly.

"And what of the Host?"

He shuddered slightly and hesitated. "They...flowed over you. It happened very fast, and we could not reach you. Then they simply disappeared...into you. And the King..." He replied softly. "The King roared and also disappeared, taking with him his three guards."

"And did he roar in triumph?"

Amras shook his head against me. "No it was...heart wrenching. He screamed in pain, as if he'd been mortally wounded. We have not seen him since." He replied without my having to ask. "I suspect he thought he'd killed you, as had we all. Though with his spies, it is likely he will know soon that that is not so."

I thought about it for a while and compared his comments to what I had sensed and felt. I still wasn't certain who the black was. Perhaps Mi could shed some light on it next time I saw her. Or better yet...I thought seeing red eyes and blackness, hmmm. I might have that discussion soon. I promised myself. "And what happened after Tdem disappeared?"

"We brought you here and we warded the room to keep you safe."

"You warded the room how?" I asked softly, my mind stuttering over the possibilities.

"To keep you here safe, your body alive and to keep...others out."

I sat up straight and leaned back to look at him. "You warded the room to keep minds out?" I whispered and he nodded while his eyes turned pensive. "Amras...who told you to do this?" I breathed softly.

He looked uncomfortable all of a sudden. "We could not wake you." He shuddered and told me. "We could not sense you....it was as if your mind had fled

leaving just your body behind. There was concern that something not you might... occupy your body. Your Mother consulted a Sorceress who seemed quite adamant that you be warded.”

“Who?”

Amras brushed my arm again and seemed to tense beneath me. “You met her in the hall last week.... Lady Laure Telrun.” He told me and my mouth dropped open in shock.

“Arrrughh!” I growled and Amras stared down at me in confusion. “I’ll kill her!” My anger flared up and nearly choked me with the force of it and the room was suddenly filled with my men, who rushed the door as if I were under attack.

“What is it My Lady?” Cursed demanded his black eyes searching the room looking for whomever I thought to kill.

“That black haired bitch trapped my consciousness in the Everlasting and nearly killed me!” I snarled and pushed off Amras’ lap as I turned to them. “Do you want to see what she did?” I demanded, suddenly knowing exactly who the ‘Black’ of Mi’s prediction was. Gareth’s eyes widened but he nodded and I turned to the others, watching as each gave his nod. Lira and Roral stood at the door and my eyes skimmed over them. “Then see.” I cried, and rose to stand in the middle of the tub and opened my mind to them, starting with the conversation I’d had and the odd way Tdem had turned to me his eyes filled with...something not natural, his actions...forced. I showed them how I’d run from the beast with red eyes in terror, felt it overcome and perhaps even kill me. Then I shifted to the gray cell and my lack of knowledge of self. I showed them Morai the Keeper of Elven Souls. How I had dreamed Jace tumbled to the rocks below me while Gareth had barely reached me upon the mountain before collapsing. And after I’d woken screaming Gareth’s name I had attacked both Talon and Roa’ and won my freedom, only to discover the cell was where I needed to be. For it was there that Talon and Roa’ helped me make the link back to this room. A connection which allowed me to return before my body died without me.

They looked shocked, yet I couldn't help noticing that several of them held a glimpse of pride in their eyes. Perhaps it was because I had defeated Roa' and Talon. For in spite of everything, I had managed to keep them from harming my person. Kit in particular seemed torn between pride and angry disbelief. Cursed just looked angry. Owen's eyes seemed to glow with a smoldering anger such as I'd rarely seen in him. Jace looked stunned, perhaps because he'd seen his own death upon the rocks and did not know how to feel about that. While Gareth just stared at me...his dark blue eyes whirling with pain and...rage.

"I think...it is only fair that we show her the same...level of accommodation." I told them and turned to Kit. "I think the Lady would look good in gray, don't you?" I growled and his red eyes narrowed and he smiled viciously.

"Oh yes Mistress I think she'd be stunning." And he snapped his fingers. "At least that's what her cell mates will think." He added and I couldn't help the sense of pleasure that crept over me. I turned to Roral and Lira and considered them for a moment. "I believe this should....remain our secret. The problem has been dealt with. There is no need to...involve others. Do you agree?" I asked and they both stared back at me in surprise then dropped to a knee.

"Your Majesty it is as if it never occurred, my word." Roral informed me succinctly.

Lira glanced at me from his knee and his two tone eyes seemed to glow with suppressed anger. "I would have done the deed myself." He informed me tightly. "My word I will not speak of this." I nodded once and motioned for them to rise.

I signed and realized two things, one I was exhausted again, and two I was cold. Gareth grabbed a towel then wrapped it about me and lifted me from the tub while Jace helped to wrap another about my hair. "Can I have more water?" I asked as my head lolled against Gareth's shoulder and Owen handed me a bottle which he opened first. I swallowed down half of it and handed it back to him. He carried it with him as we left the room.

I slept a lot over the next day and a half as my body repaired itself. Each time I woke or was awakened I found myself sheltered in the arms or cupped next to the body of one of my men. During one of my awake sessions, I was informed I became restless if left alone and that the only time I slept peacefully was when my skin was touching someone else's. I wasn't certain if just any one would do. It seemed they had not allowed anyone but the six of them near enough to me to find out. I suspected it was more that my unconscious self felt protected in their arms and it allowed me a healing sleep. The periods I was awake typically lasted only long enough to eat everything in sight, down at least a full bottle of water, then use the restroom before crawling back into bed and passing out again.

Sometime early the second day I woke to find myself pressed up against Dane's body. My leg was over his and my breasts were tight against his chest. I tilted back my head and looked into his black eyes blinking slowly. "There ye are." He whispered and I smiled. His hand spread out on my back and I rubbed my self against him enjoying the feel of my skin moving upon his.

"Hello." I replied and ran my fingers down his chest. "You smell good."

"Ahhaa." He replied with a knowing smile. "I've just been holding ye and feeling yer skin flesh out beneath me palms I have." He told me and I knew if I looked at myself in the mirror, the starving wraith would be gone completely. Even the skin on my hands seemed to glow with good health. It seemed along with my weight...my other appetite had also returned. "Tis lucky I am." He rumbled softly.

"And why is that?" I asked in a silky voice.

"Because Lassie...ye want me and I am here I am." He informed me and rolled me onto my back. "But nae nearly as powerful fierce as I want ye." And he pressed the length of himself against me while I smiled and lifted my hips to him. He made a triumphant noise as he pierced my body and I arched beneath him wrapping my legs about the back of his thighs. His fingers brushed the hair back from my face and traced the shape of my jaw while he held himself still within me. "I'm thinking tis been much

too long.” He whispered and a shadow slipped across his face and his voice turned scolding. “Tis nae easy to sit idle while ye wasted away before me eyes, ye ken?”

“Are you chastising me?” I demanded in a teasing voice then brushed at his cheek before my hand slipped into the back of his hair.

“Nae.” He sighed and nuzzled my neck so that goose bumps spread across my chest and I sucked air in through my teeth. “Tis just that I would have liked the pleasure of feeling me own hands strangling the life from the black haired witch. Tis powerful mean of ye to deny me it was.”

“The difference between us...is that it’s enough for me to know she’s there... while I am...here.” I told him and rolled my hips beneath him.

He pulled back from my neck and flashed a grin at me. “Here seems a fine place for ye.” He agreed and he slowly lowered his lips to mine. My eyes closed at the first touch and I held him tightly while his body made sweet tender love to mine.

“Where is everyone?” I asked much later while I lay sated in his arms. My breathing was just returning to normal and my cheek was pressed against his heart.

He sighed and reached for a pillow and propped it behind his head. “Yer Da has the Drakes ye brought back with ye. It seems he’s taken them under his wing I’m thinking. The others should return soon as they went to work out their frustrations by whacking upon each other with their wee little sticks and pointy things.” He told me. “Tis surprised I am they nae returned yet.”

“You sound amused.”

“Hmmm.” He replied. “Only in that ye were making so very much noise ye ken.” And he chuckled and gave me a squeeze while I felt my cheeks flush.

“Well it has been more than a week!” I told him wryly and felt him tense beneath my cheek. I raised my head slowly and glanced at him noticing that the humor seemed to have fled and his face had slipped to neutral.

He mumbled something under his breath and reached up to rub a hand over his face. “Tis a fool I am.” He growled softly, and I stared at him curiously while his eyes

looked pained. “Damn their black souls...tis clear they went and will be leaving me to tell ye then. And me the idiot thinking me luck had changed.”

“Ah...Dane? What is it you don’t want to tell me?” I asked and propped my chin upon my hands on his chest.

“Tis nae pleasant.” He warned, his black eyes holding mine then dropping. “An I nae pleased but it had to be done it did.”

“Hmmm...no one is dead. Unless you had sex with someone else while I was gone....?” And my eyes narrowed while he gave me an appalled look.

“Nae! We did not.” He told me quickly. “Just ye.” He added and grimaced.

“Me?” I asked and frowned when he nodded. My stomach turned slightly and I stared up at him in dawning horror. “You had sex with me...while I was in a coma?” I whispered. I couldn’t force myself to say it any louder.

“We did nae want to to be sure!” He told me abruptly then paled when I looked at him. “I mean of course we wanted to but nae like that!” He seemed flustered and very upset and I took pity on him and took a deep breath.

“Did I convulse?” I asked and he nodded.

“At first it was whenever one of us wasn’t...in ye. Then ye seemed to slow down around the fifth day and we...damn me eyes, it was nearly as distressing when ye weren’t as it were when ye did ye ken?” He told me harshly. “I have nae seen anything like it.” He told me and swallowed heavily. “Tis terrifying ye are for such a wee little thing. And ye nearly wore us all to naught but nubs!” He muttered. “All the while with ye just lying there nae moving.” Then he swallowed again and shuddered.

I sighed and closed my eyes. I couldn’t even imagine how horrible that must have been for them. No wonder the rest of them had fled. I took a deep breath and shook myself. “I suppose that might explain my mood swings while I was in the cell. I’m not usually that...blood thirsty.” I told him and grimaced myself. “Well...maybe I am. But I’m sure the problems back here didn’t help any. I should probably apologize to Talon for backhanding him or for dragging him across the floor by his hair.” I muttered and he hesitated as if unsure how to respond.

He told me as he took deep breaths to calm himself.

“What comment?” I asked, lifting my head and glancing up to see that the distress was slowly leaving his face.

“When ye thought at him that the Silver was more attractive. Tis his pride ye wounded. The rest was...” And he waived his hand in a dismissive gesture.

“How do you know that?” I asked, my mind drawing a blank on when I would have told him that. “Talon and Roa’ weren’t here that night were they?” I asked, referring to two nights ago when I’d fed the rest of them the events from the middle of the bathtub.

“Nae yer Da’ found other accommodations for them he did.” He replied and frowned down at me.

“I can’t believe he would have admitted that to you.” I said and he shook his head. “Was it the look on his face?” And again he shook his head.

“Ye told us.” He replied.

“I did...when?” I demanded, trying to remember having done so.

Dane shook his head and stared back at me in confusion. “When ye shared yer story Lassie.”

I pushed myself up into a seated position and stared down at him in shock. “You...felt his emotions when I showed you what had happened to me while I was gone?” I asked him softly and my mind nearly stuttered when he frowned.

“Tis more than that. Like seeing it through yer eyes but his and the other’s too. Like ye were reading a book where all characters were speaking in the first person. Tis a bit confusing.”

I bit my lip and stared down at the bed. Well this was new. I thought with a grimace. Apparently I’d given my story in stereo. How odd was that?

“Nae not odd...enlightening.” He informed me with a small smile.

“Hmmm how so?”

“Nae Lassie...I’ll nae be saying more. Tis time for ye to be eating.” And he pushed himself up from the bed and hopped to the floor. I watched him walk to Roral

and Lira who were both in the room. Hmm I thought, and frowned while they flicked their eyes at me then back at Dane. Roral nodded and left. I assumed to find more food for me.

“Lira?” I called and he turned to look at me after Dane disappeared into the restroom, probably to get the water started.

“Your Majesty?” He asked, his eyes flowing over me slowly. “How may I...service you?” He asked and I had to force myself not to react.

“Is this room still warded?”

He glanced around and tilted his head to the side thoughtfully. “Yes.” He finally replied.

“Can you....remove it?” I asked and pressed my lips together when his eyes widened slightly.

“I can.”

“Would you?” I asked then breathed a sigh when he nodded. There was just something about knowing it was still there that bothered me. It was irrational, but the thought of being separated from my body again...would likely give me nightmares for some time to come. “Thank you.” I told him and he flashed a smile.

“It will take but a moment once Roral returns. I would prefer not to be...distracted until he is present.”

I glanced at the bathroom door and back at Lira. “Lira the other night...did you also sense Talon and Roa’s thoughts or feelings or...” And I waved my arm unable to describe it accurately.

“Yes.” He replied and also glanced toward the bathroom.

“What did you see or feel?”

He took a breath and frowned then crossed his arms over his chest and a sly look covered his face. “I do not think it is my place to tell you.” He informed me in a stubborn voice.

“Why not?” I asked him softly, not wanting to raise my voice.

He dropped his arms and lifted an eyebrow to me but refused to say why.

“And if I commanded you?” I asked, lifting an eyebrow and lowering myself onto my side. I propped my head on my hand and stared back at him, my body facing him amidst the rumpled bedding.

His eyes narrowed and desire filled his face. “Then I will most certainly do... whatever you ask of me.” Then he reached for the door handle and glanced at me. “But you will be angry with me...because you do not like it when our numbers increase.” He told me, and then pulled the door open in time for Roral to walk in carrying my tray of food.

Chapter 6

“Stop harassing the help Lassie.” Dane chided me from the other side of the bed. I hadn’t seen him slip out of the bathroom and wondered how long he’d been standing there. Roral glanced between the two of us as he carried my tray to the bed and set it near me. My stomach made a loud noise and Roral looked at me and grinned.

“Do you require assistance Your Majesty?” He asked in a calm even voice which was completely at odds with the desire burning in his beautiful pale green eyes. It didn’t get by me that he was turned so neither Dane nor Lira could see the look on his face.

“Did you miss me?” I asked and he grinned and nodded. “No one to boss you around while I was...away?” And this time his smile showed his teeth.

“Your Majesty it was...most tedious without you.” He replied in his deep voice. “You are most difficult to guard when you are neither here nor there. I much prefer you here, your charm and wit were sorely missed.” He assured me. “I wish to inform you...that the Sidhe has suffered a loss.” And I glanced at him sharply and raised an eyebrow while I pushed myself up so I could eat. His head did not move, but his eyes

lowered and caressed my breasts which tightened under his scrutiny and he shifted slightly but continued in his even voice. “It appears the Lady Telrun has gone missing.”

“Hmmm.” I commented and slipped a bite of fruit into my mouth. I chewed for a moment then swallowed. “How tragic.” I finally replied and he gave me a smile that made the hair stand up on the back of my neck and caused goose flesh to break out across my arms and legs.

“Her lover and...assistant, was found dead this morning...his neck severed.” He added and I stared at him in shock. It had not occurred to me that she had had help. That could have been a critical mistake on my part.

“Thank you for...sharing the Sidhe news with me.” I replied and he lifted one corner of his mouth and dipped his head.

“It was a pleasure.” He assured me and gave me a look that caused the tips of my ears to turn pink then went to a knee and crossed back to the door. I glanced at Lira who was caressing the hilt of his sword and smiling much as Roral had just done. His actions left me with no doubt of whom I had to thank for covering my back. You had to appreciate guards who took initiative.

Dane climbed onto the bed and moved to me, his body brushing against mine while he picked off my tray and alternated between feeding me the majority of the food and took small bites for himself. While I ate, Lira spoke softly with Roral then removed a small leather pouch from his belt. He then went around the room to each of the corners and gathered up what looked like tied up pieces of my tangerine dress. Everything he retrieved he placed into his leather pouch. When he'd been to each corner he moved to the middle of the room and emptied the contents onto the marble floor.

I watched Lira closely as I had never seen anyone perform a spell, and noted that within the contents on the floor, was several curls of what looked like my hair. Also, there were different herbs, salt or sugar, and a few other items I did not recognize. Lira's eyes lifted to mine and there was an angry light burning in their depths. He settled himself on his knees and placed his hands palm up on his thighs. After which he took deep breaths and slowly closed his eyes. When he opened them again, almost

immediately, they had shifted to a milky white color and I bit my lip and glanced at Roral who looked unconcerned.

Lira chanted something so softly I could not catch the words but the cadence seemed to repeat itself. After about a minute he raised one of his hands and the items on the floor flared up and burned themselves to nothing. My eyes move to the fire briefly and by the time I glanced back at Lira his eyes had cleared and he was smiling grimly. “Your Majesty it is done.” He replied reaching for the leather pouch and tying it back onto his belt. “I was not here when the spell was cast.” He informed me. “Or I would have questioned the need for feverfew.”

“Why, what does feverfew do?”

“Alone it affects the blood flow to the brain.” He informed me tightly. “But when placed together with chasteberry.” And he shook his head angrily. “I am sorry Your Majesty. I should have checked the contents. We are fortunate that it does not last long.”

“And what does chasteberry do?” I asked putting down my fork and watching him closely.

“It is used to increase blood flow in women...to treat....cramping.” And he glanced at the floor and his hands clenched tightly.

“It is used when a woman with child wishes to...relieve herself of the burden of that child before birth.” Roral supplied. It is a foul herb and the Queen has forbidden its use in spells.

I nodded but was not surprised. She wanted to ensure I could not return. It seemed she also wanted to kill any child I might carry. How fortunate for me I was not yet fertile.

Lira glanced up at me his two tone eyes nearly glowing. “No Your Majesty... you misunderstand.” He told me in a low angry voice. “Had you ingested the herb you would have hemorrhaged and lost a child you might have held within your womb. But used in the spell this way, it does the exact....opposite of its name. It is what was used upon the King.” He informed me.

Behind me Dane made a low distressed noise and I turned to glance at him. His face looked pale and his eyes were... haunted.

“So...her intent was two fold. Kill me, and torture any who would aid me.” I whispered adding. “I cannot say I will miss her all that much.” And my voice was devoid of emotion. There was little I could do now, as the damage had already been done already. For how could my men look at me now, and not remember being forced to repeatedly have sex with my cold lifeless body?

Dane cried out sharply and moved abruptly upon the bed. His actions flipped the tray onto the floor. “Nae!” He yelled and yanked me against his chest while my emotions swirled and I felt as if there was a hole where my heart should be. His hands roamed my back under my hair as he tried to sooth me. Though truthfully it wasn't clear which of us was more distressed. I found my face buried against his neck and closed my eyes, inhaling the scent of him into me as if I could not get enough.

“If I'd know you'd handle this so badly.” Gareth informed Dane. “I wouldn't have left you alone with her.”

Dane grumbled and held me tightly. “Tis easy to be criticizing as ye were nae the one having to deliver such news were ye?” He finally remarked and I held my face against him, too afraid of what I might see in Gareth's eyes to look. So I clung to Dane and hid instead. The bed dipped...several times and I clutched at Dane tighter and made a distressed noise.

“Lexi you are insulting us.” Jace informed me in a calm voice and I shook my head but did not release my hold on Dane.

“Honestly it was almost a refreshing change. She's so demanding at times.” Owen replied in a sarcastic voice. “Although I did miss the way she purrs just so right before she reaches her peak.”

“It is the way she wraps her foot about the inside of your knee and uses it for leverage, which I missed. Although I also enjoy the noises she makes.” Amras offered and I pulled air in through my teeth.

“I missed her little red door.” Kit offered. “And of course, the look in her eyes...when she feels me grow inside her.”

“Her fingers in my hair.” Cursed added and there was a general murmur of consent and I sensed the group of them nodding their agreement.

“I didn’t realize how accustomed I had become to sharing her pleasure, nor did I understand how much I would miss it once it ceased.” Gareth added and I shivered. “At first it was...distracting. Never knowing when it might bring a man to his knees gasping for air. But this past week I discovered just how much I missed the touch of her mind to mine. I do not wish to lose that ever again.”

“Don’t pull back from us Lexi. Not now, not after everything. We could not bear it.” Jace coaxed in a gentle voice. “This past week has been terrible. It is not something any of us would wish to repeat. But it was necessary to keep you safe, and we would each of us do this and more, if it meant keeping you from harm. Please do not make this more difficult than it has to be. We would all like to put these memories behind us, and I for one, would very much like to forget this week ever happened. Besides...I miss Goldy.” He informed me and there was a catch in his voice that caused my heart to squeeze painfully. Dane gave me a tight hug then placed his hands upon my waist and gently eased me back from him.

“There now.” He whispered as he untangled me from him. “I’d much rather be making love to ye, or yelling at ye for dragging back funny colored Dragons.” He teased when I glanced up at him through my hair.

“He’s your brother.” I muttered and he closed his eyes and shook his head.

“So it would seem.” He replied with a long suffering sigh. “Tis me right to fight with me own little brother then. I’ll not be thanking ye for jumping on him in the midst of any future arguments ye ken?”

“He may have been born after you. But if he’s been living in the Everlasting for very long...he could be several hundred years older than you. I think.”

He frowned down at me and rolled his eyes. “Tis mean of ye to mention it and nae fun to always be the youngest man in the room.” And then he grumbled softly and I

couldn't help the small smile that lifted the corners of my mouth at his teasing. His eyes lit up at the sight and I did some sighing of my own.

"I was wrong." I admitted, and was careful to keep my eyes focused on him. "It really isn't enough to know she's there while I'm here. I'd much rather have beaten her to a bloody pulp before I had Kit send her away!" Chuckles and low rumbles met my statement and I finally pulled my eyes from Dane and glanced around at the others. "I'd like to go home now." I told them as my eyes moved from face to face, seeing the relief and love reflected in their eyes.

"Bath first...then we talk." Gareth advised me and plucked me out of Dane's arms then carried me toward the bathroom. I noticed Cam standing near the door with Roral and Lira and his face seemed almost sad. Jace jumped off the bed and started whistling as he pulled his black t-shirt over his head and flipped it over his shoulder. His dark green eyes met mine and his look caused me to murmur in anticipation. Gareth chuckled and kissed my brow while the others watched me with their eyes and...got comfortable on the bed. Their smiles followed me through the doorway.

Gareth sat me on the edge of the tub and I squeaked at the feel of the cool marble beneath me while he grinned and reached for the button on his pants. "Help me." He urged and my hands lifted to the first button on his shirt and quickly worked it free. His eyes narrowed while I moved to the second and then the third as he shoved his pants down over his hips and kicked off his shoes while Jace climbed into the water and wrapped his arms around me from behind.

When the last button came free I helped him ease the pale blue shirt over his shoulders then sank my fingers into the dark blonde curls covering his chest. "Drop your shield Lexi." Jace murmured next to my ear and I complied, immediately sensing their eager minds brush against and over mine. "Whatever you do sweetheart...do not hold back." He breathed and lifted me into the water and onto his lap while Gareth climbed in behind us.

Gareth went to his knees and ran his hands up my body while beneath me I could feel Jace's length pressed against my bottom. Jace slid down farther into the tub,

spreading our legs so Gareth could move between them. My body tingled where his fingers touched and with our shields down I could feel the mutual pleasure both he and Jace were feeding me. His body moved against mine, the hair on his chest brushing my stomach then my chest as he braced his arm on the edge of the tub over Jace and my shoulders.

My hands rose up Gareth's arms and over the muscles, caressing and kneading while he rubbed his lower body against me. His erection was hard and hot and caused me to tighten in anticipation. Jace's hands slid between us his fingers slipping in to my curls and lower as he spread my lips so Gareth could rub himself over my sensitive nub. Beneath me Jace lifted his hips, shifting himself until he was no longer pressed into my back and his fingers guided his hard length into me while Gareth lowered his lips to mine and swallowed my moan. Jace moved his hands to my hips and used his fingers to press me down onto him so that he was buried as deep as he could go.

My arms wrapped around Gareth as his tongue slid into my mouth. "Relax." Jace whispered against my ear as Gareth moved himself to my opening and rubbed against me, his head seeking to enter along with Jace. I pulled air into my lungs and moaned as he reached between us and guided his head inside, stretching me to accommodate the both of them. And then he was in me and I moaned and dropped my head as my eyes closed and I nearly choked on the feel of the two of them buried within me.

Gareth's mind caressed mine teasing me with sensations while Jace lifted his hips and worked me up and down his length. They moved together and then separately and I cried out and felt myself spiraling out of control as pleasure spread outward from my center and my body climaxed. My back arched forcing them deeper into me and I dug my fingers into Gareth and came again, my body clenching around them tightly. Gareth hummed and the tempo of his breathing increased while Jace pulled air in through his teeth and held me tighter.

Gareth shifted closer and reached to lift my leg over his and I held my breath as the angle allowed him more penetration. "Lexi..." Gareth called to me and I cracked my

eyes open and glanced up at him. The skin over his cheeks was tight and his eyes whirled above me. “Your door.” He whispered and I blinked.

“Open it.” I told him, offering him the way to the door in my mind and standing back as he reached for it. Our eyes met as he grasped the handle and shoved it inward. Lust blew out at gale force rushing over me and coating all of us in a heavy layer. Jace cried out beneath me, his hands clutching painfully at my hips as he shoved me down onto him. His body jerked and rode mine urgently while above me Gareth reared back shoving his hips forward. I screamed and came while waves of red tinged lust rolled off us and skittered around the room.

In my mind I felt the tide sweep outwards rolling over others who cried out. Some seemed to be consumed by the force, while other minds expanded to absorb the pleasure like breath into their bodies. Gareth growled low and moved his hips against me, his breathing ragged, eyes whirling. He shoved himself into me repeatedly then his face went taunt and his climax rushed over me, sweeping me along so that I came again and Jace cried out and I felt his release deep within me also. Caught in a loop the three of us held on while our minds and bodies shuddered as the passion skipped amongst us feeding upon itself.

Hands held Jace’s head and shoulders out of the water beneath me. I dragged my eyes open and rolled my head on his shoulder. Kit leaned over the edge of the tub keeping the three of us from sliding under and drowning ourselves. “It’s so good to have you back Mistress.” He told me and I couldn’t help noticing the blush on his cheeks nor the excitement in his red eyes.

“Am I alive?” I asked breathlessly and he chuckled while Gareth who was slumped across my body pulled air into his lungs.

“Oh yes Mistress...and so are we.” Kit replied then leaned forward and kissed my cheek. “That was wonderful. I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks Kit.” I muttered then moaned softly when Gareth heaved himself off me and flopped onto the seat at our side. Kit pulled Jace back onto the seat and as he was

still inside me, I came along too. Jace wrapped his arm around me and muttered something too low to understand. Something about...perfection.

“Not in the water...next time.” Gareth muttered as he lay with his head against the rim with his eyes closed.

My limbs felt like wet noodles and if Jace hadn't been holding me up I surely would have slid under the water and drowned. “What was that?” I finally asked when my breathing was somewhat back to normal. I turned my head and glanced at Gareth who smiled then chuckled.

“We were...intrigued.” Jace admitted in a husky voice next to my ear. “It was a mutual decision after your time...at the pond. We just awaited the right opportunity.”

Oh...my time at the pond...hmmm. “Did we kill anyone?” I asked Kit with a wry grin. “I seem to recall the feel of minds...blinking out.”

Kit chuckled and released his hold on Jace who planted his feet more firmly and seemed to stiffen his spine. “I think the Sidhe knows you are awake. Or they will when they regain consciousness.” He informed me, and couldn't have sounded happier.

“Could you heat the water back up for us?” I asked Kit and snuggled against Jace's chest. I'm a little chilly.” Kit moved to the other side of the tub and turned the facet on and we sat there in peaceful silence while the tub heated up again.

“Are you okay?” Jace asked and I realized I was a little tender. He lifted me off of him while I made small unhappy noises and he chuckled and placed me between them.

“I'd just like to point out that Kit made himself...smaller for me.” I grumbled and all three of them laughed while I felt my cheeks turn pink.

They were still chuckling when the corner nearest the vanity went black and split open. Gareth and Jace both jerked upright and we all watched in shock as Tdem stepped out of the rift in the midst of the shadow with his three men at his back. “What the hell are you doing here?” Jace growled while I stared at Tdem who looked...as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

“You are alive.” He breathed, his black eyes searching my face as if he was afraid to believe I was real. His hands moved to his shirt and he ripped it apart sending

buttons flying every which direction. Gareth growled while Kit moved to stand between us and I stopped him with a sharp cry. The Dragon on Tdem's body was a pale outline which began glowing and pulsing as we watched. His feet moved him toward us slowly and the Dragon began writhing just under his skin and his eyes moved between me and his chest. Another few feet and scales began appearing their color shifting from iridescent to a rich golden color...my color. By the time he was within five feet of me the image was clearly defined once again. It seemed to expand, almost as if it was taking a deep breath, then it settled more firmly upon him. He shrugged the shirt from his shoulders, kicked off his shoes and reached for the button on his pants.

Gareth glared at him and moved his gaze to me. My eyes held his for a moment and I did not know what to do. Technically he was mine and had declared...and I could not refuse him...but part of me might have wished to. A commotion at the door drew our attention and Dane strode into the room followed closely by Cursed who glanced at Tdem and went to a knee. "My King, what do you here?" He asked in a voice that seemed to border on disrespect.

Tdem stepped into the tub and turned to look at him, while his guards eyed Dane who moved directly to the tub and crawled in from the other side. "Nephew." Tdem growled and his body seemed to vibrate with his anger. "I believe you neglected to mention Her Majesty lives."

Cursed jerked as if struck and his hands clenched at his sides. He seemed to be in pain and my eyes moved between them in concern. "Tdem stop." I begged him softly and moved from between Gareth and Jace so that his attention swung to me as I raised myself off the seat and stood before him. He turned fully to me and from the corner of my eye I watched Cursed stagger and nearly go all the way down. Tdem's black eyes moved over me and he hummed low in his throat. His body was excited and I swallowed and watched him cautiously.

"I thought you dead." He whispered and his eyes rose to mine. "I watched you die." His words caused me to close my eyes briefly as I relived the moment I'd been smothered under red eyes and blackness with sharp teeth.

“It was a spell Tdem. You were used.” I told him softly and he seemed to expand and his skin to darken with rage.

“Who?” He demanded while I tilted my head and merely looked at him until he got himself back under control. He went to a knee before me and bent his head. “Your Majesty, he murmured while my eyes widened to the size of saucers. “Forgive me, you are well?” He breathed and turned his face up to me. He’d moved closer so that he knelt within arms distance from me and I shook my head and cupped his cheek in my palm.

“Now.” I said and fed him the events of the past week, taking care to show him my image in the mirror, and the past day and a half up to the point when I’d entered the bath with Gareth and Jace. Over his shoulder I motioned for Cursed to rise and he glanced between his uncle and myself and finally stood. Tdem’s hand came up to cup mine. He lifted his eyes and I was shocked to see the tears that shimmered there.

“I am truly sorry.” He breathed. “I would not have hurt you.” Then he wrapped his arm about my thighs and laid his head upon me. I glanced down at him unsure what to do with him. My hands somehow made their way to his shoulders which shook with the force of his guilt and sorrow.

I was standing there holding Tdem when Lira walked into the room and stopped dead in his tracks. His eyes widened and he glanced about the room taking in Tdem’s three guards then slipped to a knee. “Your Majesty, your father is here with the... others.” He informed me and then stood and moved to the side, crossing his arms as if to say he wasn’t leaving. If Tdem’s guards could be there, then so could he.

“Could you tell them to come back later?” I asked and he frowned.

“Your Majesty, I could but he informed me he was coming in whether you wanted him to or not.” Lira advised me and he had barely finished speaking when Dad marched in with Talon and Roa’ in tow. Nearly everyone in the room growled or hissed. I sank to my knees in Tdem’s arms, while he tried to decide what was more important, the new comers, or me pressed intimately against his body. The three guards jerked to attention and moved closer to the tub.

“Dad! Now is really not a good time.” I nearly yelled at him. “And what do you think you’re doing dragging those two in here?”

Dad smiled serenely though his eyes widened at the sight of Tdem in the tub with us. “We felt your...ah. You are most shocking daughter.” He chided me and I moaned and dropped my face against Tdem who appeared more than willing to cuddle me against him. “That doesn’t matter now. I’m here for formal introductions.” And he stepped back so Talon and Roa’ could move up next to him. He turned to Talon and informed us all. “Talon ‘a Nyx may I present my daughter Princess Lexi Helyanwe of the Seelie and Queen of the Dragons upon this world.” Then he looked toward Roa’ and introduced him as. “Roa’ N Bel”

Chapter 7

“Great thanks Dad, we’ve already met. Can you go now?” He just frowned and shook his head, glancing back at the two men who were eyeing me with interest. I noticed they were both dressed as they’d been in the Everlasting, and Tdem shifted against me and made a low noise. Talon stepped forward and I paled and held up a hand. “No wait!” I yelled while Talon merely grinned and leaned forward at the waist already reaching for his belt.

“I declare.” He told me boldly and dropped his blade to the floor while I watched in shock. His shoulder armor went next, and then he bent over and unstrapped his shin guards. When he was done, his weapons began dropping to the floor, one after the other. So many came off his person, that even Lira looked impressed. His boots went next, leaving him with just the red material belted about his hips and I swallowed and watched as he stood and crossed his arms over his chest. He moved away from the weapons to stand just a little closer to the tub. “Come here little one.” He demanded and crooked his finger at me while I stared back at him in horror and shook my head. “Do not make me come in there to get you.” He warned me while I glared back at him. He was being a

jerk and I had no intention of obeying him like some kind of servant. He turned to look at my father who frowned at me and also crossed his arms over his chest.

“I believe you’ve been asked to do something daughter.” He replied firmly and I swallowed and stared back at him in surprise.

“Dad...I don’t much care what he told me to do.” I informed him and held tightly to Tdem.

My Dad’s face flushed and his eyes narrowed and I nearly flinched from the anger aimed at me. “He has invoked the right of first refusal Lexi, get out of the water and get over here now.” He growled while Gareth and Jace sucked in air and jerked violently.

“Go Lexi now.” Gareth breathed and I turned to look at him and realized he was extremely distressed. “Now.” He told me and reached to help me stand while Tdem moved back.

I glanced around me and even Kit looked worried, which I figured was not a good thing. I reached for a towel only to be told. “You will not require that.” The towel was yanked from my fingers by Jace who looked even paler than Gareth. His eyes were whirling in agitation and I stared at him in confusion as I slipped over the edge of the tub and glanced at Talon.

“She looks much improved yet is still skinny for my taste.” Talon remarked as he watched me take a step in his direction. “Turn around.” He told me and I frowned and stared back at him. “Turn around so I might see all of you.” He commanded and I glared at him and watched as his eyes narrowed as he spoke to me the words I’d used on him. “Do not make me repeat myself.” He told me and I closed my eyes and took a deep breath then turned slowly. “Her hair is a disaster.” He remarked casually and reached to rub his chin with one hand as his eyes assessed me like one might a brood mare. “Long legs, nice breasts...her skin is...acceptable. No visible scars. What is that about her wrist?” He demanded then turned to my father who glanced at Kit then back to me.

“It is the mark of her contract with her familiar. The Demon Kit who stands there.” He informed Talon tightly his hand pointing toward Kit who stood with his hands at his sides trying to look more innocent than I’d ever seen him.”

“Hmmm.” Talon mumbled. “What manner of Demon?” He asked stroking his chin and glancing at Kit.

“Lust.” My father mumbled softly.

“Ah...that would explain the disruption earlier.” He remarked and my father pressed his lips together and said nothing. Interesting I thought and continued to stand mere feet from where I’d left the tub. “Does she have a problem with her hearing?” Talon asked casually and ran his finger over his lips.

“No. I fear she was...coddled as a child and has developed a stubborn streak.” My Dad replied while my mouth dropped open in shock.

“Coddled?” Talon repeated in disbelief. “Was she not raised by you in preparation?”

Dad looked a little green around the edges but replied. “No her mother.”

“You allowed a potential Queen to be raised by a woman?” He demanded and he sounded outraged.

“There was little choice in the matter as I was not aware of her until too late.”

“I see.” Talon replied, clearly not pleased. “This would explain her lack of grace and proper knowledge. However it is nothing that can’t be...tamed I’m sure.” He added while I felt myself tense and behind me distressed noises were quickly squelched. “You are trying my patience little one.” He advised me and several minds screamed at me to move. I jumped and took a few steps in his direction. He pointed to the floor in front of him. “Here.” And I swallowed and moved to the spot he indicated, then stood there watching his eyes, too overwhelmed by the terror of nearly everyone around me to do otherwise. “Open your mouth.” He told me and I let my lips part. “Wider.” Was his instruction and I opened wide while he leaned forward and actually looked around at my teeth. When he leaned back I closed my mouth and felt my face flame under his gaze. He smiled and reached out and ran a finger over my collar bone and my heart fluttered and nearly stopped. “How old is she?” He asked not bothering to look at my father.

“She has just recently turned a score and five.” He replied.

“She is breeding?”

“In the initial stages, yes.”

“You are certain she will breed true?” He demanded and my eyes flicked to my father who seemed to tense but nodded while inside me Goldy raised her head and stared up at him. She seemed hesitant...as if she wasn't sure what to make of Talon and was perhaps a little intimidated. Talon's eyes narrowed on me and he pulled air through his teeth. “Hmmm.” He muttered and his eyes felt as if they might pierce my very skin. “Who are you?” He asked softly, his voice coaxing.

Goldy blinked and leaned away from him as he seemed to expand and hover over me. “Goldy.” I finally whispered and he blinked and gave himself a small shake. He lifted his hand and slid his fingers around my neck exerting just enough pressure to let me know he was there.

“I did not like being choked.” He leaned in to inform me. And then his hand slid into my hair and his finger splayed so that he grasped a handful. “Nor having my hair pulled by a belligerent youth. But I especially did not enjoy being made a fool of the other day.” And he tightened his fingers until my eyes watered. He watched me, increasing the pressure even when I refused to cry out. And then he released me and slid his hand down my body, brushing my breast and humming softly when my nipple hardened in response. “I will try her and we shall see.” He informed the room. Behind me several people let out mental sighs as if they'd been holding their collective breath.

Gee now would have been a good time to have used some of that Dragon lore I kept meaning to have Kit share with me. If I lived through this I was going to have to get serious about those lessons.

“Okay so...does someone want to tell me what is going on?” I asked glancing around and realizing that the rest of my men had edged into the room behind Roa' who was standing with his arms crossed over his chest. He had an unhappy look on his face and I wondered if I'd need to decrease Talon's size to make him laugh again.

“No Mistress!” Kit yelped and I turned to look at him in surprise while he shook his head vigorously. “Please no.” He whispered.

I sighed and glanced up at Talon and raised an eyebrow. He did not look amused and I shrugged. “We will do this the traditional way and should I not be pleased the rights will be revoked.” And beside me my father looked like he might faint.

“So what exactly is this right of first refusal?” I asked. “Apparently I’m at a disadvantage here. I’d hate to... unintentionally cause a revocation.” Unfortunately no one seemed to want to answer me. Maybe they thought it was best I didn’t know. “So we are talking about sex, right?” I asked sighing heavily when he nodded. “And I guess you want it now? Geeze,” I muttered to myself. “Of course you do, you’re male aren’t you?” I added under my breath. “So here on the floor, or maybe the tub? Can you hold off till we get to the bed? Or do you just want to hold your skirt aside and push me up against the wall?” I asked, my voice turning nasty.

“Would you like me to do my hair first?” Then flipped my head over and shook my still damp curls in every direction then flipped it back making sure I slapped him in the face with the wet ends as I stood. It settled about my body covering my breasts and half my face. “It is, after all a disaster.”

He smiled and it wasn’t pleasant. Then his hand moved and he back handed me across the cheek, just as I had done to him outside the cell, though he did not hit me nearly as hard as I had struck him. Around me a roar went up and pandemonium broke out. I staggered one step then lifted my face and held up my hand. “Stop.” I breathed and the room quieted though in my head a war raged. “I will allow that we are now even.” I told him softly, my eyes having shifted to Dragon. “But if you raise your hand to me again...I will kill you.” And my voice was colder than an arctic winter.

He stared down at me and replied calmly. “I would expect no less.”

His response confused me and I blinked my eyes back to normal then stood there balanced on the balls of my feet simply watching him. Roa’ held his sword in his hand and my eyes flicked to him briefly then over to my men.

“Choose one.” Talon informed me and I glanced back at him raising an eyebrow.

“Choose one what?”

He sighed and shot my father a disgusted look and he was quick to answer. “Lexi you must choose one man to go with you and act as...witness.”

“Witness for what Dad?” I replied.

“The union.”

“For what purpose? If I might be so forward to ask.”

“To ensure no advantage is taken.” He replied and I frowned.

“Advantage? As in he does not beat or rape me.... advantage?” And he nodded. “Dad...this isn’t the first time we’ve had sex.” I told him. “Is this necessary?” My dad hesitated a moment then nodded. “And what will this witness be doing while we’re ah...having traditional sex? That is what you said right?” I asked and glanced up at Talon.

“Observing only.”

“Okay, is there anything else I should know? Like does he get to shift to black blob and red eyes while I have to lay there and take it?” I asked and Talon growled softly. I turned back to him and told him calmly. “It is a valid question. I think I deserve an answer.”

“There will be no shifting once you...engage.” Dad informed me.

“Okay fine...since this isn’t a love match I guess I chose you Dad.” Then watched as he turned a greenish tint.

“Lexi...that isn’t a good idea.”

“And why not?”

“Because...because if he is unable to finish...I will have to.” He told me and I swear sweat broke out on his forehead while I think I turned a little green myself.

“Okay no problem. I choose Kit.”

Talon growled again and his face became haughty. “You must select a Dragon.” He informed me.

Sheesh I thought and glanced at Kit then frowned. “Kit?” I asked and he stepped to the middle of the floor and shifted to a 20’ long black and silver dragon. Thank

goodness the room was big enough to accommodate us all I thought. “Will that do?” I asked and smiled at Kit who shifted back and stood watching us.

Talon frowned but finally nodded then he turned to Roa’ who stepped forward. “I chose Roa’.”

“For what reason would you need to choose Roa’?” I asked in confusion.

Talon unfolded his arms and glared down at me. “To ensure you do not take advantage of me.” He replied in a threatening tone.

“Define...advantage.” I demanded and he lifted an eyebrow at me and tilted his head to the side.

“None of your sorcery.” He informed me. “I will not have my person abused as you have done previously.”

I lifted both eyebrows and glanced between the two of them. “And you think he can stop me?”

“If he kills you.” Talon informed me coldly while I sucked air into my lungs.

“You would doom an entire race for your vanity?” I breathed.

“No...you would.” He replied and I rocked back on my heels. “I merely seek to mate.”

“You know Talon this isn’t necessary. I never said I wouldn’t have sex with you. You’ve declared. That makes you mine.” I told him.

“Later.” He informed me. “First we...mate.”

Kit dressed me in a black leather which he assured me would be appropriate though in looking down at the black straps that crisscrossed my body and the halter top in leather that matched the black mini skirt I wasn’t at all convinced. At least he’d given me thigh high boots with low heels and a place to put my dagger and my skirt wasn’t skin tight. I also got black lace panties, though there wasn’t much there and I nearly didn’t bother. Owen handed me my blade with a scabbard and belt. He also provided me with arm bands and braided my hair for me while he stood silently behind me. The rest of my

men watched in various stages of unease from across the room, and I had the strange sensation they were staying away so they wouldn't say something to spook me.

Talon stood chatting with Dad and Roa' his back to me. But Roa' watched me closely, his silver eyes taking in every motion as if he was committing it to memory. It was kind of creepy and I frowned at him. He frowned back, crossed his arms over his chest and continued to stare. Maybe he'd never seen anyone dressed like a biker chick before and didn't know what to think about it.

"Likely he's torn between hoping Talon fails so he can have you and loyalty to his friend." Owen whispered. "And...maybe it's a little of what you said too." He added grimacing as he shook his head. "You should have let me dress you." And Kit gave him a dirty look.

"So will we be fighting?" I asked, glancing down at the blade and knife.

"It is how it will begin." Owen informed me softly. "I can not say how it will end. That will be up to you."

"Bada bing bada boom we have sex. He's happy we all move on? Why does this have to be so difficult?" I asked.

Owen turned me and lifted my chin with his finger. "Because...he wants to test you. You've wounded his pride and he is punishing you."

"Would it help if I said I was sorry?" I asked and Owen shook his head.

"No, because you cannot change who you are and whom you love." He added and I frowned up at him in confusion while he sighed. "He's very old." Owen breathed against my ear. "And he didn't like what you said about the Silver...especially because he's younger and his protégé', but he really doesn't like your attachment to Gareth or Jace. He sees them as a challenge. Add to that the fact that you choked him, dragged him about by his hair, and then sliced him open like a fish..." He replied and shook his head, his dark brown eyes worried. "You told him he was of no use to you. But worst of all...he finds you attractive. He wants you, but his ego won't let him have you without making you fight for it."

“But what if I don’t want to fight for it? Will he just go away and leave us alone? Can we not send him back to the Everlasting and be done with him?” I whispered and Owen’s eyes widened as he glanced over my shoulder and I swallowed. “He’s behind me isn’t he?” I asked and Owen nodded and stepped back.

“No little one...if you do not meet this challenge your position is forfeit and you become...my slave. You wish to be Queen...you must earn it.”

“Well okay then why didn’t you just say so? Let’s get this little show on the road shall we?” And I made a bee line for Gareth and hugged him tightly. “Be right back.” I told him and when I would have given him a brief kiss he held me fiercely and rocked my world. When he was done he handed me to Jace who squeezed me tightly.

“Fly well.” Jace whispered and nearly bent me backwards as he kissed me. When he let me up, he passed me on to Cursed who held me in his arms and purred deep in his throat.

“I like this.” He whispered running his finger under the edge of the buckle below and between my breasts. The straps wrapped from either side across my ribs and around my back then once around my waist. “I’d very much enjoy removing it from you later.” Then he too kissed me as if I was going off to war. I was nearly panting when he handed me to Amras who ran his fingers up the back of my thighs and gripped my bottom in his hands under the leather mini skirt.

“Mmmm.” He breathed against my neck causing goose flesh to erupt over half my body. “Hurry back.” And he grasped my hand and pressed it against the front of his leather pants. “I’ll be waiting.” Then his lips came down on mine and I moaned while he rubbed himself against my hand.

Tdem pulled me back against his chest holding me up, when my legs nearly collapsed under me once Amras let me loose. His fingers traced the crisscross leather over my stomach and ribs and rose to cup my breasts in his hands while his fingers dipped beneath the bra like top and brushed my nipples. I pressed back against him then murmured and grasped his thighs when his teeth came down upon my shoulder and sank into my skin. I cried out as he purred and licked away the few drops of blood he’d

caused to pool from the small punctures. Then he turned me and held on tightly while his lips plundered mine. My eyes had gone Dragon and were whirling when he passed me to Owen who had followed me across the room.

“Be yourself.” He urged then his dark brown eyes went seductive and he gathered me in against his body and stroked his hands over my bottom while he pressed himself against me and hummed. “Perhaps Kit was right.” He offered and gripped my bottom harder pulling the leather tight against me. His fingers brushed the underside of my cheeks and lifted me off the floor, pressing me against him so I might reach his lips.

Dane was next and his black eyes searched my face and a sly smile lit his eyes. “Give em hell Lassie.” He replied and sank his hands into my hair and proceeded to make love to my mouth. I was gasping for air when he let me up and my eyes were sending sparkles around the room.

Kit wrapped his arm around my waist and grinned down at me while I placed a hand upon his cheek. “For luck.” He replied and lowered his lips to mine while he snapped his fingers.

The world lurched and I found myself standing in front of the same set of double doors I’d been at last week and stiffened in his arms. “Kit?”

“The Queen would like to visit the caverns.” He informed the guards who stared at the four of us, me in particular, in shock. “Did I mention she is the Queen?” Kit replied sarcastically and both guards dropped to their knees immediately.

“Your Majesty....it is good to see you.” The one on the left replied in a strangled voice. “We had heard you were ill.”

“All better now.” I replied and motioned for them to stand. The one on the left couldn’t seem to tear his eyes off me, and I wondered if it was the outfit or the whispers of my near death.

“It is your clothing.” Talon replied and raised an eyebrow at the guard who seemed to pale and finally dropped his eyes. I frowned and raised my shields...both of them, and watched Talon frown and stare at me through narrowed eyes. Kit grinned and motioned for the guard to open the door. He had to wave his hand a couple time as the

guard was staring at me as if he couldn't believe I hadn't disappeared along with my mind.

"I did not realize...." Talon muttered his eyes moving to Roa' who smiled and raised a shoulder in response.

"It matters little. She cannot use her sorcery with it in place." And he glanced at me smugly while I bit the inside of my lip. I debated for about half a second, then reached out with my mind and slid my fingers down Roa's chest and over his left nipple pinching it gently. He sucked air into his lungs and his eyes nearly popped out of his head. Talon glanced between the two of us and frowned. "I take that back...apparently she does have the ability." Roa' corrected himself, and I licked my lips and smiled at him.

The guards glanced between us, and Kit made an annoyed sound which caused the one on the right to reach for the door. We finally got through them after the bowing and well wishing and the doors swung shut behind us. I turned to Kit and asked. "So what are the rules?"

Kit glanced at Talon and then back to me. "You may use any weapon upon your person."

"Any? What about talents?" I asked and he glanced at Talon who frowned.

"You may not use sorcery." Talon informed me and Kit snapped his fingers and was holding a huge dictionary in his hands opened to the word 'sorcery'. "Hmm it is defined as, the belief in magical spells that harness occult forces or evil spirits to produce unnatural effects in the world." He informed us. "Tell me Talon, do you believe Lexi to be an evil spirit?" And he snapped his fingers and the book disappeared. He reached out and then ran the back of his knuckles down my cheek.

Talon glanced at Kit and then at me. "No I do not believe she is an evil spirit."

"Do you think I'm an evil spirit?" Kit asked and turned his best smile on Talon who scoffed and shook his head. "Hmmm...do you think either of us could be labeled as 'occult forces'?" And again Talon shook his head and he was starting to look annoyed. "Then if I were to do this." And kit snapped his fingers and was holding a bottle of water

which he held out for me and I gratefully took and proceeded to drink almost all of it down. “Or this.” And he snapped his fingers and the bottle disappeared. “You would not call it sorcery correct?” Talon frowned then looked at Roa’ who shook his head.

“He is a Demon...that is not sorcery.” Roa’ told him. “It is who he is, not what he does.”

“Ahhh.” Kit smiled, turned to me and winked. “Now where was I? Oh yes...you may use any weapon upon your person or any talent you may possess. The object is not to die.” He informed me while I stared at him in surprise.

“He wants to kill me?”

“No he wants to mate with you.” Kit informed me.

“Then why all the sword and dagger foreplay?” I demanded.

“Because....” Kit informed me with a grimace. “He wants to MATE with you...you Dragon you.” He told me and leaned forward to give me a look that shouted...wake up!

I stared at him totally confused while inside me Goldy cringed back and hissed. Her wings flared open, her eyes began whirling frantically, and she launched us at Talon. Apparently he was waiting for exactly that reaction, since I found myself flipped over his head as he flung himself backwards. I landed on my hands and toes and hissed. And I guessed from the golden sparkles lighting up the ground, that my eyes had sifted.

Chapter 8

The traditional way eh? I thought while Talon smiled and reached for his sword. I already had mine in my hand. Not wanting to get backed up against the door, I glanced quickly around me, gripped my sword, and took off in a sprint. I headed in the same direction I'd taken last week. The trail magically appeared before me, and I ran with my braid trailing me, straight to the meadow and dodged to the side, turning and bringing my blade up as I heard Talon skid to a halt behind me.

It was clear to me that Goldy wanted nothing to do with traditional sex. Being much happier with the more modern style we were so terribly fond of. "You know Talon." I told him as he circled to my left and I rotated to follow him. "We don't need to do this. I was only teasing when I said Roa' was better looking. I actually think you're much yummiier."

He frowned and charged me, his sword striking mine and sliding off harmlessly. He followed me as I moved left and our blades met again. I slipped the force of his strike aside, using finesse to combat his overhand barbarian style.

“I don’t believe you.” He replied, palmed a knife and threw it at me. It flashed past my right cheek and I glared at him and started to become annoyed. When next he attacked I slipped his blade but instead of moving away I slammed my elbow into his solar plexus then kicked him in the back of the knee as I swept by. His hand flashed out and he severed a good three feet off my braid with another dagger. It fell to the ground and I looked at it in shock. His blade would have sliced open my arm too, except it hit the guard that Owen had provided and glanced off harmlessly.

“Oh you want to play like that do you?” I growled and had to dodge another blade that would have buried itself in my left thigh had I been a second slower. I knew exactly where he kept his sharp pointy things, and the next time he came in I slammed the heel of my right boot into the sheathed knife on the inside of his left thigh.” He growled and this time I wasn’t fast enough to dodge the blade he threw at me. It stuck me in the side. I hissed, reaching down to yank it out. I shifted my side, using my shift to instantly heal myself.

Talon looked shocked and eased up a moment so he could stare at me. “How did you do that?” He demanded and I glared at him and refused to answer. Three more blades flew my way and I dodged two of them, but the third struck me in the shoulder. I spent several minutes with it buried there, while I just managed to keep him from hacking off my head. Blood covered my front, all the way to my thigh by the time I got the blade out and was able to shift my shoulder to heal it. He growled again and I flipped the blade and sent it flying at him. It grazed his leg, leaving a nasty cut which he ignored.

“Do you yield?” I asked and he growled. “Hey did I mention I was part Demon?” I asked. “You know that stuff I did to you in the Everlasting...that wasn’t sorcery. That was me. Are you sure you don’t just want to have sex?”

“No!” He growled and charged me. My words seemed to enrage him and he took some nasty slices but in the end I lost my sword and dagger. Apparently brute force did have its advantages. I ended up running for it. When one of his damn daggers sank into the back of my thigh I went down and rolled, managing to yank out the blade and heal myself by the time I flipped all the way over and landed back on my feet. He circled me

slowly, keeping his eyes on mine. He already had a few nasty cuts of his own, and the knife he'd sunk into the back of my thigh was now clenched in my fist.

“Did you enjoy my...what did you call it? Oh yes, the disruption earlier? You do realize that was me having sex right? Actually I was having sex with Gareth and Jace...at the same time.” I told him and watched as his eyes shifted to Dragon and began whirling. “How far away were you? Down the hall...half way across the Sidhe? Imagine what that would feel like...with your body buried inside mine.” I told him and he gave his head a shake and glared at me. “Come on Talon...you remember.” I breathed at him. “In the Everlasting....you wrapped your arm around me and pulled me onto the bed then buried yourself deep. Remember? We could that again...”

Talon had been circling and I'd allowed myself to become distracted with my speech. My heel connected with the log hidden in the grass and I teetered. Another knife lodged itself in my side and one in my thigh and I grunted in pain and went down. Talon was on me in an instant, his knees holding me down while his hands grabbed mine and prevented me from pulling the blades from my body. His eyes were whirling as he leaned down and buried his teeth in my shoulder tearing the tender flesh and causing me to scream in agony.

“Shift.” He growled and inside me Goldy reared back and hissed angrily. He bit me again, this time tearing a chunk out of me above my right breast while he pressed his body against the blade buried in my side shoving it in deeper. “Shift curse you.” When he would have bitten me a third time I lost my head and shifted feeling him yank the blades from me as my skin flowed. And then he was on me, a huge gray beast nearly twice my size. I screamed and snapped at him while he lifted his body off me slowly.

Talon's Dragon form had spikes running up the front of his head in addition to those over his eyes and at the top. His chest was plated, and his wing span was wider than my body was long. Down his back were sharp bony ridges and his tail ended in a barb that was nearly as long as my head. He was the color of his skin in human form, but his scales were iridescent and glowed in the light. I hissed at him and backed slowly away while he lowered his head and swung it back and fourth. It reminded me of what

Spot had done when he'd stolen my golden shoes, only I suspected Talon's goal was not nearly as pleasant. His size pressed me backward and when I didn't move fast enough he snapped at me then went so far as to shove me with his shoulders. I snapped back, hissed and hugged the ground. He made strange warbling sounds and continued to harass me nearly flipping me over when I stopped and tried to hold my place.

"Stop!" I finally screamed at him, and his multifaceted grey eyes lowered to my level.

"Fly." He taunted me, and I tilted my head and glanced up at the sky overhead. "Fly...escape from me." He challenged and then started up with the warbling again so that I growled and hissed and backed some more. His head swung back and forth and he reached out to bite me on the leg so that I reared back and spread my wings. He pulled back immediately and watched me with eager eyes. I screamed and launched myself into the air, doing exactly what he'd wanted all along. I headed for the horizon glancing over my shoulder and realizing both Roa' and Kit had shifted and were following.

Below me Talon watched from the ground and I hesitated, looking toward Kit. If I could reach him I thought...and banked to fly in his direction. On the ground Talon roared and launched himself into the air directly into my path. I screamed and flew left feeling him coming behind and below me driving me away from Kit. I screamed again and flew higher while he took up a flight pattern below me and made lazy circles, his eyes tracking my flight. I needed to get away from him and headed straight up into the air as fast as I could go.

Talon screamed triumphantly and chased me, his huge wings eating up the distance between us as I climbed higher trying to escape him. In mid flight, his body struck mine flipping me over and sending me into a dive. His claws grabbed at me and his neck wrapped around mine. I screamed and struggled wildly which seemed to excite him as he roared and clutched me tighter. His wings spread wide, halting our tumble and he held us airborne while his tale threaded around mine. His back legs grabbed me by the base of my tale and I felt something huge and barbed stabbing against me and shuddered in horror as I realized it was his penis.

His hind legs lifted me against him as he bent over me forcing me backwards and held me with his neck, tail, and powerful legs. He slid me back and forth against him while I struggled and tried to free myself. His tale wrapped around me tighter pulling me into position and he warbled and rubbed himself against me. When he found my opening I screamed and struggled but he held me, using his legs to pull me up his length as he buried his member inside. I screamed again as his barbed ridges invade me. He bugled and wrapped his wings around us, cocooning us together as we began plummeting toward the earth.

Talon rode me hard and fast, his body pumping furiously while we spiraled downward. I ceased to struggle and looked down in shock, watching in fascinated horror as the ground drew closer quickly. “Talon!” I screamed then struggled to get free from him before he killed us both. He reared back and shuddered then spread his wings and stopped our decent mere feet from the ground.

He placed me gently upon my back in the meadow grasses, and rubbed his head and neck all over me while he pulled his body from mine and made that strange warbling sound again. Talon unclamped his legs, unwound our tails, then leaned back and seemed to purr while I stared up at him in confusion and tried to understand what it was that had just happened to me.

I shifted form and walked myself back from him upon my feet and hands. I slowly went to my knees and watched him warily as he shifted and crossed his arms upon his chest. He stood over me with his legs spread wide, an amused look in his eyes. His mouth and chin were red with my blood. I watched in shock as he ran his tongue across his lips then lifted his fingers and rubbed them over his chin, licking at them when they came away wet and sticky.

Kit and Roa’ shifted as they landed and I flicked my gaze at Kit whose face looked... blank. In fact his eyes wouldn’t even meet mine. I pushed myself to my feet and brushed the meadow grass and dirt off my leather and skin and thought how nice it would be to have a big pair of dark sunglasses...something to hide behind. I turned my head and my hair swung forward drawing my attention. I glanced down at it...realizing it

now barely came to my shoulders. From what I could see of it, the ends looked as if they had been hacked off by a drunk on a binge.

I made a distressed noise and sucked in air, feeling the blood drain from my face as a delayed reaction hit me. Spots appeared before my eyes and I swayed where I stood. Talon reached for me and I couldn't help it...I bent at the waist and puked up the bottle of water I had drunk, along with what seemed like several days worth of meals. Kit's hands held back my hair, and he made low soothing noises while my eyes watered. It took several minutes for my body to empty itself of all my stomach contents. After which, I continued to dry heave for several minutes more. When I was finally finished, Kit silently handed me a damp wash cloth, then a bottle of water. He took both of them back from me when I was done.

"I believe she has met the terms...decide." Kit told Talon in a dead voice, while I continued to remain bent over and staring at....nothing.

Talon sighed and from my peripheral vision I watched his feet shift his weight. "She is young, but shows promise. I am satisfied." Talon informed us and I reached for Kit's arm.

"Get me out of here." I begged and he snapped his fingers and I staggered and went to my knees in the middle of my room. The tremors started as he dropped beside me and wrapped his arms around my body holding me tightly. "Oh God, oh god, oh god, oh god." I mumbled and rocked forward and back. A high keening noise escaped me and I reached to cover my mouth and squeezed my eyes closed. Anxious voices swirled around and over me but my mind could not absorb them. I hyperventilated and mercifully watched my vision go black.

I know ye are awake Lassie. Open yer eyes and talk to us. Dane's voice whispered across mine. I moaned and reached to pull a pillow over my head.

Go away. I whispered back silently.

Nae I will not. And I felt the pillow pulled from my hands and fingers brushed back the now short strands of hair from over my face.

“Lexi?” Gareth whispered and I moaned again and threw my arm across my face. “Lower your shields.” I shook my head and felt his fingers stroke my scalp. “He will be here soon and you do not want him to find you this way.” He informed me urgently and his voice was filled with concern.

“Maybe the guards will kill him.” I replied and I couldn’t stop my voice from sounding hopeful. After all, his face and hands were covered in my blood so there was a chance he would be stopped, especially when I did not appear. “If not, have Kit send him back to Hell!” I growled and several of them chuckled while Gareth made an agreeable noise.

“I wish it was that easy.” He informed me. “Personally, I would like nothing better. But though it pains me to admit this, you may not deny him.” He added and his voice sounded angry.

I moaned softly and felt my stomach roil again. “Please...I don’t think I could stand for him to touch me.” I admitted in a strangled voice.

He stroked his fingers over the top of my head and made his own sounds of distress. “This was meant to humble you. Do not give him this hold over you, or he will use it.”

His words caused my body to shudder and my mind skittered around looking for a hiding place behind my shields. I lay there for several minutes in silence thinking over Gareth’s words and realized he was right. I had to be strong, but I did not have to like it. Talon would certainly take advantage of my weakness and I could imagine that my life might become a nightmare in so many ways. Perhaps the best I could hope for was a cool indifference. I shifted slightly on the bed, my thoughts making me uncomfortable both mentally and physically. Perhaps I could ask Areth to remove the memory when we returned to the den...it was a thought.

“So much blood.” Cursed whispered and I eased my arm off my face and turned to find him next to the bed. His black eyes were intense and he looked like he was struggling to hold himself still. Behind and to the right of him, Tdem also looked very interested in the fact that I was nearly covered in my own blood which still felt sticky and

wet. Blood is the most precious of all fluids to Elves and especially Goblins. Both Cursed and Tdem were part Goblin and it was times like this that I was reminded of their differences. To deny them would have been...rude and shown a lack of respect for their care of me.

It was much easier to deal with this than the other, and I flicked my eyes to Gareth who nodded once. He trailed his fingers down my cheek then slipped from the bed. "Lower your shields first." He whispered and I nodded.

My shields slid away and I gasped at the need coming off Cursed and Tdem...and surprisingly, Cam behind them. My eyes met Cursed's and I nodded and lifted my hand to him. He hummed and laced his long graceful fingers through mine then raised my left arm to his mouth. I shuddered delicately as his tongue flicked over the skin on the underside of my wrist and he closed his eyes as if savoring the taste.

Tdem crawled onto the bed and knelt at my side his dark eyes sliding over my body and he purred and leaned over me. I glanced from Cursed to him and watched as he slowly lowered his mouth to my side where one of the blades had been embedded. Cursed placed my palm against his chest and bent over me so that he might feast at my shoulder then down across my breast where Talon has ripped his teeth through me. Cursed's heart beat fast beneath my palm and his mind brushed against mine eagerly. I relaxed upon the bed, my eyes slipping closed as their tongues and lips, sucked and lathed their way across my body.

As odd as it seemed, their actions soothed me. It helped that they shared with me the near ecstasy they felt at my offering and the pleasure they received from taking my very essence into themselves. Their pleasure became mine and I moaned softly when someone's fingers stroked my thigh. There was a gentle tug and the buckle beneath my breasts was undone. Leather straps slid out from under me and my top was pushed aside as Cursed's mouth followed the trail of blood across my breast.

The bed dipped upon the opposite side of Tdem and I recognized Amras scent and felt his fingers slide under my skirt. He hooked a finger in my panties, easing them down over my hips which I raised in order to assist him. When they were gone, his leather

covered knee edged my thighs apart and he moved to kneel between my legs. His tongue stroked high on my leg where another blade had entered and a soft humming filled my head as he tasted me. His fingers stroked my thighs and his lips edged closer to the bottom of my skirt. When his fingers brushed across my curls I pulled air into my lungs and made a small mewling noise that caused the others to rumble softly in anticipation. Amras' palms moved to the leather covering my lower hips and he exerted pressure in an upward motion which raised my skirt inch by slow inch. I bit my lip and lifted my hand into Cursed's hair and wrapped my fingers within the strands as Amras' tongue pressed into me. I raised my hips to him murmuring softly when his fingers held me open to his tongue and lips. Cursed and Tdem held me down upon the bed while my back arched and I screamed my pleasure.

Between my legs I felt Amras move and then the long hard length of him was inside me and I groaned while Tdem and Cursed used their hands and lips on my breasts and at my neck. Cursed nipped at me softly upon my shoulder and I cried out and felt my nipples tighten. His breathing was ragged and I increased the pressure upon his hair while I reached for Tdem and ran my hand down the front of him slipping beneath the waist of his pants. He reached for them, quickly releasing the fastenings so he might shove them over his hips in order to free himself to my touch.

Amras lifted my hips and slid his thighs under me forcing my lower body off the bed. His hands held me above my skirt and guided me onto him as he rolled his hips and plunged deeply. I cried out and wrapped my legs about his hips urging him to go faster. Tdem growled and moved his hips so that I gripped him tightly and worked him with my hand. I tightened my hold upon Cursed and pulled his mouth to mine then moaned when his tongue forced its way into my mouth and stroked in time to Amras' thrusts. I pulled him back and opened my eyes, staring up into his black orbs. "Please?" I begged and his nostrils flared and he reached eagerly for his pants, and kicked them onto the floor next to him. None of them were wearing shoes and I wondered at that for half a second then let it go. Cursed crawled onto the bed and I turned to him as he positioned himself on the

pillows then lowered himself to me. I purred and ran my tongue over his length while he made urgent noises and I held him and sucked hard.

Tdem growled and sank his teeth into my breast and I moaned and felt my body fill with liquid pleasure. I clenched around Amras and he stood upon his knees and lifted me higher, slipping his hands beneath my skirt so he might hold me by my bottom as his thrusts became more powerful. The position tipped my head back and Cursed moaned as my throat relaxed and I was able to take more of him into me. His hips began thrusting deeper and I struggled to time my breathing between his motions.

Within my body I felt the gathering...tightening low and deep. Pleasure swirled and radiated out from my core and I reached for it moaning as I came shuddering and gasping. The three of them hummed and Kit's voice whispered. "Open the door." I reached for it and shoved it wide feeling the force gathered behind it streaming through me like a hurricane.

Cursed cried out and arched his back shoving his hips against me so that he was buried to his hilt and I felt the warmth of his orgasm slide down my throat. Tdem hummed and wrapped his hand around mine, squeezing tightly while he forced himself through our fingers. Amras dug his fingertips into my bottom and pulled out nearly to the end then shoved back into me several times before he too cried out, shuddering as he reached release. He knelt on his knees over me for several seconds while he caught his breath and stared into my eyes. He then glanced at Tdem and pulled away from me, laying me gently upon the bed.

Tdem looked at me and his eyes were black and needy. He reached for me and plucked me off the bed and onto his thighs then raised a hand under his hair and lifted it out of the way so he could lay himself down beneath me. He placed his hands above his head and buried them in his golden waves. I watched in interest as he crossed one wrist over the other. His aura shifted to light red indicating his joy and sexuality. He lay upon the bed and offered himself up to me, giving over to me the power to use him however I might.

His body excited me and I reached to trace the image of myself which nearly glowed upon his skin. I licked my lips and ran my fingers over him down past his belly button and lower. He jerked, and hummed in anticipation. His hips moved beneath me as if in invitation and I leaned forward upon him lowering my lips to his body. He pressed himself against my stomach while I kissed and licked my way to his left nipple, sucking it into my mouth and rolling it between my teeth gently, He made pleased noises in his throat for me while I smiled.

I watched him, noting when his hands clenched into fists. My short hair brushed his chest and he swallowed and stared back at me. The blood rose beneath his fair skin, and I smiled again and increased the pressure and his lashes fluttered while he flared his nostrils. "Harder." He breathed and I happily obliged him. He closed his eyes and I felt him tense beneath me. I released him and nibbled my way to his other nipple while I used my fingers to gently roll and pinch the one my mouth had just abandoned. This time I bit him hard and his chest lifted us off the bed while he writhed and pressed himself against me. I reached for my door and cracked it open breathing my desire over him gently while anxious sounds filled the room.

"Amin mal-tari sani-amin!" My golden queen...take me, he urged in a husky whisper and I placed my hands upon his shoulders and eased myself upward on his body while he held his breath and my eyes.

I ran my hands up his arms, around his elbows and wrapped my fingers about his wrists holding him tightly. My lips pressed against the tender skin under his jaw and he shuddered and pulled air into his lungs. "Mani merni-lle Tdem?" What do you want? I asked against his ear.

"Lle mele." Your passion, he told me. And I smiled and pulled his earlobe between my teeth. I pulled myself higher upon his body lifting my hips and forcing his hard length between the juncture of my legs, up under my skirt. I leaned forward and he lifted his head so he could capture my breast between his lips. He shifted his hips silently asking for entrance. I moved for him, purring when his head pressed against me. He

stilled as I slowly eased onto him, forcing myself backwards until I had the full length and width of him sheathed inside.

“Uma.” Yes, He moaned and lifted me off the bed. I rocked back grinding my hips against his and felt him bump up against my cervix causing me to bite my lip and my lashes to flutter.

I sat up and slid my hands over his chest while over by the door I heard Roa’ ask in a ragged voice. “What do they say?”

“The King wishes her to...take him. She asks what he wants.” Talon offered, his voice sounding annoyed.

“And his response?” Roa’ asked.

“He wants her passion.” Talon informed him sharply and I raised my eyes to Lira and Roral. They looked shaken but were still upon their feet behind Talon and Roa’, who were also near the door. I had neither heard nor sensed their arrival, so absorbed had I been with Tdem.

“Get out Roa’.” I demanded, my eyes shifting to Roa’ as I held myself still upon Tdem and placed my palms upon his chest. “You have no business here.”

“He stays.” Talon informed me.

“No.” I replied and shoved my will at Roa’ forcing him to take several steps backwards. “Get out.” And Roral reached for the door and pulled it open.

Roa’s eyes widened at the pressure but it was Talon that spoke. “Not everyone in this room has declared. Therefore he will remain.”

I glanced down at Tdem who was looking up at me and seemed to be struggling not to smile. He shifted his hips and flexed his fingers and I leaned down, pressing my breasts against his chest then reaching to trace the shape of his face with my fingers. I did not bother to look at Talon but kept my eyes upon Tdem as I replied. “Get out Roa’ or you will find yourself back in Hell.” I advised then leaned forward and gently nibbled Tdem’s chin and jaw.

“I will go.” Roa’ offered and I lifted my head and glanced his way thinking it was perhaps the wisest thing he’d ever said in my presence.

“No.” Talon commanded and I ran my fingers through Tdem’s hair while I finally allowed my eyes to meet Talon’s.

“You are trying my patience and I do not like having to repeat myself.” I informed Talon then merely said. “Kit?” As I turned my gaze from him and heard a low evil chuckle, and the snapping of fingers. I glanced down to Tdem and remarked. “I apologize for the interruption.” And I drew a finger over his bottom lip. His tongue flicked out and touched me then pulled my finger into his mouth. I made a happy noise and licked my lips. He grinned and gently nibbled my finger while I watched him closely.

Talon’s fingers wrapped around my arm and tightened with a jerk and a low angry growl. I pulled my eyes from Tdem with a grimace and slowly tipped my head sideways to look first at Talon’s fingers and then up his arm and shoulder and finally at his face. “Bring him back now.” He growled and gripped me tighter.

I lifted one eyebrow and replied softly. “Remove your hand.”

“And if I do not?”

“You will not like the results.” I told him in a soft voice.

He frowned but gripped me tighter, his pink eyes narrowed dangerously and it was clear that he was very angry with me. “You may not harm me.” He replied in a smug tone that caused my teeth to clench and Tdem to murmur softly beneath me, as he shifted perhaps in warning.

“Permanently.” I hissed at Talon and reached for him with my mind and his eyes widened then narrowed as he felt my mental fingers brush against his manly parts. When he still refused to release me, I tightened my sending upon him like a vice. He yelled and fell to the floor nearly dragging me off Tdem when he refused to let go of me. Or perhaps he was simply unable to unclamp his fingers, as his entire body clenched with the pain I gave him. Tdem grabbed for me, holding me on the bed and keeping me seated upon his lap, while Talon writhed upon the floor nearly pulling my shoulder from its socket.

I glanced around the room and noticed my men watching me closely, most of them humming softly as they stood with their arms crossed over their chests. Kit gave me a happy smile and a wink and I squeezed Talon even tighter so that he screamed again. His fingers were going to leave a bruise and that angered me and I released my other sending and fed him the feel of gripping something burning and he cried out again and finally released me.

Chapter 9

“One does not place his hands upon our Queen in anger and hope to remain unscathed.” Jace informed Talon in a matter of fact voice. “Be glad she is merely annoyed and not truly angry.”

“I believe you were warned once before.” Gareth added, while the rest of them nodded and murmured in agreement.

“If you cannot control yourself perhaps you should withdraw and leave her care to those of us that have found her favor.” Owen added, surprising me with his words and the angry tone in which they were spoken. I glanced at him and his velvety brown eyes looked very angry. He seemed to nearly vibrate while around him his hair whispered and moved as if some kind of breeze tugged and pushed at it.

Tdem leaned up on one elbow and glanced down at Talon with disdain. “It is obvious to us all that you require a lesson in how to pleasure your Queen. Observe.” He commanded and I was certain it was the voice he used to command his kingdom that he used.

Talon glared up at me from the floor and Tdem made a low threatening noise in his throat. He snaked his arm around my back and pulled me against his chest, rolling us over so that his body pressed me into the bed. The distance between Talon and our bodies widened, putting him out of easy reach from the floor. “Salka-ten’ amin vanima mal-er.” Dance for me beautiful golden one, Tdem whispered and my hands sank into his hair which cascaded over us in a silken cloud. His lips came down on mine and I wrapped my legs around his thighs and lifted myself to him while he slowly moved above me. He spoke to me in Elvish, telling me how good I felt to him, and how he had missed me. How he had despaired when he’d thought me dead, and rejoiced to be given this second chance. He told me of the beauty he found in me, and how my spirit and fire excited him. And then he opened his mind to me and I shuddered at the overwhelming need that burned in him. His mind excited me so that I moaned and came beneath him while he purred and made approving noises in his throat.

Tdem’s hips stilled for several heartbeats as he allowed me to catch my breath. I pulled air into my lungs and held him tightly, then lifted my hips for him. He smiled slyly and this time his thrusts were more demanding. His hands gripped the bedding above my shoulders and he used his forearms pressed against them to hold me in place while he rode me faster. His black eyes held mine and his skin began glowing as if he had swallowed a light and it lit him from within. My breath caught in my throat and he lowered his lashes half way. “Amin salka ‘en kalina.” My dance of light he whispered seductively then hummed softly. In his mind he reached for me, coaxing me down a path and to a small beautifully ornate door. He reached for the handle then pulled it open to me and pure radiant light burst forth, coating my mind. I arched off the bed as if struck by electricity, while I absorbed the light and felt it seep down into me. My eyes widened and I glanced at my arms then down my body pressed beneath Tdem, staring in amazement as I too began to glow with his pale golden light.

He growled and touched our mouths together and light exploded outward from the contact. “Help me.” He breathed and I opened my door and allowed my passion to spill around us. He growled and his eyes bled to black, and my breath caught in my chest.

His body became heavier and it was as if he was filled with both light and darkness each of them a weight upon him. His hips began moving slowly and as the pressure built within me, the light in him was absorbed back into his skin and darkness flowed over his paleness. As his aura grew blacker, mine increased until it radiated a pure golden color. My eyes began whirling as his tempo increased and I fanned my lust at him while around the room I heard murmurs and several voices cry out.

Tdem threw back his head and shouted a word I did not recognize and I felt him instantly grow harder and thicker within me. The change surprised me and I too cried out while my head snapped back as my body arched and lifted him from the bed. My fingers dug into his shoulders and I felt pleasure explode within me. Tdem yelled and slammed his body against mine forcing me back to the bed as I felt his orgasm. Our minds and hearts seemed to hesitate for an instant and then he fell forward upon me and I reached for him burying my face within his hair.

Our breathing was ragged in the silence and I cracked open my eyes to find that our skin was starting to return to normal. My fingers stroked Tdem's back under his mane while he slowly pushed himself onto his forearms and kissed my brow. He gazed into my eyes and I went from happy afterglow to confusion in an instant. His smile slipped to worry when I murmured in surprise at the odd sensation upon the top of my left breast, and my eyes dropped to my skin. The light within me pulsed once then subsided. Then there was something that looked like a slender golden rope, lying upon my skin.

Tdem leaned back, his face appearing alarmed at first and then pleased as the rope sank into, then beneath my skin and began writhing. I reached for it with a gasp and he made a low sound that stopped me. I could feel it just under the surface and my eyes met his while I swallowed and held myself still. "I did not anticipate this, but...it will be done." He whispered and I pulled my eyes from him glancing back down at my body. As I watched, the rope formed itself into a tattoo that pressed against my skin from the inside out, burning itself into me. I cried out softly at the sensation, and tensed while it

throbbled and then stilled. Color bled through the lines forming a four part circle with another line woven between the four sections.

“What does it mean?” I breathed glancing from the marking upon me up to him.

He purred softly and ran a finger over my breast. It no longer burned and I watched as he traced the pattern, his face holding a touch of awe. “It is the mark of the Gods.” He breathed drawing his fingers over the design. “*Mirel, Svartalfar, Ljosalfar & Daoine.*” He breathed tracing the four sections as he spoke the name of each Tuatha De Dana clan. “This is the Goddess.” He told me running his finger around the outside circle of all four. “The light between is the day, and the darkness within represents the night. And this...” He breathed, tracing the ribbon that wove between the four and came to a point over each section. “Is Kaela Mensha, the God of the Hunt.” He breathed then added in a near reverent voice. “It means...you are favored Your Majesty.”



My men had gathered round the bed and my eyes moved amongst them. Amras and Cursed looked pleased. Owen nodded while Gareth and Jace seemed merely curious. I could not see Dane, but Kit climbed onto the bed and would have touched me except Tdem reached his arm under my shoulder and pressed me against his chest. Talon had moved to his feet and stood with his arms at his sides, a look of chagrin on his face. Our eyes met and he went to a knee and bent his head to me.

“It seems Your Majesty...that I have been reminded of my place.” He told me while my mouth dropped open in shock. “And beseech your forgiveness.”

Tdem took one look at him then buried his face in my neck and laughed silently. His body shook against mine and I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing with him.

“Can we go home now?” I asked Gareth some time later. I was curled in his lap wearing a long russet colored velvet dress that hugged my torso and arms and was low and loose enough in the chest that it showed off my tattoo when I bent forward. At the moment, Jace was feeding me. I’d been bathed by Owen and Kit who bundled me off to the bathroom and firmly shut the door on everyone else. I think they were feeling left out

or maybe it was just that they wanted some alone time. Owen had asked what all the blood was from and talking about it upset Kit so much he actually needed to be held and reassured. Apparently watching me be stabbed repeatedly had seriously traumatized him. We'd had a good time in the bathroom, but Owen and Kit had both been upset over my hair. When I told them to leave it like it was, they turned mutinous and the next thing I knew it was brushing my bottom. I was much too happy just to be in one piece to argue with them, and simply let it go.

Roa' was back from wherever Kit had put him, and he didn't look any the worse for wear. Cam eyed him angrily and the two of them seemed to stay out of each other's way. Talon stood against the wall, his silver eyes following me constantly though he said nothing which was just fine with me. Lira and Roral didn't look too happy and I guessed it was because we'd added to our numbers again. The rest of my men stretched out across the bed in various poses looking relaxed and chatting amongst themselves. Even Tdem's guards seemed less tense or maybe that was just my impression. For the moment we were just one happy bunch or at least we were trying to be.

Roral opened the door when someone knocked and a guard entered the room after speaking softly with him. The man moved near the bed and went to a knee. He had dark brown hair and hazel eyes and glanced around curiously, his eyes widened then narrowed when they crossed Roa' and Talon.

"Your Majesty, the Queen requests your presence in the Great Room." He lifted his eyes and informed me. I stared down at him and considered him for a moment.

"Do I know you?" I asked...thinking he looked familiar.

He hesitated a moment then stood when I motioned him to. "We have not been introduced Your Majesty." He informed me. "But I have been...guarding you since you arrived."

Oh...I thought and my cheeks turned pink while he looked like he was trying not to laugh. I recognized him as the guard that Amras had tried to wake the day I'd gone to see my Mom...the day I'd been sucked into the Everlasting. He frowned at that thought and nodded. It seemed I'd been carried past him more times than naught.

“When?” I finally asked and he looked confused. “When does the Queen wish to see me?” I helped him and smiled calmly when he took a deep breath.

“Now.”

“Ah and do you know why she has requested my presence?” I asked and he dropped his eyes to the floor.

“It is difficult to say Your Majesty.” He replied and I raised an eyebrow and lifted myself out of Gareth’s lap and onto the floor. I walked barefooted to the guard and then around him while he stood still and barely breathed.

“Do you enjoy your duties here?” I asked while my eyes traveled over his strong back and shoulders as I came round the other side of him. He was attractive and I particularly liked his ears which were...cute.

“I do.” He responded softly while the skin tightened over his cheeks.

“What is your name?” I asked and glanced at him from beneath my lashes.

“Cael, Your Majesty.” He informed me keeping his eyes upon the floor.

“Lexi?” Gareth asked and I held up my hand to him.

“Cael...it means archer or arrow does it not?” I asked then smiled when he nodded. “Cael is there some reason you do not meet my eyes? Some reason you will not speak of why my Grandmother wishes to see me?” I queried him and he slowly lifted his face and his large hazel eyes met mine.

“It is only that you will be gone soon Your Majesty, and the Sidhe will not be the same without you.”

“Hmmm.” I responded, stopping in front of him and clasping my hands behind my back. “Is the Court angry with me Cael?” I asked wanting to know if I should worry about being set upon in the halls. I’d pretty much been trapped in my room except for my two forays out into the Sidhe. Neither had ended...particularly well.

“Your presence here...has not gone unnoticed.” He replied and I stared at him for a moment then chuckled.

“What a charming way you have with words.” I told him and his eyes lightened while his cheeks darkened. “So shall we go then?” I asked and he remained standing where he was and his fine lips pressed together in distress.

“I would go with you Your Majesty.” He told me softly and went to his knee before me and he turned his face up to me beseechingly. “Three were given to you and all know you sent Nolls away. I would replace him if you but say the word.”

“You want to leave the Sidhe?” And I glanced at Lira and Roral over his shoulder. I did not know that my dissatisfaction with Nolls was common knowledge. We had simply not suited and when he had not reappeared I assumed he had been reassigned. I had no idea I’d caused him to go away permanently, though I had to admit I did not miss his narrow looks or disapproving ways.

“I wish to remain with you.”

I suppose I could have asked why, aside from the most obvious, but managed to restrain myself. “Cael that is not my decision to make. From your attire I can see that you are the Queen’s own guard.” I told him, noting that he was clothed in standard guard black and had his hair wrapped and bound in leather. Unlike my men who hadn’t wrapped their hair in some time, knowing that I preferred to see it moving upon their bodies. “I do not wish to anger the Queen.” I told him.

“Your Majesty,” he breathed. “She will not deny you, if you but ask.”

I rocked back on my heels and thought about it for a moment. “Cursed what say you? Do we need another guard?” I asked. He was seated cross legged on the bed and he cupped his chin in his palm and considered me.

“The Earl is a fine archer.” He replied. “Much better with a bow than any other Elf present.” Then he turned to Talon and Roa’ and dipped his head. “I do not count the Drakes amongst the Elves in my assessment.” He informed us. “In that I have not seen the Silver use his quiver, and that the Gray is no true Elf.” And Talon also dipped his head while Rao’ stood calmly. Obviously he didn’t feel the need to defend his skill, likely because he did not have to. “And the others must sleep sometime.” He added.

“Perhaps we can exchange him for Lord Camthalon?” I suggested and turned to glance at the man being discussed. Cam did not look happy. In fact, he looked extremely offended at the suggestion. Several of the men tensed. “Surely you would prefer to remain here in the Sidhe? Instead of traveling above ground with a mongrel half breed such as me?” I spoke to Cam for the first time since I’d placed him in the corner to keep myself from injuring him, more than a week ago.

His pale green eyes stared back at me and he went to a knee over against the wall. Everyone turned to watch him, and Cursed’s black eyes moved between us. I’d given Cam into Cursed’s care because Cam had angered me and I had been disappointed in Cursed jumping to the wrong conclusions. I had also forbidden Cam to shield his thoughts from the rest of my men. Judging by the looks around the room, his thoughts were causing a stir. I just wasn’t certain why, since I’d never been good at casually reading other people’s thoughts, especially when they were shielded. I was only good at it when I was in contact with them and they allowed me in.

“He has shown improvement.” Cursed finally offered after several moments in which no one spoke.

“Of course I’ve been in a coma or sleeping for the past week.” I replied abruptly. “One can hardly think he has warmed to me due to frequent interaction. I find it hard believe my absence would cause his cold heart to grow fonder of me. And it certainly hasn’t changed the fact that I’m still my Mother’s daughter.”

Cursed looked thoughtful and gave me a nod. “True My Lady, but it did not go unnoticed that you passed the rest of us over to heal his more grievous wounds first.”

I frowned and turned my back on both of them. Damn I thought, and slammed both shields closed as I marched toward the door. “Lexi.” Owen called to me softly and I stopped just before I made an escape. I was staring at the middle of Lira’s chest and refused to lift my eyes, afraid if I found him laughing at me I might do bodily harm to someone.

“What?” I snapped then pressed my lips together and glanced over my shoulder at him. He was in staring at me from the foot of the bed where he was laying propped up on

his side. Cael had scrambled to his feet and looked confused but determined. The others had all sat up and were watching me closely.

“Shoes?” He asked and I looked down to find a pair of delicate slippers next to me. “And you nearly forgot your jewelry.” He informed me and I felt a weight attach itself to my head and at my earlobes. I was already wearing my blade strapped to my calf and my ever present bracelet along with the ring that Gareth and Jace had given me.

I stepped into the shoes and grabbed the train of my dress and yanked it out of my way. “The door.” I growled at Lira and he crossed his arms over his chest and stood blocking my way.

“Certainly, but first you are being rude....Your Majesty.” He replied and I frowned and refused to look at him.

“Oh how nice, you noticed.” I replied sarcastically. “Now can we go? He did say my Grandmother wanted to see me now.”

“It can wait.” He replied.

“No....it really can't. It's been a long week and I just want to get out of here. So would you please get out of my way before I become angry?”

“You are already angry. And I would not be doing my duty were I to allow you to carry this anger into the Queen's presence.”

I took a deep breath and squeezed my eyes shut tight. “I can't deal with this now.” I told him.

“You must.” He replied. “The test ahead requires focus. Your anger will not serve you well. Therefore you must face it, lest it cause you problems within the Great Hall.”

“I am not angry...I am frustrated.” I told him.

“My pardon, with your mind shuttered from us all, your actions appear quite similar.”

“I cannot turn my emotions on and off like a spigot simply to satisfy you Lira.” I told him sharply and he sighed heavily.

“It is sometimes difficult to remember you are so young when in most instances you show maturity well beyond your years.” He replied and I couldn’t help thinking that...apparently this was not one of those times.

“Perhaps if you were to speak of your frustration.” Amras offered.

“How about we just go get,” and I waved my hand in irritation. “Whatever it is I’m supposed to do done, so we can leave here? Honestly I’ve had about as much angst today as I can stand and I am not in the mood to discuss him or him or him.” I told them. Pointing in turn from Cam to Cael and then to Roa’ who raised his eyebrows in stunned surprise. “I’m just getting a little sick and tired of being the last to know everything. So excuse me for being a little irritated.”

“Is that all?” Gareth asked calmly and I placed my hands on my hips and bent forward slightly. My eyes stared down at the region of Lira’s stomach and couldn’t help wondering what he would look like under his shirt. Without thought, my fingers reached out and grasped a lock of his fine auburn hair which he had taken to wearing unbound. I spent a moment rolling the soft silky strands between my fingers and nearly purred when he shifted and hummed for me. I lifted the strands to my nose and inhaled his scent. He smelled like autumn leaves and... pumpkins to me. Oh no...I thought and dropped his hair then swallowed heavily. This could not be happening to me, not now...it was much too soon.

“Lexi me love, come to me.” Dane’s lilting voice called to me sweetly and I turned my head slowly and glanced at him. His dark eyes looked urgent and were filled with promise.

Against the wall Talon made that strange warbling noise and I forced myself not to look in his direction. Instead, I pulled air into my lungs and slowly reached for my dress with one hand and bolted toward Dane. Owen scrambled off the bed to intercept Talon, but Cael was closer and much faster. The two of them went down in a heap on the floor and rolled about. Roa’ growled and reached for his sword only to find it was missing along with every blade and weapon previously on him. The rest of my men formed a wall surrounding Dane and I, while he lifted my dress and pressed me back

against the bed. He was inside me in an instant and I felt the itching cease abruptly. His hands gripped my thighs under my dress and I wrapped my legs about his hips. Our union was fast and furious and he set me on the bed and dropped his head to my shoulder when he was finished.

“Sweet Danu.” He breathed. “Tis close that was.” And I nodded and gasped for breath while my heart raced. When I pulled my head from his chest I winced at the look Talon gave me. My men seemed happy though, probably because Cael and Owen had managed to keep him off me. Kit was standing with his arms crossed in front of Roa’, an angry look on his face. The rest of the men had backed Talon to the wall and he looked like he was mad enough to kill the lot of them.

Gareth and Jace had remained on the bed, neither interfering nor helping either side. I suppose if push came to shove they could claim Dane didn’t know any better and the rest of my men assumed I was under attack.

“We’re going to keep him.” I told the group when I managed to speak again and I waved in Cael’s direction. “Arrow indeed.” I murmured and Dane chuckled and hugged me. “Do you know where my underwear went?” I asked a few minutes later as I searched under the edge of the bed.

“Your Majesty?” Roral offered and I turned to find he was holding the little scrap of gold and russet material by his forefinger and smiling. I had no idea how they’d managed to get nearly across the room and shook my head then looked at Dane who shrugged.

“Tis the elastic I’m thinking.” He offered then laughed at the look I gave him. “It’s a wonder they didn’t spontaneously combust before ye could remove them.”

“Very funny.” I told him and spent a few seconds hopping around trying to pull them on.

“Seems such a waste Lass.” He told me with a forlorn expression. “And I’m not sure why it is ye bother.”

“Appearances.” I replied and straightened my dress then glanced at Lira. “My apologies and my thanks.” I told him and noticed his eyes were still a little glazed but he was wearing a satisfied smile.

“Allow me to get the door for you Your Majesty.” And he bowed his head and reached for the handle so I could move through it. Well...after four of the others that is. It seemed I wasn't going anywhere in the lead.

Chapter 10

The Great Hall was packed and the people nearest the doors turned to me with a mixture of dismay and sly smiles. Apparently my quickie hadn't gone unnoticed. I was glad I was still shielded, though I suppose I should probably drop my upper one. I thought about it for half a second and did so, not wanting to offend the Queen. I was immediately sorry as a host of male minds pressed in on me and I made a strangled sound in my throat and my eyes nearly crossed at the pressure.

“Did anyone mention the Queen came to see you while you were...away?” Jace asked after he breathed deeply and shook his head. I had forgotten for the moment how much the static from my upper shield bothered him.

“When?” I asked curious to know how bad I looked when she'd seen me.

“Day five.” He replied. “She was...quite distressed.” Of course I didn't remember it, although I did remember my Mom visiting several times over the past day...though I'm sure I slept though more than I remembered. “And that damn Healer was there constantly.”

“Define constantly?” I demanded and Jace frowned at me.

“As in the man barely left the room to eat and go to the restroom.” He growled when the tips of my ears turned pink.

“Well that’s lovely.” I replied and Tdem muttered a string of words in a language I didn’t understand. A couple of the others must have though, because several of them looked impressed.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure science wasn’t the only thing on his mind.” Gareth added from the other side of me. His eyes were scanning the crowd and his hand was on my back under my hair which mercifully was down, as I had developed a bit of a chill walking around the Sidhe.

Lord Aerandir met us at the door and led us across the hall toward my Grandmother who was not on the dais, but amongst the crowd chatting with someone I did not know. My parents were with her and I glanced at my Father and gave him a dirty look. His eyes flicked to Talon and he looked relieved. I reached out for him mentally and whispered, *we need to talk...soon*. He frowned again, nodded once, then glanced down at my Mom who turned to see me and smiled. She excused herself and crossed to us and the men parted to let her in. We hugged and she held me back to look me over.

“You look even better than you did this morning when I checked you last.” She informed me. “We...sensed you’d regained your strength or I would have been back sooner. I heard about the caverns...how are you feeling?” She asked softly her pale blue eyes searching my face.

“Happy to be alive.” I told her then leaned forward and hissed. “Can you not do something about Dad? He keeps throwing these Drakes at me as if he’s trying to offload his ugly daughter. It’s a bit embarrassing, not to mention damn distressing.” I told her.

“I tried to tell him...but he won’t listen!” She replied tightly her eyes flicking to Dad who was watching the two of us closely.

“He told that one.” And I jerked my head in Talon’s direction. “I’d been coddled as a child.” I breathed against her ear and felt her tense. “And he was shocked to find Dad hadn’t raised me. As if he’d enacted some kind of gross offense by not doing so. I got the impression that that...was the norm for them.”

Mom hugged me and just before she turned me toward the Queen she whispered. “Why do you think I took you and disappeared?” And my eyes widened. I turned and met Gareth’s narrowed gaze. Oh...I thought and glanced at Jace who was also watching me closely. “What is this?” She breathed leaning back and catching a glimpse of my new tattoo.

“Something Tdem gave me with his dance of lights.” I told her and her eyes widened nearly popping out of her head she seemed so surprised. “King of the Slauch, Drows, Keeper of Elven Souls, and now the mark of the Gods...Lexi are you certain you are feeling well?”

“Yes....why is there some reason I should not be?”

She looked confused for a moment then shook her head. “It is just that...was it Tdem alone that danced?” She asked, and her voice was barely loud enough for me to hear her.

“If you mean dance as in...glow, then no he wasn’t. He opened a door in his mind and flooded me with golden light. I think I swallowed it.” I told her trying to remember. “Then he turned black.”

She raised her hand to her forehead and rubbed at her temple while looking at me in wonder. “I see.” She whispered and it was clear she did not see at all...not even a little. She took a deep breath then and slipped her arm through mine turning so she could lead me to her own mother who had her back to us, but whom I sensed had not missed our conversation. The Queen turned as we drew near and I and nearly all my men went to a knee before her.

“Your Royal Highness.” I replied and I felt her eyes upon my bent head.

“Lexi child rise. It is so good to see you up and about and looking so well. You had us quite worried.” She remarked and I lifted myself off the floor and she held out her arms to me. It was my first real touch from her and I slid my own arms around her waist and realized once again just how short I was compared to the true Seelie. Although five feet five wasn’t all that short, I still came up several inches below her five feet ten or eleven. Today I wasn’t even wearing heels to help me out.

“I did not mean to worry you Ma’am.” I replied and she hugged me tightly and rested her cheek against me.

“Children never do.” She replied then released me slowly and glanced down into my eyes. It was nearly like looking in a mirror as hers were almost the same shape and color as mine. “Are you ready my dear?” I must have had a blank stare on my face because she sighed and glanced over my head at those with me. “Your men did not tell you?”

She sighed again when I shook my head. “It is one of their most annoying habits Ma’am.” I informed her and she stilled for a moment then laughed.

“Yes it is indeed.” She replied and slid her hands down to clasp mine. “Perhaps they did not wish to alarm you.”

“Your pardon.” I replied. “Had they not wished to alarm me they would have described in detail what might occur thereby eliminating my need to worry and visualize possible scenarios. I have a very vivid imagination.” I informed her.

“I have observed that this is common to the male species.” She informed me. “Knowledge is ever power. Yet they are merely men...perhaps you might think to ask...in a different manner next time.” She added and I glanced first at her and then around at my men. They all were either frowning or looking concerned and I couldn’t help the wicked grin that covered my face when I realized just how right she was.

“Thank you Ma’am you are most wise. I will not forget your words.” She chuckled and the sound pretty much matched the grin on my face.

“Shall we then?” She inquired and released my hands as she took a step back. “You must approach the dais and seat yourself upon the throne. And you must remain in this form to do so.” She told me.

“That is all?” I asked wondering what the catch was.

“One piece of advice I will give you since no other has thought to. Do not allow your fears to overcome you. You are a strong and beautiful young woman, use your strengths.” She replied and I’m pretty sure I paled at the look in her eyes. “Go now.”

She breathed and I went to a knee and rose slowly turning toward the other side of the room and the empty dais.

A path opened for me as the Court simply faded back to allow me to pass. My eyes registered the people but not their faces or names. The throne seemed to beckon to me and I walked toward it, my feet moving me along at a fairly good pace. I sensed my men behind me but knew they could not assist me with this task and merely followed to be close to me. At the base of the steps I hesitated so that I might reach down and lift my dress out of my way before I started up.

As I climbed slowly, my gaze moved to my Grandfather, eternally caught in mid thrust, his naked body hard and long. My Grandmother had turned him into a statue when she had found him making love to a handmaiden almost upon the throne. She had left him there next to the seat of her power as a warning to all who would commit infidelity. That he had been poisoned by the same herb that had been placed in my room, was not known until after it was too late. Now there was none in the Sidhe who could release him from his frozen state.

Inside me Goldy looked up at me and tilted her head...*we can*, she whispered, while behind me there was a murmur as I hesitated upon the third step. *This is not the time* I thought back at her, and she looked slightly miffed at me for being put off. *Now IS the time*. She informed me and her tail flicked back and forth across her cave floor much as Mi's did when she was irritated at me. *What if she doesn't want him freed?* I demanded and watched as she tilted her head to the side then seemed to look over her shoulder back in the direction I assumed the Queen was still standing. I didn't dare look myself. *She needs*. Goldy replied when she turned back to look at me again. She had a smug smile on her face and I frowned, realizing I was having an argument with myself on the steps to the throne in a room crowded with several hundred Seelie. Could this day get any more bizarre?

I sighed and continued on up the stairs. When my foot hit the dais, a strange tingling sensation started at the tips of my toes and vibrated up my calf and thigh. I lifted my foot and the sensation stopped. Gritting my teeth I placed both feet on the dais and

felt my eyes widen as the vibration shook my entire body. A low grinding sound came from the direction of the throne and I lifted my eyes from the floor toward it. My jaw dropped as I stared into a multifaceted eye which blinked and turned from solid gold to white then black then every other color of Dragon before settling on a pale bronze color and blinking rapidly. The eye was situated along the top of the chair and I watched as the entire back of the throne seemed to stretch and pull back from itself. When it was free it turned its head to look at me while the arms of the throne became claws that flexed.

The throne itself expanded slightly and when it settled, the skin or surface flexed and the color seemed to flow from gold to the same pale bronze as the eye. In my head I heard a buzzing as several hundred minds cried out in amazement and I swayed slightly then reached to touch my temple from the pain. My vision blurred for a second and then I blinked and stared deep into the eyes of the Dragon that was even now pulling itself apart from the shape of the throne. Its tail unwrapped from the back and unfurled across the dais toward me. The pike like shape at the end of its tail glimmering upon the marble floor.

I realized if I waited much longer there wouldn't be a chair to sit on, and made my feet move in the direction of the throne. The tail flicked and the mouth opened revealing very long, very sharp teeth which I did my best to ignore. The hind legs worked themselves free of the chair legs and the claws made a scritch noise on the marble that sent a shudder down my spine. Inside me Goldy began to hop from foot to foot as if in anticipation, nearly knocking me over in her excitement as I drew closer to the chair. When she spread her wings I groaned and grabbed my stomach while the chair made a horrible sound and one very long wing extended itself from the back and scraped along the floor as it stretched out to the side.

The closer I got the more agitated the tail became until it was nearly slapping the floor. I eyed it warily and reached for my dress with the hand not holding my stomach. When I was within ten feet, the other wing appeared and I shuddered and shook while it made the same horrid noise across the marble. The sound seemed to excite Goldy who nearly shoved me forward. Caught between the noise and Goldy's abrupt movements, I

missed the tail sweep behind my feet and nearly went to the floor in a heap as I jumped back to avoid it at the last second. I managed to pinwheel my arms and stumble back out of range. I pushed my hair from my face and narrowed my eyes at the thing while its tongue rolled out of its mouth and flicked at me.

Okay I thought, and kicked at the trail of my dress while I studied it. I had to get to the throne and sit on it. I should have just run at the thing to begin with. I realized the longer I waited, the worse this was going to be. At the rate it was going, it wouldn't be long before the thing was moving about on the dais and I wasn't certain it would be a good thing if it caught me. I was supposed to sit on it...but that wasn't going to be possible if it ate me first. Realizing I was stalling, I reached under my dress and grabbed my knife then spent several seconds hacking off the majority of the material so that it fell to mid-thigh. Now well out of the way of any possible entanglements with my feet. I also kicked off my shoes and grabbed my earrings and crown and tossed them behind me listening as they skittered across the marble and rolled down the stairs. Gasps and murmurs accompanied my actions but I ignored them, my focus was on the throne and the Dragon who was watching me through intelligent pale bronze eyes and seemed to be considering me closely.

"Hello handsome." I breathed and it blinked and its eyes whirled softly while it exhaled a breath in my direction. It smelled of...forests and...something sharp and fragrant and Goldy made a mmm mmm noise inside me. I smiled and moved to the left slowly working my way around the chair while it flicked its tail and rotated its head to follow me.

"Any chance we can negotiate?" I asked, edging closer and coming in from the side. I was about eight feet away when the wing swept forward and I had to dance back to keep from being knocked over. "Guess not." I muttered and stood there for a moment with my hands on my hips considering it. Hmm I thought and moved farther to the left, out of wing range and toward its back. No real chance from here of getting into the seat which had pretty much become the Dragon's belly. Still, I was interested to see what it would do if I went all the way around it.

The head continued to rotate and when I was directly behind it, the tale shifted from the front to the back while it swung its head the other direction, keeping eye contact nearly the entire way. If I could avoid the tail I might reach its back in the middle of the wings. I wondered if it would count if I simply straddled it like a horse. Though it had changed into a Dragon's form, it still appeared glued in place as if the form had sifted but the intent had not. It was still a throne, just one that moved and was shaped as a Dragon. A Dragon that when stretched out would probably be over twenty five feet long. It was quite possibly as big, if not bigger, than Talon had been.

Scales appeared over the body as I balanced on the balls of my feet and began swaying from left to right. The thing exhaled again and blinked. I timed the blinks and at the next one I exploded at it, managing to step upon the tail and use it to spring myself toward its back. Huge wings captured me mid-leap and crushed my body between them holding me above the floor while the thing's head leaned toward me and its tongue flicked over my right cheek as if it was...tasting me. Its breath flowed across my face and I held perfectly still, wondering if I'd soon be missing my head. It vibrated and made a grinding noise and I eased my fingers forward to grip the bony ridge at the top of its wings.

"Penny for your thoughts." I muttered and the beast blinked again and shifted its wings while I eased my legs around its back. "How about we go for a ride?" I asked and it bugled in my face while I gripped it tightly between my thighs and forced my head back out of reach. My fingers dug in and it roared and yanked its wings forward nearly jerking my shoulders from their sockets. The tail slid over my back and wrapped around my neck forcing me backward as it tried to pull me from it. I held on tightly for several seconds then felt my fingers give and nearly struck my head on the floor when I refused to release my legs. Hanging upside down on the back of a persnickety Dragon is not a good plan I realized, while my skirt flopped over my body and basically got in the way of my vision and arms. Gee this was special I thought. I was flashing the entire Court and suddenly thankful that Roral had found my underwear earlier and that I'd had the foresight to put them on.

While I was hanging there considering my options, the thing's tail wrapped itself around my body and started squeezing and steadily pulling at me. My thighs held tight for several minutes and then started burning from the force I was exerting. Until I thought they might spontaneously combust from the fire in them. What to do I wondered. Realizing if I simply let go, I'd still be wrapped up in the tail and I wasn't sure how that would work out for me. Not that hanging around here was any better. In fact, I could feel my ribs starting to compress. It seemed I didn't have much choice and I just let go. That was a mistake, I thought as the tail lifted me up and flung me across the floor.

I flipped over twice and skidded several feet. My hair wrapped around me like Spanish moss and I struggled with it while I lay on my side and tried to pull air into my collapsed lungs. The Dragon seemed to smile at me and rested its head on its shoulder, while I pushed myself up into a seated position and proceeded to braid my hair. I stared back at it all the while considering my options. I used a strip I cut from the bottom of my dress to tie off my hair and pulled my legs to the side then rested on one arm. Obviously the direct approach wasn't going to work here. And I was fairly lucky I'd only received a couple bruises instead of broken bones for my trouble. What I needed...was a plan. My goal was to sit on the throne. Apparently the throne's goal was to keep me from mine. The longer I waited the more animated the thing got. I couldn't shift to Dragon so that left me with what? I wondered, chewing at my bottom lip. Use my strengths Grandma had said, and I debated on what that might mean.

I tried listing my strengths in my head and pretty much came up empty. I didn't think swords or martial arts were going to help. In fact I had just done a good job proving this thing wasn't going to be impressed by my speed or agility. So I could...what else could I do? I'd refined being irritating down to a science, but didn't think that would work. I was just starting to be able to move things around with my mind. I could apparently speak with certain animals, and they with me. And I was fairly good with touching others with my emotions...hmmm I wondered and my eyes narrowed. Something Gareth had once said stuck out in the back of my mind. I think

we'd been discussing Belinda at the time....something about only Gold's being female...but the throne before me had sifted to...Bronze. And females were only ever gold or red or blue or green. I was fairly certain that's what he said. This meant the Dragon....was male. I pushed myself up off the floor gracefully and nearly smiled when the thing slowly lifted its head and flicked out its tongue.

Obviously brute force wasn't going to get the deed done. Maybe what we needed here was a maiden. And what was it Dragons were known for? Why stealing gold, razing herds and....eating virgin maidens. I wasn't exactly a virgin anymore...but I was still female. Even better...I was a Dragoness! I flowed across the floor toward the beast...thrusting out my chest and rolling my hips while I smiled shyly and lowered my gaze, watching it through my lashes. The vibration started up in the floor again and a low humming noise whispered across my mind. The eyes whirled slowly and I lifted my arms over my head and twirled slowly, my turn bringing me nearly within reach of the tail again. I moved to the right away from my Grandfather and back toward the court, keeping my eyes on the Dragon who flicked his tongue again and slowly rotated his head to follow me.

With my mind I reached out and slowly stroked the space between his eyes and watched in anticipation as he reared back then bared his teeth at me. "Hmmm..." I murmured and sent my mental touch under his chin and down the underside of his throat. He growled and snapped his teeth at me while he flared his slightly in warning. "Here Dragon Dragon." I called to him in a teasing voice and mentally scratched at the ridge just above his eye. I scratched him in the same place which always seemed to send Spot into ecstasy.

The Dragon made a harrumphing noise and pulled his tail back around to the front as I came to a stop back where I'd originally started. His claws flexed several times and I considered his body. Now where on a male Dragon is the most sensitive spot I wondered. Not having ever really given it any thought before. Sheesh where on any male is the most sensitive spot? I rolled my eyes when my mind was suddenly filled with amused voices all muttering things that caused my ears to turn pink. I didn't need the

distraction and raised my upper shield and sighed softly as the peaceful sounds of silence surrounded me.

The Dragon made a strange noise and shook its head while its large bronze eyes started whirling. I looked at it curiously and lowered my Dragonsward, watching as its eyes slowed then stopped. Smiling I raised my shield again and his began whirling once more and this time the tail whipped across the floor toward me, missing me by just inches. I watched it closely noticing that my shield seemed to excite it though I wasn't sure why. Tilting my head to the side I tried something new. "Hello handsome can you hear me?" I called to the Dragon and it made a chirping noise that ended on a warble, that was not unlike the sound Talon made.

Within my mind a picture formed sent by something... definitely male. It was a glyph or symbol and I could see it but did not understand its meaning. "I'm sorry I do not recognize what that is." I told him softly then moved another step or two in his direction. His tail flicked slightly but stayed where it was. "May I approach?" I asked in my most innocent voice and he seemed to consider my question but didn't move. I took a step forward inching my way toward him slowly while in my mind several other images flashed...the last I recognized as the symbol for man and woman. It was a symbol used by one of the ancient races of South America, Peru I think. And they were called...the Chavins. My memory for these things was usually very good, but seeing as how they lived almost three thousand years ago and given the fact I was a little distracted, it was difficult to recall all of the details.

The Chavins lived during the Bronze Age and had a language that consisted of glyphs and pictures which only their priests could read. I think they made blood sacrifices to their god and they were all about...fertility and harvest. They worshiped jaguars, hawks and...a large snake. A large winged snake. In fact it might well have been a...Dragon. Interesting that the throne would be feeding me pictures of a deceased race. A race that specialized in bronze sculptures of females representing fertility and the harvest. I wasn't certain what it was trying to tell me. Actually I was somewhat

surprised I remembered any of this. I'd have to thank Mi later for all the interesting facts rolling around in my brain.

The Dragon made that strange chirping noise and I stopped, holding my breath. I was about four feet from his body and his eyes were still whirling although they had slowed considerably. After several tense seconds I made to move forward and widened my eyes as I felt his tail shift behind me. I watched it rise slowly and move in my direction though my peripheral vision. I swallowed and held perfectly still while the sharp spear like end gently brushed up the inside of my leg. It stopped an inch or so above my knee, where it stroked my thigh as the throne made the chirping noise again. With each stroke the spear rose a little higher, while I felt a strange panic begin squeezing at my lungs.

"Hey there big fella ah...what are you doing?" I breathed while he tilted his head and I felt the tip of his tail catch on the material of my panties. I pulled air in through my teeth as the tail slid over the front of me and under the edge of my panties. There was a tug and a tearing noise and I felt my underwear slide down my other leg. So much for being discretely covered I thought, and swallowed heavily. These damn Dragons were hard on a girl's unmentionables. His claws flexed, and his tail ran over the back of my thigh with a gentle pressure that nudged me forward. I stepped out of my underwear and took a step in his direction. Obviously he wanted me closer and I wasn't about to argue as that was the direction I was trying for anyway.

His tail continued to press me forward. His body shifted and my eyes widened then nearly screamed in horror as the protrusion at the base of his tail began growing. Oh no... this could not be happening to me, not twice in the same day! My feet stopped abruptly and I pressed my body back against the pressure of his tail while my eyes jerked up to his.

Cool feet and cold marble do not make a good combination when you are trying not to be pressed forward. I bit the inside of my cheek and put up my hands as my feet began to slide across the floor...dragging the rest of me with them. "Ah can we discuss this?" I breathed and felt an image flash across my mind and nearly swallowed my

tongue. The picture was a woman impaled upon a Dragon and I felt my stomach heave as it registered in my mind.

Inside me Goldy began making a pleased noise and I was torn between anger and horror that she would be so excited at the prospect.

Chapter 11

I needed to do something soon or I'd find myself truly seated on the throne, I thought as he pulled me to within two feet of him. My feet were still skidding and his tale was pressed against my bottom under my dress. I only hoped I wasn't also flashing the entire Court with my bare backside. His penis had grown significantly and lay like a sword against his lower stomach all bronze and ribbed and gleaming in the light. When I glanced down at him, it moved and I forced myself to swallow my horror and fear then jerked my eyes to his. Oh God I hope they weren't serious about this. There was no way that was going inside me.

His eyes looked excited and his head moved toward me while I pressed back against his tail and watched him shift forward. It was easier to focus on his head which was actually very attractive. He had two bony ridges running up from his nostrils and the spikes over his eye ridges looked very sharp. The horns on top of his head were about the size of my wrists and nearly as long as my forearms, also very sharp looking. His eyes had darker bronze colored lines spreading out from the center like lightning bolts

and got lighter the farther from the center they went. I gazed into them and saw myself reflected there, pale and flushed and frightened looking. This wouldn't do, I thought and ignoring what lay between us, I reached forward slowly and lifted my hands toward the softer scales of his underbelly. He chirped low and soft while I pulled myself together, took a deep breath, then placed my hands on him and forced every memory of every satisfying love making session I'd ever had, into his body. It was like holding a lightening bolt and the electrical current flowed between us while he reared back his head and roared. His body convulsed and something hot and sticky hit my leg. Something I didn't want to think about as I closed my eyes and shoved session after session into him.

His scales shuddered and jerked beneath my palms and he began vibrating. Behind my eyelids light glowed and I snapped them open to see the same pure golden light I'd shared with earlier Tdem, flowing out of my hands and into his body. Light exploded out of his eyes and mouth. The vibrations became stronger until even the marble beneath us began roiling, and I cried out and fell forward onto his body. At the contact a rending noise filled the air and behind me the Court cried out. The throne split and seemed to eject something out onto the floor to my right. I held myself up by a scale and glanced down in shock at the huge, perfectly bronzed naked man, lying on the floor at my feet. He coughed and pushed himself onto his forearms while I turned quickly around and seated myself on the throne, just as it began flowing beneath me and reformed itself into my Grandmother's chair.

I stared down at the man and simply said. "You must be Raimondi Stela."

"And you must be...my Queen." He replied in a deep voice that caused my hair to stand up on end. "I declare." He informed me and I sighed and simply looked at him with a pained expression while he rose gracefully from the floor and stood before me in all his naked glory.

"Would you mind telling my Grandmother's court why you were trapped in her throne?" I asked calmly and I had to give myself kudos for somehow managing to keep my eyes on his...though it was damn difficult.

He flashed a smile down at me and placed his hands loosely on his hips while I tried not to stutter or drool. Heavens above the man was beautiful and unlike anyone I had seen here at court or anywhere else. He had a smoky look about him that reminded me of Alan, only he was about five inches taller and nearly twice as wide. I didn't think he was taller than Owen but it must have been close. He had hair like nothing I'd ever seen, and my fingers itched to bury themselves in the pale bronze length just to see if it was truly as soft and luxurious as it looked.

"Waiting for you." He informed me and I struggled not to choke on my tongue while behind him a murmur rose up from the crowd. He glanced over his shoulder then back at me and lifted an eyebrow.

"Been waiting long?" I asked and he smiled again and nodded.

"Too long." He replied and his eyes slid down his body and I couldn't help my gaze from following his, which was really too bad of him given the state he was in. One would have thought after the satisfaction I'd fed him that he might have been the one stuttering and drooling. I winced and glanced around him toward my Grandmother who was standing at the base of the dais looking shocked.

"May I get up Ma'am?" I asked and she tore her eyes off Stela's glorious behind and glanced at me briefly before nodding. I stood abruptly and took two steps to the left away from Stela whom I didn't trust not to grab me and have a go right there on the dais. "I take it this wasn't supposed to happen?" I muttered more to myself than anyone else.

"Normally I just sigh or put my head on their shoulder to indicate I'm pleased. I believe your Mother got my tail in her lap...which she did not appreciate, I might add. Nor did she handle it as well as you did, but then she's very repressed." He leaned in and whispered while my eyes widened and swung between him and my Grandmother who was climbing the stairs towards us. "I'm not sure why you didn't just sit on my lap to begin with." He breathed as they drew closer. "But then I enjoyed our foreplay very much. I've never had a Queen try to ride me in such a manner." He added with a mischievous gleam in his eye.

“Because no one told me I wasn’t supposed to. And I begin to see why they sacrificed virgins to you.” I muttered and turned to face the Queen as calmly as I could.

“None of them were worthy.” He slipped behind me using my body as a shield and leaned forward to whisper. “Not like you.”

“That’s no excuse to eat them!” I growled and he chuckled and placed his hands on my waist while I stiffened and nearly jumped.

“Who said anything about eating them? No, I simply....shared with them the pleasures of the flesh then sent them on their way. I discovered a long time ago...I’m not terribly fond of virgins.” He purred against my ear and I felt my mouth go dry and had to lick my lips.

“Lexi?” My Grandmother asked as she stopped in front of us. Behind her Lord Aerandir and another guard I did not know, stood with their arms over their chests. Aerandir glanced between Stela and myself and raised an eyebrow while the tips of my ears turned pink...again.

“I’m sorry about your throne.” I told her and glanced over my shoulder to see that it had returned to its former shape and color and looked just as harmless as it had before I approached it. “This is Raimondi Stela obviously he’s Bronze and has declared.” I informed her. “I believe he already knows who you are.”

She looked like she didn’t know what to say to that and fell back on her manners. “It is a pleasure to...finally meet you.” She informed him and he bowed his head to her over my shoulder.

“Your Majesty, it has been an honor to serve with you these long centuries. You are as beautiful as you are wise.” His praise seemed to fluster her and I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. That would not be a good thing I decided.

“Ma’am...if you please.” I asked in an urgent voice. “May my Demon approach?” I asked and she dragged her eyes off Stela and nodded. I closed my eyes and dropped my upper shield and had to lean back against Stela as other minds flooded mine. I swallowed and called for Kit while I nearly cringed at the anger and upset aimed my direction from the left of the dais...the place where my men were currently congregated.

Kit moved up the stairs on his own two legs and came to a halt to the left of my Grandmother. He did not look happy with me and folded his arms over his chest and gave me his disapproving glare. “Hi.” I told him and licked my lips again while he stared at me from angry red eyes.

Behind me Stela leaned his hips into me pressing his hard length purposefully against my lower back. When I would have pulled away from him he held my waist and kept me in place. The two of them sized each other up and I could almost taste the testosterone in the air. “He needs clothing and can you...fix my dress?” I asked and he narrowed his eyes and snapped his fingers. He covered me in a long sleeved fitted black leather coat that snapped up the front from just below my jaw all the way to my knees. The snaps stopped at the knee but the coat continued on to brush the floor. My feet were encased in tall leather boots with four inch spiked heels that ended somewhere mid thigh. Under the coat was...nothing and I looked at him and winced. When I shifted I felt my nipples rub the cold lining material and had to bite my lip. The last thing I wanted to do was complain, or I’d find myself wearing the outfit with holes in all the most inappropriate places. Judging by the look on Kit’s face, I was pretty sure that would have been his solution, and he was just waiting for me to say something to make it happen.

Behind me I heard Stela mutter and was almost afraid to look. When I did...I turned immediately to Kit and did some glaring of my own. Kit finally growled and snapped his fingers. And this time Stela was dressed appropriately instead of in a big floppy clown suit. Which I’m sure amused the rest of my men but was highly inappropriate, given the fact that we were in the throne room standing next to my Grandmother, the Queen.

“Your Demon seems jealous.” Stela informed me with a grin. “That bodes well for me.”

“Hmmm.” I muttered then ignored the both of them. “Ma’am are we done now?” I asked while inside me Goldy tore her eyes off Stela and growled softly. Everyone near me glanced down and I winced and made a helpless gesture with my hand when my Grandmother looked at me.

“It seems child that your...friend does not agree. What is it that has upset her?” She inquired.

I wasn't certain but I had a bad feeling especially when Goldy turned and looked at the King then glared up at me. I sighed and chewed my lip. “May I speak privately with you for a moment Ma'am?” I asked and she looked puzzled but followed me when I stepped away from the others toward the back of the dais. “Goldy thinks I can free the King.” I leaned forward and whispered near her ear. “I tried to tell her you may not wish him free, but apparently it just annoyed her.” I added while she stood there with her face shuttered.

“For what reason...” She began softly. “Would you believe I would not want him freed?”

“I simply wished to give you the option.” I replied softly.

She frowned for a moment and replied. “You truly believe you can free him?” She asked and I stared up at her and finally shrugged delicately.

“I can but try.” I told her and she nodded and cupped my cheek in her palm.

“Then by all means...you must try. Because I've missed him sorely this past week...since the day you joined us.” She replied with a twinkle in her eye and I breathed a sigh and nodded, suddenly feeling a whole lot better about it. “I will need to speak to Owen.” I told her and...I turned to look at the newest edition thoughtfully. “And perhaps Stela might be of assistance too.”

“I will leave you to it.” She replied and went to seat herself upon the throne. I stood watching her for a moment then motioned to Stela who had his eyes upon me. He bowed his head to the Queen and moved behind her chair and strolled toward me...like a man on a mission. Yikes I thought, and couldn't help admiring the loose limbed way he moved. It was like he strolled through a field of tall wheat and all around him was the harvest just waiting to be gathered. Wow this one was going to be trouble I thought, and gave myself a good shake. Apparently he'd set himself up as a fertility god when he'd crossed over and had picked up a few pointers over the centuries he'd been worshiped. I was just hoping the rest of my men didn't strangle him in his sleep.

The thought caused him to grin then chuckle softly and I rolled my eyes. “I’ve been watching you little one.” He informed me as he walked to me then around me like he was sizing me up. “I like your fire...and your sendings have made me very hungry. Are we nearly done here? I am looking forward to...my upcoming duties.” He advised me softly, his deep voice creating goose flesh across my skin. His fingers caught the end of my braid and a gentle tug freed my hair. I stood completely still as his fingers worked it free of the weave. “Such beauty.” He whispered and I closed my eyes and clenched my fingers to keep from touching him.

I took a deep breath and asked. “Were you here when...that happened?” I asked, turning my back to the room and lowering my voice. I forced my eyes open and looked up at him.

His beautiful eyes stared down at me and he finally nodded. “Yes Your Majesty, I remember it well. It was the last time anyone has used the Great Hall for such activity.” He breathed softly, his voice sounding very disappointed.

“Seriously?” I asked and looked at him closely when he nodded.

“Raise your Dragonsward.” He urged me and I pulled air through my teeth but nodded and did as he asked. He leaned forward and whispered against my ear. “Yes these walls...hold many secrets...and so do I. Why do you ask?”

I looked at him and thought. *Because Goldy and Owen...Ve*, I corrected myself *believe I can free him. Is there any advice you can give me?*

“The tall yellow haired one?” He asked and I nodded. “Who is he?” He asked his eyes going around me and I assumed looking for Owen who stood at the base of the stairs with the others, except Kit who was busy chatting with the Queen and shooting me dagger looks over her shoulder. I knew because I could feel his eyes on me. Just as I could feel the rest of them. They did not like that I’d raised my shield and only the Queen on the dais kept them from rushing to my side.

“They seem quite protective of you. As well they should be.” Stela replied. “And it would appear your Court has grown since you first presented yourself before your Mother’s Mother more than a week hence. It needs but only a few more colors to be

complete.” He added while his eyes scanned those that most certainly were watching him back. “I recognize the Gray.” He told me softly and I glanced at him curiously. “This is not the first Court he has served upon.” He added and his eyes flickered down to mine while I chewed my lip and tried to keep my thoughts from running amok. He smiled, flashing even white teeth and leaned forward to add. “Nor is it mine.”

“Good, your first duty will be to tell me all about it.” I informed him and he made a moue but nodded. “But later, now I need to know if you can assist me with this?” I finished and tried not to think about his nearly complete comment. For some reason it made me....uncomfortable.

He cupped his chin in his palm and considered me for a moment. “The potion he was given overcame his good sense. He’s actually a fine man.” He added. “I liked him very much.” I nodded inviting him to go on. “Place your hands upon him Your Majesty and do to him what you did to me. For he is trapped in a place of no desire, just as I was, though his prison is not of his own making.”

“Later remind me to ask you why you trapped yourself in a place with no desire.” I told him then glanced at my Grandfather.

“I already have.” He replied then brushed his cheek against mine while my thoughts were elsewhere. “I was waiting for you.”

I made a rude noise and pulled back from him before I grabbed him and did something we both might regret. “I made my Mother pregnant.” I informed him and he lifted an eyebrow and stared at me in disbelief. I shook my head and waved my hand at him. “That isn’t what I meant.” I told him. “Owen and I...wished for it, while Mom and Dad were...please don’t make me say it.” I told him in some distress just thinking about what they had been doing at the time. Some things it was just better not to think about. Like your parents and sex.

“And this relates how?” Stela asked calmly his eyes confused.

“I don’t know...it just came to me. I think I need Owen to assist. If Grandfather is...trapped, perhaps he needs assistance in being made. Does that make any sense?” I asked and Stela ran his hand through his hair and considered it.

“Perhaps it would be best to simply try Your Majesty.”

“Fine, what is the worst that can happen? Nothing.” I remarked and turned then dropped my Dragonsward and called out to Owen who blinked his large chocolate colored eyes at me and moved in a non-threatening manner up the stairs, dipping his head to the Queen before moving around my Grandfather on his way to my side.

“Owen Ve, Minor God meet Raimondi Stela Bronze.” I introduced them and Owen nodded then glanced at me.

“How may I assist you?” Owen asked and I tried not to wince at the underlying anger in his voice.

“I didn’t do it on purpose.” I hissed back at him and he made a harrumphing noise and flicked his eyes to Stela.

“Only you could seat yourself upon the Queen of Air and Light’s throne and have it split open and spit out a Bronze Dragon.” He growled while Stela looked amused.

“Would it help if I told you I’d been waiting nearly two thousand years for her?” Stela asked softly and Owen gazed at him fully and frowned.

“No it would not. Is that true?” He asked, his curiosity getting the better of him.

Stela nodded. “It was foretold by my High Priestess. She claimed a golden queen would be born to the Seelie and that I must place myself inside the throne should I hope to join with her. Honestly though, I think she purposefully neglected to mention it would take so long to occur. Some women can be so jealous.” He replied with a grin while Owen smiled and nodded agreement muttering something that caused Stela to chuckle. At that point Owen seemed to remember where he was and pulled himself up short. He glanced at me and my eyes narrowed thoughtfully while he brushed a strand of hair behind his ear and tried to look innocent.

“If you two are done bonding over other women while I stand here twiddling my thumbs...” I hissed in a low angry voice that caused both of them to stand a little straighter. “I’d like to discuss possibly freeing the King. Assuming that won’t interrupt your little reminiscing fest.”

Owen swallowed and shook his head. “What would you like to discuss?” He offered in a small voice that seemed contrite.

“Stela...you don’t mind if I call you that do you?” I asked turning to him with a lifted eyebrow. He winced but nodded.

“I suppose Oh Mighty God, is out of the question right?” He asked, and Owen burst out laughing while I merely frowned then shook my head.

“Do you think we can do to the King what we did to my Mom?” I asked and Owen sobered quickly and stared down at me. Even with my heels on he was still a full head taller than me and standing near Stela I could see that they were nearly of a height though Owen still topped him by perhaps a half inch. Framed together their hair complimented each other and I...had to yank my thoughts back to the subject at hand, while the two of them glanced first at each other, then down at me. Owen made a humming noise in his throat, which didn’t help matters and caused Stela to grin wickedly.

“Is she always this easily distracted?” Stela asked.

“No. I suspect it has something to do with the amount of...energy she poured into the throne. Her helping to free you seems to have shortened her between cycle. I assure you, her needs were seen to before we...ventured out.” Owen informed him calmly.

Oh? I thought and glanced up at him...and my mind reached back over the recent past. I pondered his words and realized...he might have a point. I did seem to have a history of energy depletion followed closely by a tendency toward bitchiness. And if my issues were not dealt with quickly by one of my Drakes, they evolved into temper tantrums then convulsions. Gee wasn’t I special? I thought and chewed my lower lip. I think it was fairly safe to say that depleting my energy included having sex with any non-Drakes. Damn someone should have mentioned that to me.

Stela looked horrified and glanced at Owen for confirmation. “She is engaging in intercourse with non-Drakes?” He demanded in a loud voice and Owen frowned and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Yes including me. Do you have a problem with that?” Owen asked and it was clear the male bonding phase was over as Stela frowned and turned to me with a stern look.

“Your Majesty this cannot continue.” He informed me bluntly and I threw up my hands and turned my back on both of them as I moved toward my Grandfather. Stela followed me, intent upon having his say but I held up my hand as I stood beside his statue and focused on keeping my eyes on his face.

“Who did this to you?” I wondered and Stela jerked back and shook himself.

“The handmaiden.” He replied and I shook my head at him.

“No the handmaiden was found innocent and the culprit was dealt with.” I replied while he frowned and shook his head.

“My pardon Your Majesty, but it was the handmaiden as surely as I am standing here and no one was ever dealt with. For no one could determine the truth.”

“What?” I demanded and turned to stare up at him in shock. I could swear that Amras and Cursed had told me they had found and dealt with the culprit. Although...come to think of it...the two of them hadn't actually said that. In fact they had simply looked at each other and I suppose I assumed. Damn I thought the person could still be out there and if I did manage to free him...he might still be in danger.

“It was the handmaiden.” He replied.

“Well who was the handmaiden and why was she found guiltless?” I growled softly.

“Because it was the handmaiden, but it was not the handmaiden.” He replied calmly while I stared at him and then turned to Owen who looked nearly as confused as I felt.

“Okay slow down before you hurt yourself Stela.” I muttered and held up my hand palm out. “If it was the same person why wasn't she found guilty?”

He smiled at me as if I had just earned a gold star and informed me. “Exactly.... because it wasn't the same person.”

“I can’t take much more of this.” I warned Owen who seemed to be puzzling through Stela’s words.

“So if it wasn’t the same person but it was the same person....someone wasn’t who the seemed. Hmmm.” He muttered out loud. “How many amongst the Court could do what must have been done in order to accomplish this?” He asked while my head spun and I glanced between them in total confusion.

“Not many. Not when you consider the potion.”

Owen turned to me with a glint in his eyes and whispered. “Lift your shield.” I frowned and glanced at Stela who nodded encouragingly and proceeded to lift my shield. “Lira told us what occurred earlier. Who do we know that doesn’t like you or your Mother and has a tendency to use chasteberry?” He asked softly while my eyes widened.

“Was she old enough to have done this?” I asked and glanced at Stela who was frowning.

“I do not know of whom you speak Your Majesty.” He informed us and I glanced at Owen then added.

“Whom has most recently gone missing and had her lover...lose his head?” I breathed while this time his eyes widened and he nodded.

“The Lady of which you speak is...quite old enough to have performed this foul deed. As well as many others. In fact.” He leaned in to whisper. “It would not have been the first time she attempted to seduce the King.”

“I hope you’re going to finish that sentence with...but she was not successful.” I replied tightly and he glanced down at me and finally nodded while I breathed a sigh of relief.

“No Your Majesty...he was neither tempted nor amused, which surely did not sit well with the Lady. I do not think she was one to take rejection lightly. I believe the young Earl...he that professed his love for you last week upon the dais.” And he frowned and gave me an annoyed look before continuing. “Knows full well.”

“Lord Amras?” I asked and turned to glance at him where he stood amongst the others. His large violet eyes met mine and he smiled cautiously. His eyes looked worried and I gave him a tender smile while Stela growled and seemed to puff up.

Chapter 12

“Your Majesty I protest.” He nearly barked at me. “This is completely unseemly.”

“Wow...” I told him in a low angry voice. “I liked you a lot better before you started spouting your opinions.” I informed him, and then glanced at Owen who was looking very pleased with me indeed. “And unless you want to find yourself murdered in your sleep I’d suggest you keep your comments to yourself. My men are not going to appreciate your ideas on this subject.” I told him bluntly. “Especially given that I am as much Elf as I am Dragon, which means I may not necessarily have to follow the rules you observed in your previous Court. Not to mention the fact that my being with them serves to increase my powers.”

He didn’t seem to know what to say about that and mercifully closed his mouth. Though it looked like it pained him to do so.

“So when she couldn’t have the Queen she went after the future Prince and when that didn’t work...she came after me.” I finished his story for him. “And this story is going to have a happy ending. If Owen will assist me?” I replied and he nodded and held out his hand for me.

“How would you like to do this Lexi?” He asked calmly.

“I think...I think I’d like to try what I did with Stela...though it just seems wrong to do that to my Grandfather.” I replied and winced when he nodded thoughtfully. And if that does not work...then perhaps you can assist me with what we did before?”

“Actually...you did it.” He informed me. “I merely held your hand and directed the energy.”

I clutched at his arm and stared down at the floor. “Owen sweetie...this is not the time to shock and awe me.” I informed him in a strangled voice while he patted my hand and rumbled deep in his throat.

“I am sorry.” He replied and placed his hand over mine while I sucked air into my lungs and watched the black spots at the edge of my vision disappear.

“Can we just move this along? I’d like to go home. I believe the Council is coming soon and Gareth and Jace need to get back. Who knows what Valentine has been up to while we’ve been gone?”

“Certainly.” Owen replied.

“Owen..?” I asked cautiously.

“Yes?”

“Did anyone feel what I did to...Stela when I placed my hands on the throne?” I asked softly and he nodded. “Dane and Roa’ both had to be restrained but that was all.” He replied although he frowned then added. “Actually, one of Tdem’s guards collapsed to a knee and the other two...seemed to stagger but remained upright. I do not think the King noticed, but I was standing behind them and did.”

“Dane and Roa’ are both hybrids and can sense but not duplicate my shield though I can speak to them through it.” And my eyes turned to Stela thoughtfully. “Stela also hears me behind my shield.” I remarked calmly then dropped my shield and called

for Kit. He glanced between me and the Queen then bowed at the waist and excused himself. He walked quickly to my side and glanced at the three of us before his eyes settled on me.

“Mistress?” He asked tightly as he came to an abrupt halt in front of me. His hair whispered around him, the silver tips dancing briefly then settling.

“You are still angry with me?” I asked and he nodded briefly and folded his arms over his chest. “And how long will you remain angry with me?” I asked softly and leaned toward him while he frowned and his red eyes narrowed.

“Until we kiss and make up.” He replied then added. “Which judging from the speed at which you seem to be gathering men...might be some time from now.”

I removed my hand from Owen and stepped toward Kit my wickedly beautiful Demon. My fingers reached for a handful of his hair which I lifted to my lips while he watched me closely. He smelled of cloves and I leaned into him, placing a palm upon his chest so I might breathe him in. “We could do it now.” I offered and he raised an eyebrow and stared down at me.

“If I touch you now,” he informed me. “I will not be stopping with a simple kiss. Perhaps you should finish whatever it is you are doing here so we might go somewhere and discuss it privately.” He replied and I sighed and stepped back from him. Owen held out his hand for me and I grasped it gently.

“Your job is to ensure Stela doesn’t attack me while I’m working.” I informed Kit while he frowned and glanced at Stela who was looking as if he’d swallowed his tongue. I lifted an eyebrow at Kit and asked. “Unless you don’t think you can handle that either and would like me to get Cursed up here or perhaps Lira and Roral?”

Kit pulled back his lips from his teeth and growled at me, his merlot colored eyes nearly snapping. “You shouldn’t be out in public like this Mistress.” He informed me. “So why don’t we both do what we must so you can be...seen to. I believe its Talon’s turn next.” He replied in a nasty voice.

“I’d take Roa’ before I let Talon touch me again.” I muttered right back at him and Stela looked between us and held his tongue though his eyes widened in surprise and perhaps delight.

“Too bad for you he hasn’t declared.” Kit replied then pulled himself upright and gave me a nonchalant look while my eyes slid to Stela who glanced back at me with a look that said he was all too happy to assist me with whatever I required. Apparently that annoyed Kit who added. “Well aren’t you the fickle one. Perhaps we should wake Marcus....we’ve been here over a week and you haven’t even asked to see him yet. Are you too good for the youngsters now?”

I sucked air in through my teeth and glared at him. “You know Kit...” I growled while Owen shifted at my side. “That might not be such a bad idea.” And his eyes tightened and his lips pressed together angrily.

“Fine.” He growled and snapped his fingers while I watched in horror as a red haze appeared beside us and Marcus was suddenly standing in front of me.

“Damn you Kit.” I growled while Marcus took one look at me and wrapped his arms about my waist and yanked me to his chest. Owen made a low noise and let go of my hand while Stela stood uncertainly his light bronze eyes irritated.

“Who is this Marcus?” Stela demanded and Kit cupped his chin in his hand and watched Marcus try to devour me. His eyes were still angry and he didn’t offer me any assistance.

“One of her hybrids. My Mistress put him here on ice because he’s somehow managed to enslave himself to a Master Vampire and this was the only place where Valentine couldn’t get his claws back into him.”

“He is part of her Court?” Stela demanded angrily.

“Not yet. But he will be...once The Mistress’ Father gets a hold of him. Junior here was raised by a very angry Red Dragoness named Belinda who...doesn’t much care for my Mistress. Of course the woman is insane so...that just might be normal for her.”

“He was raised by a female?” Stela demanded in shock, and I couldn’t see his response but Kit must have nodded because Stela let loose with several very foul Elven

words which I...had never heard strung together in such a way. "So was Dane...but don't let that sour you on him. My Mistress was raised by her Mother also." I lost the rest of the conversation then because Marcus became even more demanding and given the state I was currently in I was having a hard time getting him off me.

At my wits end, I slammed my shield closed again and screamed at Marcus to stop. Apparently he got the message because he finally pulled back enough for me to breathe. He didn't want to let go of me and it took several minutes of threatening before he finally released me. I moved back out of range and directly into Owen's arms.

"Princess." Marcus greeted me and I could tell he was having a hard time keeping himself from reaching for me again. "Or should I say...Your Majesty?" And he took a breath and went to a knee before me. His pale brown eyes never leaving my face. "It is wonderful to see you."

I swallowed and shifted uncomfortably as I stared back at him. "Marcus you look...well." I replied, completely distracted by his sudden appearance and the twin glares I was getting from Kit and Stela. "Please get up...and...no grabbing." I told him firmly while he grinned and clasped his hands behind his back after standing.

"I can't promise anything." He warned me and I raised an eyebrow at his carefree attitude. Apparently rest had done him good. He smiled at my thought and I dropped my shield and turned my head, silently asking Owen to release me. He dropped his arms but continued to stand directly behind me, his body pressed against mine. I turned and looked at Kit, then leaned around him and my eyes met Cursed's where he stood at the base of the steps. I raised an eyebrow at him and he stood straighter then moved toward me when I crooked my finger at him. Cam glanced at me too, and I shook my head which caused him to frown but he held his ground. Cursed went to a knee for the Queen then rose quickly and crossed to us parking himself next to Kit. The two of them side by side was...distracting and I leaned back against Owen for a moment and closed my eyes.

"My Lady?" Cursed asked in his deep voice and he too went to a knee. Must keep up appearances I thought and motioned him to rise.

“I need you to take Marcus off the dais and keep him with you.” I told him and he frowned and stared back at me as if expecting the rest of the story. “I’m going to see if I can free the King and I can’t...be distracted.” I told him and his frown faded as he glanced at Owen then back to me.

“Certainly My Lady, it seems I’m becoming quite adept at...babysitting.” He replied and bowed his head then turned and glanced at Marcus who was also frowning.

“I’d prefer to stay near you.” Marcus replied.

“Marcus I’m going to...do something that might be distressing to you and if you distract me it might not work.”

“Then why do they get to stay?” He asked in a calm reasonable voice. Had he been whining or demanding I might have just had Cursed drag him away but his question was valid and I was feeling badly about having dumped him here, thanks to Kit.

“Because Kit is a Demon and I may need his assistance, he will watch Stela to ensure he doesn’t disrupt me either. Owen needs to assist me because he is a Minor God and I require his aide. You are a Dragon and will likely be...agitated by what I’m going to do and that could be a problem for both of us.”

He frowned and pressed his lips together. His hands were still clasped behind his back and he nodded once then asked. “You are going to do something similar to what you did to me in your room...the night you played your flute?”

My breath caught in my throat and I felt a flash of...was it remorse...guilt? Either way I felt my cheeks heat up and couldn’t quite meet his eyes. “Something like that.” I muttered and he nodded again.

“I will be waiting for you...over there.” He informed me and unclasped his hands so he could point to where Cursed had been standing before he climbed the steps. Undoubtedly he recognized Gareth and Jace as well as Amras.

“Thank you.” Perhaps the Prince and I indicated Cursed. “Would be kind enough to introduce you to the others while you wait?” Cursed frowned but nodded. “This is Cursed whom you have already met. And Owen...whom you might recognize as the white wolf from the conference room. You remember Kit, you first saw him as my black

and silver dragon. And this is Raimondi Stela who is Bronze and...like Gareth and Jace. Gentlemen, this is Marcus...I'm sorry I don't know your surname?" I told him and he bowed from the waist slightly and smiled.

"It is ve' Sca." He informed us. "The pleasure is mine." He replied and glanced at each of the others in turn. Stela seemed surprised and his gaze swung between Kit and Marcus.

"Did you say you he was raised by a Red Dragoness named Belinda?" Stela asked. When Kit nodded he moved his eyes to Marcus and it was clear he was very uncomfortable. "Belinda ve' Sca?" He asked softly and Marcus seemed to stiffen but nodded. "That is a name I have not heard in...a very long time." He breathed then turned to look at me. "And I understand why she would not like you Your Majesty. Then his eyes turned to view the rest of my men spread out below the dais. "Yes indeed." He murmured.

Marcus looked between Stela and myself and added. "Belinda is not my Mother. And I would ask that you do not judge me by any previous association you might have had with her. She has betrayed me for the last time. I am free now and intend to remain so." And while he'd started out in a calm voice, by the time he was done speaking it was clear he was very angry. His pale eyes flashed at me and I stared back at him and offered a small smile.

"And we will be glad to assist you." I told him while he struggled to control his rage and finally nodded.

"Good to know." He breathed then followed Cursed's example and went to a knee before trailing him back to the floor.

"Remind me to be angry with you later." I growled at Kit and he blinked at me and gave me a look that said he was not impressed. I grimaced and then moved away from Owen toward my Grandfather's statue. I couldn't quite handle looking at him from the front so I stood at his back so that I was facing my men but blocked from their view along with the Court. I raised my fingers to his back and gently placed them against the cold smooth marble like skin, and immediately yanked my hand away.

“What is it?” Owen asked from just over my shoulder.

“Stars and seas! I can...feel him.” I breathed softly. My fingers still tingling at the contact and I had sensed something when I touched him, his mind or maybe...his soul? “Owen...he’s trapped in there and he is aware. We have to help him.” Owen reached out and placed his hand upon my Grandfather’s arm and shook his head.

“I do not sense anything Lexi.” Owen told me, pulling back his hand and shaking his head.

I chewed my lip and thought about it for a moment. Why would I be able to sense my Grandfather and Owen couldn’t? Was it because I was his flesh and blood, or because I was part Demon? Maybe it was my ability to heal...or that I was part Elf.

“Kit?”

“Yes Mistress.” Kit replied from just over my other shoulder, I hadn’t heard him approach and jumped.

“Don’t sneak up on me.” I told him with a frown which he ignored. “Put your hand on him and tell me if you sense anything.” His hand came over my shoulder and settled on the middle of my Grandfather’s back. He kept it there for several seconds then pulled away and shook his head.

“I sense nothing.” He replied and I turned to glance at Stela who also moved forward with the same results.

“Why can I sense him and none of you can?” I asked softly, more to myself than any of them. Something was not right about this. He had been given a potion of lust...but my Grandfather had been a good man. How does one combat lust I wondered.

“One does not combat lust Mistress, which is why we are so powerful.” Kit offered and I shook my head.

“That cannot be true Kit. What is lust...is it not an intense desire or craving for self gratification? The spell over came his normal inhibitions and caused him to take...whatever was available to satisfy his craving.” I told them, my mind working through the issue slowly. “If his need was to satisfy himself...then wouldn’t being

satisfied break the spell?" I asked and turned to look up at Kit who was seriously considering my question.

"Can one ever be truly satisfied?" He offered and I nodded, a glimmer of excitement growing in me.

"Yes Kit...I think you can, if only for one brief glorious moment just before the cycle starts up again. But..."

"Perhaps but the moment is fleeting and quickly fades as the need to experience that moment reasserts itself." Kit added.

I shook my head and glanced back at my Grandfather. "Look at him." I told them softly. "He is forever caught in that moment just before satisfaction."

Owen rubbed his chin and considered my words. "Then perhaps what he needs...is that moment." He replied thoughtfully while I nodded and Kit made an agreeable sound.

"I am not the person to give him that moment." I replied firmly while the others glanced at me and nodded.

"But maybe you can assist...someone that is?" Owen asked softly and I nodded and my eyes moved to my Grandmother upon her throne. She must have felt my thoughts upon her, because she turned to look at me and our eyes met. *He needs you.* I whispered in my mind and her eyes widened and she rose gracefully from her chair and walked toward us. My eyes moved to the bottom of the dais and noticed that my parents had moved to join my men and that my Mother was watching us closely, there was a strange look on her face and I tilted my head to the side and our eyes met briefly before she pulled her gaze away.

Lord Aerandir and the other guard trailed behind her and when she stopped in front of us they took up their positions and stood calmly while their eyes moved over us. "What do you require?" She asked calmly and I smiled up at her.

The tips of my ears pinked slightly and I shifted uncomfortably before replying. "I think to release him...he must reach release." I told her, my voice low so it would not

carry far. I took a deep breath and continued. "I think to do that I must assist you in assisting him."

She frowned into my eyes and nodded her head slowly. "And what will this entail?" She asked calmly. I chewed my lip and glanced behind her at the guards, my eyes meeting Aerandir's briefly before I glanced back at her.

"I need to touch you and...give you pleasure." I breathed softly. "I think in this instance...you will be the rod and he will be the chalice. I think this will be...distressing for you but that it will not harm you Ma'am." I added while she stared down at me with a calm look upon her face. "I have never touched a woman." I told her softly.

She smiled then and brushed my cheek with the back of her hand. "To start on your Mother's Mother should not distress you." She replied softly and I swallowed and nodded.

"It is a worthy cause." I told her then smiled. "I think the others...should step back." I would not wish to have them...caught in the moment and perhaps distract us." She looked surprised then smiled.

"No I don't think that would do at all." When she motioned for them to give us space, Aerandir glanced at me and frowned but he did move back and then stood with his arms crossed over his chest. Stela and Kit also moved back while Owen remained near us. She glanced at him inquiringly.

"I may need his assistance. And he is used to my sendings and can restrain himself." I added with a smile. I took a breath and moved us to the front of my Grandfather careful to keep my eyes above his waist. My Grandmother came with me and stood at my side, her eyes moving over his figure.

"I have loved him all these years." She told me calmly and I glanced up at her and I could see the truth in her words shining in her eyes.

"Hold that thought." I told her and moved to stand directly behind her. "Lay your hands upon his body." I whispered and she hesitated then placed a palm directly over his heart while the other slid up to cup his neck. "Do you feel anything?" I asked and she nodded once.

“He...senses me.” She replied and I smiled and looked at Owen who had come around to the front with us and was standing a little behind and to my left side. “He has always sensed me.”

“That is good.” I replied and reached my arms around her and held her in a hug from behind. I placed my palms upon the skin on her upper chest just below her collar bones and closed my eyes. “Do not hold back.” I breathed and felt her stiffen in my arms while I lifted my shields and reached for my red door and shoved it open. Lust rolled off me in red waves and she cried out sharply and her body became taunt in my arms. I poured my desire through her while she shuddered against me. And when I thought she might fall taking us both to the floor, I did to her what I’d done to Stela upon the throne and fed her every pleasure I’d ever known, pouring my satisfaction into her and through her.

Behind my lids I could see a blinding light and instinctively my mind reached for Tdem down by the dais and into his mind I went. I sensed him cry out as I reached for his door and grasped the handle pulling it open. The light in front of me intensified then dimmed and I opened my eyes to see my Grandfather’s form coated in a haze of black and I dropped a hand from my Grandmother and reached for him quickly breathing the word heal as I shoved it up from the center of myself and down my arm into his body. A body that was no longer cold or unmoving. In my arms my Grandmother gasped and I pressed her forward against her husband and lover. Their bodies collided and she cried out again and clung to him while he staggered and pulled her to the floor.

Around us the Court cried murmured loudly and I yelled for Kit who snapped his fingers so that my Grandparents disappeared along with their two guards. I stood for a second staring down at the floor where they had fallen. “We did it.” I breathed then felt the itching rear up inside me and consume me. I staggered slightly and went to the floor already convulsing before Owen could catch me. I felt my head strike the marble and voices yelling above me then shifting colors and I was on something soft as my body continued to convulse and someone grasped my coat and gave it a heave as snaps gave up

the front of me while my partner made eager noises in his throat, then sheathed himself inside me. I sighed and felt my body relax.

“Do you always wait this long or should I feel special?” Marcus asked as he leaned back on his elbows and stared down at me.

I winced and met his pale brown eyes with a touch of chagrin. Marcus? What was Kit thinking? I sighed and reached to push the hair off my face as I watched him search my eyes. Yes, obviously Kit was still angry with me. Or perhaps he just felt this was the better solution. Better for whom I wasn't certain. “I apologize for the circumstances.” I replied, feeling I should say something to ease the awkwardness of the situation I found myself in. He chuckled softly and worked at shoving his pants farther down his legs.

“Don't worry about it. I was beginning to think you'd forgotten about me. I was almost resigned to the fact that you'd left me here in my room to die of boredom, while everyone else got to have all the fun. Although between your Father and that Cat...I'm not sure I'm ever really bored. Just lonely for you.” He replied and I stared up at him in horror.

That Cat? Did he mean Mi...and what did my Father have to do with this? “Ah Marcus...how long have you been awake?” I asked and bit the inside of my cheek when he looked at me and frowned.

“I'm not sure what you mean.” He replied. “I usually sleep six or seven hours a night. I've been here over a week now. It is not yet time to sleep, though it's difficult to tell buried underground as we are.”

“Plug your ears.” I growled, then yelled for Mi who materialized on the bed next to us. She stretched and yawned and blinked her amber eyes at me in question.

“Lexi dear it's good to see you looking...alive again.” She informed me. “You just caused quite a stir. The Court is in an uproar. I'm a little busy at the moment, so what do you want?”

“Have you been spending time with Marcus since he got here?” I asked softly and she blinked at me and wrapped her tail around her feet.

“Someone had to undo the damage that was done him. Your Father and I felt...responsible so we’ve been taking turns.”

“Taking turns.” I repeated and glanced up at Marcus who leaned down and kissed the tip of my nose.

“I declare.” He whispered with a sly grin while I groaned and squeezed my eyes shut.

“There now, I think I’ll leave the two of you alone. You should hurry. The others are searching for you. It seems some of them are annoyed with Kit’s choice, and Ve is angry with the Grey and Bronze and simply refused to assist in finding you.” She replied glancing at Marcus with a grin. She winked at me and I had to stop her as she started to fade out.

“Wait! Can I take him home with me or....what about Valentine?” I demanded and she shrugged and glanced at Marcus.

“That’s up to him dear.” Then she was gone and Marcus was nibbling playfully at my neck which caused me a bad moment.

“I’d prefer this to be under different circumstances.” He told me calmly. “But seeing as how this will likely be one of the few times we’ll ever have alone together. I’m willing to make the most of it...if you will just give me the chance.” He added. What could I say to that? It was clear I needed him and he’d declared so this wasn’t going to be an option.

Marcus sighed with relief when I nodded and then dropped his forehead to mine and admitted. “That is good...because performing in front of a group would have been...embarrassing seeing as how I’ve never done this before.” And I sucked air and swallowed wrong then coughed so hard I nearly choked myself to death. When I could breath again he added. “Don’t worry I understand the mechanics.” And I moaned and threw my arm over my eyes and shuddered. Then he laughed and I wondered how it could be that I, who was younger than he, felt like an old leech for having him in me.

“This won’t be a problem.” He whispered. “I’ve been practicing.” And my eyes popped open as I slowly removed my arm from my face to look at him in surprise.

“With whom have you been practicing?” I nearly growled up at him and the look on my face seemed to please him because he chuckled and reached to pull his shirt over his head while I waited impatiently. His neck looked like it had healed properly and there were no scars visible upon him which would have made me very happy if I wasn’t still waiting for an answer.

His fingers worked to free the rest of the snaps and I was soon lying naked beneath him except for my boots which he decided he liked so we left them on. His fingers stroked my breasts gently and when he lowered his lips to me my eyes nearly rolled back in my head. He kicked off his shoes and I moaned and raised my hips as he moved and shifted about on me so he might get his pants all the way off. When he was done he went back to nuzzling my breasts and smiled shyly down at me. “I’d like to...pleasure you with my mouth.” He informed me and I felt all kinds of clenching and tightening going on in my lower regions at his simple comment. “I’d like to try it on my own...but I may need your assistance.” And after informing me of his plans he gently eased himself out of me and slowly kissed and nibbled his way down my body...taking his own sweet time and nearly causing me to pant in anticipation.

When he was finally seated between my thighs he glanced up at me in wonder. “You are so...beautiful.” He breathed and I pulled air into my lungs and glanced down my body at him. He had seen me once in my nightgown...and I wondered if I was what he had expected. “I know you are different than the others that came through the Everlasting. Different than...Belinda.” He replied and his pale brown eyes seemed pleased. “I just didn’t realize how lovely you would be.” And he leaned forward and kissed the juncture where my leg and hip met. “I’ve dreamed of this since the first night I met you. Did you know that when you left the room I nearly cried? And then I felt your pleasure....and knew I wanted to be the one to do that for you. Then that night you brought me to your room, you looked so lost sitting on your bed playing your flute. It nearly broke my heart, and all I wanted was to touch you...to hold you. You were so lovely...I nearly died when you sent me back to them. And in the meadow...you were naked when you sprang at me and I felt your body pressed to mine for the first time. But

it happened so fast and I didn't get the chance to...really see you." His lashes lowered and he squeezed his eyes shut tightly. "I remember the feel of your teeth and lips on my throat...and I remember thinking...I could die happy with you in my arms, even though I had failed you."

His words left me speechless while inside me it felt as if someone was clenching a hand about my heart. "Marcus..." I breathed. "I am so sorry." I told him and he opened his eyes and stared back at me.

"I'm not." He replied then his tongue flicked out and brushed over my most sensitive parts. I reared up off the bed at the touch. My eyes widened and my breath caught in my throat while he watched me closely and did it again. "Tell me what you like Your Majesty and I will gladly do it." He whispered to me softly as I stared back at him and felt my insides melt. "Please." He urged while I hesitated for a moment before running my hands down my body and helping him to spread myself so I might guide him to the spot I liked best. He was a good student and soon had me writhing and moaning upon the bed. And when he mastered that, he slid a finger into me, working me till I was nearly screaming and begging him to take me.

His actions drove me wild. When he slid up the bed I reached for him and I'm not certain how it happened, but I wished him larger. He murmured at the feel of my fingers tightening around him as I guided him into me, and wrapped my legs about his thighs so that he could bury himself to his hilt.

"You're so tight and wet." He informed me, his voice sounding surprised. I ran my fingers over his shoulders and kissed his chest and neck. He moaned and I squeezed him to me then let my boots drop to the bed and helped him find a rhythm that was pleasing to us both. "I did not know it could feel like this." He breathed raggedly. "The heat is...incredible."

I reached to cup his cheeks and pulled his mouth to mine. "Give me your tongue." I whispered and he slid it out between his teeth. I smiled and pulled him down to me, gently sucking it into my mouth while he pressed his hips into me. Soon his tongue was duplicating the rhythm down below and I urged him on with the low sounds

of pleasure I made for him. “Marcus drop your shield.” I whispered against his ear and he pulled back to look down at me. His eyes were wild, fire engine red and whirling frantically. His face was tight and his cheeks flushed. His shield slipped away and the pent up pleasure and urgency hidden behind his shield slammed into me, so that I gasped and arched against him, my body tightening. He cried out hoarsely when I dropped my shield and shared with him the pleasure he was giving to me. I felt his mind shudder while his body shoved me back to the bed. His face looked frantic as he forced himself into me, riding me hard while I savored the feel of him. His motions became frantic and I watched in awe as he stiffened, his back bowed and felt him explode deep inside me.

Chapter 13

Marcus shuddered and all but collapsed upon my body while I reached for him and held him close. My hands stroked his strong back and I murmured nonsense against his cheek. After several minutes which he used to calm his breathing, he pushed up onto his elbows and stared down at me from eyes that had gone normal but were filled with moisture. His lips brushed my cheek then brow. "Thank you." He whispered while I smiled and held him tightly. In that moment I felt protective of him and I was glad his first time had been...pleasurable for him. I remembered my own and realized I was thankful that Belinda had not taken advantage of him and perhaps warped him for life.

He sighed and wrapped his arms around me then rolled us both over so that he was still within me, while I lay across his body, his legs between mine. His fingers brushed back my hair and then ran down my cheek and over the tip of my ear. "It is because she was waiting." He replied softly.

"For what?" I asked brushing my cheek across his chest and snuggling my hands at the side of his ribs.

“Dragons do not reach sexual maturity until they are older. She had every intention of...breaking me in. She told me so on many occasions. Usually while she forced me to watch...her activities with others.” He informed me, his voice having gone quite and emotionless. “I would not have enjoyed it.” He told me as his hands worried at my back under my hair. “Not even a little, not like this, here with you.”

I raised my face and glanced at him. He looked...calm but there was a touch of distress in his pale brown eyes. “We do not need to discuss it, if it is going to upset you Marcus. I am happy just to...enjoy this moment.” I told him and felt him jerk inside me and my eyes widened while he gave me a lopsided grin. He had not yet gone soft and was in fact as big as he’d been earlier...perhaps even bigger. Then my eyes widened even more as I remembered what I had done to him before we’d started.

Marcus raised an eyebrow at me and chuckled. “Mi told me of your ability.” He informed me. “I didn’t think you would...grace me. But I’m not going to argue the results.” And his hands reached for my hips and he raised himself up against me, his fingers pressing me down so that I closed my eyes and simply allowed the pleasure of the feel of him to flood my body.

“Mmmm feels good.” I told him and he chuckled again and urged me up so I was seated on his lap. His fingers ran down the front of my body.

“You are so perfect.” He breathed and I chewed my lip and rested upon him. “Your skin is beautiful and the color of your eyes...” He whispered and took a deep breath. “I sound like an idiot don’t I?” He asked with a wry grimace. “I’m sure you hear this all the time.” Then he lowered his eyes while I placed my hands on his chest and leaned forward slightly.

“I would be an idiot to say yes, to either question.” I teased him and he lifted his eyes to mine and flushed. “Marcus....this is all pretty new to me too. I was a virgin until just a few weeks ago myself. So please.” I told him with a grin. “Feel free to say whatever you like. I can’t think I’d ever grow tired of hearing your thoughts on this subject. Especially if you really mean it.”

“In that case...” He replied and pushed himself up onto his elbows. “I love your breasts.” And his lips closed over a nipple while my eyes slid to half mast and I felt a wave of pleasure flood my body. When his teeth nipped me gently I sucked in air and pressed myself against him. He raised a hand and cupped me then kneaded and sucked my nipple until I was breathing heavy. My hips moved of their own accord and he made a pleased sound while kissing his way to my other breast. His hands slid to my waist and he lay back upon the bed and held me loosely as his eyes narrowed. “I like this.” He whispered. “I like how your eyes glow and the way you feel when you take my entire length into your body.”

His words urged me on and I leaned forward and placed my hands on his chest then lifted myself nearly off him before slowly sliding back down again. And then I moved on him, my body increasing the tempo until I was breathing hard and his eyes shifted to Dragon and began whirling beneath me. “Come here.” He urged me, reaching to pluck me off his lap so he might lift me up his body until I was straddling his face. “I want to taste you again.” He breathed as his tongue worked its magic and I clung to the headboard. When I came and listed sideways onto the bed he slipped out from under me and wrapped his arms around me from behind then slid his fingers between my legs and into me causing me to moan and push back against him. He lifted my hips and positioned himself to pull me onto him while I hugged a pillow and forced myself not to writhe at the feel. He came down on his hands over me and his body stroked me deeply until I cried out from the feel and he growled softly at my frantic noises.

“I can’t decide what I enjoy more...tasting you or being in you.” He breathed against my cheek and I mewled and pressed myself back against him. “Hmmm...I want another taste.” He purred then pulled out and urged me off my knees and onto my back while he settled himself between my thighs. He took a few moments to remove my boots, and then lowered his mouth to me. I was soon moving for him as he brought me several times. My fingers dug into the bedding and my eyes were squeezed tightly shut. All I could feel was the pleasure he gave as his tongue and fingers worked me.

“Marcus please.” I begged softly, my breath coming in pants.

“Oh yes.” He hummed and moved up my body while I lifted my hips to him silently begging him to take me. “Say it again.”

I moaned as he entered me and whispered. “Please, please, please. Oh god Marcus...” And he growled again. His hips slammed against mine over and over while I reached for my red door and cracked it open. My pleasure spilled out over the both of us. Marcus let out a strangled cry and I felt his orgasm in both my mind and body.

“I think I’ve died and gone wherever it is we immortals go to when they aren’t here anymore.” He groaned against my ear when he’d recovered enough to speak. He’d flopped forward onto me, and I’d been too exhausted to do much more than rest my arms and hands on his back. I felt nearly as weak as I had two days ago and simply lay there basking in our considerable afterglow.

“I think you deserve a first time award...” I husked back. He was heavy and cutting off my air but I didn’t really care at the moment. He moaned and pushed himself to the side then lifted off me settling me along side of his body. My leg slipped over his thigh and I snuggled against him, resting my head on his shoulder and my arm over his chest.

“What did you do to me?” He breathed while his lips pressed kisses across my forehead. “That was....freaking fantastic.”

“Mmmmm.” I muttered and closed my eyes. “I’m part Lust Demon. That was...the softer side of what you’ve felt before.” I felt him nod and his hand slipped over my waist. With my eyes closed and cuddled against his body I felt a lassitude slip through my mind and yawned.

“Feel free to share your softer side with me...anytime.” He whispered and kissed me gently. “Thank you.” I heard him whisper as I fell asleep in his arms.

The door slammed open and both Marcus and I jerked. Me because I’d been sleeping, and Marcus from the unexpectedness of it. I glanced over my shoulder and sighed then put my head back down on Marcus’ chest while his hands spread under my

hair and his body tensed. “What are you doing here Roa’? I don’t believe you were invited.”

I heard the door shut and lifted my eyes to Marcus who was staring at Roa’ with narrowed eyes. “Talon is angry that you managed to once again evade him.” Roa’ informed me and I closed my eyes and settled back against Marcus.

“And that concerns us how?” I muttered.

“He sent me to find you and bring you back.”

“Hmmm....and he thinks that’s going to work why?” I asked then lifted my head and glanced over my shoulder at him. “I was in the middle of something when you barged in here. I suggest you toddle on back to your master and tell him I’ll be back when I feel like it.”

Roa’ growled and his silver eyes narrowed and he looked like he was holding himself stiffly. “You are a most vexing female.” He hissed while I stared at him in disbelief. My head swung back to Marcus who looked like he wanted to laugh but was forcing himself not to.

“Did he just call me vexing?” I asked and Marcus nodded solemnly.

“He looks serious.” Marcus added.

“He always looks serious.” I informed Marcus. “The only time I’ve ever seen him laugh was when I threatened to make Talon’s manhood smaller. For some reason he thought that was funny.” Marcus looked shocked at my comment then his eyes got a sly look in them and he glanced down at himself.

I couldn’t help but follow his gaze and noticed he was...happy to see me again. Happy and...considerably larger than he’d been previously. “You really must not like him.” He replied. “I’m glad you like me.” I smiled and ran my finger down his chest toward the red curls at the juncture of his thighs. He hummed and moved his hand in a circular motion on my back as I drew closer.

“Oh yes...I like you very much.” I told him and delicately wrapped my fingers around him while he pulled air through his teeth and his eyes closed for just a moment. I stroked down his length while behind me Roa’ let out a strangled noise. “Marcus have

you met Roa'?" I asked while my fingers moved teasingly up and down the length of him. "He's one of the ten that were made for me. But he refuses to behave like it because he's Talon's lackey boy and is either too afraid of him or perhaps he's simply not interested in declaring. I can't decide if he's gay and Talon's play toy or if Talon might be afraid of the competition."

Marcus' eyes tried to focus on Roa' behind me. When I felt Marcus tense beneath me I flipped over and grabbed Roa' who was reaching for me with a very angry look on his face. I caught his thumb and bent it backwards watching calmly as he hissed and went to the floor while I held him and slowly sat up on the edge of the bed. "Naughty naughty." I told Roa'. "No touching unless you declare first." I whispered as I leaned forward. My breasts were at eye level with his face and he seemed... mesmerized by the proximity. "I didn't appreciate what your master did to me today. And I especially don't appreciate being roughed up by his lackey." I breathed as I leaned toward him, still holding his thumb.

"He's not my master." Roa' growled and just managed to lift his eyes to mine.

"Really...and yet you follow him around like you're his whipping boy. If not your master then what is he to you? Your lover perhaps?" Roa's eyes moved back down my body and I felt an imp ride me and spread my legs so that he was kneeling between them. I let go of his hand slowly and watched him.

"He is not my lover! He is my A'meo." He breathed and I stared down at him not recognizing the word.

"Father." Marcus supplied. "He claims the Gray is his father."

Hmmm...maybe I should learn Dragon, I thought then glanced back at Roa' who was busy feasting his eyes upon me. "Roa' have you ever...been with a woman?" I asked. His eyes registered my question and he jerked back staring up at me angrily while he bared his teeth and flared his nostrils. Marcus rolled onto a hip behind me curling his body around mine and propping himself up on an elbow.

"You would not be his first. Although I sense a deep pool of resentment around his interest in you. He seems torn...intrigued because you are a Queen yet scornful

because you are female. I don't think he cares much for women...only in how they might satisfy him. However it seems you've impressed him in some manner and he's having a problem repressing his feelings of...excitement at the prospect of...giving himself to one who is worthy. He doesn't want to want you, and still thinks you're...a threat...but I can't say to what." Marcus added softly, his voice holding a note of disbelief. "Arrhhgh." He growled and sat up abruptly. His arm reached around me from behind and when he would have pulled me away from the edge of the bed, Roa' grabbed my knee and held me in place between them. "Release my Queen." Marcus hissed again and moved to his knees.

"What is it Marcus?" I asked my eyes focused on Roa' who was holding me firmly while staring up at Marcus and in his eyes I could see...his need.

"What he wants is...unnatural." Marcus breathed and I turned to glance up at him a little dismayed by his reaction.

"What does he want?" I asked and Marcus' lips thinned and he glared down at Roa'.

Roa' looked up at him and lifted an eyebrow. "You are young and selfish." He replied and Marcus mumbled under his breath. "What I wish is not new to her..." Oh and what might that be? I thought and felt Marcus' arm tighten in surprise against me. Well last I checked I wasn't into kinky sex so whatever it was must not be that bad. Not if I'd already been doing it.

Roa' frowned up at Marcus then moved his eyes to me. He took a deep breath then lowered his silver eyes while his fingers relaxed and became nearly a caress.

"It doesn't really matter does it?" I asked as I pulled my legs closed and leaned back against Marcus. "Until you declare, you won't be doing anything at all."

"Yet you are here with him." Roa' growled and I smiled and tilted my head up toward Marcus who was looking at me strangely.

Marcus glared down at him and replied. "I may be young...but it was my arms she woke in not yours! My body that satisfied her, not yours. And I'm not the one

letting someone else dictate my standing. I am now a part of her Court while you...are not.”

“Marcus is now part of my Court as he was always intended to be. By the way, you’ve been spending time with my Dad so you do know that Talon isn’t your real father right?”

Roa’s look turned mutinous and his eyes seemed to flash. “An act of birth does not change who I am.” He growled softly.

“And who might that be? No one here seems to believe Drow exist on this world. Yet your Mother obviously found my Father and his partners and pled her case successfully or tricked them as the case may be. Did she give you to Talon to raise? Or did he take you by force as he seems to enjoy? Is that why you believe Talon is your father?” I was curious and asked.

“You do not know me.” He replied from where he knelt before us. “I was raised...the way Dragons are meant to be, not by a...female!”

I sighed and considered him then spoke for Marcus’ benefit. “Roa’ here has been living in the Everlasting.” And felt Marcus jerk behind me. “Where he and Talon’s favorite past time seems to be turning into black blobs with big red eyes and really sharp teeth. After which they joined in with the Wild Host to kidnap women and drag them into the Everlasting. Once there they rape them, I assume to death since I have no proof to the contrary, and was informed they don’t have any females where they were. True Drow don’t really like women...or maybe they just like them too well. I can’t really tell. In either case, that was what they thought to do to me. Rape me probably until I no longer could service them at which point they would have probably slit my throat. In any case I’m sure it would have been neither pleasant nor quick.”

I don’t think Marcus knew what to say to that, but laughing wasn’t the reaction I was expecting. Even Roa’ seemed shocked at Marcus’ response.

“Why do you find her words amusing?” Roa’ demanded while Marcus settled down to chuckles and gave me a firm squeeze.

“I merely smart mouthed her then demanded she release me and found myself writhing upon the floor in pleasure too intense to be called enjoyable. I can only imagine what she must have done to you.” Marcus informed us then chuckled again at Roa’s angry look.

“You assume we did not succeed?”

Marcus made a rude noise and shook his head. “If you had succeeded you would not be sitting on the floor right now wistfully looking at her and imagining what it would feel like to be doing...what it is you’d like to be doing.” He replied.

“What do you know...you who were raised by a female?” Roa’ replied scornfully and I was surprised that Marcus did not seem offended, merely sad.

“You had advantages that I did not but I would wager you have never seen a Dragoness that has been warped by the Everlasting and cannot begin to compare my life to your own. What I was raised by was more male than female though her face and all but certain parts of her physical form appear to be perfection. Female Dragons upon this world are beautiful but...warped. To be raised by a Drake should have prepared you to humbly serve your Queen. But it appears this Talon person has done more to warp you than Belinda has done to me. At least I am able to appreciate our Queen for her strengths.”

“She fights...unfairly.” Roa’ defended himself. “She used sorcery on us and Talon...became preoccupied with the color of her eyes and...hair.” He murmured seeming confused at the memory. Talon had told me to choose and then hadn’t really given me the option when he’d rushed me to the bed. I couldn’t help wondering if Roa’ felt...annoyed at me because I had gone to Talon instead of choosing him. My thoughts were cut off abruptly at Marcus’ words.

“She is a woman.” Marcus replied and I frowned and moved slightly in his arms. Marcus brushed my cheek with his and added. “And as such, she will be the mother of our race here on this world. She has been drilled with the knowledge of her duty since she was but a small child. As a Queen it is her nature to fight to win, whatever it takes. How dare you condemn her for doing whatever necessary to ensure her safety? You act

as if her actions were dishonorable which is foolish. My Queen is honorable and I would wager she did not attack without warning or provocation. To be honorable does not require her to fight fair! I don't know about you, but I plan to become one she cares for. In my experience...it is a much safer place to be."

I turned to look at him in surprise and he smiled grimly. "I didn't realize you....understood me so well." I told him as his pale brown eyes stared down into mine thoughtfully and he took a deep breath and told me.

"The differences between yourself and....Belinda were clear to me from the very beginning. Mi and Roark simply helped to clarify some of the finer points." He added with a wry grin. "And being here with you today has proven to me that to be with you is...more than I could have ever dreamed. Belinda has always been cold and cruel, but like you she is very territorial of what she perceives as hers. However, where you wish to nurture and protect, she is only concerned with her own pleasures and ensuring no one has more than she herself can control through fear and pain.

Earlier you seemed displeased at the thought that I might have been with some other woman. I promise you of all your men...I am the only one that has not. Believe me when I say, I have never touched any other female for pleasure either consenting," and he flicked his eyes to Roa', "or through force. I know now that I was created for you alone my Queen...and I swear to you that I am yours. Know this, I am honored to take my place amongst your Court and will do all within my power to keep you safe and satisfied." He informed me and his voice held a hint of steely determination which caused my pulse to race.

"And what of Belinda and Valentine?" I couldn't help but ask.

He breathed deeply several times and held me tighter. "Belinda is nothing to me now. Because of her envy she betrayed me to that monster and I...I wish you had killed her when you had the chance." He breathed against my temple. "It pains me to think you held back because of me. But at the time I did not understand. I thought you a Faerie Princess and could not fathom why you would consider me yours. And Valentine's

insane rage had us both so wound up it was difficult to think through the haze of red that coats everything he touches.”

I smiled and brushed his cheek with my fingers. “As I recall, you yelled at me and called me a fool.” I informed him in a teasing voice. “That was hardly a declaration of love.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “I was afraid to believe that you would want me. And I had never experienced anger on my behalf. I have been exposed to temper tantrums all my life. One does not grow up with a warped Dragoness without learning to....control his emotions and tread lightly. But I couldn’t understand how you could...believe me to be yours and be willing to kill to protect me without...wanting something from me in return. It was very confusing to me. Confusing and tempting at the same time. It is not easy for me to trust.” He informed me calmly.

“I need to apologize.” I told him while he looked at me and seemed to hold his breath. “I should have sent you here the night I brought you to our den. I was overly harsh with you and it was wrong for me to put you back into a situation where I knew you were being tortured. It was cruel of me. But I had to be certain and I could not risk the others.”

“You did the right thing.” He replied softly. “By sending me back you helped me realize I had choices, as limited as they were. In my life, I had never been offered choices before. I don’t know if I can explain this so you will understand, but by sending me back you truly freed me. And for that I thank you.”

I chewed my lower lip and finally admitted. “It nearly killed me to leave you with them the first time. When you left the conference room it felt as if you took a piece of my heart with you. And when I called you to me with my flute...it was even worse to send you back. I could see the healing I had worked was being undone but I could not choose for you. You had to do that yourself. I am sorry that they hurt you but when your proximity to me roused you from your stupor, and you warned me the night of the Mayor’s party....I knew you had to be saved. I just couldn’t send you back to them again...I didn’t trust Valentine not to kill you for having followed me off the carpet. I

just couldn't keep you with me. Dane had been indiscrete and I knew I risked us all if you declared."

He nodded. "Belinda was livid when she discovered you were gold. In fact I have never seen her so angry. Partially it was that anger that allowed me to fly with you that night. At first I hoped to free myself of you all. But your father came after me and brought me back. If you had not attacked me I would have done exactly what you suspected...and probably worse. Though I'd like to believe I could have stopped myself from actually harming you."

I nodded and placed my hand upon his thigh at my side and gave him a slight squeeze. "And what of the hold Valentine has over you? Have you spoken to my Dad or Mi of it? Can you tell us?"

"Yes, though I'm not sure it will help you. I believe we have provided me with the ability to deny his control." Then he admitted. "Though both your Father and Mi agree the only way to be certain, is to...eliminate him."

"Well, maybe I'll take Claudius up on his offer and simply have him get rid of Valentine...assuming the Council doesn't do it first." I replied and then abruptly jerked upright.

"What is it?" Marcus demanded and on the floor Roa' tensed. He'd been following our conversation closely and it was clear he was confused but interested. His silver eyes narrowed and flicked over my body.

"We need to go. We have to get back." I told them both and reached for my dress which was shoved into a heap at the end of the bed. Marcus released me slowly, almost reluctantly, and Roa' got up off the floor and stepped back. His face covered in a wistful look.

Marcus stood and began pulling on his own clothing while I snapped my snaps and then rooted around for my boots which were off the other side and buried under the covers. I stomped my feet into them and grimaced at their four inch heels then sighed. My eyes met Marcus' and my breath caught in my throat at the look on his face. "Please

don't be sad." I whispered as I slipped into his arms and held him tightly. "We will help you."

He sighed and clasped me to him dropping his face into my hair and I heard him inhale deeply. "It is not that." He breathed against me. "You are my first, and I wish to remember this moment forever." He whispered while I felt my eyes fill and hugged him tighter.

Chapter 14

Roral and Lira were waiting for us outside the door. They came to attention and their eyes swept my face and body curiously before they went to a knee and rose quickly. “You look...recovered Your Majesty.”

“Thanks Lira.” I replied with a lopsided smile and reached my arm through Marcus’. “I had a bit of help getting here and a lot of help afterward.” And glanced up at Marcus who was nearly preening he was so pleased. “Speaking of which, where is Kit?” I asked, pulling my eyes off Marcus and glancing between Roral and Lira.

“Owen is just down the hall with the King and...the Princes. Your Demon took the others and they have left the Sidhe. We will escort you to the door and Owen will...ferry us home.” Roral informed me as we walked down the hall in the direction Lira indicated.

“And what about the Queen and...the King?” I asked my eyes turning curiously up at Lira who was walking at my side. He had brushed my body twice already and he looked...needy. His beautiful two tone eyes met mine and I nearly stumbled when he let

me see the fire that burned within him for just a brief second before he blinked and his eyes shuttered back to being calm.

“The Great Room was...chaos when you left. You managed to incite the Court and...it was difficult to extract ourselves. A runner arrived just a short while ago and your parents will meet us at the Sidhe doors. That is all I know Your Majesty.”

On the other side of me Roral snorted softly and I turned to glance at him. “You wish to add something?” I asked and he turned to grin at me and his pale green eyes looked amused.

“Your Majesty, what Lira oh so carefully neglected to tell you is that we were set upon by the ladies of the Court.” He replied with a grimace and I frowned and glanced between them.

“All of you?” I demanded and felt my blood pressure shoot up about thirty points. “And Kit and Owen refused to assist you in getting out of the Great Hall?” I growled while even Roa’ nodded. “And when you say....set upon...what exactly do you mean?”

Roral swallowed at my tone of voice but offered a small smile. “Your Majesty none of us were...completely separated from our clothing.” He was quick to assure me in a small voice.

“Though it was a near thing.” Lira added softly. My gaze flicked amongst the three of them angrily. The women of the Court were Seelie, beautiful, and highly desirable. That they had been overcome by my actions and gone after my men was....well damn it! It was no one’s fault by my own! That thought just seemed to make me madder so that by the time I stepped up to the others they were all wearing wary looks on their faces. Lord Aerandir was with them and he looked...concerned but said nothing. Obviously I was unshielded and it was likely that my aura was pulsing a dark nasty yellow-green color. Owen looked...edgy as if he wasn’t sure if he should run for it while he still could.

“Lexi?” Owen breathed softly while the others held perfectly still. He was closest to me and I grabbed him and pulled him down for a kiss. He made a surprised

sound then wrapped his arms around me and crushed me to him. When he let me up I turned to Tdem and his arms were already opened wide, while on his beautiful face was an eager smile. His palm slid up my leather dress and cupped my breast while I rubbed myself against the front of him. His forehead dropped to mine when he pulled his lips from me and we stood there for a second, both of us pulling air into our lungs. When he released me I turned to Cursed who growled softly and yanked me against his chest. His kiss was demanding and he nearly bent me over backwards while he plundered my mouth. My tongue caught on a tooth and he groaned at the metallic taste and sucked it hard while pleasure poured into my core and filtered out to my limbs. When he finished with me he stood me up and pressed me against his body while I clung to him and made small noises.

“I’m sorry.” I breathed against his chest, just loud enough so that the others could hear me. Cursed growled low and soft and I pulled back and glanced up at him in surprise. He was looking behind me and I turned to find myself staring up at Cam who was glaring down at me with his arms crossed. His aura was red orange and nearly pulsing he was so agitated. Cursed crossed an arm over my chest and pulled me back against him.

“Remember your place.” Cursed growled and Cam flared his nostrils and slipped to a knee before me while his pale green eyes never left my face. Behind me I felt Cursed tense.

“Your Majesty.” He breathed and I nearly squirmed at the look he gave me. Roral and Lira had moved to flank him and both were standing with their legs shoulder width apart, hands loose at their sides. They acted like I was in danger of being attacked at any second. Tdem’s guards were ranged behind them and I could see their red eyes glowing from my peripheral vision. Marcus stood at the edge of the group with Roa’ beside him. Both looked tense.

“Cursed release me.” I told him softly and he hesitated and made a negative sound which I ignored as I leaned forward, asking with my body to be released. His arm slipped away and I took the step forward that put me within arms reach of Cam. His eyes

narrowed and he watched me closely as I bent at the waist toward him. I raised my hand and slipped it into his hair, holding him for my kiss. My lips brushed his softly and when he made an anguished sound I closed my eyes and leaned into the kiss, sending him the pleasure and release I'd felt earlier within Marcus' arms. He went limp and nearly pulled my arm from its socket as I held him up by the hand I'd buried at the back of his head. Roral and Lira reached to assist me from behind and I glanced over my shoulder at Owen who raised an eyebrow at me but said nothing. Aerandir looked confused and glanced from Cursed to Cam. "I gave him...release. He will be fine. Owen could you please...send him home?" I asked. And perhaps you should send..." and I glanced around at the men for a moment trying to decide who was best to send.

"I will go with him Your Majesty." Lord Aerandir informed me and my jaw nearly hit the floor. His gave me a sly smile and nodded then went to a knee before me. "The Queen has given me leave to attend you." He informed me while I struggled to keep my eyes on him and not look at Cursed.

"What happened to Cael?" I finally asked. "I promised him we would take him with us."

"I believe he traveled ahead with your Demon." Aerandir replied and I breathed a sigh and nodded, motioning for him to stand while Cursed assisted me back to my feet. I couldn't help myself and moved my eyes to search Cursed's face, happy to see that he was unperturbed. I pulled a breath into my lungs and sent up a plea that this would not become...more awkward that it already was.

"Do not worry My Lady. We have made peace." Cursed informed me while I felt my smile become just a little sickly as I nodded. Uncles and nephews, mentors, fathers, brothers, a king and princes....this was becoming just a little complicated even for me.

"Owen if you would?" I asked my hand shaking just a little, while Aerandir moved to stand next to Cam.

Aerandir leaned forward and brushed his knuckles down my cheek while I stared back at him. "I find I cannot let you work through all these...issues alone. Not after

your recent...misfortune...which I feel somehow responsible for.” He told me, and then leaned down to place a kiss upon my brow. “I would pay the debt between us...thus I will honor you with my service, just as you have honored...my house.”

“Then we will see you shortly and I thank you.” I told him while he smiled then disappeared along with Cam.

“Shall we?” Tdem asked and reached for my arm, tucking it firmly into his own. The others spread out around us and Cursed took point leading us down the hall at a good clip. I thought it odd that we met no one along the way.

Tdem leaned down and informed me. “They are still...recovering from your...most glorious efforts Your Majesty.” And he smoothed his fingers over mine and gave them a gentle squeeze. His golden hair brushed against my arm and I felt my cheeks go pink while he chuckled. We’d walked in silence for several minutes when Tdem leaned down and breathed against my ear. “He will not thank you for sleeping with his father. And neither will I.” And I jerked and nearly stumbled.

“Then perhaps you should have convinced him to remain here.” I growled back at him and lifted both my shields. This was hardly the subject to be discussing in the Sidhe halls. I did not wish to get Aerandir into trouble from any wayward thoughts. My eyes swung to first Marcus and then Roa’. Both of them were looking at me curiously. Behind them one of Tdem’s guards walked...but his red eyes were focused on me and I knew...he sensed me.

He sighed and nodded. “He feels responsible for his niece’s actions...however I suspect he misses the Prince and wishes to be near him...away from here. My Nephew’s time here has...hardened him. Yet you have managed to sooth his edges and helped him find himself again. One day he will be a fine King.”

“Unless you have a child of your own! And even if you do not, it will be a very very long time from now.” I replied pulling my eyes off Tdem’s guard and feeling a morbid sense of dismay to be speaking of such things. He glanced down at me and chuckled then sighed and stroked my fingers.

“You could give me that child Lexi my love.” He whispered and I stared up at him wide eyed.

“But I am not...fertile.” I breathed back my voice so low he strained to hear it. A sexy smile lit his face and his black eyes caressed mine.

“For the Drakes you are not. But for me...you could be, if you but chose.”

We walked while I mulled it over in my mind and something niggled just under the surface which eluded me each time I reached for it. “How do you know this?” I finally asked.

“Because we danced.” He replied and I frowned and remembered the look upon my Mother’s face when I had told her of Tdem’s dance of lights and how I had swallowed his light and taken it into my body. I stopped in the middle of the hall, my feet refusing to move me forward as I bent at the waist and placed my hands upon my thighs.

I squeezed my eyes shut tight and reached for Goldy shoving at her so that she glanced up at me in alarm. In my mind I asked the question I was...nearly too afraid to speak out loud. *Was I pregnant?* I demanded when she glanced up at me and her eyes whirled softly. Marcus and Roa’ both made a distressed sound and I ignored them. *Do you wish to be?* Was her response, which was really no response at all! I didn’t know how to answer and stared down at her helplessly. Her head shifted and she seemed to glance over my shoulder toward Tdem. *If so...heal him.* She told me and I sank to my knees with a sharp cry while around me my men gathered.

“Lexi, what is it?” Owen demanded and I squeezed my eyes shut tight and felt every piece of the puzzle fall into place. All the comments Goldy had made about me and the women of Faerie not being the problem! Stars and seas, it was the men! They were...sterile. Goldy pulled her eyes off Tdem and tilted her head as she glanced up at me in approval. *Heal him, as you’ve healed your others.* She whispered and I made a strangled sound as I realized...Amras, Cursed and Cam were all...viable. And Lira and Roral too...because the day I’d been poisoned, I had healed them both. *Only the two.* Goldy told me sharply then blinked up at me. *Which two?* I thought lifting my head

from my thighs where it had fallen. My hand braced me against the floor as I stared down at her. A picture formed in my mind of Amras and Cursed's faces. *Only the two.* She repeated and I frowned and knelt upon the floor while I could hear Marcus' voice speaking softly.

I bit my lip and squeezed my eyes shut tightly, feeling a little shell shocked. Only the two she said and it was crystal clear to me. It was only the two...I had taken as lovers. Goldy rumbled in approval and turned her back upon me as she made herself comfortable upon her rocky bed. Her golden eye blinked up at me calmly as her tongue flicked out just before she added. *Heal them all.* I moaned softly and shook my head thinking that that was not a good plan, not a good plan at all.

I took a moment to gather my scattered thoughts and pushed myself onto my knees. Hands reached to assist me to stand and I brushed back my hair from my face. Taking a moment to tidy it behind my ears. I bit my lip and before I could stop myself I reached for Tdem cupping his face between my palms, I closed my eyes and I pushed healing down my arms and into him. He murmured at the tingling sensation and blinked down at me when I opened my eyes. I gazed up at him, confused and amazed at what I had just done. And for a moment I simply stared at him, and then I reached to pull him down to me, gently kissing his lips. "Lle naa eithel." You are well, I told him not knowing the word for 'whole' which is what I truly meant to say.

He looked at me oddly and held my sides with the tips of his fingers. "Thank you Your Majesty. But I think the question we would all like to have answered is...are you?" He replied in a confused voice. I dropped my forehead to his chest and felt my body trembling. What had I done? I wondered as I slipped my hands down his chest and around his waist allowing him to hold me gently.

Behind me I heard Roa' whisper. "She asked her little one if she was...I do not know the word." And Owen's voice asking something I could not hear. "I do not know...only that she then asked...which two. I could not hear the little one speak."

And I heard Marcus clearly reply. "Pregnant. She asked her Dragon if she was pregnant." And the hall went dead silent while I stood trembling in Tdem's arms.

Cursed made a strangled sound of pain and I jerked and turned to look at him. “No!” I nearly yelled. Then pulled air into my lungs while their faces looked frozen, eyes wide. I took a deep breath and added more calmly. “No I am not pregnant. I am fine. We are all fine.” I told them while my eyes moved to Cursed who looked as if he was recovering from a knife wound to the heart. “I am sorry, I did not mean to...alarm anyone. I just...realized something. Something I cannot discuss here.” I told them and held up my hand indicating the Sidhe.

“Why did you tell me I am...well?” Tdem replied in a low voice and I dropped my eyes to the floor and chewed my lip. “Your Majesty...” He breathed and turned me back to him then placed a finger under my chin and lifted my face. “For what reason...did you heal me?” He asked me softly and I stared back at him and felt just a little frantic.

“Please Tdem...do not ask me. I...can not say it. Not here.” I told him. He searched my eyes and must have found something there that convinced him of my sincerity because he finally nodded and cupped my chin. When he leaned down to kiss me I moaned and clutched him tightly.

“Vee’ lle nauva amin mal-tari.” As you will my golden Queen he replied against my mouth.

“Thank you.” I breathed then pulled myself together and turned to Cursed who looked...like he’d just been to Hell and back. I gave him a tentative smile and he looked at me as he did not know how to react. “You are also well.” I told him. “As is Amras.” He frowned and stared back at me in confusion. “Which will be important to you all...should you wish to have children of your own some day.”

“Lexi what have you done?” Owen asked me, his voice sounding...strange. My eyes moved to him and his dark brown eyes looked almost alarmed.

“I have...evened the playing field.” I told him softly and watched as his eyes widened. “I could not...not once I realized.” I told him and turned to glance at Tdem. “Since I already had.” And I turned to glance at Cursed. “Though it was not intentional... except for the last.”

“I think we should...hurry.” Owen informed the group and glanced around then snapped his fingers and we found ourselves standing in the hall near where I had burned my images into the wall. Tdem reached for me and pulled me into his arms.

“Here is where I must leave you.” He breathed against my hair. “But I will see you again...very soon Your Majesty.” He promised. “And perhaps you will give me your decision.” He replied.

“Tdem...I already have.” I told him then pulled from his arms and moved quickly down the hall to where my parents stood waiting.

I don't remember much of what was discussed with my parents. I was too distracted with what had just occurred and trying to figure out what if anything I was going to tell Amras and Cursed. And worse, how was I going to explain any of this to Gareth and Jace. Just thinking about Gareth's reaction made my heart tighten and I felt an overwhelming need to see them both, I hugged my parent's distractedly and called for Owen. “I'm sorry, but we have to go, right now.” I told them and ran for the door. The others sprinted after me and after frightening the guards I laid my hands upon the portal it shifted and we stepped out into the night air. “Quickly Owen.” I cried and felt the ground shift beneath me.

We arrived in the middle of our front room and I stared around us in horror at the destruction everywhere. “Owen, my weapons.” I whispered and he flicked his hand at me and my spiked boot heels were suddenly shorter. I was armed with several knives including the one Gareth and Jace had given me as well as the blade he always gave me which was strapped about my waist. I dropped my shields and cried out for Gareth and Jace while Owen provided Marcus with weapons. “Where are they Owen?” I demanded and he closed his eyes and something brushed past me.

“The caverns.” He hissed back and we turned and ran for the hall.

KIT! I yelled in my mind and a black and red haze appeared next to me.

“Mistress hurry we've been overrun by Vampires.” He told me then winked out.

“Owen, I need my chopsticks.” I told him and my black lacquer hair holders appeared in my hand. Owen yanked the door open and we piled into the second hall then

down toward the sauna. As we passed my doorway I skidded to a halt, feeling a draft of cold air coming from under the closed door. My dress flapped around my legs and I reached down and unsnapped several of the snaps. Lira and Roral also stopped as did Marcus who had a pained expression on his face. I watched him for half a second and realized his eyes looked glassy. My gaze moved to Owen and I motioned for him to look at Marcus. "Send him back to my parents now." I breathed and watched as Marcus disappeared.

I reached for the door handle and shoved it open staring in horror at the body upon the floor. I recognized Calvin who had been with me when I'd gone to dinner with my parents. Above him three other men were standing in the middle of my room. Two of them were clearly Vampires while the third...was Dean. Their mouths were covered in blood and only the fact that they held him up gave me hope that he was still alive unlike poor Calvin whom they'd already murdered and left for carrion. Vampires do not eat the dead. But judging by the amount of blood...everywhere Dean might not last long either. There was blood on my floor at his feet, I assumed it came from his neck as it had run down his chest, soaking up the light blue shirt he was wearing and turning it nearly black

"Let him go." I growled as I stepped into the room followed closely by Cursed and Owen. Roral and Lira covered the hall while Roa' moved into the room and to my left.

"What are they?" He breathed and from the corner of my eye I could nearly see his breath upon the air. Clearly they had been here for a while. Dean was...unable to lift his head though his hand moved at the sound of our voices. .

"Bloodless ones...Kindred." Lira breathed with a touch of disgust in his voice. "The one they hold between them is Lupine. Do not harm him."

"Roa' wood through their hearts." I advised him. "Or take their heads if you can...or even better. Areth!" I yelled and my gnome appeared in a black haze.

"Mistress...you are back!" She breathed her black eyes glancing around at the group in agitation.

“They need help in the cavern...a little sunshine to warm our cold guests up.” I told her quickly and she smile and winked out while the vampire on the left dropped his hold on Dean and came for me. I had my sword in hand and was just raising it when Cursed swept by and something flopped to the floor next to me then rolled about a bit just before it erupted in a cloud of ash.

“Pardon My Lady. I did not mean to...distract you.” He called to me as he moved to stalk the remaining vampire who watched him closely and bared his fangs. His pale face swung between us and I moved to my left on the balls of my feet while Cursed slid right.

“Let my friend go and we may allow you to live.” I told the blood sucker who stepped back leaving him open to the foot long wooden arrow that flew over my shoulder and embedded itself in his chest to the hilt. My eyes widened as the Vampire exploded in a cloud of dust and Dean collapsed to the floor in a heap.

“Damn you Dean!” I growled when I shoved him over. “Check the closet...there’s a tunnel to the caverns.” I yelled while my hands pressed against the nearly severed skin of his neck and I rammed my healing down into him. His body jerked like I’d electrocuted him and he flew off the floor then slammed back into it, smacking the back of his head on the hard surface and crying out. “Oh shut up you big baby.” I growled at him. “And get off your ass and help us!” And I jumped to my feet and ran for the door. Behind me I heard him yell an obscenity which I ignored as I yanked open the door to the caverns and found them lit up with sunshine like a hot August afternoon. Bless Areth!

Gray ash covered everything and there were bodies all over the place some still trapped in their animal forms. Nick’s men littered the sand and I reached for the first one nearest me and proceeded to quickly make my way across the room. With my shields down the healing rebound was kept to a minimum. I tried not to think about what I was doing as I recognized several faces. A couple of them were beyond help and I forced myself to not think about it, moving as fast as I could between their fallen forms using my talent to heal their savaged bodies.

Eventually I found myself huddled on the sand at the far side of the caverns. I had hyperventilated, and that was where Gareth and Jace found me. When they reached for me I screamed and then screamed some more as I beat my fists against Gareth's chest in anguish. Near to me on the sand were Nate and Jon spread out like a couple of broken GI Joe dolls. Their lifeless eyes staring up at the ceiling both of them covered in blood. I had been too late to save either of them. Dean went to his knees upon the sand across from me and his face looked hallow, while tears overflowed his dark eyes and slowly rolled down his cheeks. He reached for Nate and gently closed his eyes. Nate and Jon had both had their throats ripped out and I...could not stand to look at them. "I'm so sorry." I sobbed as I held to Gareth's chest. "I should have been here sooner." This was my fault. I should have saved them.

"Lexi." Gareth growled holding me tightly. "It happened too fast." He breathed. "There was nothing you could have done for either of them."

I cried for several minutes then finally pulled myself together enough to ask. "How did they get in?" I glanced around slowly realizing my men had quietly joined us. I searched from face to face feeling my heart beat within my chest as each man came into view. My head dropped upon Gareth's chest after every one of them had been accounted for. Several were covered in blood, but mostly it was fine ash that layered their hair and clothing. "Is anyone injured?" I breathed and Gareth smoothed back my hair.

"Lord Amras will need his arm set. And Lord Cael...has a wound upon his back but the rest are fine." Jace assured me softly from where he knelt beside us. "Lexi...there is something you must see." He breathed and I raised my face from Gareth's chest and found his emerald green eyes were shadowed with sorrow.

"Show me." I told them and took a deep breath while Gareth rose from the sand with me in his arms and carried me to a body which I did not recognize. The man was large and well made. He had short dark brown hair and was wearing jeans and a button up shirt with a collar. He'd had a blade through his chest and his head was nearly severed. His body was sliced to ribbons and there wasn't much of him not covered in blood.

Nick was standing near and he raised his pale eyes to me and looked...horrified. "I am so sorry." He replied. "Valentine must have gotten to him before he came here. He must have somehow let them in." He breathed and I stared down at the remains of...one of my potential mates.

I motioned to be put down and slid to my knees on the sand. I reached for him and lifted an eyelid then sat back in shock. He had two other blades embedded in his body and I reach for the one through his chest. It came out of him with a strange sound and blood oozed up from the wound. I held the blade in my hand and stared down at it blindly. A high keening noise erupted from my throat as what had happened seeped into my consciousness and I realized that Valentine had caused us to kill my Blue. I swayed upon my knees in the sand and closed my eyes.

My head dropped forward on my neck and in my mind I pictured the roof of the club and thought how very much I wanted to be there...right that moment. I felt a familiar lurch and opened my eyes to the fog shrouded night. I screamed out a name and immediately launched myself into the air, shifting as my powerful wings shoved me into the clouds and quickly out of sight.

Chapter 15

Like an arrow I flew through the mists toward downtown and Civic Center Plaza. In my mind rage burned and I chanted a name over and over again. The closer I got the louder I chanted till it was nearly a continuous scream. I landed on the roof and tucked my wings under then shifted and stood in the dark. I didn't think I'd have long to wait, and I wasn't wrong. A cool breeze settled over me almost immediately. "I want you to kill him." I told him tightly, not even bothering to turn around. "Name your price."

"You smell of blood and death." He breathed and moved around me as if he was one with the night. "Who is it you wish me to kill?" He asked softly as his hand reached out to brush my cheek and came away wet. "Who is it you cry for?"

I held out the knife I still clutched in my hand and he stared down at it silently. "He made us kill my Blue." I breathed, my voice sounding hollow and nearly as dead as the Dragon I'd just left on the sand in our cavern.

"Gareth is dead?" Claudius breathed sharply and I sucked air into my lungs and gave myself a shake. My mind stuttered at the horrible possibility, before I clamped down on it and reined in my run away imagination.

“No!” I nearly yelled then got a hold of myself and managed to respond more calmly. “No the one that was...made for me. Like Marcus and Dane and Roa’. I did not know him. And now...now it is too late.” I breathed and my eyes found his.

In the light from the dome I could see his face. He looked thoughtful. “Valentine?” He asked and I nodded and stared back at him my heart in my eyes. His arms reached for me and I collapsed against his chest.

“Kill him Claudius. Kill him for me and you will have...this Queen’s favor. I will be your friend and more. Only do it quickly before any more of my Court are harmed. I cannot protect those I have not yet gathered. And I cannot bear to lose those I have.”

“Are you sure?” He replied in a voice that was taut with emotion.

“Just tell me what I must do.” I replied and reached for the snaps under my chin. “I only ask that you let me watch him die.” And I pushed my high collar off my shoulders, exposing myself to him while he gazed down at me through his hazel eyes.

His fingers rose to stroke the column of my neck and his body tensed against mine. “You have been gone a long time.” And his comment was more of a question.

“I...nearly died.” I told him softly. “It seems even the Sidhe is not safe for me. I was...lost and could not find my way. But even when I did not know my own name...I knew one thing.” I told him softly. “I knew that I would never allow anyone to use me against my will. Take me Claudius....I do this willingly. If you but swear you will kill Valentine for me.”

A low hum rose up from his chest and he lowered his mouth to me slowly. “The Council arrives tomorrow.” He breathed against my neck. “I swear to you upon my honor that Valentine will not be alive...when they depart.” And his lips and teeth came down upon me.

I used the chip embedded in my arm to let myself in and realized as I rode the elevator down to the third level that I’d never been in it alone before. In my hand was the knife I’d taken from my Blue’s chest and inside me was a strange new awareness.

Claudius had not been the only one to drink and I was having just a bit of a problem adjusting to my newly heightened senses. Tonight was but the first step he had assured me and what we gained was a minor blending of some of our powers. For me it seemed I could smell and see much better. My sight was improved even past the infrared which I so seldom used. And I could smell...that both Dean and Nick had been within the elevator last. It was...disconcerting. I did not know what I had shared with Claudius, he had not said or perhaps he did not yet know.

In addition to the senses, I struggled to negotiate the memories he had given to me. When his teeth had sunk into my throat, I had given him....everything, every hope and dream, every memory of self. He had absorbed them all and had cried out hoarsely from the contact. His aura had flared against me and throbbed with an angry red haze before settling back to a sunshine yellow color. Obviously our sharing caused him great happiness. And when he ripped open his shirt for me and sliced a gash into his chest just below his collar, I had pressed my lips to him and drank his essence down my throat and into my body. With the rich taste of his blood, had come a host of memories, two thousand years worth. He had held me to him while they poured into me and filled me up. Then when I could take no more he had closed his wound and been content to simply hold me. He had kissed me before letting me go, promising to contact me soon. I had turned and launched myself skyward back into the fog shrouded night.

Now as I moved down the hall toward our door, I nodded to the guards who seemed shocked to see me out alone. I recognized them from the training floor but did not know their names. The man on the left used a card key to open the door for me and I slipped within pausing briefly when the door closed behind me. Smells assaulted me and I swayed as I reached for that one scent I was looking for....there, I thought and headed toward the kitchen.

The living room was empty, but every chair was occupied around our kitchen table which seemed to have grown to accommodate the additional men. Noise came from nearly every one of them at my arrival. All fourteen turned to look at me in varying degrees of upset. I had hidden the knife behind my back before I'd stepped through the

doorway. Now I glanced around the table and moved to my left, coming up behind one specific chair and reached out with my free hand to grab a handful of white hair as I slammed the knife into Talon's shoulder clear to the hilt, shoving him backwards.

"I believe that belongs to you." I hissed as I held his head against the back of the chair so he couldn't move. Around me chairs flipped over as men scrambled to their feet. The tip of a blade touched my neck and I smiled and held my ground.

"Step away from him." Roa' breathed from behind me.

"No!" Talon cried out. "Get away from her." Roa' hesitated and I felt the knife removed and Cursed and Aerandir were suddenly there between Roa' and myself blocking him from reaching me again. I twisted the knife slightly then released it and grabbed the back of Talon's chair and yanked it over. He made no move to fight back, merely went to the floor with a grunt and laid there still half in the chair staring up at me.

"I pulled that from the chest of my Dragon. A Blue that you helped to murder. Tell me why I should not banish you from my Court?"

Talon's pale pink eyes stared up at me and he neither flinched nor lowered his eyes. "Your Majesty...none of my throws was intended to kill. He could have changed at any time and healed his wounds. I do not know why he did not shift, or why he allowed the bloodless one standing near him to rip out his throat. But it does not matter...either way he would not have survived."

I stared down at him and considered his words, my eyes sending golden sparkles over the pale grey shirt he wore. A shirt which even now was turning dark red as the blood oozed out of his wound. "Why...would he not have survived?" I demanded softly my voice echoing around the silent room.

Talon blinked and shifted his eyes to Gareth who had stood from his chair and taken several steps toward me. He was standing possibly five feet from me with a shuttered look on his face and his arms crossed over his chest. My eyes met his and he stilled then replied for Talon. "Because there can only be one of each color for your Court." He replied. "And I would not have stepped aside to give him my place."

I stared back at him and felt the horror creep over me as I struggled to breathe. Only one of each color....my eyes moved over those in the room and settled for a moment on Jace who looked...determined. "If a Green comes...I will fight." He replied calmly, to the question in my eyes. "I was your first. I will not give you up, not even to one created for you. I know I told you I would share you...and I have." He told me indicating the rest of the men around the room. "But even I have limits." I pulled air into my lungs and turned to Dane who stared back at me calmly then nodded once. I reached for the back of the chair next to the one Talon was occupying and watched my knuckles turn white.

"You will not kill my Gray." I told Talon softly. "We will find a way, and you will not kill him. I forbid it."

My words enraged him as the knife in his shoulder and pulling his chair over had not. His eyes went Dragon and whirled in agitation as he stared up at me. "I will hold my place." He growled. "I will not hand it over to another simply because you tell me I must. You have no right."

"Your Majesty," Stela spoke in a soothing voice. "Your Court will consist of only the strongest."

"So you will kill my men because they are young and perhaps not as strong as you?" I demanded, my golden eyes turning to look at him in disbelief.

He held his hands out palm up and looked back at me calmly. "It does not have to come to that. But we will not allow another near you...when the time comes. It will not be a matter of wanting or not wanting. Only of doing, as we will be...beyond reason by then."

When the time comes, I thought and chewed my lip at his words. The time was coming soon. Already I'd gathered six of the ten. With Roa' it was seven. "Is this why you hold Roa' back?" I breathed, glancing down at Talon who suddenly had a problem meeting my eyes.

"Your Majesty...I would not see him killed." He replied softly while behind me Roa' made an angry sound but said nothing.

I turned to Owen and Kit who were both watching me closely. “Should the need arise...you will be responsible for getting anyone not a part of my Court out. If it is true as Stela says then I will need you to put them someplace where they will neither interfere nor be hurt. I cannot have them injured. If they are in fact weaker, then I must think of my sisters with whom they may suit.”

“It is not only during rut.” Stela added. “Should a Bronze appear...you will either send him away, or I will. I will not tolerate you entertaining another of my color.” And he crossed his arms over his chest while I stared back at him in dawning horror. My eyes moved to Gareth and I was shocked to see him nod agreement.

“We,” and he indicated Jace and himself, “have allowed the others because it has not been an issue. But soon it will be. Should your White, Brown, and Copper arrive they will be accepted also, assuming they are worthy. After that...” He told me calmly and shook his head. “You will not be allowed to interfere. We will handle it...amongst ourselves, as is our way.”

The smell of testosterone suddenly filled the room and I blinked and shook my head as it crashed into me, nearly overwhelming my mind. My tongue licked at my lips and I unpeeled my fingers from the chair and took a slow step backward. A low humming came from Talon and spread to Stela then Dane. Gareth and Jace watched me closely and I shook my head again and placed my foot behind the other. I felt...hunted and could feel my heart accelerate within my chest as their eyes bore into me. The feeling I needed to flee crept over me and I took yet another step while Gareth’s arms dropped to his sides and his fists clenched.

“Lexi don’t move.” He growled softly and I felt my eyes widen and froze in place. Talon rolled to his hands and knees and made that warbling noise and I swallowed heavily and slowly moved my eyes to him. “Where did you go tonight?” Gareth murmured.

“And what have you done to yourself?” Jace added and I moved just my eyes to him and realized his were whirling frantically and he looked like he was struggling to hold himself in place.

“Step back from her...do it now.” Talon growled and I heard the whisper of feet as Roa’ moved away from me. I could actually smell his scent getting fainter as he shifted away from the door behind me.

“This should not be happening.” Stela added in a deep urgent voice. “It is too soon. But her...reaction is intoxicating.” Dane made a strangled noise in his throat and I found myself taking quick nearly panting breaths as I struggled to fight the flight reaction their scent was causing in me.

“I need...to go.” I whispered in a small frightened voice. “Can I go?”

“My Lady,” Cursed spoke softly almost directly behind me. “Your aura is pulsing...you must calm yourself. They cannot take much more.” He whispered and gently wrapped his arm about my waist. I found myself held tightly against his chest. “Feel my heart.” He breathed against my ear and the incongruity of his words pulled me back from the edge of panic. “Close your eyes and feel me breathe against you.” I stiffened slightly and he murmured soft and low. “Close your eyes...trust me.”

Kit made a rude noise and from across the room said. “You only trap her in with her panic. Here let me try. Little Johnny comes home and tells his mom, today I got my first blow job. His mother is very mad and tells him to go to his room and says when his dad comes home he is going to have a talk with him. A couple hours later Johnny’s dad comes home and his wife says go talk to your son, he just got his first blow job. So the dad goes upstairs and says to his son, Johnny I hear you got your first blow job today? Johnny goes yep. The dad asks Johnny, so how was it? Little Johnny says ok, but I still can’t get the taste out of my mouth.”

Startled silence met his story so Kit tried another. “Little Johnny went to the drugstore for condoms. He walked up to the druggist and asked. Sir, can you tell me where the ribbed condoms are? The druggist asked. Son, do you know what condoms are used for? Sure do replies Johnny, they keep you from getting venereal diseases. Okay, said the druggist. Do you know what the ribs are for? Little Johnny thinks for a minute, then looks up at the druggist and replies. Well, not exactly. But they sure do make the hair on my goat’s back stand up.”

“What is a blow job?” Aerandir asked in a confused voice...and I couldn't help myself I was suddenly laughing hysterically.

“Kit!” I finally moaned when I could speak without gasping. He chuckled when my eyes met his across the room. “That was terrible. Where do you hear these things?” I muttered.

His merlot colored eyes flashed and he smiled at me and replied. “I was a civil servant in Hell Mistress...it was a very boring job.”

“Hmmm.” I replied and turned to glance at Aerandir and with my shields lowered I pictured Cursed as we were earlier while he leaned over me and I used my mouth to pleasure him until he came for me. “That is a blow job.” I replied while Aerandir's eyes widened and around the room several people shifted as if their pants were suddenly too tight. Cursed's arm tightened around me and he rubbed his chin against the top of my head.

“I am almost afraid to ask what is a condom.” Aerandir replied while I smiled and turned to look at Gareth.

“Sorry that I cannot help you with as I've never actually seen one.” I informed him, as my eyes moved over Amras and I frowned suddenly and pulled away from Cursed who let me go reluctantly. I had forgotten that there were injuries to heal. I moved around the table, passing several of them who merely watched me curiously as I was intent upon Amras.

“I'm so sorry.” I told him as I placed my hands upon his chest and healed him. “All this foolishness and you've been in pain this entire time.” With his arm healed he pulled me to his chest and I clung to him for a moment enjoying the way he smelled and felt against me. “Cael come here.” I called to my guard who was standing stiffly just down the table. With my eyes closed I listened as his feet whispered across the floor and opened my eyes when his scent filled my nostrils. His hazel eyes looked back at me from where my cheek was pressed against Amras' chest and I hesitated for just a moment realizing if I healed him...he would be half way to whole. Yet I could not not heal him.

He tilted his head and frowned. “Half way to whole?” He replied and I chewed my lip and stared up at him. “Your Majesty what means this?”

I dropped my eyes and stared for a moment at his chest while my thoughts shifted every which way. “Cael, do you have children?” I asked and watched as his chest expanded sharply.

“Once.” He replied softly. “But that was a very long time ago and...she is no more.”

I felt his anguish briefly and asked. “Would you have more?” And raised my eyes to his. He stared down at me cautiously, as if he wasn’t certain how to answer my question, or perhaps he was trying to understand why I would ask such a thing.

“If the Goddess so blessed me, I would be most pleased to once again have a family.” He finally replied.

“May I see your wound?” I asked softly and he turned and lifted his shirt showing me a gash that would have killed a mortal. Already the inner layers were starting to knit themselves back together. Elves healed perhaps ten times faster than a human, maybe even faster than a Were who had not shifted. If I left him as he was he would be healed in a few days. Goldy did not appreciate my hesitation and rolled over and glared up at me then hissed, *heal him now*, while behind me Amras murmured and spread his hand upon my back under my hair.

“Why do you hesitate?” Amras asked quietly and I took a breath and reached out to touch Cael, healing him in an instant.

“Because...should he at some point find himself within my body, he will then be whole and able to sire children.” I replied calmly while the room erupted around me.

“Lexi what does that mean?” Jace asked calmly while the others glanced amongst themselves almost angrily.

I wrapped my arms about Amras and closed my eyes feeling his heart beating erratically within his chest. “I mean that the problem with Elves not breeding does not lay within their women...it is their men that are sterile.” Amras jerked against me and collapsed back into the chair behind us, dragging me with him. It was perhaps the most

graceless thing he'd ever done and I nearly ended up on the floor in a heap. As it was, my hair wrapped round my face and it took several seconds to situate ourselves before I finally found myself seated in his lap instead of sprawled across it. It seemed the only two men my comment didn't upset were Owen and Kit. That was not the case for the rest of them.

"Should he find himself within her body? What is that supposed to mean?" Stela remarked angrily. "For what reason would she sleep with her guards when she has us?" He added and the room went silent as I grabbed for my head and moaned at the war raging silently behind my eyelids.

"Please!" I nearly yelled causing the static to cut off abruptly. I slumped against Amras and spent several seconds sucking in air. "I warned you Stela. Should you find yourself murdered in your sleep there won't be any problems if my Bronze arrives." I told him angrily.

"I am whole?" Amras asked me in a breathless voice that bordered on awe and I hesitated then nodded against his chest.

"Tdem and Cursed too." Owen replied and his voice sounded as if he finally understood what I had been talking about in the Sidhe earlier. "You healed Tdem...have you lost your mind?" Owen demanded.

"Maybe." I replied. "But how could I not? You know I did not make this decision lightly. He has declared and was at a disadvantage. How was that fair?"

"Lexi...his beast is Black." He added quietly while I pulled air into my lungs and jerked back from Amras chest to look at Dane. He seemed startled and shifted his eyes between Owen and myself.

"I'll nae be giving up me place." He breathed.

"It hasn't been a problem yet." I replied and remembered the way the two of them had...instantly disliked each other, and how I'd had to keep them off each other. Every time they had been in close proximity. Damn, I thought and stared back at Dane who narrowed his black eyes and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Aye.” He growled. “I dinna like the man from the first but ye accepted him an I abided. Tis likely it will cause me problems later. But that will nae doubt be between us an will be dealt with when the time comes it will. I will nae be waiting another twenty years for yer wee little sisters so do nae even think to ask it of me.” He huffed.

I frowned at him and felt my own anger rise. “You are mine! I will not share you with anyone!” My comment caused him to smile slyly and the anger to drain from his eyes.

“Nae I had not forgotten Lassie.” He replied. “Tis a poor second I’m thinking they would be in any case.” I waved my arm at him and made a rude noise which caused several of the men to chuckle while my stomach rumbled loudly. My cheeks turned pink at my unbridled jealousy and unruly body and I buried my face against Amras neck and groaned softly.

“Do you remember the last time you ate?” Jace asked me sharply and I shook my head and thought about it.

“It was this morning once she had been...seen to after she awoke from her healing sleep.” Roral offered and I frowned and wondered how that could have been today. Quite a lot had happened in between.

“Tis a good portion which ended on the floor, thanks in nae small part to me clumsiness an yer...leaving me to be explaining things.” Dane added.

I heard the fridge open and things being placed on the counter while around the table chairs were pulled back as the men reseated themselves. Amras stiffened and I caught the sound of footsteps and Talon’s scent. “What?” I growled not bothering to lift my face from Amras’ neck.

“Your Majesty.” He spoke and Amras firmly pushed me back so I was forced to sit up.

“Do not be rude Princess.” He whispered and his beautiful violet eyes held a hint of disapproval which caused me to sigh and turn to Talon. The knife was still buried in his shoulder and I glanced from it to his face with a frown.

“I cannot heal as you do.” Talon informed me and if I remove it now I will continue to bleed until I shift. And of course the Kitchen was hardly the place for a twenty something foot Dragon.

“I put it there for a reason.” I told him in a tight voice.

“Yes Your Majesty.” He replied and slid to a knee before me so close his chest was only an inch or two from Armas’ knee. “But I did not kill your Blue as you mistakenly believed when you...gave me back my blade. And I ask that you...remove it from me.” He was politely telling me to apologize and I was having a problem with my stubbornness...not because he wasn’t right, but because he was. He was mine but it was an uneasy relationship at best. I would not have had this problem with any of my others. Of course I couldn’t imagine sinking a blade in any of the rest of them in the first place. That in itself was a pretty good indication of how unsettled Talon made me.

He knelt there calmly, his pale pink eyes merely watching me. “Why did you have to be such an ass earlier?” I finally demanded and the room went quiet as all conversation died around us. “You wounded me much worse than this.” I told him in a low voice that seemed to vibrate with my chaotic emotions. He blinked and nodded finally.

“I did.”

“Why?”

He took a deep breath and shifted slightly. “Fear.” He replied softly. And I stared back at him in surprise. “You are unlike anyone I have ever known.” He added. “That was clear to me when you locked yourself away from us in the very heart of Kaela Mensha’s stronghold. I knew you for Dragon, but I thought you Red and was...intrigued. It had been so long since I’d seen a female let alone a Dragoness.” He told me and shook his head and swallowed.

“Your dream...alarmed me. And I did not anticipate your reaction when I had Roa’...change it. No Dragon upon our world ever had the powers you seem to possess. When I realized you were Gold...” And his eyes slid shut for just a moment as emotion took him. When he opened his eyes they were intense and he blinked again and seemed

to gain control over himself. “In the tunnel on the wall your picture excited me, gave me hope. But it was not you...you had become a wraith...nearly transparent and I was shocked at the change. In a very short time you pulled me from my home then moved me from place to place and...what you did to me upon your bed.” He breathed and stared up at me in wonder. “Hell was not enjoyable.” He replied tightly, his face moving from wonder to a fierce dismay in an instant. “I was very angry with you for having sent me there. For having dismissed me so easily. Then they refused to allow me in to see you.” He told me. “Roark said it was because you were healing and I...wanted to be with you. I wanted to believe him when he said that what I had seen...was not the real you. He promised that you were getting well. And when I felt your pleasure...I knew I had to see you. But Roark was hesitant so I invoked my right of first refusal.” He replied while across the room Stela made a sharp angry sound.

“You flew her?” Stela demanded and his anger vibrated off the walls. “You could have killed her!”

Talon glanced down the table at Stela and nodded. “You were not there...you do not know what she looked like. I had to be certain and...I was afraid to hope.”

“You were mad at me for having defended myself and because I have a smart mouth and tend to be annoying. You wanted to humiliate me.” I told him sharply.

“No!” He argued. “I wanted...to declare but I could not...not without knowing.”

“Knowing what?” I cried.

“That you would not betray him.” Stela replied for him.

“Betray him how?”

“It is a long story Your Majesty.” Stela offered and looked thoughtful when I pulled my gaze from Talon to glance down the table at him. “I told you this was not the first Court for either of us. It is not my story to tell, but...no Court is without its politics. And not all Queens are honorable.”

I stared at him for several minutes trying to absorb his words then glanced back at Talon with a frown. “You feared I’d betray you?” And watched as he slowly nodded. “I told you I do not lie, repeatedly. And I offered to apologize for my comments which

seemed to distress you. I would not have denied you my body.” I added in a soft confused voice.

A look of pain crossed his face. “Once invoked...the right cannot be stopped before completion. And truthfully, I am not sorry for what I did. You are more beautiful than I could have dreamed and our mating was...” And his eyes slid closed and he shuddered while his scent changed and I jerked in Amras’ lap at the flavor. It was as if I could taste his near ecstasy. For me the experience had been alien and distressing but for Talon, even the memory was sublime.

“Why would you think I would betray you?” I asked in a shaky voice, unsettled by his reaction. His eyes opened slowly and his face turned down the table to where Gareth sat. I followed his glance and realized Gareth was watching me though his sapphire blue eyes his face covered in a shuttered look.

“Because of him.” He breathed and I flicked my eyes back to Talon in surprise.

Chapter 16

“She does not know.” Gareth replied calmly. “We have not told her.”

Told me what? I wondered frowning between them. “You know it’s very irritating to be the last to know everything. As I believe I’ve mentioned on more than one occasion. Talon I have no idea why you would believe I would betray you. If there is a reason, obviously I find myself once again ignorant of it because those I trust believe it is better to send me into the lion’s den unprepared. I can only say that betrayal is not in my nature unless someone here would like to share with me what it is I might possibly, in the I don’t know when future, do something that might be construed as a betrayal?” I asked and looked around the room not surprised to find most of my men refused to meet my eyes. “This is exactly what I’m talking about. It’s a silent conspiracy.” I told him and raised my arm and waved it around the room. Grimacing, I leaned forward and abruptly yanked the blade from Talon’s shoulder then quickly placed my other fingers over his wound and healed him. “There.” I said and handed him his knife. “You’ll forgive me if

I do not kiss it to make it better. I find myself once again slightly annoyed and not really in the mood.”

Talon apparently didn't know what to say to that but took the knife from me and quietly rose to his feet then went back to his chair. I was staring down at the floor when the smell of chicken and potatoes hit me, just before a plate was shoved abruptly into my hands. “Eat.” Jace growled then turned and stomped back to his chair while I stared after him in shock.

“Wait!” I muttered as I clutched the plate and scrambled off Amras' lap and moved to the end of the table where he sat. I set the plate on the table and stared down at him crossly. “Why are you now angry with me?” I demanded. He never let me feed myself...ever. His emerald green eyes rose to mine and I sucked in air at the pain which filled them. I went to both knees on the floor beside his chair, my arms reaching to hold him while he sat stiffly. His fingers plucked at the neck of my dress and gently pulled back the material.

“Where did you go tonight, and why did you not heal these?” He demanded and his finger pressed against one of the puncture wounds that Claudius had given to me. “You stink of men's colon. It is an unfamiliar scent. And your mind...is filled with memories not your own.” He growled and I released him and set back on my heels staring at the floor beneath his chair while minds pressed hard against me.

“Mistress...what have you done?” Kit demanded in a shocked voice. He was seated next to Jace and nearest me. His fingers brushed back my hair and cupped my chin gently lifting my face to his.

“She has sold herself to our Mayor.” Gareth growled. “Haven't you Lexi?” And I blinked and nodded while Kit stared down at me in horror.

“Why?” He breathed. “Why would you do such a thing?”

“Because she still does not trust us!” Jace yelled and slammed his hand down upon the table so that the silverware clattered upon the plate.

“Mistress...you gave us over to him? I cannot believe you would do such a thing!” Kit cried softly and I realized...perhaps I had not thought this all the way through.

“What was his price?” Gareth demanded and the men shifted and muttered angrily around the table.

“The death of Valentine.” I told him in a small voice. “Before the Council departs.”

Gareth stood suddenly and his chair clattered behind him. He leaned his hands upon the table and glared at me. “Nothing any one of us could not have accomplished. And for such a paltry sum you gave yourself...our Queen to him!” He yelled back at me and I had never seen him so angry...not at me.

“I am not mortal.” I breathed in a soft voice. “No slave will I be.”

Kit released my chin and I stared up into Gareth’s eyes which were like shards of blue ice. “No...that is true.” He replied in an emotionless voice. “But you are bound to him just the same.”

“Yes.” I whispered. “And now you will be safe. Not like my other Blue.” For it was clear to me that that had been the reason the Vampire had ripped out the Blue’s throat...it was Valentine’s promise of what would happen if I he could not have me. Valentine’s way of telling me he knew exactly what would bring me to heel.

He stared into my eyes for a moment in stunned silence while the blood drained from his face. Then he turned his back on me and walked quickly from the room. In my breast my heart squeezed painfully and I found it difficult to breathe. To make matters worse, my eyes filled with tears. I only hoped that by doing what I thought I must to save him, I had not lost him. Jace’s hands lifted me off the floor and into his lap where I clung to him and cried silently against his chest.

“You are so very frustrating.” He whispered against my ear.

“He hates me.”

“No Lexi he does not hate you. If anything he hates himself for not having dealt with Valentine before now, for allowing it to come to this. He blames himself and...it is

guilt that consumes him not hate. He will be fine. We all will...somehow.” He breathed and I hugged him and clung to his words like a lifeline.

“Jace?”

“Hmmm?” He murmured.

“It’s been a long day and I’m very tired.” I told him.

He chuckled and pulled me back from his chest and rearranged me against his shoulder then reached for the fork so he might feed me. “Sweetheart, every day with you is a long one.” He teased and I wiped at my eyes and gave him a sad smile.

“I tried to warn you.” I told him. “The first day I said you should just toss me out as I’d be nothing but trouble.”

“Yes you did.” He told me and hugged me about the waist. “Thank the stars and seas I didn’t listen to you.”

“May I sleep with you tonight?” I asked and blinked up at him when the fork he was aiming toward me hesitated. His eyes glanced down the table and I watched him carefully.

“I think...for the next few hours that will be alright.” He replied as he glanced down at me and smiled sweetly.

“Good because...I miss your bed.” And I chewed and snuggled my cheek against his shoulder.

“Chew faster.” He urged and I cracked open an eye and glanced up at him. His dark green eyes were no longer calm and the sweet smile had been replaced by something...needy. I swallowed and opened my mouth wide for the next bite holding the fork for just a second longer than I needed to. My eyes met his and he made a low urgent sound for me.

When he set down the fork I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed the skin just below his jaw. I closed my eyes as he stood and carried me out of the kitchen and down the hall. He sat me on the edge of his tub and buried his fingers in my hair, tilting my face up to his lips. My hands burrowed under his T-shirt and he pulled back from me to start the water and remove his clothing. My boots went next then I helped

him undo all the snaps down my front. My dress was caked with blood from the floor of my room and the bodies of those I'd healed. Jace tossed it to the corner and stood back to look at me. His fingers trailed over the tattoo on my breast up to the puncture wounds on my neck. "You are home now, right where you belong." He told me softly then lifted me and stepped into the bath where he settled himself on the seat and cuddled me into his lap. His tears came soft and silent and I held him tightly as they washed away the fear and anxiety he'd bottled up over the past ten days.

He lathered my hair and we bathed each other. At some point I turned to find Gareth standing next to the tub, his face looking lost, his eyes haunted. We helped him undress and held him gently. He seemed to need to talk, but couldn't find the words. I ended up apologizing and promising to try not to do what seemed to distress him so terribly. It seemed I distressed him a lot. When I'd apologized to his satisfaction we reached for each other and he told me in actions why it was I had the power to distress him so terribly.

And when we were all squeaky clean and exhausted he carried me to Jace's bed and we three cuddled and fell into a peaceful sleep pressed tightly against each other.

I smelled coffee and pushed back the pillow from off my face and stretched under the covers like a contented cat. "Mmmm." I murmured and reached for the naked body next to mine. I squeaked and bolted straight up in the bed when I realized it was neither Jace nor Gareth beside me. A pale bronze eye blinked back at me and I grabbed for the sheet and held it tight against me, realizing Stela wasn't the only one sharing my bed.

"I was beginning to wonder if she'd ever wake." Talon muttered and I glanced to my left and noticed the dagger and blood tattoo with a grimace.

"I like the way she wakes. Like a big cat." Stela added.

"What...what are you two doing in here?" I asked, my voice sounding small and hesitant.

"The others went out to run errands and we've been left to...mind the Queen." Stela told me calmly. The door opened and Kit strolled in. He was carrying my mug of

coffee. I pushed up on the pillows holding the sheet against me and gratefully reached for the cup. Talon and Stela growled at Kit who ignored them, looking completely unperturbed.

“Kit...where did everyone go?” I asked as I held my coffee under my nose and pulled the scent deep into my lungs. The smell nearly made me drool and I realized it had been much too long since I’d had any. Beside me Talon muttered and flicked his eyes from Kit to me.

“Gareth and Jace took Dane to...run errands. I believe Owen, Aerandir, and Cursed went with them. Amras and Cael are riding and practicing archery in Amras’ room. The others are sleeping. Roa’ and I are on guard duty.” He replied.

I chewed my lip and glanced down at my light coffee and frowned. “That’s just great. Basically they cleared out to make way for these two?” I asked in a disgusted voice while Kit tilted his head and considered me.

“I could get rid of them for you Mistress. Then you and I could...have that discussion.” He added in a seductive voice and I grinned and would have reached for him but Stela was in my way and he did not look happy at the prospect.

“Are you still angry with me Kit?” I asked in a teasing voice.

“I made you coffee didn’t I?” He asked with a grin.

“They aren’t being...fawned over by some floozy are they?” I asked and sat just a little straighter in bed.

Kit chuckled and shook his head. “No Mistress.”

“Good because you know how annoyed that makes me.” I told him and he grinned and nodded. “Kit?” I asked and glanced up at him with a grimace.

“Yes Mistress.”

“This doesn’t feel right to me.” I told him and glanced around the room. “This is Jace’s room....could you?”

“Yes Mistress.” He replied and snapped his fingers.

“Thank you.” I told him when the world stop tilting and I found all four of us in the same positions only in my own room. Talon and Stela shook their heads and looked

around curiously and I glanced between them. “This is my room. I don’t entertain anyone but Jace and Gareth in their rooms. I hope you will respect that.” I told them and Stela simply raised an eyebrow at me while Talon placed his arms above his head and made himself comfortable against my pillows. My gaze swept my room and I noticed the crown next to my flute and smiled. I’d have to ask Owen later what manner of stones they were.

“Padparaschas.” Kit offered and I tilted my head and looked at him. “They are orange red sapphires, rare and hard like diamonds.” He added. “Fitting don’t you think?” He asked with a smile and I nodded thinking that an orange red aura was the color of lust. “It matches theirs.” And he waved his hands at Talon and Stela while I glanced at each of them and nodded.

“Remind me to thank Owen later.” I told him and took my first sip of coffee. It was like...ambrosia and I rolled it over my tongue and slowly let it slide down my throat while Kit hummed for me and next to me Stela and Talon made strangled noises and sat up abruptly.

“What was that?” Stela breathed and I smiled and took another sip.

“My Mistress enjoys her morning coffee.” Kit told him with a mischievous chuckle. “Without it she becomes...cranky.”

“Kit...” I chided softly after swallowing down more of the heady brew.

“It is very sweet.” Talon muttered and made noises like he tasted it on his own tongue.

“And pleasurable.” Stela added. “I enjoy sweet things myself.” I drained the cup and handed it to Kit then pushed back the covers and crawled toward the end of the bed. “Where are you going Your Majesty?” Stela asked in a concerned voice.

“Restroom.” I replied. “Then the training room. You can join me if you like.” And they both reached for the covers and looked like they planned to join me in the bathroom. “Not in the bathroom...in the training room.” I told them with a frown while Kit chuckled.

“I think you should come back to bed.” Talon told me with a frown.

“What is a restroom?” Stela asked and Talon shook his head and I turned in the doorway to stare in horror at Kit who looked...more shocked than me if that was possible. “Kit?”

“Yes Mistress.” He replied with a grimace. “I will take care of it.”

“Thank you!” I told him and nearly bolted to the toilet. “I didn’t really trust either of them not to join me and wanted to get into the shower before they had a chance to realize I was not going to be crawling back into bed immediately. I managed to get the soap out my hair and was just rinsing my body off when the door opened and Stela stepped in. His body filled the shower and he pressed me back against the tiles.

“Hmmm, these new conveniences are charming.” He told me and placed his head under the water and let it run down his perfect body.

“Did you kill Talon?” I asked and handed him the shampoo which he looked at curiously so that I ended up showing him how to open it. I found myself soaping his hair while he murmured and pressed his body against mine suggestively.

“Your Demon took him to meet the Wyrn. I was more interested in...finding you.”

“Is Spot okay?” I asked as I showed him how to get the soap out of his hair.

“If you mean your Wyrn, then he was fine last night while he assisted us in fighting the Kindred.” He replied and ran his fingers over my sides and across my back. His hands were hot to the touch, hotter even than the water which cascaded over us. He had no hair aside from that upon his head, even his chest was as smooth as Amras or Cursed’s. He was hard and thick and there would be no need to increase his size as he was easily one of my largest men. He seemed pleased with my thoughts and told me. “Two thousand years is a very long time and I was never a patient man.” He breathed against my ear. I reached for the soap and slid it over his body between us while his fingers reached to assist me.

“You smell like forests and something tangy.” I told him as I glanced up into his pale bronze eyes.

“And you smell sharp and spicy. Like nothing I’ve ever experienced.” He murmured and his fingers slid around my face and cupped my jaw tilting my head back for his lips. “It is quite heady, and makes me wish to eat you all up. A Drake could lose his head and heart to you.” He remarked and angled me back against the tiles so he could hold me there and press his body to mine.

I murmured and slid my palms up his chest then rubbed my nipples against him while his lips found mine and I felt my blood flow faster in my veins.

“You are such a tiny thing, so small and delicate for one so fierce.” He breathed as his fingers slid into my curls when I moved against him. “I find I like that very much.” I reached for him and wrapped my fingers around his base while he pulled air into his lungs and I slid to the floor in front of him. He made a startled sound as my lips moved over his head and then groaned and sank his fingers into my hair when I sucked the length of him into my mouth.

Stela’s hips began moving for me and I wrapped my arms around him enjoying his taste feel. I was pleased by the way his breath came in small pants. He pulled himself from me and with a growl lifted me up and onto his body. I reached between us and guided him into me then wrapped my legs around his waist while he placed his arm around my back and the other around my bottom and proceeded to stroke me slowly at first and then more frantically as I reached for him mentally and shared the way his body inside mine felt. He growled and I nipped his shoulder then lathed the spot with my tongue as he made hungry noises for me.

“Lower your shield.” I whispered and nearly cried out when I felt his mind flow over mine. He was a sexual creature, denied pleasure for more than two millennium and had never felt anything compared to our minds touching one another. He was so close to orgasm but held back. I felt he wanted to extend this moment and I smiled and tightened my body around him, then cracked open my red door and breathed my desire into him. The combination was too much, and he cried out then shuddered against me while I felt his mind and body release within.

He slid to the floor taking me with him and his breathing was harsh. His head rested against the tiles behind us and I sat upon his lap and considered him with a grin. “That...did not go how I expected it to.” He gulped air and informed me.

I ran my fingers over his chest for a moment enjoying the way his skin felt beneath my fingers. “No? And how did you expect it to go?” I asked him in a teasing voice.

He cracked open one of his beautiful eyes and gave me a chagrined look. “I expected you to be the one panting and gasping for air.” He replied and I chuckled and leaned forward to kiss him.

“I imagine after two thousand years...you might be a little out of practice.” I told him calmly and wrapped a strand of his hair around my fingers.

“No...I think this has more to do with you than me.” He replied and his eyes slid shut.

I tugged at his hair and he opened them again and grinned back at me. “What exactly does that mean?” I demanded with a frown. He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me closer.

“I was a fertility God and before that I occupied a space upon a Court. Believe me when I say...you are more woman than I have ever experienced.”

I chewed my lip and considered his comment, feeling a little uncertain. I hadn't been at this for very long and never really knew if I was...doing something I shouldn't be. “Is that bad?” I finally asked and both eyes popped open and he stared at me in surprise.

“Nooooo that is a very good thing, and I begin to see why...others are allowed to entertain you.”

“Really and why is that?”

He chuckled and kissed me just below my collar bone. “So you do not kill us all.” He replied and my eyes widened in surprise.

“Talon comes.” I breathed, having scented him over the shampoo and soap and sex smells. And when the door opened, Talon glanced down at us with a frown.

“Ah there you are...finally.” Stela remarked. “She isn’t even breathing hard. It is most distressing.”

Talon gave him an odd look and glanced at me where I sat on Stela’s lap his erection still within me. “If you are going to join us then hurry up. You are letting out all the hot air.” I informed him and he looked surprised for half a second then reached to undo the belt around his waist. Apparently he’d left the rest of his armor and weapons somewhere else. I watched him curiously as his red flap slipped off him and made a low sound which caused Stela to jerk within me. Talon looked...nearly alarmed but stepped into the shower and pulled the door closed behind him. I had been under his skirt before when looking for weapons and knew his manhood lay nestled within a patch of white curls. At the moment, it was neither nestled nor resting. His hair was unbound as he knew I preferred it, and I reached for his calf and pulled him under the stream of water.

I found the shampoo and soaped him while he held himself still above me, his eyes wide and slightly glazed. Beneath me Stela’s breathing returned to normal and he began running his fingers and hands over my body. When Talon was clean and soap free I urged him closer, my eyes lifted to his as I ran my tongue over him and he sucked air into his lungs. My body clenched as he jerked and Stela made a pleased sound and raised his hips to me. My fingers wrapped around Talon and I pulled him deeper into my mouth while his knees nearly buckled and he let out a startled noise for me. If anything he lasted less time than Stela who was just starting to enjoy the feel of me riding him when Talon lost control and came for me. He went to a knee and sucked air into his lungs while I rinsed out my mouth and watched him lean against the wall of the shower curiously.

“You see?” Stela asked him. “It is distressing.”

“Yes....yet I am at a loss as to what can be done about it.” He replied breathlessly. “She seems to have this effect upon me. The last time she merely touched me and elicited the same response.”

“I too felt release at the touch of her hand.” Stela replied and I remembered the feel of something hot and sticky striking my leg in the Great Hall.

“What’s worse, I was not even in the room with her last night.” Talon replied in an amazed voice. “Her passion reached out to me from clear across the den...how is a man to sleep or concentrate when she has this affect upon him?” He demanded softly.

“Perhaps it is something one gets used to.” Stela offered and I watched the two of them glance at each other then back to me.

“It explains the large number of...men about her.” Talon offered. “She does not even need to be in the same room to satisfy them.”

“You should have seen the Seelie Court the first night she arrived.” Stela remarked. Even I sensed it from within the throne. “Her lust caused an orgy the likes of which I’d never seen.”

“What is it about her? She is unlike any Queen before. I have never been disturbed in my sleep like this. Even when Misanne mated.”

“Misanne...did not enjoy her duty.” Stela replied with a touch of disgust in his voice. “She was lazy and vicious even before she went into the Everlasting. She was like night and day to our Lexi here.”

They both looked at me curiously and I gave them a smile and rolled my hips upon Stela’s lap. “I like my duty.” I told them with a grin. “Are we done then?” I asked my voice sounding amused as I glanced between them while they both frowned back at me then looked at each other.

“I don’t think she should look like that.” Talon growled and Stela nodded.

“I think she should be panting and gasping for air. Perhaps begging one or both of us to take her.”

“I’d like to see her moaning and writhing beneath me. In the Everlasting...she was close. But then her need was upon her and I’m not certain I can take credit for her actions. She seems to have no problem doing so for the others. I have seen her beneath several of them...sometimes at the same time!”

I looked at them and smiled, neither offering criticism nor assistance. In fact I was quite amused at their antics and very interested to see where it might lead us. Obviously neither of them had met a modern girl, nor knew how to please her. Perhaps

with a little effort both of them would learn. In a way they were worse off than poor Marcus who might have been a virgin but at least he was not naïve.

“Marcus was a virgin...but managed to bring her to her pleasure more times than I could count.” Stela growled.

“She had the rest of us nearly dancing in the hall! It was why the Blue dragged us here ahead of them.” Talon frowned and told me while I grinned and had to bite my tongue to keep from laughing.

The door opened with a yank and Kit stared down at the three of us his arms crossed over his chest. “Mistress if you are done playing with the new men perhaps you might wish one of us.” And he stepped back so that Amras could be seen behind him. “To assist you?”

“Kit!” I nearly yelled, and Talon and Stela turned to look at them with twin frowns. Then Talon glanced at Stela who hesitated and shrugged.

Chapter 17

“I was going to go to the training room.” I told him with a frown and he rolled his eyes and reached out his hand for me.

“I believe this will be more...beneficial to you than running around swinging a sword at imaginary foes.” He replied with a grin. I glanced up at him and then Amras who had a knowing smile on his face and pulled myself off Stela who sucked in air and watched me closely. Amras handed Kit a towel which he used to wrap around me and with the door still open he leaned in and turned off the water. “This is a shower...we take them at least once a day here.” Kit informed the men. “Sometimes more often if Lexi makes us hot and sweaty. No one likes a smelly body.”

Amras smiled and reached for me then murmured while his hands slowly moved the towel over me, his large eyes holding my gaze. I felt my heart stutter in my chest at the feel of his hands caressing me and Kit moved behind and used another towel to soak up some of the water from my hair. His lips rained small kisses over my shoulder while Amras went to a knee before me and ran the towel slowly down my thigh and over my

calf and foot. When he moved up the other leg, his fingers brushed me and he hummed low and pleasing in his throat.

Kit picked me up and behind me I heard Stela and Talon scramble out of the shower while Amras led the way to my bed removing his tunic as he went. Kit placed me in the middle of the bed and stood back to slowly unbutton his red silk shirt while his eyes moved over me slowly.

Amras' boot hit the floor as Kit slid his shirt off his shoulders and slowly down his arms. The second boot hit the floor and I licked my lips and rose to my knees then motioned Amras onto the bed. He smiled and crawled to me gracefully then knelt before me. My fingers reached for his laces while his hand spread over my breast and gently kneaded it. My fingers spilled inside his leather pants and I cupped him within my palms.

“Amin mela lle tarien.” I love you Princess he breathed against my cheek as my hands slid around him and eased his pants off his hips.

“Amras, we found a way...didn't we?” I whispered and kissed him while he pushed his pants over his thighs and I reached to touch him with my fingers. Kit slid onto the bed beside us and I turned to him finding his lips and kissing him deeply. Amras moved down my body and teased his way across my stomach to my nest of curls and I moaned and clutched at Kit beside me. The bed dipped and Talon and Stela joined us one to each side.

“See the way she moves for him?” Kit breathed softly. “Our Lord Amras loves the Mistress and pleases her well. She likes the way his tongue caresses her and the feel of his hair as it whispers over her body.”

“Kit?” I moaned and he eased his body around my shoulder and head amongst the pillows, caressing my cheek.

“Hush Mistress...let me help you.” He told me and Amras stroked me with his mouth while my eyes closed and I allowed myself to simply enjoy his touch. “Feel her skin.” Kit murmured. “It is like silk beneath your fingertips.” And hands brushed my waist and breasts softly. “Taste her.” He urged. “She tastes of cinnamon and cloves.

Cinnamon from the bark of a tree which when pounded produces oil, hot and spicy and golden in color. Not unlike my mistress. Its name means...sweet wood. Cloves, from the bud of crimson flowers, are an aromatic and potent spice which creates a warming sensation. Cloves are used to prevent impotency, and their shape is that of a man's sword. Their oil is used to block pain and cleanse wounds." Kit murmured in an almost hypnotic voice as fingers and lips moved over me. "Golden and red, warming and potent, sweet and hot, does that not describe my Mistress?"

Kit said nothing for several minutes which allowed me to focus on the feeling of Amras and what he was doing to me. The pressure inside me built, quickly pooling in my middle. My breath came in soft pants and I reached for the bedding gripping it tightly as I raised my hips to Amras and felt my climax come upon me. It was exquisite and stole my breath causing those upon the bed to murmur in pleasure. There was a shifting and Amras moved to my side while Stela took his place. Amras leaned down and bit me softly upon my breast and my back arched off the bed.

Stela's tongue slid into me and I cried out while Amras lathed my breast with his tongue. I shuddered, lifting myself to him while Kit urged him on. "Slide your finger into her...feel her sweet moistness." He breathed and a finger slipped inside of me and I shuddered and moved my hips silently asking for more. His tongue found me and it wasn't long before I was moaning and shuddering once again. When Stela would have kept at it Kit cautioned him. "Give her but a moment...she will enjoy it more if you allow her to savor the feel without rushing her. There is always time for one more and she will let you know when she is ready." He told them softly. "It is an art." He murmured and reached down my body and slowly ran his fingertip up me so that I arched into his touch. "You must play my Mistress gently and she will sing for you like no other."

Stela's finger was still inside of me and it felt good to me and I lifted myself trying to pull him in deeper. Stela hummed and lowered his mouth to me again at Kit's urging. "Harder." Kit murmured...and his mouth moved upon me and his finger set a rhythm which my body echoed as I quickly reached orgasm and cried out once again.

Amras' mouth found my breast and sucked me hard causing me to come yet again. My head tossed from side to side and I moaned soft and low while the bed shifted again and Talon replace Stela. This time Kit offered no assistance and Talon apparently needed none because he set upon me and soon had me writhing beneath him just as he'd wished for. Twice more and I was panting and clutching at Amras who hummed and slid down my body while Talon moved out of his way. And then he was pressing himself into me and I reached for him and called his name as he filled me. I pushed my door open at Kit's whispered urging and coated the five of us with my desire. Stela and Talon cried out while Kit whispered what he wished to do to me against my ear, as Amras rode my body.

"Look at me Princess." Amras called to me and I opened my eyes and stared up at him and his shield dropped away and I came to the feel of his passion for me while he pressed himself in deep and matched my release with his own. My arms reached for him and held him tightly for a moment then he slipped from my body and Kit rose over me and straddled me easing slowly down the length of me. His knee spread my legs and he placed himself at my opening. His hands reached for mine and pulled them over my head holding both my wrists there in one of his hands.

"Are you ready Mistress?" He asked his voice low and dangerous and I bit my lip and nodded. "Then take me." He breathed and rammed himself inside of me growing even as he entered me so that I choked and reared up at the feel. He held my hands and pummeled me against the bed. "Come for me." He breathed and I cried out and felt liquid heat invade my body. "Again." He called and I jerked and moaned softly. "Open it."

I reached for my door and shoved it all the way open and he arched against me and absorbed the red waves of lust in through his skin. His hips became frantic and his eyes nearly glowed. "More." I breathed and he chuckled and I felt him grow larger until I cried out and shuddered. His breathing was harsh and his hair covered us both when he reared back and his body went stiff. His eyes slipped closed and I felt his release against my cervix. He lowered himself onto me and I wrapped my arms around him sinking my

fingers into his hair while I squeezed him tightly. His lips found my cheek and nibbled their way down to my earlobe which he sucked between his teeth while I shivered and twitched beneath him.

“Mmmm, perfect.” He breathed and I wrapped my other leg around his and raised my hips. Amras brushed my hair from my face and leaned down to softly kiss me from where he’d relocated himself above me amongst my pillows. His fingers stroked my forehead and I purred low in my throat. Beside us on the bed Stela and Talon both moaned and I reached for them and brushed their bodies, feeling them tremble at my touch.

Several minutes later Kit pushed himself to his elbows and kissed my tattoo with a grin. “Jace made me promise I would feed you.” He replied and a tray appeared on the bed within arm’s reach of Amras. The smell sent my stomach to rumbling and caused Amras and Kit to chuckle. Kit urged me higher onto the bed so that my head was resting in Amras’ lap then he lowered his head to my chest and proceeded to amuse himself by teasing my nipples with his long delicate fingers and tongue. After the second time I nearly aspirated my food, Amras made a low warning sound and Kit chuckled and behaved himself. Amras fed me while I silently watched Talon and Stela who looked...like they had been rode hard and put away wet. You would have thought, by looking at them that they had been beneath Kit instead of me.

Both of them growled low at my thought and Stela turned his pale bronze eyes up to me with a warning look. “He is attractive Mistress...but I prefer you.” Kit teased and Stela speared him with look that clearly indicated he was not amused while he nearly bristled on the bed.

“The Mistress does not share her men ...with anyone.” Amras offered in a calm voice. “Kit merely teases you, as is his way. Rising to his bait will encourage him to try harder. No one here engages in...edan a’ edan. It is not necessary and would not be tolerated.”

I flicked my eyes to Amras who gave me a lopsided smile and held my fork for me. “Man to man eh?” I asked and he nodded. Stela seemed to calm down while Talon

remained laying upon the bed with his eyes closed. He had not seemed troubled by Kit's comments. Either the subject was not offensive to him or he did not see it as a problem. Perhaps living amongst men it was the former which led to the latter. Talon sighed and flipped over onto his stomach. He braced himself on his forearms and looked at me calmly, his eyes holding mine as he reached out a hand and ran it slowly over Kit's bottom and the back of his thigh. Kit abruptly reared up off me and turned to glare at Talon who merely raised an eyebrow while I watched in shock. Above me Amras froze, and seemed to hold his breath. Kit growled low and threateningly.

"Your Demon should not make offers he is clearly unwilling to satisfy." Talon remarked his tone calm and somewhat chiding. It sounded as if he was instructing a child and it caused Kit to nearly sputter he was so outraged. He growled again and snapped his fingers before I could stop him and my eyes widened and nearly popped out of my head. Kit had dressed Talon in a dog collar and black chains. He was wearing a leather...bustier and mini skirt and his arms and ankles were shackled together behind his back so that he flopped over onto his side, his body slightly bowed backwards. His hair was in ponytails like a school girl and I choked on the bit of egg that was still in my mouth and starting coughing violently.

Stela muttered in disgust and pushed himself up into a seated position as if to distance himself from the sight of Talon dressed as a girl. Kit levered himself off me and knelt between my legs placing a hand next to Talon's waist and leaning toward him. His other hand wrapped around the chain that led from Talon's neck and down the front of his body and gave it a slight tug. The chain ran between Talon's legs and I was betting Kit had purposefully neglected to give Talon any underwear to protect his more sensitive parts.

Talon growled and then paled as the pressure Kit exerted became just a little more intense. "Let me go Demon." Talon hissed softly, his pale pink eyes filled with his anger.

"You were not invited to touch me." Kit informed him. "My Mistress has freed me from Hell and I will control who may and may not place their hands upon

me...except at the Mistress' command." And the pressure got just a little tighter and Talon seemed to pale slightly while I pushed myself up onto my elbows and stared at the two of them. "I wonder..." Kit breathed as he leaned even closer and Talon's eyes widened as he held his breath and tried to ease his hips forward to release the pressure. Surely the chain was mashing his most delicate parts. "If we invited the Silver in here...would we learn something of interest?"

I swallowed and flicked my gaze to Stela who looked...disturbed as if he was having major masculinity issues. Behind me Amras wrapped his arm around my waist and snuggled closer to me, using my body as a shield.

"Kit is this necessary?" I asked calmly and he didn't bother to look at me, simply stared down at Talon with a narrow look.

"Mistress, you would not wish your men to fear for their honor would you? I think this should be dealt with now before it becomes a problem. I say we castrate him."

"Kit...I know you're angry because he teased you back. But I doubt that is cause for something so drastic. I'm certain Talon can control his urges and you insult the others by insinuating they are unable to...make their preferences known should he...lose his head and...offend them." I replied nearly choking on the subject matter which I had no experience with and found extremely distasteful.

Talon glanced at me and growled softly his eyes looking both angry and offended. "Tell your Demon to release me. This is unnecessary." He informed me in a low voice that vibrated with anger.

"See Kit this is unnecessary. You should let him go. I...don't wish to have nightmares, please."

Kit growled and looked determined and I chewed my lip and glanced between them. "If I castrate him Mistress...perhaps your other Gray will be better suited and prefer you to me." And he snapped his fingers again and there appeared on the bed the image of another man who was well made and had soft gray eyes and a shaved head. His shoulders were wide, his chest deep and he had dimples and a smile and lips that looked

very kissable. He was dressed in jeans and a light gray shirt that showed off his fine body and I stared back at the image and licked my lips.

Talon hissed and his eyes shifted and began whirling softly. “Hell spawn.” Talon growled and Kit lifted an eyebrow and stared down at him. “I am no lover of men and well you know it. Why don’t you come to the point and say what this is really about?” He demanded.

Kit gave the chain a yank and Talon’s eyes closed in pain then opened again brighter than ever. “Apologize for taking liberties.” He demanded and Talon’s shoulders bulged as he pulled at his chains behind his back.

“My pardon.” Talon hissed and glared back at Kit.

“Not to me you idiot! To the Mistress...for what you did to her in the Sidhe both in the bathroom and within the cavern.”

Talon looked shocked, his head reared back and he glanced up at Kit who looked as if he might explode from the anger within him. His eyes flicked to me and I knew I was likely looking pale and shaken.

“I have already explained my actions.” Talon growled.

“Explained...you did not apologize for striking her or for...stabbing her repeatedly.” He growled and yanked the chain again so that Talon cried out and writhed upon the bed. “You buried your knives to their hilts in her till she was covered in her own blood and looked like one of the bodies upon the sands yesterday!” He nearly yelled and I pushed back against Amras and made a frightened noise in my throat. “Look at her!” He growled and Talon’s gaze rose slowly to me. “That is my Mistress...whom you forced me to watch nearly die because of your fear and pride! She is priceless and you...you son of a she goat are not!”

Talon blinked back his anger and glanced back at Kit. “She has already forgiven me.” He replied more calmly. “Else she would not have allowed me near her as she did in the...shower.”

Kit bared his teeth and his knuckles turned white from the pressure he exerted on the chain. It looked like he was straining to keep from ripping Talon in half. “You

fool...she took you and gave you what you thought you wanted. You gave her...nothing except power over you. Do not think for one second that because she knows her duty it touched her heart. She could use you all day long and spit you out. Did she not tell you that? That you should not mistake her use of you as a declaration of love or devotion! She is part Demon...and is learning her nature well. She will tolerate you because she has been told she must...but if you want her heart...you must earn it. As have we. Could you not tell the difference between our efforts?"

Talon swallowed and glanced between us while Amras held me tightly and we watched Kit in wide eyed wonder. "How?" He finally replied.

Kit leaned forward and placed his face not an inch away from Talon. "First you must convince us!" He growled. "And we have not yet forgiven you. I have not yet forgiven you."

Talon pressed his head back against the bed and blinked up at Kit who looked like some kind of avenging angel. "Kit...stop please. He cannot help who he is and the sum of his experiences. To punish him is wrong. He is unlike you and the others in that he did not wait for me, or know of me since birth or before. You cannot expect him to...behave towards women as you or Amras or the others do. Please." I breathed and he took a deep breath and slowly released the hold upon the chain.

"I will not allow him to hurt you again Mistress. You are more than Dragon and I will not allow their laws to come between you and your happiness."

"I would not ask you to Kit." I replied and he nodded once and snapped his fingers and Talon went back to being naked upon the bed. He pushed back from Kit with a wary look and rubbed at his wrists. "Kit..." I asked hesitantly and he turned his face to me while Stela glanced between Talon and him and also looked wary. "Who was...the man?"

Kit smiled and glanced back at Talon who flared his nostrils and narrowed his eyes. "Your Gray Mistress." He replied with a touch of spite in his voice. I turned to the wall and the portrait that hung there and pulled air into my lungs. Both the Bronze and the Gray were clearly defined in the light shining down upon them. The Bronze...was

not Stela and I pulled air into my lungs and pushed myself slowly up off Amras, my body tense.

“And how do you know this?” I whispered, feeling my pulse speed up in my veins.

Kit lowered his eyes and gave me a wicked smile and tilted his head as if listening to something I could not hear. “Because he and your Bronze are both...just coming around in the living room.”

No one said anything for a moment then Stela leapt off the bed and ran for the door. I glanced at Kit and he snapped his fingers and locked it. Stela reached for the handle and yanked upon it in vain then turned to Kit with look filled with rage. “Open this door! You may not interfere!” He growled and Kit shook his head and crossed his arms over his chest.

“You are not the boss of me.” Kit informed him.

Talon growled and slid from the bed running toward the bathroom. I assumed he was going for his clothing and watched in confused dismay as Stela glanced around my room and moved toward the closet.

“Do you think he knows he is naked?” Amras spoke loudly as if having a conversation with someone hard of hearing.

I shook my head while Kit sighed and snapped his fingers. Amras and he were suddenly clothed while I was given...not much in the way of apparel. “Kit this is...not appropriate if I don’t wish to get them killed.” I muttered and he turned to look at me and his face brightened. The outfit wasn’t much better than what he’d given me in the Sidhe before he’d sent me out to...mate with Talon. In fact...it was worse. “Please?” I asked and he made a moue but snapped his fingers again and this time I was wearing...a baby doll dress that was a soft dove gray with dark and pale bronze dragons embroidered across the itty bitty bodice and up the thick straps. It was sleeveless and came to just above mid thigh and there was no way I was going to be able to bend over or walk fast without flashing everyone in sight. “Underwear?” I asked and he gave me a look that said I was pushing it.

I sighed and watched Talon run out of the bathroom. He'd strapped on his belt and his sword was in his hand. He glanced about and also disappeared into the closet and I sighed and turned to Kit with a shake of my head.

"How long do you think they'll be gone?" Amras asked as he eased off the bed and reached to assist me. I glanced down and realized Kit had painted my fingernails and toenails a becoming bronze color which matched the darker Dragons on my dress. He snapped his fingers and there was a weight upon my brow which I assumed was intended to let the newcomers know who they were dealing with in the form of some sort of crown. I glanced at the wall and realized it wasn't my orange one...maybe it too matched, I had no idea.

"Not long." Kit answered. "These older Drakes have excellent vision. Much better than the youngsters."

"Do I get shoes?" I asked and Kit shook his head and glanced at me thoughtfully then grinned.

"You look...quite adorable as you are. It would only ruin the pedicure I gave you and you have such lovely feet. Should they become cold Mistress, I will gladly carry you."

"Shall we?" Amras asked and moved to the door while I sighed and followed along. Roa' looked troubled when we emerged without Talon but Kit quickly closed the door and pressed his finger to his lips as if to say...shush don't wake them. Roa' frowned but held his position and we moved down the hall leaving him there to guard the empty bedroom.

The rest of our men were stationed around the room and Lira hummed softly as I moved through the door from Gareth and Jace's section to stand in the hall just out of sight. "They are nearly themselves again." He replied and his eyes moved over me in approval while I nodded and wished I'd taken the time to at least brush my hair. Kit sighed and snapped his fingers and I grinned and gave his arm a squeeze letting him know I appreciated the fact that my hair was no longer looking like...I'd just been having sex with four men!

“But you did.” He leaned down to reply and I chewed my lip and took a deep breath as I glanced down the hall toward the front room.

“Lock the door Kit.” I told him and he grinned and snapped his fingers. “Talon and Stela are just...a little upset.” I warned Lira who raised an eyebrow and smiled.

“Competition is stiff Your Majesty. And unlike some of us, these Dragons do not wish to share.” He informed me then laughed softly.

I smiled and nodded then turned to Kit and raised an eyebrow while I crossed my arms over my chest. I didn't say anything, merely continued to stare up at him till he fidgeted and crossed his arms over his chest. “What?” He finally replied and I raised my other eyebrow and pursed my lips.

“You did that on purpose.” I told him and he tried to look innocent but failed miserably.

“I was angry Mistress. You have no idea what it was like to watch him do...what he did.”

I waved my hand at him as if to dismiss that and tilted my head at him. “And did our new friends deserve to be initiated in this manner? Do you not think it will cause...more issues if I must send them away?”

“I thought a little less lust in the room might keep you from panicking like you did last evening Mistress and...perhaps allow them to think more clearly before attempting to kill one another.” He replied with a grimace.

I considered his words for a moment and finally nodded. “Well, I suppose your heart was in the right place.” I told him then reached up and gave him a quick hug.

“Ah Princess...” Amras replied while Lira made a startled sound and I turned to look at him. “Your dress.” He replied and I realized I'd just flashed Lira in giving Kit a hug.

“Shoot.” I muttered and yanked my arms down while Kit chuckled as did the others. Lira looked...like he normally did and I felt my cheeks turn pink in response. “Before we go in there, could you...freshen their clothing?” I whispered as I discretely placed my palms upon Kit's chest. As long as I didn't raise my shoulders I was okay.

Obviously my indecent exposure put him in a good mood because he snapped his fingers and from the living room there were twin exclamations of surprise. “Guess that’s our queue huh?” I asked and all three of them nodded. “Wish me luck.” I replied while they chuckled again.

Chapter 18

Lira stepped around us and blocked my path to the front room with his body while I frowned at Amras who reached for my arm and slid it through his. His eyes held a mischievous twinkle as he leaned down to whisper in my ear. “I enjoyed our time together. And I am most pleased to be back here again with you. I did not think it possible when we left.” I grinned as we moved into the front room, my eyes glued to his beautiful dark purple orbs. His lashes swept down as he moved back slightly, leaving me framed in the doorway with a smile on my face filled with the love I shared with him.

From the sunken floor of the living room someone cursed softly under his breath and I pulled my eyes from Amras and turned to glance at our guests, mortified to realize in my moment with Amras I had forgotten they were there. At my right, Lira bent from the waist and announced in a clear strong voice. “Queen Lexi Helyanwe.”

I nodded my head and glanced down at the two men staring up at me and replied. “Gentlemen, thank you for coming.” They both rose slowly from their seats and the Bronze went to a knee before me while the Gray glanced at him and quickly followed.

“Please...” I told them and motioned for them to stand. Lira spoke once again indicating the Bronze first. “May I introduce...Arrin Herion and Bryce Meldiron.”

Arrin had short dark bronze hair and eyes, unlike Stela who was much lighter. But like Stela he was well made, he had a look about him that fairly screamed all American, as in apple pie. There was a dusting of freckles over the bridge of his nose and he looked like he had been raised on a farm and could toss hay bales around one handed. He was not as tall as Bryce but was at least two inches over six feet. He was dressed in a crisp button down shirt the same bronze color as his eyes and dark brown slacks. He seemed very pleased to see me, and his smile was charming. I was surprised to see that his ears...were almost as pointed as mine. I pulled my eyes from him and glanced at Bryce who looked every bit as good as the image Kit had portrayed. He was perhaps six four and because of the color of his hair elected to shave it so that there was just a brushing of fine hairs covering his head. His eyes were pale gray as were his eyebrows. His body was not nearly as broad as Arrin's and showed some of his elvish heritage in that it was long and lean. He was built not unlike Amras but taller. He was wearing the same gray shirt and soft blue jeans Kit had portrayed him in and when he smiled, his dimples peaked out at me from finely sculpted cheeks.

Down the hall something hit the door and I hesitated then smiled and stepped into the living room. Moving calmly toward them as the door was struck again. Their eyes widened and both flicked their gazes behind me briefly. “I feel obliged to tell you that...that is another Gray and Bronze and should they make it through the door it is likely they will attempt to injure if not kill you for being so close to me.” I replied with a wry smile. “Both came to us through the Everlasting and this is not the first Court they have served upon. I fear they take their duty...very seriously.”

“You did not wait for us?” Arrin asked calmly his voice deep and slightly gravely. I moved to a couch and carefully seated myself upon it while motioning for them to sit.

“No...I’m afraid I had no choice in the matter. It seems it is first come...first serve.” I replied and clasped my hands in my lap demurely while I placed my legs together at the knee.

Bryce glanced at Arrin and frowned. “Your Majesty.” He replied and his voice seemed quite boyish compared to Arrin’s deeper one. “We,” and he indicated himself and Arrin with one hand. “Have been searching for you for some time. When we heard in the news you were here in San Francisco we came as quickly as we could.” He informed me. “Had we been closer we would have flown with you last night.”

“How did you know I flew last night?” The two of them looked at each other and then back at me.

“We felt you rise.” Arrin replied looking nearly as confused as I felt. I thought about it for a moment and realized...Dane had torn apart the den the night we’d met because he too had felt me leave the red carpet with the others. Had they felt me last night? I wondered then turned to Kit who was watching me closely.

“Yes Mistress.” He replied and crossed his arms over his chest. “You took us all by surprise when you disappeared from the cavern. I thought you needed time to be alone. Had I known where you went, I would not have prevented them from following you.” He replied tightly. They had felt me rise. Was this something all Dragons could sense and only I could not?

Arrin leaned forward and clasped his hands between his knees his bronze eyes watching me curiously. “I hear your thoughts.” He replied his eyes moving to Bryce who also nodded. “I have never felt another Dragon rise. Not even Bryce. Not like last night.”

“You two know each other?” I asked, somewhat surprised. The pounding in the hall had gotten louder as if Talon had joined Stela and the two of them were trying to tear the door down. I frowned and glanced at Kit who shrugged.

“I could send them to Hell Mistress.” He replied. “But they aren’t likely to thank you for it.”

I pressed my lips together and nodded. “The conference room?” I asked and he snapped his fingers and the lot of us found ourselves standing in the conference room. Arrin and Bryce were on the opposite side of the table from me while Amras and Cursed were standing to either side. Cam and Cael had been left behind perhaps to deal with my angry Drakes while Lira and Roral were stationed at the door. Bryce and Arrin looked slightly shaken and I gave them a small smile and seated myself in my chair watching as they followed suite. “There now we can chat in peace.”

Arrin leaned his forearms on the table and answered my earlier question. “We have known each other since we were young.” He replied. “Our Mother’s are friends.” Amras made a noise and I turned to glance at him tilting my head to do so.

“I am familiar with a Lady Meldiron.” He informed me. “Though it has been some time since she has been within the Sidhe.” Bryce glanced at Amras and the look on his face...was not altogether friendly. And his aura shifted to a yellowish green color. I sensed he did not like my feelings toward Amras which must have been clear on my face earlier.

“Lord Amras is my personal guard and the Earl has pledged fealty to me. He is Seelie.” I informed them then turned toward Kit and said. “My familiar Kit who is a second level Demon and...mine for all eternity. At the door are Lira and Roral. The others below are Prince Cam and Lord Cael. The last four as well as Amras were given over to me by my Grandmother...the Queen of Air and Light.” I informed them quietly while they glanced about the room and then back to me. “Like you, I am Dragon and Elf. Yet I am also part Demon and perhaps more. It is difficult to say as my Father’s familiar had access to nearly every species of immortal.”

“Interesting.” Arrin replied and leaned back in his chair. “But it does not solve our little problem.”

“No it does not.” I replied and curled my feet into the chair with me. I took a moment to ensure I was adequately covered and when I lifted my eyes both of them were leaning forward with...very interested looks upon their faces.

“What happened earlier?” Bryce asked as he cupped his chin in his hand and stared at me. “I have never experienced anything like that.”

I chewed my lip and stared back at him feeling my cheeks heat up slightly. “I was...entertaining my men.” I replied softly.

“Entertaining your men...” Arrin repeated and raised an eyebrow as if to say...what exactly does that mean?

“It means that I was...”

“She was making love with us...the four of us.” Amras specifically offered and my ears felt like they were on fire and I dropped my eyes to the table and chewed my lip. Normally it was something that Kit would have offered and I couldn't help wondering what had gotten into Amras.

“Technically it was only you and I as the others were quite...useless by then. Much the same as these two were within the living room.” Kit corrected him and I swallowed and reached to rub the spot between my eyes.

“This was you then? Some form of Demon magic?” Bryce asked and I glanced up to see he was looking in Kit's direction.

“Oh no, what you felt was my Mistress' pleasure. Though I'll not offer false modesty in that Lord Amras and I had some small part in...her achieving her climax....several times as you no doubt felt.” He added and my fingers slid over my face and I let out a soft moan.

“Kit...that's enough.” I told him from behind my palm. “Please this isn't helping.” I added.

“Yes Mistress.” He replied in a seductive voice. “You know I only live to serve you.”

“I think...maybe you should go wait out in the hall if you can not behave.” I told him trying not to clench my teeth as I moved my hand and turned to look up at him. He was wearing his innocent look which nearly always meant trouble for me.

“I will behave.” He replied promptly and I sighed and glanced back at Arrin and Bryce.

“So I am supposed to send you away.” I told them abruptly and watched while they went from confusion to alarm to stubborn denial in a matter of seconds.

“And if we do not wish to go? If we wish to declare?” Arrin asked in a low angry voice.

“I cannot protect you all the time and Stela and Talon have already informed me they will not tolerate your presence.”

“And you will allow them to dictate your Court?” Bryce demanded.

I spread my hands and glanced up at Kit. “It seems I have no choice. I do not want anyone to be injured on my behalf and I can’t keep you and not expect you four to tear each other apart while I’m not looking. I’m not exactly sure what it is you’d like me to do about this?”

Arrin sat back and considered me for a moment. “Let us stay, we will not declare.”

“I doubt it will matter if you declare or not.” I told him with a frown. You are Dragon and that will be enough to set the others at your throat.

“Lord Amras has sworn fealty to you and you allow him within your bed. How does that sit with the other Drakes?” Arrin asked in a calm voice. Bryce turned to look at him and his eyes widened then moved back to Amras with a slow smile.

I looked at them and wondered where he was going with this. “They have...just recently admitted to the need for...other men within my bed.”

“The mistress wore them out and was not even breathing hard.” Kit added while I closed my eyes and forced myself not to yell at him.

Arrin and Bryce looked at each other and chuckled. They both pushed back from the table and while I watched in surprised horror went to a knee and damned if they didn’t swear fealty to me as Elves!

“Do you accept?” Arrin asked calmly and I stared back at him and finally nodded.

“I do.” I told him and then repeated it to Bryce. “You realize you just made yourselves...subjects of The Lord of Air and Darkness?” I asked softly and they glanced

between themselves and nodded. "I cannot protect you from him and I'm not sure he will be pleased when he finds out what you have done." I added and glanced up at Amras with a worried frown.

"He has mellowed Princess....he will be pleased they did not declare as that would have annoyed him greatly."

"Yes but kept them from him." I added while he nodded his agreement. "I suppose it is too late to hide them?" I asked wistfully and Amras chuckled.

"I'm certain he'll be along shortly to see to his own duties. My advice would be to keep them out of his sight if possible."

Kit turned to Arrin and Bryce and informed them calmly. "Lord Tdem Stoneshadow, King of the Slaug, and Lord of Air and Darkness is one of my Mistress' Court."

Arrin and Bryce looked like as if they both might faint.

"Kit...I think you're intentionally trying to scare them." I chided then shook my head. "I'm sure I can work something out with Tdem."

"Yes, it's likely he'll only ask for your first child." Amras offered, tongue in cheek.

"Let's not give him any ideas shall we?" I replied in a sing song voice. "The walls have ears."

"Sorry Princess." Amras replied contritely.

I sighed and turned to Kit. "Where are Gareth and Jace now?" I asked and he tilted his head and blinked several times.

"Owen informs me they are....unavailable at the moment." And his eyes slid away from mine and he suddenly looked like he was keeping something very important from me. My fingers clenched on the arms of my chair and my eyes narrowed.

"Tell me." I nearly growled.

Kit shook his head and folded his arms over his chest. "It is for your own good." He replied. "Gareth does not wish you to know, and I resent you putting me in this position." He replied with an angry pout that brought me up short.

“I am sorry Kit.” I told him and he nodded his head once but still refused to look at me. “Fine then we’ll have to do this ourselves. Can you get my Dad in here please?” I asked calmly.

He flicked his eyes to me and snapped his fingers and my Father swayed slightly and glanced around with an angry look on his face. His hair looked...tousled and his shirt was nearly unbuttoned. “What is the meaning of this?” He demanded and I bit the side of my cheek as I realized...what he’d been in the middle of when I’d yanked him here.

“You might have warned me he was...with Mom!” I snapped at Kit who shrugged and pointed my Father in Arrin and Bryce’s direction. Dad growled and ran his hand through his hair while he blinked his eyes back to normal.

“Dad meet Arrin Herion Bronze and Bryce Meldiron Gray. This is my Father Roark e’ Venth Silver.” I told them.

“Lexi are you mad?” He growled at me. “Where are Stela and Talon? You have to get these two out of here immediately. You shouldn’t even be here!”

“Yeah I got that Dad thanks.” I told him and rolled my eyes. “Arrin and Bryce are also Elven and have pledged their fealty to me as Princess of the Seelie.” I informed him while he reached for a chair and limply lowered himself into it. “By the way, it wasn’t my idea.” I told him primly. “They came up with it all on their own. Although we aren’t certain how Tdem is going to feel about this.” I admitted. “I figured you might want to be here when I introduce them to the others.”

Dad sucked air through his teeth and put his head in his hands using the heel of his palms to rub his eyes. “I don’t think this is going to work.”

“It will...it must. Or I’ll simply shrink them to the size of five year olds and see how useful they are in that size.” I told him and he shook his head and looked just a little horrified at the prospect.

“Shrink them to the size of a five year old?” Arrin asked. “You could do that?”

“Their manhood only.” Amras offered. “And yes she could.”

Arrin sat up straight in his chair while Bryce glanced at me in alarm. “I’ve never actually done it before. They just like to threaten men with it to keep them from being idiots.” I told them.

“No.” Amras replied. “I like to mention it because you enjoy me so well you made me larger just for you.”

“Not helping Amras.” I told him while across the table Arrin and Bryce looked like kids in a candy shop all of the sudden. “Anyway back to the subject at hand. Kit you need to make sure you divest Talon of all his weapons. The man keeps them everywhere and I don’t want to explain to Gareth and Jace why we tore up their conference room while they were out...doing whatever it is they are doing which you won’t tell me.” I ended on a growl. “Are we ready to do this? If they misbehave you have my permission to turn them into...I don’t know donkeys maybe?”

“Lexi!” Dad nearly yelled at me. “You will show the proper respect for your men!”

“Or what Dad? It’s not like I chose this. You prefer I let more of my men die?” I breathed and he stiffened and looked at me in shock and I realized he did not know. “Oh no Dad...I’m so sorry.” I told him and reached for his arm. “The Blue...is dead.”

“Gareth is dead?” He breathed in horror and I sucked air into my lungs at the thought just as I had last night.

“No! Not Gareth...the other the one you created.” I told him softly and watched as his eyes filled with tears.

“Was it Gareth?” He asked softly his fingers reaching up to brush my cheek when my own tear slipped from my eye.

“No...Valentine. Did Marcus not tell you? We were under attack here in the den last night when we returned. One of Valentine’s men ripped out the Blue’s throat. I’m sure he was in thrall to Valentine.”

Dad’s eyes dropped to the floor and he stared at it unseeing for several moments. “It is one thing to die with honor...but this is not right.” He breathed and I nodded and stroked my hand through his hair. “Were you also attacked?” He asked and raised his

eyes to my neck. My face paled and my fingers slid over the puncture wounds which were just beginning to heal.

“No Dad I...I wasn't.” I whispered softly and he looked confused.

“What have you done child?” He breathed and stared up at me his face becoming more distressed by the second. “What have you done?”

“What she had to.” Amras told him and he blinked and glanced between Kit and Amras in horror.

“He will pay for what he did. I promise you Dad. He will pay with his very existence and I will see it done. It has been promised me.”

Dad dropped his face into his hands and his shoulders shook with the force of his emotion. I rose to my feet and placed my hands upon his shoulders while I glanced over his head at Amras who looked bleak. When he finally pulled himself together he muttered from between his fingers. “You said something about Marcus? Please tell me he was not hurt also.” I glanced at Kit and my eyes widened in surprise.

“I had Owen send him back to the Sidhe just seconds after we arrived. The den was overrun by Vampires and he was distressed.” I told him. “Did he not find you? Owen should have sent him to you in the hall.”

“He did not return.” My Dad told me and slowly raised his face from his hands to glance at me while I looked at Kit and he snapped his fingers and Marcus appeared in Dragon form his wings spread wide. Several of us cried out and Marcus shifted and tumbled across the table, his forward motion carrying him off the other side and onto the floor. Arrin and Bryce jumped from their chairs and reached to help him up while he winced and rubbed his elbow.

His eyes swept the group and he smiled brightly at me and nearly ran around the table while Lira and Roral growled softly and Amras stepped in front of him. “Are you well Marcus?” He demanded and Marcus grinned and nodded.

“Yes thank you Lord Amras.” He replied and edged around Amras who watched him closely but let him go. Marcus went to his knees in front of me and wrapped his

arms around my thighs. “Your Majesty.” He murmured while I stroked his cheek and he hummed for me. “Do not send me from you again.” He breathed against my body.

“Marcus I was worried about you.” I told him and gently lifted his face up to me. “I am sorry but I could not take the chance and you looked so distressed.” I added.

“Do not send me from you again.” He repeated and I ran my finger over his lip and allowed the sadness to claim me.

“Marcus, I could not bear to see you dead. I will send you from me in a heartbeat if it means keeping you alive. We lost a Blue last night and...it could have been you also.”

He pulled back and stared up at me in horror. “Gareth?” He demanded and I shook my head.

“No Marcus...I did not know him but he was like you. Valentine...killed him as a warning to me.” I breathed while his eyes widened.

“A warning what he will do to Gareth...your sebenne.” He murmured softly. I looked at him then glanced at my Dad who was nodding agreement. I did not know this word. I’d have to ask him later.

“Who is this Gareth?” Arrin muttered and I ignored him and urged Marcus to get up. His hands got tangled in my dress as he started to rise so I was forced to reach for it and hold it down lest he flash everyone in the room.

“Mmmmm.” He murmured and went back to his knee then slid his fingers under the edge and over my bottom while I gave him an exasperated look. “Sweet.” He whispered and I felt my face turn bright pink and glared first at him and then at Kit.

“Marcus stand up before I get angry with you.” I told him trying to be dignified while his cool fingers stroked my bottom. “Sweet Danu, your hands are cold!”

“I am sorry Your Majesty...the mountains of Colorado are cool this time of year.” I frowned down at him and demanded. “And what exactly were you doing in Colorado?”

“It was the shortest route back to you.” He replied and smiled slyly and I stared at him in wonder. He had escaped the Sidhe and was flying back to me...all by himself?

He nodded and ran his fingers over the spot between my bottom and thigh. "I'm very glad you remembered me quickly this time. It was a long night."

I sighed and squeezed his shoulder. "Get up Marcus and meet your brother." I told him and he slid his hand down the back of my thigh and carefully lifted himself back to his feet. He turned and moved behind me then wrapped his arms about my shoulders and upper chest resting his cheek against mine.

"Hello." He greeted Arrin and Bryce. "I am Marcus 've Sca and who might you be?" Arrin looked us over and introduced himself then turned to Bryce who stepped forward and made his own introductions.

"Bryce is your brother Marcus, as Arrin is Roa' and Dane's."

"Why are they here?" Marcus asked, his voice sounding confused. "Have they done something to the others? Are they dead too?" He asked solemnly.

"No Marcus we thought we'd take a novel approach. They have sworn fealty to me just as Cursed and Amras have, as Elves not Dragons." I told him and he stilled against me and made an amused sound.

"Interesting." He replied. "And do we believe this will work? Neither elder seemed overly endowed with a sense of humor to me."

"I don't know we were just about to introduce them. You can help." I told him and he laughed and kissed the top of my head.

"You are so cute my Queen." He replied. "I suppose if I survived Belinda I can survive this meeting." He responded then stepped back from me and crossed his arms over his chest. "Be sure you do not...aim wrong. I would hate to find myself on the floor writhing in agony because I was trying to assist." He teased me. Across the table Bryce looked at him strangely.

"You would put yourself in harms way for me?" He asked his face looking wary and confused.

"Sure...what is family for?" Marcus replied with a grin. "Besides, I've lived through it once. It wasn't pleasant but I'm still here. You aren't planning to seriously

injure them are you?" Marcus asked me a disapproving tone. He gave me a tight squeeze.

"No...I hadn't planned on it. I don't want to injure them. I don't want anyone to be injured. I just need to restrain them long enough to explain matters. I'm hoping they will see reason."

"Good luck with that." Dad muttered and I frowned at him while he finished buttoning his last button and stood up from his chair.

"Kit?" I asked and he snapped his fingers and Talon and Stela were standing in front of me looking very angry.

"Where is he?" Stela demanded in a voice that made my hair stand up on the back of my neck. Wow Stela angry was a pretty scary thing, seductive and calm was more his norm. Beside him Talon glanced around and I watched as his eyes met Bryce's across the room.

"Stop! They have sworn fealty to me as Elves!" I yelled as Talon gathered himself to leap across the table. "And I say that you may not harm them." I finished and Stela and Talon both turned to me with disbelieving looks on their faces.

"They did what?" Talon yelled right back at me and I crossed my arms then dropped them suddenly when all eyes moved to the hemline of my very short dress. Well maybe I could use that as a distraction I thought and recrossed my arms. And around me several minds hummed.

"I said." In a more normal voice. "They are half Elf and have sworn fealty to me as such. They will not be declaring, so you may not harm them just as you may not harm Cursed or Amras. They are my loyal vassals and by accepting their pledge, I have promised to protect them. If you harm them willingly I will be forsworn and you will find yourself without a Queen."

"What care we if you are forsworn to the Elves?" Talon demanded while Stela grimaced and alternated between glaring at Arrin and me.

“You risk bringing both Courts down on our heads! The Dragons have ever been allies of the Elf’s. The Prince of Air and Darkness is sworn to her! For stars sake the King is one of us!”

“I stand corrected.” I told Stela. “I should have said...I will find myself without my Gray and Bronze as their wrath will fall upon you where it rightly belongs. Of course...assuming you do not kill them, either or both...will take your place. This way...no one gets harmed. They will not declare and you will not be killed in your sleep for having caused a Princess of the Seelie to shame her family.”

Talon growled and flexed his hands angrily. “I told you you could not interfere.” He warned me.

“No, I believe you told me I could not tell you to step aside and give up your place. I have not asked you to, nor will I. This was not my idea. I would have sent them away, perhaps to wait for my sisters whom they may find of interest in twenty years or so.”

Stela glanced at my father and dipped his head. “Pardon,” he said to Dad and then to me, “Your Majesty, your sisters are not Gold.”

“True but that doesn’t mean they won’t make fine mates.” I told him calmly while he stared down at me in agitation. “Who knows maybe they would enjoy having a Dragoness all their own.”

“I cannot guarantee I will not attack him.” Stela warned me and I turned to look at Arrin who looked equally agitated.

“Fine, bare handed only, and no killing. And that goes especially for you and Roa’!” I hissed at Talon who pulled his angry pink eyes off Bryce to glare at me. “Roa’ has no standing in my Court and has not sworn to me. He is nothing to me yet, and I will send him away if you even think to use him against Bryce. Do I make myself clear? Do I make myself clear to all four of you?” I demanded in an angry voice and watched at Bryce and Arrin went to a knee and bowed their heads. On this side of the table Talon and Stela held themselves tightly and glared at me. I glanced down at my bronze colored nail polish as if unconcerned and remarked to no one in particular. “You know...I have

plenty of other Drakes....should you find yourself cold and alone at night...you might wish to remember this moment as the reason why.”

Stela glanced at Talon and slipped to a knee as if struck in the back of the leg. “Forgive me Your Majesty.” He replied and I lifted an eyebrow at Talon who stared back at me and flared his nostrils and looked mutinous. I narrowed my eyes and warned him softly. “I do not know why you so enjoy setting your will against mine. But I am starting to become annoyed with you and as I cannot harm you...perhaps Roa’ would be the better choice to reprimand. Kit?” I breathed and he snapped his fingers and Roa’ swayed slightly and was standing next to me. I reached out my hand and slammed my desire into him and he crumpled like a brittle leaf and fell to the floor. Amras’ knife at Talon’s throat held him in place while he stared between Roa’ and myself. “He is fine...this time. I gave him what you felt before experiencing Hell, and so few of its wonders. Please do not make me send him back there. He did not handle it at all well last time.” I reminded him.

Talon muttered under his breath and slid to the floor while Amras just managed to get his knife out of the way. “Your Majesty.” He choked out and stared down at the floor and I wondered if the carpet might not spontaneously combust from the anger in his glare.

“Kit, take them downstairs to the training floor. Let them work it out amongst themselves upon the mats. Make sure none of the Weres are harmed in the process please. Marcus...go with them would you?” I asked and turned to my Dad and gave him a hug not really caring that I flashed the lot of them. “Thanks Dad...I am sorry about the poor timing. Tell Mom hi.” Then I glanced at Kit who snapped his fingers and my Dad disappeared. I turned toward the door then stopped and glanced over my shoulder. “Oh and Kit?”

“Yes Mistress?” He replied with a curious look.

“Would you give Stela something to cover himself up with? While I find his body....quite pleasing, you know how I feel about sharing.” I replied and watched as he chuckled while Stela glanced up at me with a grimace. “Bring me, if anyone needs

healing.” Then I turned and Amras fell in behind me. Lira and Roral met me at the door and we crossed to the elevators. The bell dinged, the doors opened, and I found myself staring at Gareth who reached for me then dragged me in against his body. And once again, I flashed my men.

Chapter 19

“Lord Cael said a Gray and Bronze arrived and you disappeared with them to the conference room and then Stela and Talon disappeared followed closely by Roa’? Where are they?” He asked as the rest of the men got into the elevator and it started down to the third level.

“I just sent them off to the training room to work it out amongst themselves.” I told him and watched as he reached forward and promptly hit the button for the second floor. “Perhaps I should tell you that Bryce and Arrin did not declare.”

“No?” He replied with a worried look.

“No they pledged fealty to me as Princess of the Seelie.” I told him calmly and his eyes widened then narrowed thoughtfully. “I also sent Kit and Marcus along with them and told them bare handed fighting only. I’m sure Kit will call me if anyone needs to be healed.” He took a deep breath and pushed the close door button when it opened on the second floor.

“Perhaps letting them work it out amongst themselves might be a good idea.” He replied and placed his arm around my shoulder so that I rested against his body.

“So....” I remarked casually once again glancing at my bronze fingernails. “Have a busy morning? We missed you earlier. I could have used some help with the introductions.”

He stared at the doors and urged me out of the elevator when they opened. “We had some errands to run.” He replied then clasped my hand in his and led us to the doorway. “I like your dress.” He offered as he opened the door and I narrowed my eyes at him.

“Thanks. Where is everyone?”

“Their rooms or the training floor I think.” He told me. “I need to get upstairs to meet with Nick and Jace. We’ve had some trouble with the club while we were away and it has to be dealt with. But I wanted to make sure you were okay first.” He told me and turned his blue eyes on me. It was clear he wasn’t going to say anything and trying to drag it out of him wasn’t going to get me anywhere. If I wanted to know where everyone had gone that morning I’d have to use other tactics....and I cut off my thought and smiled brightly up at him while his eyes narrowed.

“I’m fine.” I told him.

“Hmmm.” He replied and stopped us in the hall while the rest of the men moved on into the living room. He backed me up against the wall and trapped me there with a hand on either side of me. “Leave it alone Lexi.” He murmured, his voice brooking no argument and I tilted my head and smiled up at him.

“Fine I’ll just go figure out something to entertain myself with.” I told him and when I would have ducked under his arm he placed his hand on my shoulder and held me still.

“I mean it.”

“I suppose going out is out of the question right?” I asked calmly and he eyed me warily and nodded.

“I would prefer you didn’t.” He replied. “Though it seems...we can’t force you to stay given your...newest ability.”

I stared up at him and chewed my lip. Last night I’d teleported. Last week I’d teleported the little gold dragon Alan had stolen from me and this week it had been me. Of course a lot had happened in between. A lot of sex...if what Dane had said was true...it had been one continuous sex fest the entire time I’d been in a coma. Combine that with a really strong desire to do something and apparently I could teleport. Maybe I should just go practice that, I thought and Gareth gave me a look that said he wasn’t certain if he should approve or not. “I will try to behave.” I told him with a pout. Speaking of Alan...I thought then squelched the thought when Gareth frowned.

“Don’t.” He told me abruptly. “You have more than enough of us to keep you occupied you do not need to...encourage others.”

Well I wasn’t planning on encouraging anyone I thought, as I crossed my arms over my chest and gave him a stubborn look. But I’d made a promise and I was planning to keep it. If only so I could say no. At the moment we still didn’t know what the hold was over Marcus. It was something worth looking into, just in case.

His body pressed me up against the wall and I uncrossed my arms and placed them on his chest. “You have done enough...looking into things on your own. You have nearly a full Court and many more guards who are more than capable of dealing with this. Leave it be Lexi. It’s not open to discussion.”

“Fine!” I growled feeling like a teenager being told I couldn’t go to the party because it was only for grown ups and much too dangerous for me. “Would it be okay with you if I went for a swim with Spot? Or am I no longer capable of even that?” I asked angrily.

He sighed and leaned back. “Please do not make this harder than it has to be.” He replied in a tired voice. “Have you eaten yet today?”

His change of subject left me feeling helpless and...the disappointment in his voice was like a cold slap in the face. “Yes.” I muttered and he nodded then leaned down and kissed my cheek.

“I think a swim would be a good idea. Just don’t over do it please. It’s only been a few days since we...almost lost you.” He added in a quiet voice that made me feel like a heel. I wanted to make a smart comment but somehow managed to swallow it and simply nodded instead. He leaned down and kissed me hard on the mouth then pushed away from the wall and headed out the door on his way to the elevator. I stood there for a moment then turned and went down the hall in the opposite direction.

Cael, Cam, Lira and Roral were all waiting for me in the living room and I glanced at them then moved down the hall. At the door to the cavern I turned and raised an eyebrow while the four of them stopped and stared back at me. “I’m just going to go visit with Spot for a while.” I told them. “I’d like to not be disturbed. So...you can all stay here.” I told them and was met with a stony silence and raised eyebrows. “Right here.” I added and Lira and Roral both shook their heads. “On this side of the door.”

“I think not Your Majesty.” Cael informed me bluntly. “The cavern is not safe and we have been instructed not to let you out of our sight.”

I frowned back at him and felt my anger start to simmer. “Exactly who was it that told you not to let me out of your sight?” I growled.

“The Prince.” He replied while the others nodded and I cursed softly under my breath.

“And why would he tell you such a thing?” I demanded sharply while the four of them glanced amongst themselves and to a man, crossed their arms over their chests.

It was Roral that answered for the group. “Because Your Majesty he does not trust you not to...how did he put it? Place yourself in a situation that might tempt you to...behave badly.” I stood there staring at him and felt my ears turn red at the insinuation. I think my blood pressure shot up about forty points and I let out an inarticulate sound of rage then turned and yanked the door open not much caring that Cam had to jump back or be struck by the door.

I was perhaps ten feet into the room when I reached down and yanked my dress over my head and threw it onto the sand. And then I was running for the water and dove in head first.

“Go away.” I gasped as I dragged myself onto the shore and simply lay there too exhausted to get up. I had no idea how many laps I’d swam. Even Spot had grown tired of my back and forth and retired to his sandy bed when it was clear I was more interested in working out my anger than in playing with him.

“I believe Gareth told you not to over do it.” Lira replied calmly as his hands reached to assist me out of the water.

“And I believe I already have a Father and do not need you or Gareth to tell me what I may and may not do!” I hissed back at him. My words were met with a pregnant silence and I squeezed my eyes closed and simply lay where I was, my lower half still in the water.

“Your Majesty.” Cam asked hesitantly. “Do you require...a Drake?” To which I grimaced and slowly lifted my head to look at the four of them who were gathered around me and...I realized this was the first time I’d been alone with them without...someone to buffer me.

“No I do not require a Drake. I do not require a man at all. Just because I’m angry does not mean I need to have sex. Sometimes I am merely angry for the sake of being angry and it does not mean that I am about to convulse upon the floor. Goddess knows there are times, such as now, when I have every right to be angry! And while I appreciate that you are trying to do your job, I’d very much prefer if you just went over and stood by the door and left me alone to deal with my anger in peace.”

“Oh she wishes to be left alone.” Roral replied calmly and crossed his arms over his chest.

“She does not wish to be bothered with our concern for her well being.” Cael added.

“In fact she would like us to remove ourselves from her presence...immediately no doubt so she might...ponder her anger and become even angrier.” Lira replied.

“You heard her. She does not need a man.” Cam offered and he glanced around at the other three.

“Perhaps we should just...drown ourselves now as we are of no use to her.” Cael spoke, his voice bordering on sarcastic.

“Surely she could not be referring to us when she speaks of not needing a man for sex. As none of us have had the honor and it is obvious she does not view us as men.” Lira growled and I turned to glance up at him...starting to feel a little wary.

“No we have not, though she parades herself around in front of us constantly.” Cam added.

“Perhaps because we are only half men.” Roral offered. “And as such we do not warrant her attention.”

“And yet she refers to us as her men.” Cael spoke softly as he knelt on the sand before me.

“Has placed herself in danger to protect us.” Roral added as he went to the sand closest to me and gently reached out with a finger and brushed the puncture wounds on my neck, while I held perfectly still.

“She has healed us all.” Said Cam as he too knelt. “Kept us safe, even from herself.”

Lira went to his knees and spoke saying. “Gave us pleasure when she raised the passion to the point of pain.”

“At times she is wise beyond her years and always fiercely loyal to those she cares for.” Roral offered.

“It was not easy to watch her nearly die. To see the spark of life drain from her and feel helpless as she wasted away before us.” Lira whispered in an unsteady voice. “To realize we might never see her eyes blaze with anger or soften with a deeper emotion.”

“Who among us has not grown addicted to the pleasure she shares so freely? Does not hope that she might one day look to us and see us for the man we would be for her?” Cam asked calmly.

“Does she not realize we would give our lives for her? That we only wish to protect her...even from herself? Because we care for her, would love her if she but let

us?” Lira asked gently. “Just as her Drakes are to her, so would we be. She is as much Elf as she is Dragon and just as precious to us.”

“Do not discount us Your Majesty. Consider us.” Roral offered. “We would be more to you, than bodies at your door. We would be men.” He breathed and I felt my heart contract as I stared at the four of them and did not know what to say. I had held myself back from them for reasons I could not even explain to myself. I had healed Tdem and knowing what I now knew could I do any less for them? They looked at me and waited silently for me to decide.

“I think.” I replied calmly and lowered my eyes to the sand. “That you are wearing too many clothes.” I replied and glanced up at Lira and watched as his eyes shifted from calm to excitement in an instant and then my eyes moved to Roral who smiled and reached for the hem of his tunic. When I glanced at Cam he stared back at me hesitantly and I smiled and gave him a nod then turned to Cael who only needed the approval in my eyes before he too began undoing his clothing. While they were busy divesting themselves of their garments, I slipped back into the water to removed the sand from my body. I watched them from the water and sent up a request to Areth for towels and a very large blanket both of which we would need.

Roral could not wait and his body filled mine with pleasure before we left the water. Lira carried me to the blanket and his loving was fiery. It was as if he didn’t trust me not to change my mind and wished to pull every ounce of passion from me before he lost the opportunity. When he released me, Cam shifted me into his arms and I cried out when his body glowed like moonlight for me and caused my tattoo to pulse upon my breast. Behind us the water heaved and broke upon the shore as if a mini typhoon raged upon its surface while we made love.

Cael surprised me most in that he was happiest to have me take him and ride his body. A hand in his hair held him in place and he writhed beneath me offering himself so that I felt...aggressive above him. When I drained his body, he pulled me down to his chest and held me tenderly. His lips whispered softly against my ear, while the others placed their hands and lips upon me and stroked me. I had not cracked my red door open

once, preferring this first time to be free of the overwhelming lust with which they contended daily. The four of them had dropped their shields for me, nearly drowning me in emotion. Their feelings clearly indicated that coating them with my desire was not necessary nor would it, in this instance, be welcome. After much whispering and gentle stroking, we fell asleep upon the blanket, cuddled in a pile of warm body parts.

The light flavor of cloves and large cat woke me and I blinked slowly and lifted my head from Lira's chest. Roral murmured against my back, tightening his arm about my waist as I shifted slightly and glanced around looking for the source of the smell. I recognized the scent and lowered my cheek to Lira who opened an eye and made a soft curious noise. He lifted his hand and ran it over my hair, then traced the shape of my ear delicately.

"What is it that disturbs you?" He breathed while I nuzzled my cheek against his chest.

"We have company." I replied and he tensed. I soothed him and urged him to stay where he was. "He will not harm me." I told him softly.

"He who?" Cam demanded.

Roral moved slightly and covered me with one of the towels before shifting us forward so that my front was pressed to Lira while he pressed against my backside. The towel draped my body, providing covering from prying eyes. I smiled against Lira and turned my head so that my chin rested on his chest. "You can come out Alan." I called and watched as he materialized on the blanket seated on the other side of Lira who jerked and cursed under his breath. Cael rose slowly from the other side of Roral and Cam lifted himself up behind Alan like an avenging angel. His pale blonde hair tousled and very sexy looking.

"Lexi you said a few days. You've been gone nearly two weeks." He told me with a pout and glanced over his shoulder at Cam with a frown. Cam stared back at him and bristled, his pale green eyes taking Alan's measure. "And your group seems to have grown while you were away."

"You have no idea." I muttered.

“What do you do here shifter?” Roral demanded. He raised himself onto his elbow and remained pressed against me, protecting my back. Alan glanced around at the others with a distracted look. Perhaps he was picking up their thoughts and didn’t much care for them. He frowned then glanced down at me, his dark eyes turning serious and I tensed and lifted my head.

“Bodark has been taken.” He finally replied while I felt dread creep over me.

“When?” I breathed, almost afraid to ask.

“Last night.” He replied. “They left Margie...barely alive. She just woke at the hospital and had the presence of mind to call me to let me know. I’ve been popping over daily, waiting for you to return. I’m pleased that you’re finally back, and sorry to be the one to have to tell you of Bodark.” He replied with a sad look.

I pushed up on my elbow and was immediately pressed back down again by Roral. I grunted and glanced over my shoulder at him in confusion and got a look that warned me to stay put. I sighed as I felt him tuck the towel around me more firmly, and held my place.

I chewed my lip and wondered if Kit had finished upstairs and would he try to kill Alan again if I called for him. Alan’s dark brown eyes narrowed and he looked...almost eager. Not a good sign I thought, and closed my eyes and reached for Owen, who would at least be reasonable.

He appeared on the stand behind Alan and glanced around, his face going from surprise to blank in an instant. It was obvious that he was concerned over my choice of lovers but managed to restrain himself from saying anything, merely lifted an eyebrow at me and flicked his eyes to Alan with a disapproving look.

“Alan came to let me know that Bodark was kidnapped last night.” I told him and watched as he continued to stare back at me with no change to his expression and I realized...it wasn’t news to him. “I see.” I muttered and he crossed his arms over his chest and refused to say anything. Alan leaned back on an elbow to the side and glanced between us.

“You do not seem surprised at the news.” He replied while Owen continued to look at me.

“No Alan...he doesn't. It makes you wonder why that is doesn't it?”

Alan turned back to me and nodded. “If I had to guess, I'd say it's because he already knew.”

“It would explain the ‘errands’ they had to run this morning.” I replied thoughtfully while all eyes turned to me as I pondered the situation. “Now, who has the most to gain by kidnapping Bodark?” I wondered out loud in a musing voice to no one in particular. “Did Margie say what the men looked like who attacked them?”

Alan looked confused for a moment then replied. “She did not say.”

“Vampires? Surely she would have sensed the coldness of them?” I asked while Alan stared back at me with a strange look.

“Coldness?” He asked and his eyes looked confused.

“Yes do you not sense how cold they are when you are near them?”

He pursed his lips and glanced about at the others then shook his head. “Perhaps this is a Dragon's ability? It is not something that I have ever experienced.” And I swallowed and looked at Owen who shook his head.

“The bloodless ones smell...slightly metallic.” Cam offered. “I did not sense coldness last night during the attack.”

“You were attacked?” Alan asked sharply.

My eyes turned to him and I gave myself a small shake, apparently I was the only one able to sense Vampires in the way I did. I'd need to check with Gareth and Jace later to see if it was in fact, a Dragon thing. “We were attacked as we returned from the Sidhe last night...this morning actually. They were older, more experienced than the last group. And they brought with them a Blue Dragon. I assume Valentine gained control over him just as he did Marcus. They killed him, here in this cavern...not far from where we are.” I told him and his eyes widened in shock.

“Lexi...I did not come just to warn you of Bodark.” He told me in an uneven voice. “We have been watching Valentine since the Mayor's party. In the past week,

three men have been taken into Valentine's mansion. We have not seen any of them come back out again. All of them smelled of Elf and...Dragon." He finished softly and I stared up at him, my eyes widening in horror.

"You didn't see them come out. Then how did they bring the Blue with them?"

Alan frowned and shook his head. "They must have gotten by us somehow."

"What did the men who went in look like?" I asked in a strangled voice.

Alan looked down at me then at Roral behind me. "Two had brown hair, one was like his." He replied pointing to Cael's dark brown hair behind me. "The other was a coppery color, while the third had hair white as snow." He replied and the others made startled exclamations and scrambled after me as I leapt to my feet and ran for the door, my hair trailing behind me like a streamer.

Chapter 20

Amras was standing in the hall chatting with Aerandir and Cursed and all three of them looked alarmed as I burst through the door and ran down the hall toward my room. That I was naked and had four naked men and one clothed one in hot pursuit while I had a distressed looking on my face caused a huge problem. Cursed and Amras placed themselves in the other's path and everyone started yelling at once while I slipped into my room and moved to the picture hanging on the wall.

Of the original ten men...there were only nine left. Stela and Talon now stood behind and to the side of Gareth and Jace. Dane, Marcus, Arrin, and Bryce could be easily identified, their faces having moved from shadow to clarity. In the background the Green was farthest from me and slightly in front of him was the Brown. The White and Copper were closer in proximity, however they appeared to be leaning away from me and both...had their backs to me. I stared at the picture and realized Cursed and Amras had entered the room and were standing behind me. Dane had joined them as had Marcus and they had shut the door on the commotion in the hall.

“Valentine has my White and Copper. Alan’s men saw them go into his mansion last week and they have not come back out.” I told them in an anguished voice. “Last night he kidnapped Bodark.” Dane reached out to touch the portrait, his fingers brushing the spot where my Blue had stood, which was now empty. “We have to do something.” I breathed and Marcus wrapped his arms around me and pulled me against his chest while the others glanced amongst themselves and looked angry.

Out in the hall something struck the wall. It made a sound that reverberated in the room through the closed door. “What the...” Dane muttered and turned to glance at the door with a concerned look on his face. The others looked alarmed and I pulled away from Marcus and would have moved to the door except Cursed was suddenly in front of me, his arms crossed over his chest and a disapproving look upon his face.

“What?” I demanded distractedly.

“My Lady...you are not dressed.” He informed me with a look that indicated I would not be going anywhere until I was. “And though I enjoy you thus...I do not think it is a good idea to wander the halls unclothed.”

“Especially since we have a visitor.” Amras added and I turned to look at him in surprise.

“Who is here?” I demanded and watched in dismay as Dane handed me my dress with a censoring look. I gritted my teeth, grabbed it and yanked it over my head.

“You would know better than us, as he ran from the cavern behind you.” Dane offered and I frowned and glanced at the door as something struck it. “Along with several...naked guards.” He added while Marcus crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow.

“I can’t deal with this now!” I muttered and dashed to the door, only to have Amras reach for the handle before I could.

“You will remain here...this will only take a moment.” He replied then pressed his shoulder against the door while I stared up at him in surprise. The door shuddered again and through the wood I could hear sounds of a struggle and perhaps fists striking flesh.

“They had better not be doing what I think they are doing!” I growled and crossed my own arms then quickly dropped them remembering it was not a good idea if I wished to be taken seriously.

“They are doing, precisely what you think they are, and have every right to be doing it. And you will not interfere.” Cursed remarked.

“He came to warn me!” I cried angrily. “You can’t punish him for that!”

“We are not punishing him. And you are not thinking clearly if you believe he came merely to warn you. I can assure you that that was not his reason for visiting the caverns daily.” Amras added while I stared at him in surprise and wondered how he could know that. Amras frowned down at me and remarked. “I stood guard at the door while you....worked through your anger.”

“You were listening?”

“How else was I to guard you but to listen?”

“But the guards...were with me.” I told him...ending my comment rather lamely as my eyes slid off his and down to about the middle of his chest.

“Hmmm.” He remarked in an offended voice. “I believe they were otherwise occupied at the time.” My eyes jerked back up to his then widened in surprise as his aura turned a nasty yellowish-green. Amras was jealous. I pulled my eyes from him and glanced at Cursed who was also...not very pleased with me.

“I assume I no longer need to baby sit Lord Camthalon?” He replied in a sarcastic voice while I chewed my lip and finally shook my head.

“No...I guess that won’t be necessary anymore.” I replied in a small voice. My eyes moved to Dane who simply looked annoyed.

“An ye’ve added two more Drakes or so I’ve been told. An here I was thinking ye would nae be getting around the rules but ye did it anyway ye did.”

Great! They were all angry with me. Even Marcus looked disapproving though of the four at least his aura hadn’t changed to yellowish-green. No his was more a brown sliding toward dark red. Apparently he was just working himself up to being angry, whereas the others had moved straight to discord and jealousy.

“What was I supposed to do?” I asked quietly. “They ganged up on me and...”

Amras made a rude noise and shook his head. “They manipulated you Princess. And you...allowed them to.”

“You weren’t there! And no one said I wasn’t supposed to!” I told him angrily. “How was I to know it would make you mad at me?”

Amras’ nostrils flared and his eyes narrowed. “For what reason would it not?” He asked me in a low voice that fairly vibrated with anger.

“For the reason that...it never has before.” I replied in confusion.

Amras leaned forward and placed his face mere inches from mine and angrily articulated each word slowly. “Define before.”

I leaned back and flicked my eyes to Dane and Marcus and pointed a finger at the two of them mutely.

“Are Drakes...and have declared.” He replied, his voice sounding like he was instructing a mentally handicapped person.

“Fine, what about Cursed and Tdem?” I demanded and he shook his head slowly and pointed his own index finger briefly at Cursed.

“Was here first...and none of us had a choice with Tdem who, even you must remember, declared.” So it was only...other Elves that bothered him and I had not known it might. Had not considered it. My thoughts only seemed to make him angrier and I turned to Cursed, unable to meet his eyes.

“And this is why you are mad at me also?”

“In part.” He replied and waited till I glanced up at him to finish. “I would thank you to remember who you are and what you represent.” He remarked while I stared back at him even more confused than I had been over Amras’ comment. He frowned and added. “Your clothing My Lady. Had you not removed it before the guards we would not be having this conversation. And I do not care for the fact that you exposed yourself to my...atar.” He gritted out and his black eyes flashed dangerously while Amras and Dane stared at him in shock.

“What is that?” Marcus asked.

“Father...his father.” Dane muttered while Marcus’ eyebrows rose nearly to his hairline.

I pulled air in through my nose and stared up at him in surprise. “They have all seen me naked...many times.” I told him. “Why is this any different than any other time?”

Cursed flashed Amras a pained expression and it looked like he’d like to wring my neck but was manfully restraining himself. “That is different.” He replied as calmly as his upset would allow, which was hardly calm at all.

I frowned and glanced at Dane who was rubbing his temple with a finger as if in pain. “Lass,” he breathed. “Tis one thing to be beneath one of us and another to be flaunting yerself.”

“I did not flaunt myself!” I cried angrily.

“Did ye not?” He growled, slowly lowering his hand and giving me a look clearly indicating he did not believe me, not in the slightest.

I gritted my teeth and felt my blood pressure start to boil at their unfair accusations. “For your information,” And I turned to glare at Cursed. “I told them not once but three times to remain outside the cavern on this side of the door! I did not invite them to join me and I did not want them near me to begin with. Even when I pulled myself from the water my first words were...’go away’!”

“Excuse me Princess, but since when have you ever had a problem achieving your own will in these matters?” Cursed snapped back at me and I narrowed my eyes and reached out to stab him in the chest with my forefinger as I replied.

“Since they informed me that YOU told them I was not to be let out of their sight because it would only encourage me to behave badly!” I nearly yelled back at him while he looked at me with disbelief covering his face.

“I said no such thing.” He told me coldly and I frowned and stared back at him in dismay.

“You did, they said you did.”

“Truly? Are you certain?” He replied and lifted an eyebrow then tilted his head to stare down at me.

“Cael said they were told not to let me out of their sight. And when I asked who had told him that, he said....”

“Yes?” Cursed purred in a nasty tone and my cheeks flamed and I wrapped my arms around my waist and dropped my gaze to the floor in shock.

“He said...the Prince had told him because he didn’t trust me not to put myself in a situation where I might behave badly.” I muttered feeling like a fool.

“And does this sound like something I would have said My Lady?” He remarked sarcastically.

“No...” I admitted. “Which is why it made me so very angry.” I added softly and I turned away and walked to one of the chairs in my room and sat on the edge dejectedly. “What a fool I am.” I breathed my voice full of self recriminations. “Everything has changed.”

Amras growled and Dane made a rude noise. “Of what do you speak Princess?”

I dropped my face into my hands and sat there in silence for several seconds. “Do you know the definition of politics?” I asked softly and when there was no answer I responded. “It is process by which groups of people make decisions. Political power is the ability to impose one’s will upon another even when faced with opposition. And it appears...we are no longer a family. We are a Court.” And I rose from the chair and walked back to the door. I didn’t look at Amras I simply said. “I am sorry I was a fool for allowing myself to be used. Open the door Amras. I am done being manipulated today.”

He hesitated a moment then reached for the handle and the door opened revealing Gareth and Jace standing over Alan who looked like he’d seen better days. My eyes flicked over the rest of the men congregated in the hall and I glanced back at Gareth and calmly stated. “If you are done now, I’d very much like to speak to the Alpha of the local Werejaguars in private.” Then I turned to Kit and held out my hand palm up. “I command you to produce the contract, now.” And his eyebrows shot up at the look on

my face. He hesitated a second or two then snapped his fingers and I closed my hand on the envelope then turned to Alan and indicated he should get up. “We can use the study.” I told him then stopped suddenly when Lira and Roral fell in behind me. I turned to them slowly and the look on my face was not pleasant. “You are relieved from duty today and I suggest you spend the time considering your actions. Lord Aerandir and Bryce will guard the door...from outside in the hall.” I told them angrily while the blood drained from their faces.

“Lexi?” Jace called and I turned to him slowly.

“Yes?”

“Are you...are you alright?” He asked his voice sounding confused.

“No Jace I am not.” I told him in a matter of fact voice. “Alan if you wish this meeting, get up now or leave.” And I moved down the hall toward the other hall while men moved back from me and behind me Alan, Bryce, and Aerandir followed. At the door I hesitated and waited for one of them to open it for me. When Gareth’s arm came around me I stiffened and ignored him, stepping through the doorway and continuing on down the hall. At the Library I stopped in the open doorway and turned to him calmly. “What do you think you are doing?” I asked as I motioned Alan past me into the room and continued to block Gareth.

“I believe I will join you.” He replied and crossed his arms over his chest.

“For what reason would you think I needed you to join this meeting?”

“It is not a matter of needing.” He replied while I nodded and took a deep breath and turned to Alan. “Alan do you intend to harm me in any way?” I asked and he glanced at me sharply and raised both eyebrows. He had moved to one of the wingback chairs and was clearly waiting for me to join him before seating himself.

“No Lexi I merely wished to speak with you. Harming you...is not something I would ever do.”

I turned back to Gareth and raised an eyebrow. “You see. We merely wish to converse so you will not be needed.” I informed him then reached behind me for the door knob while he stared down at me, his face shifting from annoyance to anger.

“Nevertheless I will join you, it was not a request.”

I narrowed my eyes and glared up at him, my own anger spilling over onto my face and body. I raised both shields and informed him tightly. “Gareth...I am already angry...please do not make me more so. You have made your point today...twice. I suggest you step back and leave it before I do something we both will regret.” And with that I grabbed the door and literally slammed it in his face. I stood there for several seconds. When I realized he was not going to open it, I turned and moved to one of the chairs while Alan watched me cautiously.

After I carefully seated myself on a chair, I glanced up at Alan and took several calming breathes. “Shift.” I commanded and watched as he reached for his shirt buttons and slowly undid them. As he removed his garments, he draped them over the chair. His eyes held mine as he slid out of his pants and stood naked before me. Alan’s skin was a light brown, indicative of his Spanish heritage and he was well made, not overly muscular but certainly he took very good care of himself and had an athlete’s body. I watched curiously as his skin flowed and became orange and black spotted fur. His transformation was smooth and did not appear to distress him any. I suppose being an Alpha allowed for certain benefits. He blinked up at me from his same dark brown eyes and seated himself upon the rug wrapping his tail about his front feet while I opened the envelope, pulled out the two page document, and began reading. When I reached the second page, he shifted and calmly pulled his clothing back on then seated himself in the chair opposite me, waiting patiently for me to finish.

When I was done, I glanced up at him satisfied to see that his injuries had healed in the shift process. “You realize I have Marcus?” I asked and he steepled his fingers and placed them against his lips then nodded once.

“I sense that you have also...made an alliance.” He told me calmly and I reached for my neck and ran my fingers over the still healing puncture wounds.

“How?”

He stared back at me in silence for several seconds then finally replied. “Before you blocked your mind from mine...I felt memories that could not be your own. May I

take this to mean you have already come to some agreement with...Blake? I know he was looking for assurances of the Drake's support. I assumed your men would not allow you to...provide them." He replied calmly and his eyes were shuttered, his emotions firmly concealed behind a polite façade.

"You assumed correctly. However my men...do not make every decision for me. Much as they would enjoy doing so." I told him and left it at that. He did not need to know everything. And I was not comfortable admitting that I had run to Claudius for help. That information was best left private for now. I glanced down at the paper in my lap and informed him. "If Blake is successful, he has assured us there will be status quo and that he would release Marcus. As I already have Marcus I assume that offer would extend to the White and Copper which Valentine apparently now has control over. I do not believe I would need to trade favors for Bodark's release. Do you agree?"

"Should Blake somehow manage to free us all of Valentine, I believe he will release Bodark...if it is still possible." He replied and I felt my blood turn to ice in my veins.

"You said that Margie was in the hospital? Will she be alright? Are they...happy?" I asked then smiled slightly when he nodded. "Margie brought me here to the Salty Dog one night after work. I had never been to a dance club before. And I believe she felt...sorry for me." I told him in a musing voice.

Alan looked like he was having a hard time believing me but wasn't about to argue so I held out my arm and shifted it, starting at my wrist and moving quickly up my arm, across my chest and down the other arm. The areas I shifted turned to Dragon scales for just an instant. The effect was like doing the wave across my skin. "I can shift to more than just Dragon." I told him with a tired smile. "This is my natural body, but it is not the one I've presented to others since I was a small child." I told him by way of explanation. "Some days I still look in the mirror and have to force myself not to shimmer. It seems odd to...look like this and has required some getting used to."

"I see." He replied then asked. "This other body...can I assume it was less attractive?"

“Jace has assured me it was ugly. Though I prefer to refer to it as my Plain Jane. Which was not ugly...merely non descript in every way.”

“And now...” He replied and held out his hands palm up. “I could see where it might take some getting used to. It must be difficult to go from never being noticed to never being left alone. Not to mention the politics.” He added with a sly smile.

I stared at him and nodded sharply. “Yes the politics seem to be getting worse the larger our group becomes. Soon I fear I’ll be dealing with the Tories and the Whigs with all the subterfuge and machinations that entails.”

“Most women would kill to be in your situation.” He replied candidly while I nodded and thought about it.

“Envy is a dangerous emotion. It nearly got me killed within the Sidhe. And unless Belinda is dealt with along with Valentine...I fear my mercy in the conference room will come back to haunt us.”

“What happened to you in the Sidhe?” He asked his dark eyes curious.

“It is a long story. Suffice it to say a woman did not like me and caused the Lord of Air and Darkness to attack me. In the process she separated my consciousness from my body which nearly died while I was trapped within the Everlasting.”

Alan looked at me oddly and his fingers gripped the arms of the chair. “You appear...better. He replied although I noticed you are now...marked with more than a set of incisor wounds.”

I glanced down catching site of my breast under the top of my dress and smiled wryly. “The Lord of Air and Darkness’ way of apologizing. Though he claims it is the mark of the Gods. I only know it brought Talon to heel.”

“Who is Talon?”

“One of the two Drakes I brought back with my consciousness from the Everlasting. He is a royal pain in my ass.” I told him with a frown.

He looked a little dazed but asked. “And who was the other you brought back?”

“My Silver though Talon will not let him declare since it appears there is only one color allowed on a Court and he does not wish for Roa’ to be killed should a more

powerful Silver appear. It is most complicated. They are the grey and black skinned men you saw in the hallway.” I told him with a wave of my wrist.

“And yet there were two with bronze hair? Was one a Copper?” He asked curiously. The fact that he noticed surprised me.

“The tall one with the pale bronze hair is Stela.” And I smiled and chuckled softly then told him. “I split my Grandmother’s throne and he spilled out. He set himself up as a fertility god when he came to this world several thousand years ago. Apparently he trapped himself within her throne more than two thousand years ago because his High Priestess informed him a Gold Queen would be born to the Seelie. She failed to mention it would happen so far into the future, and he did not think to ask. The other Bronze is like Marcus. He and the man with the shaved head, who is my Gray, arrived together this morning. Apparently they managed to escape Valentine...likely because they traveled some distance and arrived during daylight. Neither will declare because I already have a Gray and Bronze. However since they are both part Elf they opted to swear fealty to me, much as Cursed did...during the Mayor’s party. Should either of them shift or look at me funny it is likely Stela and Talon will kill them. As they tried to do this morning before they...figured a way to circumvent the rules.”

“And the four you were...napping with?” He asked. “I only recognized two of them from before you left.”

“The Queen sent Lira and Roral along with another to escort me to the Sidhe. I did not care for the third man and...sent him from me. Cael asked to replace him when we returned and provided a small service in keeping Talon from me at an inopportune time so I granted his wish. Lord Camthalon was gifted to me when I was two...just as Cursed was. They are both Seelie Princes...Cam angered me and has been watched over by Cursed since he joined us. The man thought to use me to make my Mother jealous and was not overly happy about being subjected to a half breed mongrel such as myself.”

“Hmmm...it appears you have worked through your issues.” He remarked and I frowned and drummed my fingers upon my thigh in agitation.

“Truthfully I had not considered it. However Roa’ nearly bit him in half and I healed him before even Amras or Cursed who were both injured at the same time. Cursed assures me he has changed toward me. And as I refused to allow him to shield his mind from my men...I must trust that Cursed was right. But that does not erase the fact that the four of them...tricked me.”

“Ah that would explain why you were angry with the two in the hall earlier.”

“Yes it is not pleasant to be made a fool of. I should have known better than to trust them. Beware Alan...Elves do not lie...but they do not always tell the truth either.” I told him in a musing voice.

Chapter 21

“The contract seems fairly straight forward.” I told him. “You will understand if I refuse your offer of additional guards.”

Alan smiled and nodded. “I can see that you already have your hands full.”

“I must also warn you that...because of my condition I would not be able to spend and entire day with you.” And I grimaced while he sat straight in his chair and glanced at me in concern.

“Are you...well?” He asked softly his dark eyes looking worried.

“I am breeding.” I told him. “One of the lovely side affects is that if I am not...how shall I put this delicately....with one of my Drakes often enough, I turn nasty then throw temper tantrums after which I slip into seizure and convulse violently until such time as I am complete segregated from all males or I find a Drake...within me. At the moment I require attention at least every twelve hours. I’ve been assured it will become more frequent the closer I come to...it’s not quite clear to me what I’m coming

closer to, as no one has seen fit to inform me. My men delight in keeping me in the dark about...many things. My Grandmother believes its how men try to control women.”

He stared back at me in shock and blinked his eyes several times before he ventured an opinion. “It seems...you are a very complex woman.” He replied and I couldn’t help laughing at his hesitant delivery.

“I believe the word you are looking for is...difficult. I did warn you I was difficult.”

“Yes, yes you did.”

“Alan...can I not convince you to share the secret with me without this?” I asked and lifted the paper in my lap while he frowned slightly. “I have so many obligations already...and if you merely wish for pleasure, I can satisfy you. In fact I would be pleased to do so now if you...are willing?”

Both his eyebrows shot up and he glanced first at me and then around the room no doubt looking for someplace in which we might...become comfortable. “Lexi...are you certain this is appropriate...here?” He asked a sly smile lighting his eyes.

I gave him a lopsided grin and informed him calmly. “You will not even need to remove your clothing.” And he frowned suddenly and looked mutinous.

“I am no lothario.” He growled softly, seeming to be insulted that I would think him...what...easy? I rose from my chair and dropped the contract upon the end table then crossed slowly toward him. He watched me move, and within him I could see a war raging between his desire to do this right, and his need to simply do this. When I slid onto his lap, he held himself tense as if he was not sure how to deal with my forwardness.

I placed my palms upon his chest then lifted one hand and ran my fingers through his hair. “Would you like me to pleasure you Alan?” I breathed against his lips and his desire to do this right held up their arms and surrendered gracefully to his need to simply do this.

“Oh god yes Lexi.” He breathed and my hair stood up as his Demon heritage flowed over my skin and coated me with his desire. It seemed I was never fully prepared

to handle his power, and it caused my insides to clench with liquid fire. I couldn't help wondering if this was how my men felt when I breathed my lust at them.

"Then kiss me." I replied and when his lips met mine I felt my world tilt slightly. It was hard to remember what it was I was about. We kissed for several minutes before I recalled I should be doing something more than simply enjoying the feel of his velvety soft lips against my own. I murmured softly and shifted in his lap while his hand slid up my thigh and he purred low and soft. "Alan." I breathed and then filled his body with pleasure as I had done to Talon and Stela and even my own Grandmother.

He cried out and his eyes slipped shut. He moaned softly while I continued feeding him full of my pleasure. When he jerked and slipped sideways in the chair, I lifted my hands from his chest and kissed him lightly upon his cheek. He took a deep breath and one corner of his lips lifted in a small smile. Then he made a pleased sound in his throat and seemed to simply pass out.

I had just lifted myself off his lap and was standing over him gazing down with a pleased look when the door slammed open and Kit marched in. Behind him I saw Aerandir and Bryce poke their heads in, their faces curious. Kit took one look at Alan and growled angrily.

"Mistress?" He demanded while I raised an eyebrow at him and placed a hand upon my hip.

"I do not recall inviting you in here. Is there some reason you would disturb me when you know full well I am having a private meeting?"

"Since when do you have private meetings?" Kit growled as he crossed to the chair I'd been using and slumped upon it. His fingers reached out and plucked the contract off the end table. I frowned at him while he quickly scanned it then tossed it aside.

"Since when is my Demon in league with my Drakes in keeping information from me? Oh wait..." I replied sarcastically. "Pretty much since you all decided I was too stupid to make any decisions for myself right?" I replied in an angry voice. "Last I

checked.” And I shook my wrist and jangled the Dragons hanging there at him. “I was the one that fulfilled the contract, not Gareth or Jace!”

Kit glared up at me from the depths of the chair his dark red eyes narrowed. “I have been keeping you safe since you were too young to string two words together, let alone make your own decisions Mistress. I am not about to forget my duty now, because you throw a temper tantrum. And just because my actions happen to coincide with certain other members of our currently unhappy little family, does not mean that I have forgotten to whom I own my allegiance. Have you?”

I sucked air into my lungs and stared back at him in dismay. “That was uncalled for Kit.”

“I do not think so.” He hissed. “You have hurt Gareth. Was that your intention?”

“No it was not my intention! My intention was to find a way to save three men without having to sell more of myself to do it! I don’t think a little trust is too much to ask. You would think the lot of you would have learned by now. Did we not have this exact same conversation the last time this occurred?” I cried. “And correct me if I’m wrong, but were you not all angry with me only to apologize because you had treated me badly? Was it not a matter of you trusting me, not the other way around?”

Kit pressed his lips together and flared his nostrils at me. “What did you do to him?” He growled clearing wanting to change the subject because he knew I was right and he...was not.

I glanced down at Alan who had a very happy smile on his face and seemed blissfully unaware of the turmoil going on so close to him. “No more than I did to Talon or Stela or Lira. No more than I did to my own Grandmother for stars sakes!” I yelled at him. Beside him on the coffee table the contract went up on flames as he stared back at me.

“We will retrieve these men, and you Mistress...will keep your blessed nose out of it.” He hissed back at me.

I pulled air into my lungs and tried to calm myself realizing...all this anger was causing me other issues. I had only had Stela this morning and that had been...brief at best. If I kept this up...I'd be on the floor in less than an hour. At the moment there weren't any of my Drakes I was inclined to cuddle with. "Fine." I replied and I turned my back on him, counted to ten several times then did some deep breathing exercises.

"What...what just happened?" Kit demanded his voice sounding confused and still angry but bordering on concerned.

"Nothing." I told him.

"You never agree with me." He replied suspiciously. "Why do you not lower your shields?"

"Because I don't want to." I replied while he gnashed his teeth he was so frustrated. I ignored him and walked toward the door then asked Bryce if he could please find Owen and bring him to the Library for me. He glanced at Aerandir who nodded and we both watched Bryce turn toward the living room. Aerandir looked back at me and eyed me curiously but blissfully kept his mouth shut. Bryce returned quickly with Owen at his heels and I stepped back into the room and crossed to Alan's chair motioning him to follow me.

"Can you please send him home?" I asked Owen and he glanced between Kit and me and nodded. Alan disappeared a second later. "Thank you." I told him politely then turned and left the room. Both of them watched me go with disturbed looks.

I left Aerandir and Bryce outside my bedroom door and gratefully closed it behind me. I desperately needed to escape all this testosterone and smothering manly concern that seemed to follow me all over the place. What I needed...was a little nature. What I needed was to relax...away from men. Some place like Amras' room but all my own. I crossed to the bed and sat myself on the edge and softly called for Areth. She appeared in a swirl of black hair and piercing black eyes and greeted me fondly.

"Mistress...it is so good to see you. We have missed you sorely." She told me.

"I am very pleased to be home Areth." I told her wearily.

She smiled and seated herself upon the bed gazing up at me inquiringly. “You look as if you need something Mistress.” She remarked in a concerned voice.

“A vacation.” I muttered and she tilted her head to the side and considered my words.

“What is a vacation?” She asked and I smiled and told her of riding a beautiful horse down a sandy beach near a crystal blue bay teeming with fish. On the opposite side of the sand was a tropical forest with the sounds of birds in the distance. I pictured for her ancient ruins somewhere inland and convenient hiking paths through the forest.

“Something like that.” I told her. “Someplace I can go to get away from... them.” And I waved my hand to indicate all the men currently swarming around the den. “Do you think you could...do something like that...maybe through a doorway down the hall behind my closet? Someplace with a little cottage close to the beach that has wide porches and a swing I can sit on? A small fruit orchard with ripe peaches and pears and apples growing. Sunshine and a rose garden I can putter around in? That would be heaven.” I breathed. “With a door that locks on the inside and a big sign on the outside that says...trespassers will be eaten!” I added while she chuckled then hopped down from the bed and disappeared within the closet. When she came back she was smiling and the look on her face nearly made me sigh in anticipation.

“Let me know Mistress if there is anything else you require.” She told me and then smiled and waved her hand as she passed me a large floppy straw hat. “You may need that.”

“Thank you Areth you are a lifesaver.” I replied and she nodded her head and was gone in a puff of black haze. I moved into the closet toward the back where the tunnel led out of my room to other areas of the caverns. I passed from the closet and moved down the tunnel about twenty feet just around a bend and found myself staring at a large wooden door. Torches were set into the stone to either side and they illuminated a big sign in red letters that said ‘Entry prohibited unless invited by the Queen. Trespassers will be found in disfavor.’ I reached for the door knob chuckling as the door swung open, and just stared in delight at the sight before me.

I closed the door and shoved home the deadbolt then sighed and wiggled my toes in the warm sand. Overhead the sun was shining brightly in a deep blue sky and I put on my hat and pulled a deep breath into my lungs. Little puffy clouds hung in the distance and I pushed away from the door and walked down to the edge of the water. Brightly colored fish swam in schools and the water was so clear I could see straight through it. The waves gently lapped the shore and I dipped my toe in and sighed at the temperature. The water was cooler than Spot's pond, but still pleasantly warm. I turned slowly, taking a moment to enjoy the picture from my mind come to life around me. Some distance from the shore was a small island with a rocky outcropping ringed in a white sandy beach with six or seven palms and not much else. It looked perfect sitting in the middle of all that pale blue water and was within swimming distance. If I got ambitious later, I might make the swim.

A sound startled me and I jumped and twisted around to find a horse with big brown eyes eying me curiously. It was large and well muscled and its body was a golden yellow color, while its long flowing mane and tale were nearly white. All four of its feet had white stockings and there was a little snip of white at the base of its nose. It reached out and nibbled the bodice of my dress then rubbed against my shoulder.

"Hello beautiful." I whispered and gently stroked the soft hair on its muzzle. It poked at me a few times then wandered off a few steps and nibbled a tuft of grass growing along the beach. I bent down and chuckled. Apparently Areth had taken me seriously since even the horse was female! Too funny, I thought and splashed my toes in the water while I wandered down the beach. My new friend kept tabs on me...never letting me get more than twenty or so feet away before she would trot closer and shake her head or snort at me.

Several hundred yards down the beach was a trail that led up to a white washed house that had a porch from which you could sit and look out over the water. There was a little white picket fence that ran around the front with a cute trellis gate covered in a vine with large blue flowers. Grass grew up to the fence and around both sides of the house which was probably not much more than twenty or thirty feet wide. I walked up

the sandy path and pushed open the gate. My new friend seemed content to munch the grass outside the fence while I stepped up the two steps and onto the porch. The view was magnificent and I promised myself I'd come back and enjoy it later. I was much too curious just then to sit.

I pulled open the screen door and passed into the main living space. To my left was the back of a couch and across from it two comfortable looking armchairs. A coffee table and several floor lamps were situated around the room. The far left wall had built in bookshelves and there were books and several large sea shells displayed. On the wall to my left was a picture of me in Dragon form splashing about in the crystal blue sea, in the background was the little island and near me appeared to be several dolphins also frolicking. It made me smile.

I pulled my eyes from the portrait and directly ahead was a full kitchen complete with marble counters and the latest in appliances. The refrigerator even had an ice and water dispenser in the door. The room was done in pastels and there was an open and airy feel to it. A ceiling fan circulated slowly above the dining table which looked like it could seat six and was located over in the far right corner. Beside me on the left was a wall and I moved toward the kitchen and looked to my left.

A short hall led to a bedroom in the right corner and a bathroom on my immediate left. The bedroom had a nice sized bed with frilly white comforter and throw pillows. Filmy white curtains rustled in the breeze from the overhead fan at the edges of the floor to ceiling windows that took up most of the walls and looked out over lush vegetation on the left and a fairly large garden complete with a roses and all manner of flowers and shrubbery to the right. On the other side of the bed was a set of French doors that lead to another porch off the back of the cottage.

I stepped into the bedroom and realized there was a closet. Unlike my closet in my bedroom, this closet was full of sundresses and there was one wall with nothing but sandals and flip flops. The far wall had a dresser and on the floor was a sturdy pair of hiking boots and several pair of running shoes. I pulled open the drawers and found tank tops, running and walking shorts, socks and several pairs of sturdy overalls. It looked

like Areth had supplied me with the clothing to explore my new vacation spot as well as work in the garden. After which, if I wanted to then relax in the hammock out on the front porch I could do it in a lightweight dress.

Before I went out the back, I took a moment to poke my head into the bathroom and sighed. In here, like the kitchen, everything was a creamy pale marble. There was a good sized tub, separate shower and large vanity as well as a toilet for more practical purposes. Humming under my breath I went back into the bedroom, pulled open the French doors and stepped out onto the back porch.

Climbing roses wrapped the trellis that covered the path to the garden behind the house. Steps led down to a grassy area which was about half the width of the house and lined to either side with a perfectly manicured one foot hedge. Behind the hedge were rose bushes with roses of all colors. The air smelled wonderful, sweet and spicy and heady with rose oil. I closed my eyes and pulled the scent into me realizing that I could smell more than just roses. The scent of grass and evergreens also filled the air along with the smell of the water. The grassy patch stretched several hundred feet and where it stopped there was a full sized maze and large trees that provided shade for the wooden benches which looked inviting. Off to the left was a little mini cottage which I guessed might hold gardening supplies.

My feet sank into the thick grass as I moved toward the little structure. I opened the door, smiled then pulled a basket, gloves, and pruning shears off the work table and went to gather myself some roses. Little breaks in the hedges concealed walking paths and I wandered amongst the roses, slowly taking my time in choosing just what I wanted for the bouquet I was planning. I was careful to trim the stem just above a five leaflet leaf. I hummed as I worked and eventually gathered a basketful of bright yellow and creamy white long stems. I carried them back to the flower shed. After putting my tools away I carefully arranged the flowers into a bouquet in one of the clear crystal vases I pulled from an open shelf. I used the sink and gave them water then carried the arrangement up to the house and placed it on the kitchen table, standing back to admire my handiwork with a pleased smile.

The sight of the roses took me back to my childhood days. We had spent the summer one year when I was eleven in South Carolina. That summer my Mother had worked at a hospital near the Edisto Gardens. During the Civil War a small number, less than five hundred Confederate soldiers had briefly stopped the Union Army from advancing on the shore of the river there. Eventually the smaller force had had to withdraw but for one brief shining moment in history, the little guys had held off the big guys. By the time we lived there the gardens had been turned into a memorial park to celebrate veterans from all the wars the US had fought in. The facility was more than five acres and had over fifty rose beds.

That summer I'd spent every free moment playing hide and seek with the head caretaker's daughter. The experience had caused me to develop a fondness for roses that followed me into adulthood. It was a shame that the closest I'd come to roses since I got here was those arrangements sent by Bodark and Alan...and the fair citizens of San Francisco. All of which had been sent away. Now though, I could have flowers whenever I wanted and I didn't need a man to get them for me! It made me very happy indeed.

There was a path at the back of the garden and I felt like exploring so I went to my room and changed my dress for the hiking boots, a bra, tank top, and I rummaged around till I found underwear and khaki shorts. I put my hat back on and went out the back, down the steps, and across the lawn.

Birds sang in the trees over my head as I slipped into the lush vegetation and followed the path away from the house. Small rustlings in the underbrush let me know I wasn't alone and when a pair of round black eyes stared back at me from under a large leaf I stopped abruptly and stared back at them.

"Hello..." I breathed softly while the eyes blinked up at me.

"Goodness you startled me." The little animal spoke, surprising and delighting me.

"I'm sorry I did not mean to. My name is Lexi." I told the little critter who was making a chattering noise and eying me cautiously. "Who might you be?"

“Antoon.” He replied and took several steps toward me. “You smell odd.”

“That’s because I’m a girl.” I told him with a smile while he tipped his head sideways and considered me.

“No...it’s because you’re a Dragon and...something else.”

My eyes widened and I chuckled. “Well yes I am. Dragon and Elf.”

“Yes yes I can smell the Elf parts but...you smell spicy.” He replied and muttered to himself.

“That would be the Demon in me.” I told him and he shook his little head as if to disagree.

“No...that’s not it, though I can smell that on you too. It will come to me.” He replied while I stared down at him in surprise.

“Well do let me know if you figure it out. I’d be interested to know.”

“Certainly, what are you doing in the forest?” Antoon asked and then waddled the rest of his body out from under the leaves. He was about two feet long, half of which was tail. His body was covered in a light brown fur with grey markings on the end of his nose, above his eyes, and down the underside of his chin and chest. He looked like a cross between a badger and a raccoon only he didn’t have a mask and his nose was much more pointed. He had long claws, likely for digging or climbing, and his tail had faint rings around it, like a raccoon.

“I’m just out for a walk to explore the area. Is there anything around here I should be on the look out for?” I asked.

He made a cuffing noise in his throat and sat up on his hind legs then scratched his belly. “Not much out here to worry a Dragon, if that’s your concern. Mostly just javili, sloths, capis and some painted cats. Else I wouldn’t be down here on the ground now would I?” He replied.

“Thank you, that makes me feel better.” I replied and bit the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. Antoon was cute.

“Might wander over to see the falls, worth a look if you like that sort of thing. Just stay on the path to the fork and take a left.” He replied then turned and disappeared

back into the vegetation and was quickly gone from sight. Follow the path to the fork and go left, I repeated and stared back down the trail.

I wandered along for several minutes and realized I was being followed. I stopped in the middle of the trail and tipped my head back and found myself staring up at a black bird with a large bright yellow beak, little beady black eyes and a swath of yellow feathers that started behind its eyes and formed an oblong shape down across its chest. It tilted its head and looked at me and in a clear voice repeated. "My name is Lexi."

"It is huh?" I repeated and it leaned down and rubbed its large beak on the branch then said.

"Dragon and Elf." I shook my head and turned down the path. The bird continued to follow me but didn't say anything else so I ignored it. When I came to the fork in the road I headed off to the left. The vegetation thinned out a bit and I glanced around realizing I could see several large hills, or perhaps they were actually small mountains, in the distance. Areth had outdone herself and it looked like I could get lost in here for days. The thought made me smile. Now that would be a vacation indeed with no men to worry about. It was nice to breathe fresh air and see the sun overhead, even if it was...fabricated. It certainly looked and felt real to me. Of course none of my problems had gone away. Valentine and Belinda still had two of my Drakes and Bodark. I'd still taken the first step in an alliance with Claudius. Gareth was still hurt because I'd slammed the door in his face and I'd have to deal with that. The den was overrun with Drakes and Elves all wanting something from me and I had no idea how to deal with that. Politics had reared its ugly head and I supposed from now on I'd need to be more wary, not that the men in my life hadn't been manipulating me in one form or another since...well some of them since I was little. And to top it off my body was under the control of some primal urge to mate at least twice a day. I had no idea how long that might last but it was for certain it was going to get worse before it got better. The little episode in the kitchen last night had fairly freaked me out and I was still wondering what exactly had happened there. Worrying over it just upset me though and at the moment I was doing all I could to remain calm. The last thing I wanted was to start seizing out here

all by myself I thought, and then looked around slowly. Although...out here by myself...there weren't any men. Out here by myself I might not...need a man. Hmm, it was something to think about.

When Mi and Mom had sent everyone from the room, the first time I'd seized, I'd been fine till she called Gareth and Jace back in. Maybe the trick to being free of the seizures...was to be free of the men. Not that any of them would let me get away with that for long. In fact I was surprised I'd been left alone this long. Perhaps they were having a communication breakdown back at the den and everyone thought everyone else had already checked on me. In any event I wasn't going to waste my time worrying over it. I was here and they weren't and I was going to enjoy my mini vacation...maybe make some new animal friends and simply enjoy the scenery. Explore this wonderful new place Areth had created for me.

The sound of water filtered into my thoughts and I walked just a little faster toward the noise till I rounded a bend and looked out upon a small waterfall not much higher than my shoulders. Water sheeted off a smooth rocky ledge into a pool that was surrounded by large ferns. Date palms surrounded the little grotto and moss covered rocks were everywhere. A little river about knee deep flowed away from the falls and disappeared under low hanging vegetation. I crossed to the edge of the stream and cupped water in my hands, drinking deeply. It tasted clean and was cool and crisp and quenched my thirst. I found a rock and seated myself on it and simply glanced around.

"Dragon and Elf." The bird called from the branch of a tree near my head.

"Is that all you say?" I asked with a lopsided smile.

"Feel better." He replied and I frowned and remembered I'd said that to Antoon.

"Too bad you can't talk...I mean really speak not just repeat my words."

"My words." The bird replied. I sighed and leaned my head back and closed my eyes. I could hear other birds singing in the trees and smell the rich earth and the sun on the moss. Last night when I'd gone to Claudius he had shared with me some of his senses. I couldn't help wondering...what I'd given him. He was old, older than some of my Elves. Would the bond we were creating allow him to day walk? Could he now? It

was frightening that I'd gone to him so quickly and trusted him as I had. I knew next to nothing about him, other than he'd watched me for over six months and had never hurt me in any way, had allowed me to poach on the criminals in his town and simply watched from the shadows. It raised the hair on my arms to realize...he could have attacked me at any time...perhaps killed me. I wondered how soon he might contact me. And what that might mean to me.

Claudius had not said how long the Council would be here, only that they would arrive today. Given their nature I assumed that meant tonight. I wasn't even sure who the Council was. But they apparently had the power to turn both Gareth and Jace pale. The two of them had been very distressed at the mention of their coming to San Francisco. Had they seen them before? Did they have experience with them I wondered? I hadn't said last night that I'd demanded to see Valentine die. I couldn't think that any of my men would be pleased to hear that. It was something I felt I had to do...and I hoped it would be painful. Valentine deserved to die a painful death for what he'd done to my Blue. For what he might even now be doing to my White and Copper, certainly for what he'd done to Marcus. It would be helpful to know before hand what hold he had over them. I could only hope that my demonstration with Alan might sway him to share with me that knowledge I needed. But I was not going to bank on it.

Chapter 22

I sat there for several minutes and realized...while I needed a vacation, what I really needed was to be doing something constructive. Escaping wasn't helping me and I'd had a lifetime full of letting life pass me by while I hid in the shadows. I'd been trained as a hunter, had in fact enjoyed that status for years and relying on others...made me antsy. My men wished to keep me safe for all the obvious reasons. What they didn't realize is that while I could appreciate their concerns...living my life secluded as I was, was not going to work for me. I needed to feel normal. I missed the thrill of the hunt and I needed...to feel useful at something other than...providing release. I considered the years that stretched ahead of me and realized...this was not how I planned to spend the rest of my life.

I got up from the rock and headed back down the trail. At the cottage I rummaged through the closet and realized there was nothing suitable for what I wanted. I left the clothing I'd been wearing in a pile in the closet and pulled on the dress Kit had given me earlier. Then plucked up the flowers and left the cottage. The horse met me at the gate

and I struggled for a few seconds to close the gate and keep my roses from being munched upon. The mare followed me all the way back to the door and seemed sad when I gave it one last stroke promising to return soon and perhaps take that ride I'd dreamed of.

My room was empty and I quickly placed the flowers next to my bed then called for Areth. I needed something different to wear and was provided a pretty wrap around dress and sweater in a pale peach color along with matching leather pumps. I specifically asked for undergarments and gave a sigh of relief when I pulled them on. As I dressed, I glanced around the room, realizing that Jace had been here recently as I could smell his distinctive scent in the air.

When I would have crossed to the door, I hesitated and went back to the nightstand and pulled out my communicator which Jace had given me weeks ago. I kept losing the thing, in fact I'd never actually worn it and it took me a few moments to figure out how it worked. I eventually got the gist of it and spoke into the mini microphone and asked for Nick.

His startled voice replied back and I smiled and asked him to bring the car around as I'd be going to the hospital to visit Margie. My request met dead air and I chuckled as I strapped the communicator onto my wrist and plucked my matching purse off the bed and headed to the door. Bryce jumped to attention while Aerandir simply flicked his eyes at me. Both looked surprised to see me. I sailed past them and down the hall and had nearly made it to the first door when Jace's voice echoed up at me from my wrist.

"Where are you?" He demanded and I could tell from the tone of his voice that he was not happy with me.

"I just left my room." I replied, holding my communicator up to my mouth as I'd seen him do so many times. He didn't respond so I lowered my wrist and moved through the door and on down the hall toward the next one. No one seemed to be around and I passed through the living room toward the elevators and pressed the upper level after Bryce and Aerandir followed me in. When the door opened to the hall just below street level, Jace and Nick were standing there, both of them had their arms crossed over their

chests and Jace did not look happy with me perhaps because both my shields were still in place.

“Where were you?” He asked me as calmly as his upset would allow.

“In my room.” I replied and looked back at him serenely.

“You were not there when I went looking for you.” He informed me tightly and I cocked my head to the side and stared back at him.

“I was. You simply weren’t looking in the right place.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” He demanded and I sighed.

“What does it matter? I was in my room and not in any danger so there is nothing for you to be angry at me over.”

“I would appreciate you lowering your shields.” He informed me and I shrugged and lowered my upper shield only. His body seemed to relax and the line between his eyebrows disappeared.

“Now where were you?” He asked again while I took another deep breath, telling myself to stay calm.

“In my room.” I replied once again and his lips thinned to a straight line and his brows lowered.

“If that was the case I would have sensed you when I came looking for you almost two hours ago.” He informed me in an angry voice.

I shrugged again and simply looked back at him. “I needed a break and so I took it.” I told him. “But I never left my room and I was alone the entire time. So don’t even bother thinking any differently. I do not appreciate being interrogated like a five year old.” I informed him. “Are we quite done? I’d like to visit Margie.”

“You are not going out.” He replied and stood straight with a look that shifted from angry to smug in a second.

I lifted an eyebrow at him and swung my purse slightly. “I asked...as a mere courtesy.” I told him bluntly. “I did not need to. If you do not wish me to take the car then I’ll take my own. I still have my keys...and in spite of your belief to the contrary, I am perfectly capable of going out in public by myself.”

“The press has not left.” He informed me.

“Fine.” I replied and closed my eyes then dropped my lower shield and immediately felt all of them pressing in on me mentally. I ignored their minds and reached down inside myself, picturing the way I wished to look and forcing it out from my center toward my skin. I stood there feeling my muscles shift and my body parts realign themselves faster than they ever had before, my hair shortened and I heard several started exclamations. When the shimmer was complete, I rolled my head on my neck and realized I was not even a little tired and smiled to myself. Cracking open my eyes I stared back at Jace who looked...shocked and slightly horrified. He had never liked Plain Jane, but then I wasn't exactly trying to seduce him so what did I care. I lifted my lower shield and simply looked back at him.

“I told you...I told you not to do that.” He breathed.

“So am I driving myself or taking the car?” I asked.

“Damn it Lexi.” He growled. “I can't go with you now I am in the middle of something else.”

“So, I didn't ask you to. Aerandir and Bryce are both here.” I told him.

Jace frowned and flicked his eyes at Bryce. “You are not going out without a Drake.” He informed me while I stared back at him in surprise.

“Ah...Jace you do realize what Bryce is right?”

“Yes.” He snapped back at me. “For all intents and purposes he is no different than Aerandir. It is what he agreed to and you will not change that by...trying to once again get around the rules.”

I threw up my hands actually starting to become irritated though I had been trying so hard to hold my temper. “Fine then get Dane up here.”

“Why not one of the other elders?” He demanded and I glared back at him.

“Because neither of them has ever been outside and I do not intend to spend my precious few minutes above ground trying to keep them out of trouble.” I replied.

“Besides, it will be bad enough with Aerandir here. I don't need to draw anymore attention to myself by dragging around a grey skinned Drake!”

Aerandir pulled himself up sharply and glanced at me in dismay. “Your Majesty do I endanger you by my presence?” He asked.

I closed my eyes briefly and shook my head. “No it’s just that Elves are so rare and you are...going to be noticed and not just because of your ears.” I informed him. “It defeats the purpose if I look like this and am surrounded by Elves as handsome as you. Look Jace why don’t I just take Owen and go by myself. This is ridiculous.” And I closed my eyes and sent out a call for Owen who appeared with a confused look.

“Where is Lexi?” He demanded his eyes flicking over me and glancing at Jace then the others. “She called me, where is she? Is she in trouble? Did you find her?” I bit the inside of my cheek and stared back at him when his eyes shifted to me and I smiled. “Lexi?” He breathed and looked nearly as horrified as Jace had earlier. “What has happened to you? Where did you go? We’ve all been looking for you for hours! Are you trying to give us all heart attacks? It is you right? Why do you look...like that?”

“Nothing, nowhere, I’m sorry, no, yes, because I want to visit Margie.” I replied while he stared back at me and I could tell he was mentally trying to arrange my responses to his questions. He finally shook his head and gave me a stern look.

“Why did you call me?”

“Because sometime in the past month the men in my life have decided I’m incapable of going out alone. I’m not certain how it happened, nor why I am forced to ask permission to do so.” I told him in a tight voice. “So if you aren’t too busy would you mind accompanying me to the hospital so I can visit a friend?”

“Who is Margie?” He demanded and I felt myself nearing the end of my rope.

“Look damnit either you will or you won’t just decide now. Either way I’m leaving. If you don’t like it, then you can just go to Hades.” I told him as I turned on my heel and shoved Bryce out of my way while I headed toward the stairs.

“Wait!” Jace growled and I stopped with my foot on the first step. “Nick will bring the car around. But you are not going out looking like that and you will not go with only Owen.” He told me abruptly.

I glared back at him and crossed my own arms over my chest and raised both shields. Jace jerked and stared back at me angrily as he and Owen chatted briefly while Nick spoke into his communicator. I took the opportunity to shift back to myself. In the end I was stuck with nearly every one of my Drakes except Jace and Gareth who I hadn't seen since I slammed the door on him. Bryce and Arrin were left behind as were the rest of the Elves. Talon refused to leave Roa' behind and I became stubborn because Jace wanted Marcus to remain. It became a matter of debate as it was still light outside and Owen was there and could remove him if necessary.

Dean met us at the door and I took a moment to hug him tightly while around me my Drakes growled and glared. I didn't much care and Owen was kind enough to assist them into the car which in itself was a bit of a problem. I ended up sitting between Dane and Owen which seemed to irritate everyone else. Had I had my own way I would have sat up front with Dean.

"Where to?" Dean asked.

"Where do they take Werewolves that have been attacked by Vampires?" I asked and he nodded and pulled out smoothly into traffic.

"So where did you go this time?" Stela demanded. "The Green was most distraught when he returned from your room and found you once again missing. We've been searching the den for hours. We could not sense your thoughts and none of us felt you in flight."

I leaned my head back on the seat and closed my eyes. "I was in my room taking a much needed break from you all." I told him. "Jace was mistaken." Growls and low mutters met my words which I simply ignored.

"Tis a wee spoiled one yer acting like. An ye are nae too old to be turning over me knee ye are." Dane whispered against my ear and I cracked open an eye to look at him.

"I wouldn't recommend it."

"I was nae asking yer permission Lassie." He replied

“Doesn’t matter, I still wouldn’t recommend it. Look Dane I just want to visit my friend in the hospital. Try to put yourself in my shoes for a minute. Four weeks ago I would have left my home, locked the door behind me and simply got in my car and drove there. I didn’t have to ask anyone’s permission and I didn’t have to drag around an entourage of men just to walk outside. I don’t exactly appreciate you telling me I’m acting like a spoiled brat because I resent having lost control of every aspect of my life. So if you don’t mind, I would appreciate it if you would keep those thoughts to yourself.” My words caused them all to glare at me and I closed my eyes once again and simply ignored them.

“I missed you on the training floor today.” Dean remarked. “Training sessions have not been the same since you’ve been gone.”

“Who is he?” Talon growled and I cracked open an eye and glanced over to see his pale pink eyes focused on Dean in the driver’s seat.

I would have replied but Dane beat me to it. “His name is Dean and he assists her in sparring and practice.”

“Sparring and practice of what?” Stela added his voice low and angry.

With my eyes closed I mentally reached across the car and gave Stela’s unmentionables a firm squeeze. He leapt off the seat and smacked his head on the roof of the car while beside him Talon and Roa’ eyed him thoughtfully. “What the devil was that?” Stela yelped while Dane and Marcus both chuckled and Owen seemed to tense next to me.

From the front seat Dean started whistling. “That is what he assists her with practicing.” Dane replied. “I’m certain if you’d like to replace him...arrangements can be made.”

With my eyes closed I could feel Stela’s eyes on me and remarked to no one in particular. “Be thankful I wasn’t angry. Dean and Nate have been helping me develop my power.”

“Who is Nate?” Marcus asked.

I took a deep breath and told them in a quiet voice filled with sadness. “One of the guards Valentine’s men killed last night.” My comments shut them up, and we rode to the hospital in silence. At the reception desk I asked the nurse if they’d had a woman admitted the previous evening that had been attacked by Vampires and I described Margie to her. She was human and quite overwhelmed by my men and me. I almost felt sorry for her.

“There was a woman named Margie Henderson admitted last night but she wasn’t attacked by Vampires. She was beat up pretty badly though. They’ve moved her out of ICU to room 612.” She told me while I frowned. I could have sworn Alan said they were attacked by Vampires.

“Are you sure she wasn’t bitten?” I asked and when she looked like she might balk I gave her my best smile and stroked Marcus’ arm as he was the closest one to me. Her eyes widened and she licked her lips and shook her head.

“No bite marks. Whatever attacked her wasn’t after her blood.” She replied and her eyes flicked from me to Marcus then on to Roa’ who seemed to mesmerize her. Perhaps it was his silver hair and eyes. Or maybe it was just that his skin was nearly as black as the shinny pencil sharpener she’d been using when we arrived. Who knows?

“Has anyone else been to see her?” I asked softly not wanting to shock her into realizing she probably shouldn’t be answering my questions.

“Three men were in earlier.” She replied distractedly.

“Were they human?”

“Weres.” She answered.

“His name is Roa’. He’s half Drow, half Dragon.” I told her with an amused smile. Roa’ did not seem to find it funny and frowned back at me. I was happy she’d elected to fixate on him instead of one of the others.

She seemed to shake herself and glanced at me with a guilty expression. “You are the Princess, aren’t you? The one I saw in the newspapers. The one that flew from the steps of City Hall.”

“Yes that’s me.” I replied. “If I leave Roa’ here with you while we visit Margie, will you promise not to tell anyone you saw us until after we leave?” She bit her lip and seemed to think about it while Roa’ gave me a dirty look and Talon shifted uncomfortably. “In fact...I’ll leave Marcus here with you too.” I told her and stroked his arm while he rolled his eyes and sighed. “Which way to the elevators?” I asked and she pointed down the hall before turning her eyes on Marcus who leaned against the counter and gave her a big smile which caused her to blush. “Be right back.” I told them and Marcus gave me a wave while Roa’ watched us go with a disturbed look.

“That was not very nice.” Owen told me and I shrugged.

“He’s going to live here, he might as well get used to it. Don’t worry, Marcus will charm her and keep her occupied while Roa’ gets his first taste of humans.”

“It is not the female’s job to teach.” Talon informed me stiffly and I ignored him and pushed the up button.

“Talon, perhaps you should...learn a little about our world before you venture too many opinions. We here on Earth do just fine with our females teaching our youngsters. Woman earned the right to vote a very long time ago and that kind of...backwards thinking is going to get you into trouble.”

Stela looked around when we exited the elevator and asked. “What is this place? What is a hospital?” He asked and I glanced at Owen who shook just shook his head.

“Tis where we bring our sick and injured. Her Majesty’s ability to heal is a rare and wondrous thing. Mostly we use science to heal our sick.” Dane offered as we stepped out of the elevator on the sixth floor. We wandered down the hall till we found room six twelve while Dane and Stela chatted quietly behind me.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes.” I told them and Owen and Dane looked around for someplace to wait while Stela and Talon glanced between us. “I’m just going in to visit with Margie. You are not coming in with me as you will probably upset her.” I informed them and Stela frowned while Talon looked mutinous.

“She’ll be fine.” Owen told him and took up a position next to the door with his shoulder against the wall. “Just don’t take too long would you?” He asked and I nodded

and pushed through the door. Margie was watching television and when she glanced at me I could see that her face was still bruised. I suppose since she wasn't alpha status it was harder for her to shift than it was for Bodark or Alan and since her injuries didn't look all that bad she had opted to let them heal naturally.

"Hi there."

"Lexi what are you doing here?" She asked and seemed quite surprised to see me.

"I heard you were attacked last night by Vampires and had to be carted off to the hospital." I told her and when she nodded in agreement I schooled my features to show no surprise. "I also heard Valentine's men took Bodark." I added and she chewed her lip and quickly glanced away from my eyes.

"I didn't see them." She remarked and I made soothing noises all the while I wondered what was going on.

"That's okay, I'm sorry I didn't mean to upset you." I told her as I reached for her hand and held it in my own. "So you and Bodark...have been seeing each other since the party?" I asked softly and she flicked her eyes to mine, probably to see if the thought made me jealous which of course it didn't since I'd introduced them to begin with.

"Yes."

"That's good." I replied. "He seems like a nice man. I was hoping you two would hit it off." She glanced away from me again and nodded.

"We're getting along just fine. Or we were until last night." She added and I sensed...something here wasn't quite right.

"So what happened? Or would you prefer not to talk about it?" I asked and she shook her head.

"I don't really remember. We were sleeping and then someone was hitting me and that's about all I remember." She replied evasively while I nodded and stroked the back of her hand.

"Were you at home?"

She hesitated briefly and then shook her head as if she wasn't certain she wanted to answer but couldn't see a reason not too. "No Bodark's." Interesting I thought.

Alphas tended to live with their packs. Unless I was mistaken...there should have been more bodies here than just hers.

“Oh was anyone else injured in the attack?” I asked softly, giving her my best sympathetic ditzy voice.

“No...I don't think so.” She replied. “But I really couldn't say since I remember so little of what happened.”

Hmmm I thought. “You know, we were attacked last night too?” I told her softly and this time I didn't have to fake the distress in my voice. “Several of our men were killed.”

“But you are okay? Who was it?” She demanded.

“Valentine's men.” I told her. “The Council arrives tonight and...I suspect they are not going to be happy with him. I know I'm not.”

She stared up at me through wide eyes and finally nodded. “No I can't imagine.” She replied softly and I wondered how someone that was sleeping with Bodark could be so cavalier about his disappearance. Perhaps they weren't getting along as well as I hoped. Perhaps she blamed him for her injuries. I realized holding her hand it would be easy enough for me to heal her...but something inside advised against it.

“So are you okay?” I asked realizing the woman downstairs had been correct, there didn't appear to be any Vampire marks on her. Perhaps her injuries were all...internal.

“A couple broken ribs and they think I punctured a lung.” She replied. “I'll be out by tomorrow.” Nothing too serious.

“Not worth shifting over eh?” I asked with a small smile and watched as she tensed then got control of herself and nodded. I did my best to pretend not to notice her forced smile. “I imagine you'll want to try and get Bodark back when you get out? If you need any help, please send someone to the club. I'm sure Gareth and Jace would be pleased to assist, in fact I'm sure they will expect to since they are Guardians.” I told her and watched through my lashes as she paled at the thought. Something was definitely

wrong here and I didn't need my new Vampire spidey senses to know that Margie was lying through her fangs to me.

"I'm sure Bodark's pack is out looking for him even now." She informed me and I nodded.

"You're probably right." I told her then released her hand and stepped back from the bed as if to go. She looked relieved and I had to control the urge I had to jump on the bed and put my knee on her already broken ribs to get the truth out of her. No doubt that would cause me more trouble than I needed right now so I tried a different approach. "Oh by the way...I was supposed to call Alan about making dinner arrangements. You don't happen to have his number do you?" I asked and she pulled herself out of her musings and nodded.

"Sure it's...in my purse which is in the closet there." She told me offhandedly and I moved to the closet and brought back her purse. She wrote down the number from her address book and I took a second to memorize it and then shoved it into my purse. She'd given me both his personal and cell numbers. I put her purse back and turned to go.

"I hope you feel better soon." I told her. "I'm so sorry about Bodark. I promise you we'll do all we can to find him and bring him back." I told her and watched as something ugly flashed in her eyes. Had I blinked I would have missed it. I slipped out the door and moved to the elevators. The others followed me in and when the doors slid shut I turned to Owen and said. "I need a cell phone." He frowned and gave me a look that said he didn't think that was a good idea. "Please Owen don't make this difficult for once would you just do what I ask?" He frowned but snapped his fingers and passed me a phone which I flipped open and punched in the numbers. As the doors slid open it started ringing and I did not recognize the man's voice on the other end.

"Hello?"

"Hello this is Lexi Helyanwe."

"Princess Lexi Helyanwe?" The man asked his voice sounding surprised.

"Yes."

“You wish to speak to Alan?”

“Yes please.” I told him, being as cryptic as I could. My men were staring at me oddly and I gave them an innocuous smile.

“Hold on let me get him. Whatever you do, don’t hang up. This will just take a minute.” The voice informed me and it sounded like he dropped the phone and I heard the sound of his running footsteps. I walked into the lobby and crossed to one of the chairs and seated myself on the edge while I waited. Marcus and Roa’ were surrounded by women and I glanced at Owen who was alternating between giving me dirty looks and concern over Marcus and Roa’.

The phone was picked up and I heard Alan tell whomever it was that had answered the phone thank you then the sound of a door closing. “Princess....” He breathed and my hair stood up on end from the lust oozing out of his voice and actually licked my lips. “I’m pleased you called...it seems I am indebted to you.”

“Hi.” I squeaked and he chuckled in a sexy voice while I took deep breaths and tried to control myself. “Ah what I meant to say was, hi there. Did I hear you correctly earlier today when you said Bodark was taken by Valentine’s men?” I asked in a near whisper.

He seemed to hesitate a moment before answering. “Yes that’s what I was told.”

“By who?” I asked.

“Margie called me from the hospital.”

“And did she say she was also attacked by Vampires?”

Alan must have been thinking about that because he took a moment to answer. “She said...they’d been attacked by Vampires who took Bodark and that she was in the hospital after having also been attacked.”

“That’s interesting.” I told him softly.

“Why?”

“Because I’m at the hospital now. I just went up to see her and I would swear that she was no more attacked by Vampires last night than you were.”

“What do you mean?” Alan asked in a near growl.

“I mean...the woman lied.”

“Lied? Why would she lie? Then is Bodark really missing?”

“I don’t know.”

Chapter 23

“I’ll be right over.” He replied.

“Ah...no I don’t think that’s going to be a good idea.” I told him in a calm voice.

I could hear him breathing on the other end of the line. “Not alone?” He asked and his voice held a wry sarcasm in it.

“No....not exactly.” I replied.

“Can you get rid of them?” He tempted and his voice held that note that nearly set me to drooling.

“No...that’s not going to be possible.” I told him. “It won’t do you any good anyway.”

“Why not?” He asked a little more briskly.

“Because something else is going on here. She lied to me about Bodark and I’m not convinced she cares that he was taken. When I told her we would do all we could to get him back....”

“What, what happened?” He asked his voice sounding urgent.

“I don’t know...for just a moment there was this look in her eyes...as if that was the last thing she wanted.” I finished lamely. “I know it doesn’t make any sense.”

“What do you want me to do?” He asked and I nearly fell off my chair in surprise.

I got up and moved away from Stela who was hovering. Dane, Owen, and Talon had gone to rescue Roa’ and Marcus so it was only Stela I needed to avoid. From the other side of the lounge I turned my back on Stela and asked softly. “Give me Bodark’s address.” Alan gave me an address in the Sherwood Forest area off Portola near Mt. Davidson Park. “Does he live alone?” I asked.

“He’s an Alpha...we’re never alone.” He replied curiously. “Why do you ask?”

“Well don’t you think it odd that Bodark was taken and only Margie ended up in the hospital?”

“I see your point.” Alan replied. “Can I meet you there?”

“Yeah I think I can get Dean to drive us over.” I replied. “We’ll be leaving as soon as I can drag my Drakes away from the humans.” I told him and he chuckled.

“Good I’ll see you in about twenty minutes then. And Lexi...” He breathed softly and I swallowed.

“Yes.”

“What you did to me earlier....I look forward to returning the favor.” He replied then there was just dead air and I gave myself a shake and hung up the phone. I reached for my communicator and spoke softly as I called for Dean asking him to bring the car around.

“And Dean, I want to swing by Bodark’s on the way home.” I told him, keeping my eyes on Stela who was standing across the little lobby and staring back at me thoughtfully. I wasn’t certain he knew I was speaking to someone else and was probably thinking I’d lost my mind. The thought made me smile.

“Bodark?” He asked his voice sounding surprised. Being Werewolf I knew Dean was familiar with Bodark. I didn’t know if he’d come to Gareth and Jace from Bodark’s pack, I’d never asked. But prime Werewolf males did not enter an Alpha’s territory

without first introducing themselves and explaining their presence. Once they entered Gareth and Jace's school they became virtual pack members and their actions were the responsibility of Gareth and Jace. While under Gareth and Jace's leadership, no Weres of any kind could poach on alpha or beta females from the local packs. Though not every female Were was required to join their local pack, their lack of doing so ostracized them from their fellow pack mates and left them fair game to all sorts of harassment. Lions, Hyenas, and Wolves especially. The other Weres happened to be a little less demanding about it. But if a beautiful Were moved to town, she'd soon find herself being lobbied...hard to do the right thing. Alpha females liked to know who their competition was and keep a tight leash on them.

The problem with Bodark's family was that he'd yet to raise any of his women to the status of Alpha and that, no doubt, created problems of another sort. For all I knew, his females may have ganged up on Margie and beat her senseless. It wasn't unprecedented. I wanted to make sure Bodark wasn't being held against his will by his unhappy pack mates who might have grown tired of him dilly dallying around. At least...I was hoping that might be the problem and that Valentine wasn't behind this at all. It might explain why Margie was upset. If she blamed Bodark for the attack she'd have every right to be angry with him.

"Yeah and I'd prefer you didn't say anything to the others. I'll simply tell them we're going sightseeing or something. I'm supposed to meet Alan there in twenty minutes."

"Alan...do you mean the Alpha Werejaguar?" He asked his voice sounding incredulous. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"No but we're going so could you please just bring the car around and not say anything?" I demanded then gave him the address. He promised to have the car in front of the building in two minutes and I lowered my wrist and simply walked toward the doors. Stela made a high chirping noise and I glanced over my shoulder to see the rest of the men scrambling after me.

Marcus piled into the car after me and yanked me onto his lap. “Don’t do that to me ever again.” He chided me then buried his face in my hair. “I feel so dirty...they touched me.”

I glanced at Roa’ who also looked annoyed then at Dane who simply rolled his eyes. “Tis a wee bit of petting only. Ye’d think they stole his virtue with the way he’s been carrying on.” He replied while Marcus held me tighter and nibbled on my neck.

“I do not like being pawed. Except by you.” He breathed against my neck and I reached back to lift my hair out from under his arm. He’d caught a button in it and it was pulling at my roots.

“Marcus good grief.” I told him and pulled my hair into my lap when he finally let go long enough for me to gather it out of his way.

“They put their hands all over me.” He pouted and I tensed in his arms and turned to Roa’ my eyes full of questions. He stared back at me then nodded once and turned his face away from me to look out the window.

My fingers soothed the back of Marcus’ neck and shoulder softly. “I’m sorry, there was only the one woman when I left you there. If I’d know you’d get mauled I would have taken you up with us.”

“I don’t like humans.” Roa’ informed me tightly. “They have no control.”

“Yeah not like me eh?” I asked and he turned to glare at me then finally nodded. Owen frowned and sent Roa’ an annoyed look that seemed to surprise Roa’. His silver eyes widened and the temperature in the car dropped about twenty degrees. Marcus poked his head out from behind my hair with a curious look.

“Why is Owen mad?” He asked in a stage whisper. I thought about what Roa’ had said and replied.

“Because Owen...doesn’t appreciate his children being maligned.” I replied while Owen flicked his eyes to me and seemed to settle back against the car cushions. He turned his face away and stared out the opposite side of the car ignoring the rest of us. Everyone else just looked confused.

“What children?” Marcus finally asked.

“Humans.” I replied and left it at that. I glanced back at Roa’ and admitted with a sigh. “I’m sorry I should have left Dane with you instead of Marcus. I keep forgetting how young Marcus is.” In my arms Marcus made a distressed noise while Dane brightened and seemed happy all of a sudden. “Why are you so happy?” I asked and Marcus turned to glance at Dane.

“Because Lassie I’m nae longer the youngest in the room am I?” He replied and leaned back on the seat across from me with a big smile. Marcus’ hand slid under my dress and I placed my fingers over it and squeezed while he moved his lips on my neck and rolled my skin between his teeth gently.

“Stop that.” I told him and he hummed and shifted me closer in his lap so that I felt his erection pressing against me through the fabric of his pants. They were all dressed casually, jeans and button up shirts in varying colors. Talon and Roa’ were even dressed appropriately and I wondered who I had to thank for getting them out of their little red skirts. When we started climbing up out of downtown, Owen sat forward and glanced at me sharply.

“Where are we going?” He asked his voice holding a note of distrust and annoyance. I ignored him and tried to get Marcus’ hand out of my dress. “Dean where are we going?” Owen asked when it was clear I wasn’t going to answer him.

“Lexi asked me to take you for a drive.” He replied, his eyes never leaving the road which was starting to wind and required his attention.

“A drive to where exactly?” Owen asked and turned to look at me with a frown.

“Marcus!” I snapped and tried to shove myself off his lap. My wiggling only seemed to encourage him and I gritted my teeth and held still while he chuckled and moved his fingers father up my dress.

“My Queen.” He breathed against my ear just before his teeth found my earlobe and bit down. I made a started sound and my eyes slipped closed.

“You are such a brat.” I told him and he laughed and pulled his hand out from under my dress and wrapped it about my waist while I relaxed against him.

“I know, but you gotta love me. I’m the baby.” He teased me.

“Hmmm.” I replied as he hummed softly and ran his fingers through my hair.

“I love your hair.” He told me. “It’s got red in it just like mine.”

“That’s nice Marcus but would you leave her alone for a moment so she can answer my question?” Owen growled and I cracked open an eye just as Dean pulled the car to a stop. I kissed Marcus on the cheek and he winked at me and glanced out the window.

“Oh look we’re here.” He remarked then lifted me off his lap and edged me toward the door. I suddenly had the feeling he’d been misbehaving all along as a distraction and reached for his hand and gave it a squeeze as he opened the door and helped me out.

“What are you doing?” Owen growled.

“I’m getting out of the car.” I told him. “Would you stop growling and acting like the chaperone from Hell for a minute or two?”

“As soon as you tell me where we are.” He demanded and climbed out right after me and when he would have wrapped his hand around my arm, Marcus insinuated himself between us and turned me toward the front door of the very large house we were standing in front of. Vegetation grew all around the Mediterranean style home which sprawled out for quite a ways. Dean had pulled us into a circular drive and I could see that someone had left the gates wide for us...or so I assumed. The front door opened and Alan stepped out followed by three others, two of which were Werewolf and one was Werejaguar and must be Alan’s man. Appropriately there was a black Jag in the driveway along with several SUVs and some other cars which I couldn’t make out. I was guessing the Jag was Alan’s.

“Isn’t that the man the Blue and Green attacked earlier today?” Roa’ asked softly and I couldn’t hear Talon’s response but Owen was suddenly in front of me as was Dane. I glanced up at Alan and shook my head while Marcus gave me a squeeze and an inquiring look.

“Are you sure you should be doing this?” He leaned down to whisper and I nodded.

“Lexi, so good to see you again.” Alan told me while I steered Marcus up the steps. Owen and Dane planted their feet and would have refused to allow me to pass but I reached out and pinched Dane mentally on the bottom and he jumped and turned giving me a dirty look but just enough room for Marcus to ease me by him and up the steps. Owen made an angry sound and followed us. Behind me I could smell the others close on my heels.

“Sorry Alan, they’re a little over protective.” I told him and gave him my hand which he raised to his lips and kissed. His eyes flashed his desire and behind me Stela bristled.

Alan smiled and dropped my hand then turned to the men on his left. “These are Bodark’s men.” He replied. “This is David and Len.” David was the taller of the two at about six foot but Len was more muscular which of course made him look that much shorter. David’s hair was a pale blond and his eyes were crystal blue. Len was a brunette with soft brown eyes. Both looked serious. Alan gave us a moment to look each other over then turned to his right and added. “This is Jose, he’s with me.” Jose looked like...someone had mashed his face in with a mallet at some point. He was not attractive in the least. Judging from his body he was strictly muscle though his eyes held a light of intelligence that caused me to smile up at him.

“Hello.” I told them and reached out my hand to each of them. David and Len both sniffed me then placed a chaste kiss on my knuckles. Jose turned my hand over and sniffed my wrist then placed a delicate kiss on the vein while Alan watched him closely. When I got my hand back I turned to my men and told them. “Owen, Marcus, Dane, Talon, Roa’, Stela and this is Dean who you may know is under Gareth and Jace’s protection.” I told them while David and Len nodded.

“Please come in, David invited us. I’m sorry I didn’t mean to keep you standing on the steps. I just wanted to warn you that...things are in a bit of an uproar inside and I’d like to apologize in case something is said that...causes you distress.”

My gaze flicked between David and Len. I lifted an eyebrow and tilted my head. “Is there something I should know?” I asked my sense of self preservation coming to the fore.

“Only that we’re not usually this...inhospitable.” Len offered. “Please try not to take it personally.”

“Okay.” I told them then followed them in through the door while Owen muttered under his breath and Marcus held me just a little tighter.

“Let’s go into the library.” David invited and he moved us down the hall at a pace that caused me to lengthen my stride to keep up. My heels were loud on the parquet floor and seemed to echo off the walls. David reached for a door knob just as two women entered the hall. One was blonde and about four inches taller than me. She had a look in her eyes that meant trouble. The other had flaming red hair that reached the middle of her back and wasn’t much taller than me. They were both voluptuous with the look of well kept women about them. Neither seemed happy to see me and both moved with a grace that set my senses tingling. They looked...like they were stalking me. Or perhaps that was just me being...paranoid.

“Who’s this?” The tall blonde demanded as she loose hipped slinked her way down the hall towards us.

“None of your business.” David told them rudely.

“You are not Alpha.” The red head informed him. “And any female within our territory is very much our business.” David pushed open the door and urged the others into the room. Marcus got me going and I was nearly through the door when the blonde’s voice stopped me in my tracks.

“This is your fault you bitch.” She hissed and leapt at me. Marcus cried out when I shoved him to the side and open palmed her in the chin snapping back her head and causing her feet to slip out from under her. She went down with a thud and a crack as her head struck the floor and everyone froze around me. The red head took one look at the blonde and started circling to my right. She was wearing pants and flats and had me at a distinct disadvantage in my dress and heels.

“I don’t know you.” I told her and she bared her teeth at me and hissed.

“Oh but I know you.” She growled back at me. I knew better than to try and reason with her. Were females were...worse than the men. When they felt someone had poached or invaded their territory they tended to be more relentless and less merciful. I didn’t think Bodark would thank me if I killed her and I didn’t really have time for these games.

“Fine.” I told her and reached out and mentally grabbed a handful of her hair and yanked her to the ground. She let out a high pitched yelp and I moved my mental sending from her hair to her throat closing my mental fingers upon her windpipe till she was frantically clawing at her neck. Beside me David muttered while Len stared between the two of us. In less than three minutes she slumped on the floor and I released my sending, turning back to David with a raised eyebrow. He seemed to look at me in a new light and I could tell his face had paled slightly. Len actually stepped around me giving me a wide birth while Marcus offered me his arm and looked at me with adoring eyes.

“That was so cool.” He whispered. “I didn’t know you could do that.”

“Talk to Talon and Roa’.” I muttered and he glanced over his shoulder at the two who had stood watching but not interfering in any way. Stela too had stood back and only Dane and Owen had looked concerned. It was nice to know they all thought I could handle myself...against a couple of women.

“Don’t get cocky.” Owen growled. “They will eventually wake up and we have to come out this door to get out of here.”

Right, I thought then settled myself on one of the leather couches across from David who looked a little uncomfortable at all the Dragons in the room. My men spread out around and behind me and simply stood with their arms over their chests. Jose took up a position at the end of the couch when Alan slipped onto the cushion next to me. I dropped my shields and felt Alan sway slightly as if the pressure of my mind had rolled over him. His dark brown eyes glanced toward me then he leaned his arm across the couch at my back and crossed a knee with his ankle.

David moved his eyes to Alan and informed the rest of us. “You called this meeting, what is it you wanted to discuss?”

Alan glanced at me and replied. “Actually the Princess...or should I say Queen Lexi called this meeting so perhaps we should hear what she has to say.”

I nodded and then told them of my visit with Margie at the hospital. “Were they actually attacked by Vampires?” I asked while David and Len exchanged a look I could not interpret. “Look, I know you don’t know me, but Bodark is my friend and I’m very concerned. We were also attacked last night by Vampires and we lost...several men. Most were wolfs.” I told them. “I know there have been more than fifty disappearances over the past seven months that you know of. Bodark was going to set up a meeting between me and Dten to see if he would tell me if any Fey had gone missing. But we got detained in the Sidhe and we just returned last night. I just think there is something wrong with Margie’s story....and I feel responsible.”

Len looked at me and rubbed his hands together. I assumed it was one of his nervous gestures. “Why do you feel responsible?” He asked curiously.

“Because she introduced them.” Alan replied for me and I watched as David and Len both frowned. David stood up abruptly.

“I think this meeting is over.” He informed me coldly while I sat there staring up at him in shock.

“Just like that?” I asked and watched as he narrowed his pale blue eyes and glared down at me. Behind me there was a shifting and his eyes flicked over my shoulder and he stilled. Apparently whatever was over my shoulder seemed much scarier than me.

“We do not deal with ttpootns.” He hissed and held himself tightly, his eyes brittle like icebergs. Beside him Len looked equally as upset.

“And that means what exactly?”

“Traitor.” Len informed me in a cold voice. “We do not deal with traitors.”

I sucked in air and considered them both. “And why would you think I’m a traitor?” I asked calmly my golden eyes swinging between the two of them.

David pulled his eyes from mine and glanced at Len and then they both looked at...Marcus. "You arrive on our doorstep with him and you didn't even bother trying to hide those." He told me pointing to the vicinity of my neck. I held my hands in my lap though I had the urge to reach for the still not healed puncture wounds.

"I believe Lexi told you they were also attacked last night in the Guardian's residence." Alan replied smoothly while I held myself still and tried not to look...too anything. Not too guilty, or too innocent, or too shocked that he would mislead them like that.

"Marcus was taken from Valentine and Belinda. The past two weeks he's been living in the Sidhe. We returned last night to find the den crawling with Vampires...not youngsters either. When we discovered the attack, I immediately sent Marcus back to the Sidhe. However he...did not wish to stay there and proceeded to fly his way to Colorado trying to wing his way to California. I had my Demon retrieve him this morning." I informed them both. I have not seen Valentine since the Mayor's party. My Grandmother, the Queen of Air and Light demanded an audience and we left the next afternoon. I spent six of the ten days I was gone in a coma, my body separated from my consciousness. I can assure you, I was much too busy trying to survive a conniving female Elf to know what was happening back here in San Francisco. The last I saw of either Bodark or Margie was at the Mayor's party when I introduced them. Alan was there and can vouch for the fact that neither of us expected them to...hit it off so well. In fact we left them quickly as we did not wish to...disturb them.

Earlier today Alan came to our den and informed me that Margie was in the hospital and had called him to say that Bodark had been taken. I was led to believe as was Alan that it was Vampires behind the attack. Aside from that, I have only ever met Bodark on two previous occasions. Once when he came for the meeting at the Club and the second time was when I went out to dinner with my parents. Alan was there that night also, as was Jared Dentry." I told them conveniently leaving out that Blake had also dined and danced with us. I had no idea how close Bodark was to these members of

his pack and the fact that Blake had been there was not really something I thought any of us wished to spread around.

David stared down at me and seemed to be considering all I had said. He slumped back onto the couch and placed his head in his hands as if extremely distressed. Len placed his arm around him and grimaced. From between his fingers David muttered, “I think...he’s dead.” He murmured and my eyes widened and I suddenly remembered the reason Bodark had taken over this pack to begin with. And while it was hard to fathom, it seemed that David was very much in love...with Bodark.

Chapter 24

Alan dropped his foot to the floor and leaned forward on the sofa his arm brushing me as he moved them to his thighs. Behind me I felt several of the others shift uncomfortably. “Why do you think he is dead?” Alan asked calmly. David shuddered and rubbed at his eyes.

“What else are we to think? His room was tossed and there was blood everywhere. His blood.” He nearly moaned.

“May I see his room?” I asked and Len glanced at me with a frown then nodded. “Good, were he and Margie the only ones here last night?”

Len looked disgusted and David lifted his red rimmed eyes to me. “He sent us all away. Said that little bitch didn’t feel comfortable being here with us. It wasn’t the first time she’d made him do it and while we weren’t happy...the rest of us went to dinner and a movie. Normally she doesn’t stay long.”

“Hmmm...where does she go when she leaves?” I asked and both of them frowned but shook their heads.

“Who knows, we never thought to follow her. Just pleased that she elected not to stay. None of us like her.” Len added.

“Why not?” I asked and watched as both of them frowned and looked angry.

“We’ve seen her with other...men. In clubs around town...even at the Salty Dog. There is about six of them she keeps company with. Sometimes at the same time. I think she was just toying with Bodark but he wouldn’t listen to us.” David added and my eyes widened. I sucked air into my lungs and rose abruptly from the couch. I paced to the fireplace and stared down at the grate for several seconds.

“Tell me about these men?”

No one spoke for a moment then David informed me. “They are Weres though only one is wolf.”

“What do they look like?” I asked not bothering to turn around. “And is it that they are wolf, lion, tiger, hyena, bear, and jaguar? One of each like...a mini conclave?”

David made a surprised noise and Len offered. “They range in coloring from blondes to brunettes. The wolf has brown hair and eyes and the others...I don’t know we didn’t take notes.” Len offered. “The wolf has not presented himself to us, we assumed he was one of the Guardian’s since he spends time in the Salty Dog.”

“No...I do not think so.” I replied.

“Do you know them?” David demanded his voice sounding curious.

“Nearly.” I replied and turned to look at Alan who was watching me through narrowed eyes. “Do you know the jaguar they speak of?” I asked and he nodded slowly.

“I have seen him, but like the wolf he has not presented himself to me. He has been in town for several months but as he has not poached or caused any problems I have...allowed his rude behavior. It sounds as if that may have been a mistake on my part. Why do you say you nearly know them?”

I took a deep breath and glanced down at the floor for a moment. “Because the night Margie took me to the club...she brought me to their table.”

“So you met them?” David asked then frowned when I shook my head.

“No their excitement...overwhelmed me and I...lost my head and caused a panic. That was the night I met Jared Dentry...and had my Demon not rendered him impotent...” And I waved my hand and smiled. “It is water under the bridge.” I remarked while everyone stared back at me in varying degrees of confusion and dismay. “That was the night I met Gareth and Jace.”

Dane laughed suddenly and then covered his face with his hand while the rest of my men looked shocked. I fear I had just fed them a snippet of what had happened to poor Jared. Dane at least, had found it amusing. The others...shocking. “Tis like I’m always telling ye.” Dane remarked. “Ye be such a wee thing for one so terribly fierce.”

“In my own defense, I was untried. Perhaps the foot on his chest was...a bit much but I was completely overwhelmed and...he seemed suitable at the time. Anyone could see by his mane that he was...prime. How was I to know he’d wet himself and pass out?” Alan looked like he couldn’t decide if he wanted to laugh or be offended while David and Len just looked horrified.

“I’m sure you have a reason for bringing this...indelicate subject up.” Owen remarked while I nodded.

“Yes sorry. We were attacked that night by Vampires...Gareth and Jace and I. Compliments of...Belinda and Valentine.” I replied and glanced at Marcus who looked angry. “Mi found me later and during her discussion with Gareth and Jace she told them, ‘the six you entertained upstairs last night, are not what they appear.’ None of us knew what she meant and honestly I had forgotten it till you mentioned there were six of them.”

“Mi... the cat who joined us during the conference, the one Milos was so fascinated with?” Alan asked and I nodded.

“She is immortal...older than even my oldest Drakes. Her title is...Keeper of all Knowledge and she practically raised me. I am her gift to the Dragon race.” I replied while my Drakes eyed me thoughtfully and the others just looked, confused.

“So you do not know what she meant?” Alan asked.

“No I’m sorry...at the time she was busy giving me over to Gareth and Jace and it...was not a priority.” I told him wryly. He frowned at my comment while Stela and Talon looked annoyed.

“Why don’t ye ask her then?” Dane offered and I gave him a wry grin.

“She is Keeper of Knowledge...not sharer. If I asked her she’d tell me something like...you must discover that for yourself child. Or, what do you think it means? I assure you it would do no good. In fact that she mentioned it at all...tells me I should probably have paid attention to it sooner. But things have been...a little busy this past month.”

Marcus chuckled and I glanced at him with a question in my eyes. “You have her tone and inflection down perfectly.” He told me. “And...I recognize the phrases.”

“It’s nice to know I’m not the only one she torments.” I told him then my thoughts went off in a different direction. “Marcus...how long had you been with Valentine before we removed you?” I asked and he looked uncomfortable when everyone turned to glance at him.

“A few months.” He replied.

“How did you come to be with him?”

He grimaced and glanced at me with a distressed look. “Belinda met him somehow. I wasn’t there. She introduced me to him about months ago and my life soon became a living hell.” He replied tightly. “At first he only fed on her. But she is not strong like you and she...gave me to him.” He informed us and his voice shook. His pale brown eyes took on a haunted look and it seemed everyone in the room held their breath at the horror he described. “He kept me in a room, too small to shift and when I tried to keep him from me he and Belinda...abused me. She had always been unstable but under his influence she became nearly as insane as he is. I think our blood...empowered him somehow.” He finished in a small voice.

“I am so sorry Marcus.” I told him softly and he clenched his hands and dropped his gaze to the floor. “While you were with Valentine, did you ever hear or see any other prisoners?” I asked and he lifted his eyes to me and seemed to consider my words.

“No Your Majesty...no others. I’m sure Belinda or Valentine would have mentioned it. They both seemed to enjoy tormenting me. Had I known there were others I might have tried to help them escape...or to escape with them.” He replied.

“The night of the conference, what happened?” I asked and he grimaced and put his hands behind his back.

“Valentine thought it would be amusing to show the Guardians what he intended to do to them. He threatened to do...things to me if I did not go along. It was...a long night.” He replied, his voice sounding hollow.

“Marcus why did you not heal yourself in the conference room when you shifted?”

He took a deep breath and lifted his pale brown eyes to mine. In them was a wealth of horrors to numerous to contemplate. “Because I knew if I did it would be worse on me later. I did not expect him to force Belinda to the collar. But it did not matter since you...did it for me.”

I nodded and gave him a small smile. “Did Valentine ever say how he planned to take Gareth and Jace?” I asked softly.

“Not to me, though Belinda...may know.” He breathed and he glanced down at the floor.

“Did Valentine ever force you to...exchange blood?” I asked and he shook his head violently.

“No though Belinda and he..” And he seemed to nearly gag at the memory.

“While you were with them...was there anyone, anyone like Kit? Someone who seemed to be in service to Valentine. Someone not a Vampire?” I asked and he thought about it while next to me the air shimmered and filled with a black smoky haze out of which Kit appeared with an irate look on his beautiful face. David and Len growled and Alan narrowed his eyes.

“Wait, please!” I told them, holding up my hand to David and Len. “He is my Demon and will not harm you.” Kit turned and glanced about the room his eyes narrowing on Alan who seemed to puff up and actually growled. “He and Alan do not

care for each other. However Kit will behave himself while we are guests in Bodark's home." I informed him and he swung back around to stare at me in shock.

"Mistress what are you doing here?" He demanded. "Gareth is already angry with you. He is not going to be happy when he finds out about this! Why did you not call for me sooner? Or take me with you?"

"I didn't exactly call for you at all." I informed him and crossed my arms over my chest. "And I think perhaps we can discuss the rest later."

"You spoke my name." He breathed and rocked back on his heel and crossed his own arms over his chest then proceeded to eye me angrily while I frowned and turned back to Marcus.

"Fine, just stand there and don't interrupt we were in the middle of something." I told him then said to Marcus. "Anyone that came and went as he does?" I asked pointing to Kit who frowned and moved so his back wasn't to the room.

Marcus thought about it for a moment then finally nodded. "A pale haired man, slender with red eyes. I only saw him once or twice with Valentine." He replied, and I chewed my lip and flicked my eyes to Kit who looked...uncomfortable.

"A Thrones no doubt." I offered while Kit shifted and refused to meet my eyes.

"And what is a Thrones?" Roa' surprised me by asking.

"Well, Christians believe they once carried the throne of God. That they are celestial beings and that they are bringers of justice. They occupy the sixth level and some refer to them as the Lords of Flame. They are intensely humble and able to dispense justice with perfect objectivity without fear of pride or ambition." I replied while Kit seemed to squirm slightly where he stood.

"If they are good, then why would one be with Valentine?" Alan asked clearly confused.

I stared at Kit who seemed to find the floor extremely interesting. "Because even celestial beings go bad sometimes. And when they do...its not pretty is it Kit?" I breathed softly while he seemed to twitch.

"No Mistress it is not."

“Don’t worry Kit...I won’t hold it against you.” I replied and he took a deep breath and seemed to grimace.

“I am sorry Mistress...it is indelicate to speak of other’s origins.” He replied meekly and I nodded and reached out to stroke his shoulder and down the outside of his arm.

“If this is distressing for you, you may leave.” I told him and he shook his head and seemed to pull himself together.

Roar interrupted my musing by saying. “If this man was from the sixth level then why would you say he was a fifth level?”

“Because the levels in Heaven, do not necessarily relate to the levels in Hell. And Angels and Demons are merely flip sides of the same coin. But that is not really relevant. What is relevant is that Valentine seems to have a familiar who revels in those emotions of the fifth level of Hell...where those filled with wrath exist. Is that not what you said Kit?” I asked and he moaned softly and nodded.

“Yes Mistress...”

“It is not Verrine...is it?” I asked him softly and he jerked and his eyes widened in alarm.

“No! And please Mistress, do not speak his name. You do not wish to gain his attention! I cannot protect you from him.”

“Who is this...Demon?” Stela demanded. “And why would Her Majesty merely speaking his name cause her to need protection from him?”

“Because he is said to rule over thirty legions, he is a second level Thrones who rules the fifth level of Hell. He’s not terribly nice. In fact I think his title is...Prince of Impatience.

“Please Mistress.” Kit moaned and looked extremely anxious.

“What is it Kit? Surely my talking about him will not call him to me.” I told him and waved my hand as if his concern was ridiculous.

“Yes...yes it can.” He replied and I stared back at him in horror.

“Why would you say something like that?” I demanded feeling my temper rise.

“Perhaps because it’s true.” Owen offered and I turned to glance at him. “You call Kit and Jace has told us how you merely wishing for clothing called Areth. Perhaps this is part of...your nature.” He replied. “There are not many...females in Hell.” He replied. “Certainly not any with your...pedigree.” He offered while Kit nodded beside me. I swallowed and chewed my lower lip for a moment while I considered his words...I remembered that Jace had been very concerned over the fact that I had merely wished for Areth...hmmm perhaps this was a discussion for another day.

“Or better yet, never.” Kit offered while Len and David looked confused. I reached up and rubbed my temple with my fingers and tried to regain my train of thought.

“Whomever it is...it seems that Valentine had acquired an...assistant who shall remain nameless although I think it is safe to say it isn’t who I thought it was. Would you agree Kit?”

“Yes.” He muttered. “Valentine is not that strong...you would not need to look above my rank for that which you seek.”

“Thank you. Perhaps we will discuss that in depth later.” I told him firmly and he nodded but said no more.

“Owen when you went to visit the Dwarfs earlier today did they shed any light on Bodark’s disappearance?” I asked him in an off hand manner still looking at Kit who stiffened and lifted his eyes to mine.

“No, he was not aware of it until Gareth told him.” He replied while beside me Kit glared at me and I gave him a smile.

“So I after David contacted Gareth and Jace to let them know, you all went to Dten to discuss it?”

“I called them. We did not know what else to do and it is what Bodark would have wanted.” Len offered while beside me Kit sputtered and his cheeks turned red.

“I see.” I said and had to force myself not to laugh at Kit who looked irate at the way I had just gained the knowledge he refused to share with me earlier that day. Owen must not have gotten the same message because he seemed totally unaware of the fact that I was sticking my nose in where I’d been expressly told not too. Across the room

Owen frowned suddenly and his dark eyes narrowed on me while I cursed the fact that both my shields were still lowered. Oh well too late I thought and glanced away.

“That was...I cannot believe you just did that to me.” Owen growled while the others turned to glance at him curiously.

“I’d like to speak to your females now. Specifically the two from the hall earlier.” I told David and Len who seemed shocked that I would make such a request after having laid them both out flat. “And then I’d like to see Bodark’s room. If that won’t be an imposition?” Both of them seemed extremely confused but Len got up and went for the door.

“Lexi do you think this is a good idea?” Owen demanded.

“I won’t know till I try will I?” I told him then chewed my lip and glanced at Owen. “Come here Owen quickly.” I told him and he frowned but his feet moved him in my direction. “Could you please shift?” I asked when he reached me and then turned to Kit. “Both of you...now?” Owen sighed and shifted into his white wolf form while Kit made an annoyed sound and shifted to his black wolf with silver tipped fur. Both of them looked up at me and I motioned to the floor to either side. I swear Kit rolled his eyes but seated himself next to me while Owen did the same. I buried my fingers in their ruffs and glanced up at the door as Len walked through it leading the tall blonde and the red head. Behind them were a brunette and another paler blonde. Their eyes moved to me and the tall blonde and the red head dropped their gazes to the floor, subservient because I’d bested them in their own front hall. The brunette seemed a little full of herself and I raised an eyebrow and stared her down. She seated herself on the couch beside Len and seemed to hide behind him. The paler blonde seemed merely curious, perhaps she wasn’t threatened by me or maybe it was Owen and Kit that had her attention.

“What are they?” The paler blonde asked politely.

“Mine.” I replied and both her eyebrows rose in surprise while the other three shifted slightly on the couch they’d crammed themselves on.

“Len said you wanted to see us. What do you want?” The tall blonde asked her voice not exactly demanding but bordering on insubordinate. If I wanted to keep this

meeting social I'd have to do something about her tone or the four of them would be after me in a heartbeat. I reached out with my mind and wrapped my fingers in her hair and yanked her onto the floor to her knees. Next to me Kit growled softly and showed his fangs. Alan watched me and seemed to be...pleased with my response as he leaned back on the couch and spread his arms across the back, appearing to settle in to enjoy the show.

"Let us start by being civil shall we?" I asked while I held the long haired blonde's head back at an odd angle. The pose would have been perfect had I wanted to chop off her head. "I would have thought the greeting I gave you in the hall would have...changed your tone. I assure you, you do not wish to anger me." And I released her and watched as she slinked back onto the couch rubbing the back of her head. "Now, who do we have here?" I asked David.

He introduced them starting with the pale blonde, red head, long blonde haired woman and the brunette. "Joanne, Patti, Toni, Sheila this is, I'm sorry do you prefer to be called Queen Lexi or simply Lexi?" David asked and I shook my head.

"I think Lexi will be fine as none of you are Dragons or Elves in which case it would be Princess." I replied with a wry smile. "I asked Len to have you join us because I wished to get a sense of your feelings for Margie." I told them and watched as all four of them lifted their heads and stared back at me as if worried they might say something wrong. I sighed and ran my fingers over Kit's head. "Please let me rephrase that. I am trying to understand if Margie might be responsible for Bodark's disappearance as it seems that Valentine may not be."

Not surprising, the brunette was the first to speak. "We don't like her." She informed me and I nodded and pursed my lips together while Kit opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue as if to pant.

"Why not?" I asked and all four of them frowned and glanced amongst themselves. I took a deep breath and tried again. "Aside from the fact that she was sleeping with Bodark, was her perfume offensive or did you not like the way she walked?" They eyed me warily and Joanne, the pale blonde nodded.

“She smelled funny.” She responded while the others glanced sideways at her and finally nodded.

“How so?”

“She always smelled like...other Weres. And not just one or two.” She replied. “It was like she immersed herself in several species. And...sometimes she smelled like a hospital.”

“Like a hospital.” Now why would Margie smell like a hospital I wondered? “Did any of you think to run a background check on her when she...joined your little pack?” I asked and got blank stares in response. “I see.” I replied and turned to Alan. “Do we think it isn’t too late to get right on that?” I asked and he glanced at Jose who flicked his eyes to me then back to Alan and nodded. “Good, I think a tail might not be a bad idea either.” I offered and glanced around at my men thoughtfully. “Owen? Could I trouble you to go back to the hospital and find out where she goes? I imagine my little visit earlier upset her and it wouldn’t surprise me if she’s already checked herself out or going to do that soon.”

Owen turned his dark brown eyes up at me and seemed to frown. “Kit’s here.” I told him and he looked at Kit who blinked back at him. “Before you go.” I told him and went to my knees and wrapped my arms around him. “I don’t suppose you tried to bring Bodark back yourselves this morning did you?” When he nodded I chewed my lower lip thoughtfully and glanced at Kit. “Both of you?” And Kit nodded too. Damn did that mean he was already dead? I wondered with a bit of distress.

“No Mistress...only that we could not find him.”

“What would prevent you both from finding him?” I asked, almost afraid to know the answer.

“He may be drugged or unconscious or...protected somehow. As Marcus was when you brought him with your flute.” Kit responded.

“What about the Drakes?” I asked and they both shook their heads.

“We were unable to reach them either.”

“Your Majesty?” Marcus offered. “After you...took me from my room, Valentine was very angry and he brought in someone to perform binding spells on my...accommodations. He did not want you to take me again. It is likely he is keeping the others there.”

I nodded unhappily and gave Owen another hug and a kiss on the nose. “Be careful. I don’t wish to tip her off that she’s being followed.” I told him and he sighed and was gone. I rose to my feet and turned back to the group who were watching me in awe. “Minor God...created humans.” I replied with a grin while they stared at me as if I’d lost my mind.

“Lexi?” Patti the redhead spoke and I moved my eyes to her. I gave her a nod and she replied. “She never wanted to stay.” She offered and what she really meant was...what woman wouldn’t spend eternity in his bed if given the opportunity.

“Do you think she didn’t enjoy sex or was it that she wanted to be away from Bodark?” I asked and she seemed relieved that I understood her comment.

“I have no idea, but there is something just not right about that. Bodark is...” And her cheeks turned a delightful shade of pink then her eyes narrowed on me as if in anger.

I held up my hands palm up. “If you say so.” I told her. “I would not know. Bodark and I have a plutonic relationship. I’m sure you are correct but these men serve me.” I told her and waved my hand at the Drakes standing about the room. “Some days it is very difficult for me to get out of bed.” I told her while her face went slack and then all four of them were laughing and their attitudes toward me thawed considerably.

“I thought you were the Guardian’s mistress?” Toni asked.

“Forgive me...I should have said these men along with several others serve me. Not everyone fit in the car.” I told her then rolled my eyes while she chuckled. “Actually...I do not share so it would be more appropriate to say that they are mine not the other way around.” I told her and the four of them glanced at my men all of whom nodded.

“They are all Dragon and something except for the one on the end and that one next to you who smells...like cloves.”

“Three of them are part Fey part Dragon. Two of them are like Gareth and Jace and originally came here from another world. The man on the end is Dean he is like you and assists to train me. This.” I told them and motioned for Kit to shift. “Is Kit he is a second level Demon. Mine for all eternity.” I told them as he shifted and stepped behind me. His arm came round my waist and I leaned back against him placing my hand over his while they made low sounds in their throats. “Lovely isn’t he?” I asked and they all four nodded. “Except for Gareth and Jace, the rest of my men are Elf. They include the King of the Slauch, two Princes, a Duke and two Earls. I’m not sure if Lira holds a title.” I told them musingly while their jaws dropped open.

“I believe he is a Viscount Mistress.” Kit offered.

“And a Viscount.” I replied.

“Poor Bodark.” The brunette Sheila laughed. “He never stood a chance.”

Chapter 25

“As I told your Alpha, lovers I have in plenty. Of friends I have very few, which is why I’m most anxious to retrieve him. I feel responsible for introducing him to Margie who I met through the publishing company I used to work for. She has been a receptionist there for the past year...or at least she was a month ago. Remind me to get you the name and address.” I told Jose who gave me a grin and flashed his teeth at me. “Kit could you do me a favor and try again?” I asked and he snapped his fingers and nothing happened.

“Sorry Mistress...it appears his condition has not changed.” I nodded sadly and turned to the women.

“Could you show me his room? I’d like to see it. “Talon would you join me?” I asked and my request seemed to surprise him but he stepped forward and moved toward the end of the couch as I walked toward the door. All four of the females got up and I followed Patti. “We’ll be right back.” I told the rest of the group and glanced over my

shoulder and caught sight of Kit and Alan glaring at each other. “On second thought, Kit why don’t you join us too?” I called and the look he gave Alan could have been translated by any six year old as na na na na na! As I passed out the door I heard David’s smooth voice asking if anyone would like something to drink and Dane asking for a beer. Interesting, I didn’t even know the man drank beer. I thought as I followed the women up the stairs and down a long hall. At the end of the corridor Sheila opened the door and stepped back so I could pass.

I walked into a room that was...very masculine and very lavish. It brought to mind caviar and roses and moonlit nights. Behind me Kit muttered something under his breath while Talon moved into the room and glanced around. His pale pink eyes gave me a curious look. Perhaps he didn’t know what moonlight or caviar was. Shoot for all I knew maybe he’d never seen a rose either. He frowned and gave me a dirty look then moved to one of the largest bloodstains on the Persian carpet. There was a broken lamp on the floor, the shade laying twisted as if someone had kicked it or perhaps stepped on it. There was a set of French doors that were closed and I turned to the women and asked. “Who discovered he was missing?”

“I did.” Toni the long blonde haired woman told me. “I came up to see if he...needing anything before going to bed.” She replied and blushed.

“And what did you smell?”

“Two maybe three men, Margie and Bodark.”

“And what kind of men?”

“Human, I think.” Toni replied. “Though they were odd.”

“How so?”

“They just smelled...off.” She replied. “I can’t describe it.” And she turned to the others who also shook their heads.

Sheila replied. “It was like...they were not well or perhaps they were not only Human. As Toni said, it is hard to describe.”

“Were the French doors open?” I asked and she frowned and glanced at them realizing while we’d been downstairs the sun had set and the sky had started turning dark.

“No. They were closed, as they are now.”

“And when you went out last night, did you set the alarm? I noticed the home security sign in the front yard as we came in.”

“Len set it. I watched him do it.” Patti told me then frowned and glanced around the room. “Bodark is very strict about it since he discovered so many Weres had gone missing. I know Len checked all the windows and doors before we left because we had to wait while he and David did it.”

The way most of these alarms worked is that they were all on a circuit. If something broke the circuit it set off an alarm both in the house and down at a central monitoring location. So if Len had set the alarm, that meant all of the doors and windows were engaged otherwise the alarm would have made a chirping noise much like your car door when you leave it ajar. If Patti had watched him set the alarm she would have noticed the chirping and someone would have gone to find the open window or door.

“Has Valentine ever been here?” I asked and all four of them shook their heads no. “How about Blake?” I asked and the telling glances indicated...that he had.

“He has been here twice in the past six months. Bodark preferred to meet him elsewhere but it wasn’t possible on either of those occasions.” Sheila informed me.

“How about the Mayor? Has he ever been here or any of his men?” I asked.

“Claudius?” Joanne asked her voice sounding surprised. “Why would the Mayor come here?”

“Just curious.” I told her then asked. “And do you think...Margie knows the codes?” And watched as all four of them nodded angrily. “So how did they get in?” I asked while Talon dropped to his knees on the other side of the bed. He disappeared for a moment and when he came up he was holding something small and round. He glanced at it curiously and Kit walked over to him and leaned down to take a look. Something caught Kit’s attention because he leaned down and picked a champagne bottle up off the floor and sniffed at it.

“It smells...odd.” He replied and I moved to them while the others followed me. I held the bottle to my nose and took a whiff and made a distressed sound and shoved it

away from me. It took me several seconds to get the acidic smell out of my nostrils. When I could breathe without wheezing I held out my hand to Talon who dropped a round disk like object into it and turned it over several times. When Toni would have asked what it was, I held my finger to my lips and motioned her to be quiet. I turned to Kit and in my mind I asked him *can you track this back to where it came from?* When he nodded I dropped it into his palm and he gave me a wicked smile and disappeared in a red and black haze.

I went to the bed and pulled back the covers. Eying the sheets and shifting to my infrared sight. “Talon?” I called and he moved to my side. “Can you see...in red?” He looked at me and nodded. “What do you see?” I asked and he blinked and his eyes started whirling slowly. His gaze shifted to the bed and he reached for a spot just below the pillows. The sheets were creamy white, maybe ivory and the material glowed a lighter shade of white. He smeared it on his fingers and lifted them to his nose then held them out for me. I didn’t need to get close to smell the Chloral Hydrate on his fingers, the white crystalline solid was a pretty good indication that someone had been drugged. I was guessing Bodark. *Get it off your finger*, I warned Talon mentally and he glanced at me and rubbed his hand on the bedding then blinked his eyes back to normal.

The women watched us closely and I shook my head and looked around the room. Searching for any other clues we might find. I stood back for a moment and considered...not just what was there, but what wasn’t. How many attack victims take the time to dress completely before calling an ambulance? I wondered...just who had called for the ambulance, or if one had been called. Maybe see their phone records. I’d have to ask the others once we got out of the bedroom. I didn’t trust it not to be bugged and didn’t want whoever might be listening to know what I was thinking. Margie had not only taken the time to dress herself, but she even gathered up her purse. And that I found very interesting.

I walked to the side of the bed and stared down at the lamp shade. Something about it just didn’t look right. I pulled the covers up onto the bed and crawled onto it laying on my back and imagining myself as Bodark. There were only two ways into the

room. Through the French doors and through the bedroom door. I sat up abruptly and glanced at the other door which led to a bathroom. Okay scratch that, three ways and I frowned at the bathroom till Talon got the hint and went to check it out. *Look for a door leading out.* My mind whispered and he raised his hand and nodded.

“Are you two talking?” Joanne asked in a quiet voice. “I could swear you just said something to him and he answered.”

I nodded and lay back down on the bed. Now if I was going to attack Bodark when would be the best time to do it? Knowing Margie was only going to be here a short time he would have used every spare moment, and not in sleep. So they must have caught him at an inopportune time...even with the knock out drug he would still be formidable. Bodark was not a small man and it would have required quite the dose to render him helpless. Talon returned and shook his head and I went back to imagining the scenario. “Talon come here would you?” I asked and he walked to the bed gazing down at me curiously. “I need your assistance.” I told him and he raised an eyebrow.

“Now Your Majesty?” He asked and his eyes narrowed and he reached for his shirt buttons.

“No not that!” I told him while the four women smirked and Joanne chuckled wickedly. “Just come here.” I told him and he frowned but climbed onto the bed and I arranged him over myself. He settled with a humm between my legs and held himself above me on his elbows. “Now if you were Bodark.” I told him in a matter of fact voice. “And someone came at you? What would you do?” I asked and he stared down at me and looked confused for a minute then looked left then right and reached under the pillow and came up with...a very sharp knife. I wasn't certain who it surprised most. I had no idea that Bodark used a knife. I would have pegged him for a gun man myself and flipped over one of the other pillows and stared down at the nine millimeter.

The women all growled and I turned to look at them then up at Talon who didn't recognize the weapon but seemed to understand its significance. “I would not have forgotten I put it there.” He replied calmly while I nodded and felt little lightning bolts of pleasure from the way his body pressed against mine. His eyes widened and then

narrowed and on the other side of the bed all four of the women pulled air into their lungs.

Patti glanced between us and told me. “He is...ah potent. Are they all that way?” She asked and licked her lips while the others shifted uncomfortably.

“How do you stand it?” Toni breathed and her eyes looked a little glazed.

“Talon you can get off me now.” I told him while he stared down at me and looked like he might want to argue, and I realized why the lamp looked strange. He turned his head at my thought and glanced at the lamp on the floor. It had been staged. No way could it be lying like that unless someone had picked it up and threw it directly down onto the floor then stepped on the lampshade.

Talon glanced back at me and informed me in a no nonsense voice. “You cannot go on like this much longer. We need to return to the den where I would be pleased to see to your needs.”

“I know...you being on top of me is not helping, can you please get up before I embarrass myself?” I told him calmly and he signed and pushed himself off me.

“If we go downstairs, it will only get worse due to the numbers.” He informed me and crossed his arms over his chest. I breathed shallow breaths and eased myself off the bed and around to the other side.

“Is there a problem?” Toni asked and I nodded.

“Being a Dragon isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.” I told them then moved to the hall and toward the stairs. I was hoping Kit would show up soon.

“You look like you’re in distress.” Sheila informed me. “And no wonder, with all the pheromones flying around back there.”

I stopped dead in my tracks in the middle of the hall and turned to her in wonder. “You could smell them?” I asked and glanced around at the others.

“You’d have to be nose dead not too.” Patti remarked. “I don’t even like women and its enough to nearly turn me on.”

“Ah...how is it now?” I asked in a strangled voice.

“Not bad...just don't look at him and you'll be fine.” Toni offered while I moaned and rubbed at my face with my hand.

“Damn.” I muttered. “I think...I think I may have waited too long.” I told them then pulled air into my lungs and glanced at Talon who raised an eyebrow and stared back at me.

“What do you mean?” Sheila asked and stared down at me curiously.

“It means...I'm breeding and need a Drake at least twice a day whether I want one or not.” I grumbled.

“And what happens if you don't have one?” Joanne asked.

“Oh you know the normal stuff...I get real cranky...throw temper tantrums...convulse until my eyes roll back in my head.” I told her and winced at the look of horror all four of them shot me. “I was fine until just a few minutes ago.”

Talon made a scoffing noise and shook his head. “You have not been...'fine' since you stepped into the library earlier. Why do you think none of us joined you when you seated yourself next to the shifter?”

“Really?” I asked...surprised at his words. “Are you sure? I didn't think I was having a problem.”

He sighed and told me. “Separating yourself from us across the room and calling both your Demon and the tall one to your side seemed fairly clear to me.” He replied while I chewed the inside of my cheek and realized...he might have a point. I groaned suddenly and all five of them looked at me with concern.

“Oh stars.” I muttered and felt my face flame. “They all think I dragged you out of there because...because I wanted you don't they?” I asked and he nodded slowly and uncrossed his arms. The smell of him hit me like a brick and I staggered back a step and held up my hand at him. “Talon...no.” I breathed and he moved toward me while the four women looked alarmed. I stepped back one step leaving my pump on the floor as he stalked me slowly. One more step and both my shoes were gone and I turned to run while he leapt after me. The woman cried out as I headed for the stairs. I'd nearly made it when I felt his fingers grab my hair and I screamed as he yanked me back and into his

chest. My scream brought the rest of them and they spilled out into the hall while I struggled against Talon at the top of the stairs.

Out of the corner of my eye I watched Marcus tackle Dean to the floor while Dane went after Alan. Roa' watched eagerly as Stela bolted up the stairs towards us while Len and David looked shocked as Talon shove me up against the wall and proceed to practically ravage me in clear sight of everyone there.

Stela's arrival sent all three of us to the floor and I cried out as I felt my panties ripped from me. The arrival of Stela sent me over the edge and my body bowed up off the carpet in preparation of seizure. Someone thrust inside me and I felt my body relax and I quieted. I didn't want to open my eyes, too horrified to even care. "Just get it over with." I replied bitterly and above me Talon growled.

"Oh no, Your Majesty. You will not deny me, not again." He replied in a low angry voice and I turned my head away and simply lay there neither helping nor hindering him in any way. He rode my body for several minutes then let out a frustrated growl and dropped his head into the hair at my neck. "You said you would not deny me your body." He breathed against my ear and his voice was full of anguish. "You promised I could have you again as you were in the Oiotellad. When you wrapped your legs around me and looked at me with your beautiful golden eyes shining and you urged me to hurry. And now I have your body...but it is not enough. Why are you punishing me like this?" He whispered brokenly and I felt my heart clench at the sorrow in his voice and I realized I could not do this to him. I did not love him, could barely tolerate him most of the time. But I could not do this...to either of us.

I took a deep breath then turned my face to him reaching for him tentatively while he held his body still as if too frightened to move or believe what he was feeling. I opened my eyes and stared up at Stela who was leaning on his hip and arm next to us. His pale bronze eyes stared back at me with a hint of pride as if he knew my struggle and was proud of my decision. He brushed my cheek with the back of his knuckles and gave me a slight nod then glanced at Talon who continued to hold himself still against me. I wasn't even sure he was breathing.

“Talon.” I choked out and then chewed my lip for a second as I glanced around Stela and realized the four women were still standing there looking uncertain. “Perhaps we could...start over and pretend that we are not in the home of my friend and that you did not just grab me by the hair and toss me up against the wall in plain sight of his pack mates as well as the Alpha for another pack?” I replied calmly while he stiffened and pulled air into his lungs. Perhaps he was hoping it was just the circumstances and not him that was the problem here.

“You ran from me Your Majesty.” He told me in a confused voice and I sighed realizing for him that was probably tantamount to foreplay. “You should not have run from me.”

“Yes obviously my second mistake.”

“Your second, Your Majesty?” Stela asked in an amused voice. “What was your first?”

“Wearing heels.” I told him and winced when the four women chuckled. I glanced up at them with a pleading look. “You wouldn’t happen to have a spare bedroom around here would you? Your landing is...charming but the floor is a little hard and I’d prefer not to have rug burns when this is over.”

“Just down the hall.” Patti offered. “I’ll show you.” She replied and I gave her a thankful smile and placed my hand on Talon’s shoulder. His head was still buried in my hair and I gave him a little nudge.

“Talon can you get up for a moment so we can go someplace less public?” I asked and he hesitated probably not wanting to give up his position. “We’re just going down the hall a little ways.” I urged him then buried my hand in his hair and tugged on it slightly increasing the pressure when he refused to lift his head. My eyes moved to Stela who was frowning.

“He does not trust you Your Majesty.” Stela replied with a worried look.

“Kit.” I whispered and loosened my grip in Talon’s hair. “Stubborn.” I remarked and Stela flashed his teeth at me and nodded. Talon seemed to relax against me and his lips found my neck. “The others didn’t injure anyone did they?” I asked

patiently waiting for Kit to arrive and feeling rather foolish for simply lying there. Stela glanced down the stairs and shook his head.

“The Black spoke to them and the Weres have returned to the Library. Several others have joined them.” He informed me and I groaned and closed my eyes. Apparently more than just David and Len along with the four women lived here. Of course my screaming had brought them running. What a fabulous way to make a memory. I thought and grunted when Talon nipped my neck hard then lathed it softly with his tongue.

“We’ll be along in just a moment.” I told the women. “Talon refuses to get off me and so we are waiting for my Demon to return so he can....relocate us.” The four of them eyed me thoughtfully then their gazes turned toward the stairs and I shifted my head to see Marcus and Dane poke their heads over the top step.

“Are you alright Your Majesty?” Marcus asked his voice sounding amused and I gritted my teeth and gave him a dirty look.

“Yes Marcus I’m just peachy keen can’t you tell?”

“It is so difficult when you give off mixed signals.” He replied with a grin. “Its like you are waving a red flag at a bull from behind cage bars. Your body says come and get me, while your eyes....are not so inviting.”

“Ha!” Dane muttered. “Tis more like they scream....get away from me or I’ll be ripping yer throat out I will.” He added while the others muttered agreement.

“I’m sure it’s difficult for any of you to understand how distressing this is to me.” I replied. “Because you’re men and probably find this extremely amusing. But the fact of the matter is, I don’t and it’s damn irritating at times.”

“Like now for instance?” Marcus asked and seated himself on the other side of me and leaned his elbow on an upraised knee.

“Yes like now.”

“Well I’ll admit your timing sucks. And I don’t think I need to point out had we returned immediately after your visit to the hospital you wouldn’t be laying where you are at the moment. You have to admit it was rather immature of you. Sometimes it’s

hard to feel sorry for you when it's self inflicted." He remarked dryly while I gritted my teeth and glared up at him.

"Thank you Master Zen...you're what, like five seconds older than me?" I replied in an irritated voice. Talon made a low soothing noise and pulled my skin between his teeth while his hips shifted slightly. His movement distracted me and I slid my fingers through his hair, enjoying the way the soft strands felt. "Where in the world is Kit?" I muttered while Talon rocked against me and my eyes slid half way shut. Inside me I felt him jerk and my body instinctively tightened. Dane made a low sound and seated himself on the carpet near my knee. His fingers reached out and trailed slowly up my thigh then back down again and around my kneecap while I did my best to ignore him. It didn't really work.

"Talon can you please just...be reasonable?" I asked in a small voice. "I'd really prefer to do this someplace else." In reply he bit my neck again. I gasped softly and my hips lifted in spite of my attempt to prevent them. He made a pleased sound and next to us Stela hummed. Marcus' fingers moved through my hair and whispered over my ear causing me to shudder. Stela's hand cupped my breast through my dress and I arched into his palm and felt my pulse accelerate. They all made noises and Marcus leaned down and slowly kissed his way across my cheek toward my lips. I turned at his gentle teasing and his mouth came down upon mine so that I no longer cared where I was I simply reached for Talon and offered myself to him reveling in his slow powerful strokes.

In the end each of them had me and I did in fact have rug burns. I came back to myself held against Dane's chest while the others cupped my body and stroked me gently. They all seemed well pleased with me. The four Weres were lying passed out on the floor not far from us. Apparently our efforts had rendered them senseless. Nick was the only Were that had ever been that close to me during sex and even he had had a door and rock wall between us, though if I remembered correctly...he'd look frazzled when he'd burst in upon Gareth and Jace and I on the floor. At the time I'd simply chalked it up to embarrassment at finding the three of us naked on the floor.

I lifted my head and glanced around noticing Kit sitting on the steps. He was leaning back on one elbow and watching me closely. I blinked at him several times and he lifted an eyebrow at me and glanced around as if to say...what you couldn't find a bed?

"I can't leave you alone for five minutes Mistress." He told me with a sigh. I stuck my tongue out at him and his eyes widened then narrowed and his face took on a sultry look. "Hmmm...Roa's just downstairs if you aren't sufficiently exhausted from the efforts of these four? Or I could...assist. You know how I enjoy being next." He told me while the others glanced between us.

"I'm fine thank you." I told him as Dane pulled me tightly against his chest. Kit rolled his eyes and flipped the little silver disk up into the air like he was tossing a coin.

Chapter 26

“You have something to tell us? Seeing as you didn’t answer your call. Either one.” I told him with a touch of sarcasm. He pushed himself to his feet and nodded then wandered down the stairs.

“I’ll be in the Library. If you can pull yourself away maybe you’d like to join us?” He replied then his head disappeared below the steps and my head fell back and I squeezed my eyes shut.

“Oh crap.” I muttered while all four of them chuckled and started redressing themselves. When Dane reached to help me back into my bra I smacked his hand and growled while he laughed and then yanked me against him kissing me hard.

“Now Lassie none of that. Maybe next time ye won’t be so headstrong.” He replied then ducked my half hearted swing. Chuckling, he lifted me away from him so he could pour himself back into his pants, which were somewhere around his knee caps. Lucky them...none of them wore underwear. Marcus retrieved my undies...and held them out to me by a finger. It was clear they were torn beyond use and I simply glared at

him. He grinned and lifted them to his nose, inhaling deeply then shoved them in his pocket while my jaw dropped open and my cheeks flushed at his audacity.

“Mmmm smells like our Majesty’s desire.” He replied and wiggled his eyebrows at me. He rocked back on his heels and whistled a low tune while his fingers rolled the material within his pants and I realized if he went into the room with those every Were there would know he had them.

“Give them to me.” I growled and he shook his head.

“Finders keepers.” He told me then laughed at the look on my face. I growled and nearly snapped at Talon who held out my shoes to me.

“I believe you left these down the hall.” He replied and his pink eyes looked amused.

I pulled myself to my feet and shoved my shoes on. After finger combing my hair I glanced at the four women realizing I probably wasn’t going to wake them and headed down the stairs. The others followed me. Roa’ was standing in the hall beside the door. He gave me a small smile and a wistful look then reached for the knob while I schooled my features and counted to ten. The door swung open leaving me standing in the middle of the doorway and I immediately realized that...nearly all the men present, with the exception of Alan, had not fared much better than the females. Half of them had simply passed out while the other half looked dazed. Jose was sleeping like a baby at the end of the couch. All of them except for Alan had damp pants.

I looked at Kit who was standing over by the fireplace. “Is a little dignity too much to ask?” I commented and he glanced around and sighed.

“No Mistress...but watching your reaction is half the fun.” And he snapped his fingers and several of the men murmured while the others, just blissfully slept on. Len was passed out but David was slumped against the side of the couch and was watching me cautiously.

“I’m glad to see you and Alan didn’t kill each other while we were gone.” I told him, and Kit flipped his black and silver tipped hair behind him.

“We haven’t left Bodark’s house yet.” He replied and shifted his red eyes to Alan who ignored him as he was busy staring at me.

“You seem....better now?” Alan offered and I felt my cheeks go pink and nodded.

“Yes it’s hard to believe just four short weeks I was a normal girl with a normal life.” I replied. “Now I can’t even go out in public without embarrassing myself.” I replied and while I tried not to sound sorry for myself, I’m afraid it pretty much came out that way. Alan nodded thoughtfully.

“Chose one and bring him with you.” He replied and leaned back on the couch. “For you I would make an exception.” His comment was met with shocked silence though in my head it sounded like a war party. I groaned and reached for my temples and staggered into the nearest chair while Marcus and Stela grabbed for me.

“Aiieee.” I breathed and raised my shields then took several deep breaths while my head lolled on the back of the seat. When I pried my eyes open everyone including the dazed wolfs were looking at me. “Sorry.” I muttered. “Feedback.” At least they weren’t tearing Alan apart I thought while nearly all my men turned to glare at him. Even Dean looked annoyed.

“Alan has offered a night for the secret to the hold Valentine has over my Drakes.” I murmured and Marcus turned to look at me his eyes huge, the blood draining from his face even as I watched. He dropped onto the arm of my chair and grabbed for the back. I reached for him and pulled him down into the seat with me then moved myself onto his lap and wrapped my arms about him tightly. His face disappeared into my hair and I turned to Alan with a thoughtful look.

“I will consider your offer.” I told him while Marcus moaned softly and shook his head. “Hush.” I breathed and soothed my hands over his shoulders. The others watched quietly though none of them appeared to be particularly happy. Kit looked like he’d enjoy ripping Alan’s internal organs out through his nostrils and then roasting them over a very hot fire. Dane gave me an odd look then shook his head. Obviously my analogies were... disturbing but then...so was the look Kit was giving Alan.

David took a breath and asked quietly. “Did you find anything upstairs?” I glanced at him and then moved my eyes to Kit who nodded.

I dropped my shields. *Kit is there any more of those listening devices here in this room with us?* I asked him silently. He glanced around and shook his head. *Can you disable the one you have?* I thought and he nodded. Alan’s eyes widened and he glanced between us, his face looking distressed as smoke rose from the silver disk in Kit’s palm.

“I suspect Bodark was drugged, probably by Margie. Len set the alarm before he left and there was no sign of a break in. Either the men who took Bodark away were already in the house, in which case they would have to be...amongst you, or she let them in. We found an undisturbed knife and gun under his pillows so there was no chance for him to fight back. It looks like the room was tossed after Bodark was already disabled. The champagne bottle was tainted and there was a crystalline residue on the sheets. One more thing...Bodark’s room was bugged. And I waved at Kit who held up the little silver disk in his fingers for the rest of them to see. It’s likely...it’s not the only one here. I had Kit track the bug back to where it came from.” I told them and we all turned to look at Kit again.

“So you suspect Margie did this?” David asked and I nodded.

“Pretty sure.” I told them. “I don’t know too many victims that taken the time to dress themselves then gather up their purse before leaving for the hospital. I know she had her purse with her, because I got it out of the closet at the hospital so she could give me...Alan’s phone numbers.” I replied and moved my eyes to Alan who looked...startled. “Interesting that she had both his work and cell in her little black book.” I replied and Marcus pulled his face out of my hair and turned his eyes to Alan. “I seem to recall she was speaking to you at the Mayor’s party when I dragged Bodark over to introduce them.” I added and raised an eyebrow while I leaned back against Marcus.

Alan looked annoyed then...almost offended as I finished talking. His dark brown eyes met mine and he replied in a calm clear voice. “She came on to me. I had never seen her until that night and I have no idea how she got my cell number. I may have mentioned...my gallery.” He replied. His gallery, the front for his more nefarious

activities I thought while he frowned but finally nodded. I watched him calmly and gave him a small nod. It did little good to accuse Alan of anything. Margie could have gotten his numbers from Bodark himself I thought while Alan seemed to relax slightly. In and of itself it meant nothing. Besides I didn't see Alan as the type of man to beat his partner in crime bloody to cover his trail. He was much too refined for such barbarian behavior. I thought while his eyes widened and he vacillated between looking pleased I would think so highly of him and disgusted that someone would do such a thing.

“Be careful Alan. If Margie came on to you...you may be next on her agenda.” Everyone in the room turned to look at me in shock and I pursed my lips and turned to Kit. “Can you tell us what you found?”

“The device came from a warehouse down around 1st and Bryant. From the outside it looks like any other run down warehouse in that area but inside...is a whole different story. No one was there so I took a glance around. I looked like most of the places your mother used to drag you around to when you were a kid. Some kind of lab complete with clean room and...a silver cage.” He replied while my eyes widened. “And space where it looked like several more cages might have been.” At the end of the couch Jose sat us and glanced around his eyes focusing on me while his face got a rapt look on it. I glanced at him and smiled which caused him to actually blush. “I'd say we were too late.” He replied. “They cleared out pretty fast.”

I chewed my lip and thought about it. This was not good. This was so my worst nightmare come to life...only I wasn't the one in the silver cage...yet. I thought and sucked air into my lungs while Marcus made a sharp noise and held me tightly. “Research?” I whispered and flicked my eyes to Kit who shrugged.

“Perhaps...it could explain the missing Weres. If they have Bodark, they may have already left the city. They would have drugged him to keep him quiet while they relocate him. I couldn't tell if it was merely a holding cell or if whatever they are doing...experimenting or operating was done there. My nose is not that good.” He replied. “Perhaps some of these lupines can be of more use in tracking them.”

“We will go.” Len responded from where he’d pulled himself into a sitting position and was holding his head in his hands. “If you have an address we can start from there.”

“You look pensive Lexi...is there more?” Alan asked.

I chewed my lip and stared down at my hands. “I was just wondering how Owen was doing. And I was thinking...tonight the Council arrives. I think it’s time we went home.” I told them and climbed out of Marcus’ lap. I smoothed my dress and turned to David and Len. “I’m sorry about the...earlier.” I told them and waved my hand toward the second floor. “It was my fault for being careless.”

David looked around the room at the fifteen or so other Weres in the room and chuckled. “Don’t be, it was enlightening.” He replied and I remembered Alan saying the same thing to me. “And I appreciate your concern over our dignity.” He added while I felt my cheeks heat up and nodded.

I turned to Alan and repeated. “Be careful.” While he and Jose both climbed to their feet.

“I believe we’ll also be going. I’d like to run that trace and if you don’t mind I’ll take the address also. It wouldn’t hurt to find out who leased or owns the warehouse, we might get lucky.”

Those that could...stood. David and Len walked us to the front door. “Tell the women...thank you.” I said and Len gave me an odd look then nodded. “And if you need anything, contact us. I’m sure Gareth and Jace will let you know if we hear anything.”

“It was a pleasure meeting you Your Majesty.” Len remarked and kissed my knuckles. David did the same and we climbed into the car while Dean held the back door open for us. I found myself sitting between Roa’ and Talon and wondered how that had happened. Talon slid his arm behind me and in the dark of the backseat I felt his fingers in my hair and turned to glance at him. His pink eyes gazed back at me and in my mind I heard him whisper *Niea teigat eilet*. I had no idea what it meant. I wondered if any of those books Kit had included a Dragon dictionary. I sat there musing over nothing in

particular as Dean slid into the driver's seat and started the car. Next to me Roa' shifted his thigh closer to me and Talon's fingers rubbed against my neck while Stela leaned forward and turned his body on the seat toward us. From the corner of my eye I watched him place his arms on his thighs as he sat watching us from the other side of Roa'.

"Move." He told Roa' who seemed to stiffen and balk at the command. "You take liberties with my Queen, which are not yours to enjoy. Move now." He growled and Roa' tensed while Talon's fingers upon my neck nudged me closer to him. On the seat across from us Marcus, Dane, and Kit watched silently. Roa' made a soft hissing noise and Stela moved so fast it was as if he did not move at all except that Roa' found himself face down on the floor at our feet. "Stay there." Stela told him harshly while he slid over next to me so that there was no room between us. Roa' lifted his head slowly and in the dim light I could see three deep claw marks upon his face. The metallic scent of blood quickly filled the car. I held my breath and stared down at Roa' in shock. Stela settled himself next to me and his foot came down upon Roa's hair which was pooled on the floor.

I was too shocked to say anything but slowly leaned forward and reached my palm to Roa' quickly healing him with a thought. Talon's fingers stayed with me as I pressed forward then gently pulled me back against him. He had said nothing and I was not so unwise as to venture an opinion. I merely sat stiffly upon the seat between two of my elders and was thankful my Bronze and Gray had seen fit to swear fealty instead of declare.

"Hmmm." Stela murmured beside me and stroked his palm down my leg then laced his fingers through mine, while Dean drove us down the winding road.

I watched through the front windshield as we got closer to downtown and recognized when we turned onto Market. We moved into traffic on our way to the Business District. Stela and Talon were stroking and petting me like some sort of lap dog while Kit looked slightly annoyed and Dane and Marcus did their best to not say anything. On the floor at our feet Roa' sat quietly however his arm brushed my leg each time we turned and I didn't think it was by accident. We had just passed Van Ness when

I felt a mind brush mine tentatively. I tensed suddenly, my eyes widened and I glanced around in surprise. No one else seemed to feel it and Talon and Stela both made calming noises. Perhaps thinking I'd thought of something alarming.

"What is it Mistress?" Kit asked. His red eyes nearly glowing in the pale light from the floor by the doors. Obviously he'd seen me jerk.

"I don't know." I replied and relaxed back against the seat. When the mind brushed mine again I held my breath and waited calmly. *Lexi?* The voice whispered and this time everyone except Dean heard it and grew alarmed. *Claudius?* I thought and turned to look toward City Hall which was just about two blocks off to our left. *Where are you?* His mind breathed and I looked through the front window at the Polk Street and Market Street sign. *Close.* I thought while Kit growled as did several of the others. Marcus looked ill but said nothing. At the corner of 9th and Market while we were waiting for the light, the back door opened and the Mayor of San Francisco slipped into the backseat with us.

"Peace." He held up a hand and murmured then glanced sharply at Roa' who still had blood covering his face though I'd healed him.

"Claudius what are you doing here?" I asked while Stela shifted on the seat and nearly put his back to me so I couldn't see around him. "Stela, please." I told him my voice sounding exasperated. "The Mayor does not want to harm me." I told him and leaned forward though Talon kept his hand on my shoulder as I did so.

"Lexi you should not be out. Valentine knows you are about and has sent his men looking for you. The Council will be here soon and...it is not safe for you in the City tonight." He warned me.

"What of Gareth and Jace? Is the den safe?" I breathed, realizing I had left them with neither Owen nor Kit.

"The Guardians are...under my protection tonight. They are required to be present when the Council arrives and are already...where they need to be. You however are not, which is why I am here. We were all very worried."

I took a deep breath and told him quickly. “Bodark was taken...see.” I urged him and mentally replayed my visit to the hospital on up to the hall outside Bodark’s room then forwarded to the Library and what Kit had found in the warehouse district.

He was leaning forward on the seat on the other side of Stela and I could see his hands clench where they had been held loosely before. “That is not all.” I told him. “Alan’s men have been keeping an eye on Valentine and we believe he has two more of my Drakes.” He blinked and stared back at me while my eyes widened in shock...his hazel eyes had shifted and were whirling slowly.

“It requires a bit of getting used to.” He told me with a wry grimace. “I had not expected....to be so gifted.” He replied then spread his hands palm up. “It is, I believe unprecedented. But then...so are you.” He replied as we continued on through traffic.

“Claudius, I need you to do something for me.” I told him and he turned his head slightly and smiled. “Find out who invited Margie Henderson to the party you gave for me.” I told him and he nodded. Dean pulled into the alley behind the Salty Dog and Claudius turned to look out the window.

“Give me but a moment.” He replied then opened the door and was gone. Dean watched me through the rearview mirror and looked tense.

“This is unnecessary.” Kit remarked his voice laced with sarcasm...as the door was yanked open and Claudius stood there looking....regal. Stela pulled his foot off Roa’s hair and nudged him toward the door then slipped out after him. Kit, Dane, and Marcus went next and surrounded me as I moved out with Talon behind me. Claudius closed the door and slapped his hand on the roof twice, a signal to Dean who pulled the car down the alley toward the parking structure. I turned to glance after him and frowned.

“I’ll make sure he returns safely.” Claudius replied.

“Thank you.” I told him. “Valentine’s men killed his friends last night. Having you in the car with him was....distressful.”

He smiled and cupped my chin while my Drakes shifted around me and he dropped his fingers. “I will tell the Guardians that you were safely delivered. Look for

them before dawn.” He replied and stepped back from me, taking with him the sense of cold I always felt in their presence.

“Be careful Claudius, Valentine has his own Demon.” He gave me a lopsided grin and nodded.

“Yes his name is...Kazef.” He replied and he was simply gone, faster than anything or anyone I had ever seen before. The men muttered and Dane pulled the door shut behind us and eased us down the stairs. The music from the Salty Dog was like a throbbing vibration in my blood and set my teeth on edge, but I refused to leave until I was certain that Dean had made it in safely. While I waited I called Nick on my communicator and let him know we were in the service entrance behind the club. A few minutes later the back door to the club opened and the air was full of loud music and the smell of excited Weres. I took shallow breaths and turned my face into Dean’s neck inhaling deeply of his sharp scent. He seemed surprised but wrapped his arm around me and held me against him while I nearly panted.

“Lassie are ye alright then?” He whispered.

“The smell is...overwhelming.” I muttered as Nick joined us.

“That has to be the longest hospital visit ever. Did they finally kick you out after visiting hours?” Nick demanded and did not look happy with me. “Were you attacked?” He demanded his eyes drawn to the blood on Roa’s face and shirt.

“No that was...a disagreement with one of the others.” I told him while his eyes shifted immediately to Stela. How he knew the culprit was a mystery to me, although of them all, I suppose he was the most likely.

“So where have you been? Gareth and Jace were practically frantic with worry as are the others. You were out of communications range and you took the only two men we could have sent after you! I’ve had a hell of a time keeping the others downstairs. They wanted to go after you and I don’t need to tell you what a disaster that could have been!”

“No we...made a detour on the way home.” I admitted while he cursed softly under his breath. “The Mayor is up making sure that Dean gets back from parking the

car. He will tell Gareth and Jace we made it home in one piece. Claudius said...Valentine has his men out looking for us and that we should remain inside tonight.”

“So why then are you standing in the breezeway?” Nick demanded.

“She wants to make sure Dean makes it back safely.” Kit told him when I frowned and looked stubborn. “He should only be a few more minutes.” We stood there for nearly five minutes of strained silence and then the door opened and Dean was there. Behind him I caught a glimpse of Claudius who raised his fingers to his forehead. In my mind I heard him whisper *be safe my Queen* then he was gone again.

My Elves were waiting for us in the living room downstairs. All of them looked...haggard as we stepped through the door. With them was Owen and I breathed a sigh of relief and felt my insides unclench.

Chapter 27

“Princess!”

“My Lady!” Amras and Cursed greeted me while the others simply looked relieved.

“Hi, I’m sorry I didn’t mean to worry you. We’re all fine.”

“What took you so long?” Owen demanded.

“So she was gone already?” I ignored his question to ask. He moved his hands behind his back and nodded.

“What took you so long Lexi?” He asked again, more firmly.

“We had a...umm...”

“She overestimated her ability to keep her hands off them.” Kit replied and waved his hand at the four Drakes standing around me. “We had to wait for her to finish them all off before we could get back to playing detective.” He added while I glared at him and felt my face turn red. The Drakes frowned at his words and looked annoyed. I think it was his ‘finish them off’ comment that did it.

“Why is the Silver covered in blood?” Bryce asked calmly while Talon glanced at him and I swear I felt him puff up behind me. I shifted, placing my body between them and Talon made a low warning sound in his throat which I ignored.

“Because he overstepped his boundaries and took liberties with the Queen which he should not have.” Stela answered and crossed his arms over his chest. He eyed first Bryce and then Arrin and he looked as if he was wishing it was Arrin he had sliced up. I turned to look at Kit and raised an eyebrow.

“I thought they were supposed to have worked it out on the training floor earlier today?” I muttered while Kit shrugged.

“They certainly tried Mistress.” He replied.

“I can’t deal with this now.” I muttered and crossed to the couch Amras had been sitting on. He eyed me thoughtfully as if he was happy to see me but still not certain of his welcome after our words earlier. “Kit could you fill everyone in while I think for a moment?” I asked and flopped back on the couch and kicked off my heels. I leaned my head against the back of the couch, crossed my hands over my waist and closed my eyes. I felt the cushion dip and smelled Amras next to me. “I’m not mad at you.” I told him calmly and heard him suck in air.

“How nice Princess.” He replied and I cracked open an eye at the sarcasm in his voice. He was leaning forward braced on his elbow on his thighs and staring at his clasped hands. He looked...mad enough for both of us and I wasn’t exactly sure what to do about him. The others were in the room and I’d avoided looking at them which was probably going to cause me trouble later but for now I simply closed my eyes while everyone found seats.

Cursed beat Stela to my other side and wedged his body next to me. I felt his hair drop into my lap, the thick black strands covering my hands, and I turned to look at him. He had an odd expression in his eyes that seemed to calm when I turned my palms over and began running my fingers through the strands. He gazed down at my fingers then moved to place his head in my lap and my eyes widened but I made room for him.

It was obvious he needed the comfort and truthfully it was soothing to run my fingers through his hair.

When Kit began speaking I listened distractedly. My mind wandering as I sat there simply enjoying the smell and feel of my men around me. I thought about it for a moment and realized that my Elves smelled...earthy and rich like the woodlands and open fields while my Drakes...were a blending of forest and sky, wild and musky. Below it all was the flavor of Kit and cloves. I licked my lips and breathed deeply nearly purring at the pleasure their scents stirred in me.

“Mistress?” Kit’s voice interrupted me.

“Yes?” I asked, having lost track of where he was in the story and wondering if he needed something clarified.

“No....” He replied his voice sounding strained. “You are...being disruptive.” He informed me and I opened my eyes and realized everyone in the room was staring at me hungrily. Uh oh, I thought and glanced around in confusion. What had I done now? “You are emoting.” Kit informed me. “And while it is nice to know you...enjoy us so much...perhaps we might finish the narrative before we move to the demonstration piece of our program here?”

I gave him a contrite nod and shimmed out from under Cursed’s head while he frowned up at me. “I think I’ll just go make something to eat for everyone while you finish the story.” I told him and got up from the couch.

“I’ll help Lassie.” Dane offered and pushed himself off his chair and followed me to the kitchen.

“What would you like to eat?” I asked as I opened the fridge. Dane’s body nearly shoved me into the crisper as I stood and turned to place my hands on his chest.

“Why ye know tis ye and nae other.” He replied with a grin as he ran his hands across my back and down to my bottom. He cupped me in his palms and pulled me in against the hard length of him.

I chuckled and ran my fingers over his chest and up to wrap around his neck, pressing my breasts against him. “That’s lovely Dane but it won’t feed me and I’ve only

eaten once today. You don't want me cranky do you?" I teased while he gave my bottom a squeeze and kissed me hard and fast.

"Nae we wouldn't be wanting that." He laughed and released me to grab a slice of cheese.

"Here." I told him. "Make yourself useful." And then handed him the ingredients for a salad. I rummaged around and came up with a pot roast that was so big it looked like it came from a dinosaur or something, and a bag of red potatoes. I suppose feeding the masses could bankrupt us if we actually had to worry about those sorts of things. I was pretty sure that Snick was in charge of the grocery shopping or...grocery appropriating or creating as the case may be.

I rubbed the roast with herbs and got it into the oven along with the potatoes and rummaged in the cupboards till I came up with the necessary ingredients to make crusts. I found pans and a rolling pin and made the bottom crusts for three pies then set them aside. Meanwhile Dane finished the salad and put it back in the fridge to keep crisp.

"I'll be right back." I told him and disappeared out of the kitchen. The others were still chatting with Kit and I waved. "Be right back, dinner's in the oven." I said and Aerandir and Bryce got up to follow me. I left them in the hall and went into my room using the restroom first then going to my secret door. I was after the peaches I'd seen growing in the little orchard behind my cottage.

"Areth can I have a basket to gather fruit in?" I asked as I pushed open the door. I reached down and gathered up a big white wicker one from the sand and took off at a jog down the beach. A huge moon hung in the distance and the sound of the water lapping the shore was soothing. I took several deep breaths and took the path around the house.

In no time at all I had enough fruit for the pies and slipped back down the path and out the door, careful to wipe my feet so I didn't drag sand into the hall. Aerandir and Bryce gave me strange looks, but as neither had been in my bedroom before, neither of them said anything.

I carried my basket of fruit down the hall and into the kitchen. And like the Pied Piper, the rest of my men followed me. “Where did you get those from?” Marcus asked, as he joined me at the sink and watched me wash them.

“Areth.”

“What are they?” Talon asked and leaned over my shoulder. I reached for a knife and felt him tense. I chuckled and took a small slice which I held it up for him to eat. He glanced at me as if he didn’t quite trust me then opened his mouth when Marcus made an amused noise.

“She’s not trying to kill you.” Marcus joked. I popped the sliver into Talon’s mouth and he chewed and looked pleasantly surprised. I moved the fruit into a colander and let it sit while I went to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of white wine. Arrin found a cork screw and did the honors while Bryce and Marcus set the table. It was nice having helpers. Mi didn’t exactly have hands and when she wanted something done she simply flicked her tail or blinked her eyes. This kept them out of my hair and gave them something to do while I cut up the peaches and rolled them gently with spices.

“Hmmm that smells like you.” Cursed offered as he watched me closely from the other side of the center island. Arrin handed me a wine goblet and filled one for him.

“Puligny Montrachet....this is a very fine wine.” Arrin told me. “With a hint of orange, pineapple, peach and....gingerbread.” He added. They only make about ten barrels a year.” He added. “It’s almost a shame to drink it.”

“Don’t worry Arrin.” I told him. “If you’d like us to fill your bathtub full I’m sure it can be arranged. One of the perks of living here.” I told him while he looked... almost sad. Across the room Stela watched him through narrowed eyes from his chair.

“You seem to know a lot about wine.” I offered as I split the peaches between the three pie crusts and spread more flour on the marble counter. Dane checked the roast and the smell nearly made my mouth water as I rolled out the top crusts.

“Comes from spending time in France.” He replied while I glanced at him in surprise. “You can’t live there long without learning something.

“You lived in France?”

“Bryce and I have been....many places.” He replied.

“I’ve never been outside the US. What is it like?” I asked as I carefully laid the top crust over the first pie and crimped the edges.

He shrugged and leaned a hip against the counter while he stared down at his wine.

“Different.” Bryce replied. “Very different.” Arrin and he exchanged a look that made my shoulders twitch.

“You didn’t say what you did for a living.” I asked in an offhand tone.

“No we didn’t.” Bryce replied as he opened a cupboard and pulled a goblet out. I watched him out of the corner of my eye while he helped himself to wine and pulled out a stool then sat.

“Kit can you see if anyone else wants something to drink?” I asked and he shrugged and I watched as he turned to the others and proceeded to fill their orders by simply snapping his fingers. I wasn’t certain if he knew what they wanted or if he just chose their drinks for them off the top of his head. However no one seemed to complain, so I went back to my pie making.

“Am I being rude by asking?” I wondered out loud. “After all you have pledged yourself to me...it would be nice to know if someone might come looking for you for some reason.”

Arrin chuckled and the sound...gave me goose bumps. “Exterminators.” He replied and my fingers hesitated on the crust I was still crimping.

“I assume you don’t mean....crickets and cockroaches.” I breathed while his dark bronze eyes looked amused.

“Not exactly.” Bryce told me. “More like...infestations. Let’s just say...we don’t get a lot of calls for work here in the US since most of our regular targets....are law abiding citizens.”

“The US is the only country that has legalized them. In every other country they are still myths and folktales.”

“Oh.” I replied and took a paring knife and cut a pretty design into the top crust then reached for the second ball of dough to roll out. “Any...species in particular you specialize in?”

“Trolls.” Bryce offered and around the table conversation stopped.

“Orcs.” Arrin replied at nearly the same time.

“I see.” Well those were certainly a couple of nasties...and I suppose anyone that made a living eliminating them could most assuredly handle themselves.

“Lexi killed a Troll her first day here.” Owen offered as he strolled over to the island and leaned against it. Some woman Gareth was dating...dragged her across the floor and sank her in the pool upstairs. Then she did a victory lap around the cavern and nearly caused the Weres to have heart attacks. Gareth and Jace weren't thrilled either. Especially when she yelled at them for not warning her that there was a Troll here and that she would likely try to kill Lexi for having gained Gareth's interest. Or so I heard. I wasn't there.

I winced and glared at Owen. “He wasn't sleeping with her.” I growled while he looked surprised.

“She had a bedroom where your rooms are now...but he wasn't having sex with her. She wanted everyone to think she was having sex with him, when in reality Ricky was her lover which is why he tried to kill me at the meeting. And that is why Cursed cut off his head.”

“Yeah and they called the meeting because someone...aka you, were systematically eliminating every rapist and crook in the city, and the community leaders were not amused. They thought it was one of Gareth and Jace's Hunters.” Kit replied with a touch of wry humor.

“It was a Hunter, and I am registered.” I replied quietly while Dane, Arrin, and Bryce eyed me with a new appreciation. “And Kit...the only people that know about that is Gareth, Jace, and Claudius.” I told him. “The other leaders don't know. Although I think several of them might suspect. In any event I think its best we keep that to ourselves.”

“And why does the Mayor of San Francisco know you were hunting the back streets, decimating his constituents?” Kit demanded.

“Because he’s been watching me do it for the past six months.” I told him and placed the top crust on the second pie.

“Watching you how?” Kit snapped and seemed annoyed that someone other than he may have been keeping an eye on me. Up until four weeks ago Kit was pretty much the only one that knew where I was and what I was doing.

I waved my hand and frowned. “He said he was intrigued by my...skill and allowed me to poach in his territory because my heart was in the right place and...it amused him.” I replied then quickly lowered my eyes when Kit slinked into the kitchen behind me.

“And is that all?” He breathed against my neck.

“What do you mean?”

“Was that all he did...watch you serve and protect? Or was there more?” He asked and hovered over me while I bent forward and reached for the knife to cut the design in the top of the pie.

“He said...” I replied and took a deep breath, wondering why he cared. “He said he liked to watch me sleep.” I admitted and winced as several minds pressed in on mine the roar they created, tinged with anger.

“No wonder he threw a party for you. He must have been thrilled when you decided to come out in your natural form. I assume he must have seen you shimmer at some point?” Kit asked in a nasty tone while I nodded. I couldn’t tell if he was mad because Claudius had been keeping tabs on me and he didn’t know it, or because he would have done something about Claudius before he had the opportunity to be formally introduced to me.

“Both.” Kit admitted. “But mostly the latter.”

“Too late now.” I muttered while he went back to the table after having swiped a slice of peach covered in cinnamon.

“So it would appear.” He replied bitterly while I put aside the second pie and started on the last one.

“So since we’re all getting to know one another, why don’t we go around the room and everyone can tell us something about themselves. Something we don’t already know?” I asked. “I’ll even start.” I told them while my eyes swept the group. “Today I spoke with an animal who informed me I am more besides Dragon, Elf, and Demon. His name was Antoon and he said he could not figure it out, but it would come to him and he promised to tell me when it did.” I told them and then smiled while they all stared at me as if I’d lost my mind.

“What kind of animal?” Amras asked and grinned.

“I believe it was a white nosed coati. It’s a type of raccoon.”

Every one of them frowned and glanced around curiously and Amras demanded. “And where did you meet this...Antoon?”

“Nope you next.” I told him with a small smile.

“I...” He breathed and his cheeks turned pink and I lifted an eyebrow and leaned my elbows on the counter. “Anything?” He asked and I nodded while he grinned sheepishly. “Sometimes when I am alone...I think of you, as Kit dressed you...in golden chains.” He replied and Kit sat up from where he was slumped in the chair and grinned wickedly. I felt my own face flame and struggled to keep the memory from spilling across my mind for the rest of them. Apparently it didn’t help because everyone turned to stare at Amras and then back at me. The silence was nearly deafening and I swallowed.

“Okay...thank you Amras that was...not exactly what I meant but your honesty was...interesting.” I turned to Dane hoping he might provide something a little less inflammatory. He wiggled his eyebrows at me and nodded then appeared to think it over.

“I was five the first time I shifted into me Dragon form and got stuck that way for nigh on a week. It nearly gave me Mum a heart attack it did.” He replied and several of us chuckled.

Bryce glanced around and offered. "I once flew into a tree and knocked myself out for several hours. I think I was eleven at the time and extremely gangly." His comment caused several smiles and nods.

"I was once a pirate." Owen informed us and I raised my eyebrows in surprise.

"I once ran away and joined the immortal circus." Marcus added. "It was three months of bliss until Belinda found me and dragged me home. She was not amused. I was fifteen."

"I once raised a storm that sank five hundred war ships." Cam told us and I remembered the way Spot's pond had heaved and overflowed its banks yesterday. Amras glanced down at his hands and frowned while Cursed shot Cam an irritated look.

"After your song released me from prison, I used a scrying ball to keep track of you. At first I assumed the Princess had sent you away, because you seemed to have disappeared. Each time I searched for you I my ball would show a brown eyed, brown haired urchin. It was very frustrating. I took me some time to realize your mother had taught you to shimmer and was hiding you in plain sight. I did not know one so young could do such a thing and only discovered it because you sometimes shifted during sleep." He added with a wry smile then turned serious and added. "When you called me to you...you asked why I had not come sooner."

"You told me it was because you did not have a taste for children." I told him and he smiled wryly and nodded.

"I was not entirely truthful." He replied. "Had you called me, I would have come." He told me then his voice became more intense as he added. "I used to dream of your eyes. And as you grew older, the way your hair would look pooled with mine upon my pillow." My fingers stilled on the crust. Our eyes met across the room and I could almost taste his passion. I licked my lips and stared back at him while he slowly moved his hands behind his back. I could not help but notice the length of him pressed against the front of his leather pants. He smiled then and tilted his head to the side so that his hair slipped off his shoulder. My knees felt weak. I closed my eyes, trying to calm my breathing, and realized if I didn't I just might hyperventilate.

Kit's voice broke the silence as he informed us. "I was once an Archangel." And my eyes popped open and I shook my head as if to clear it of cobwebs. Kit's lips were pursed and his red eyes seemed full of amusement. "I like it here with you, better than...either of those places." I took a shaky breath and gave him a smile.

"I like having you." I told him and watched him relaxed back against his chair. His smile was full and lovely.

Roral looked around. "I was once a Sylvan Ranger." He informed us while Roa' turned to him and narrowed his eyes. "It was a very long time ago." He added with a wry smile.

"And what is a Sylvan Ranger?" I asked as I rolled the last top crust out and moved it onto the pie.

"We were once forest dwellers."

Cursed glanced between us and added. "One does not claim the title Ranger without several hundred years of training, mastery of swords, as well as being an experienced outdoorsman with a scholar's knowledge of animal and plant lore."

"And why is Roa' looking at him like that?" I asked my hands having stilled on the crust.

"Because Roa' is half Drow....and Sylvan and Drow...were once mortal enemies." Cursed offered.

"This is not going to be a problem is it? Because I believe we have more than enough squabbles already to be dredging up this kind of history. Especially given that Roa' was never Drow in the true sense. He is barely older than Marcus here." I informed them sharply and both Roa' and Roral turned to look at me.

"No Your Majesty." Roral offered. "As I said, it was a very long time ago." I nodded and glanced at Roa' who shrugged but gave a nod.

Cael looked around and spoke softly. "I was once a Bard...for more than a century."

"And do you still sing?" I asked and he nodded shyly. "Perhaps sometime I will play for you and you will sing for us?" I asked while several of my men sucked air into

their lungs and looked alarmed. I caught their looks of dismay and chuckled while I moved to the oven and checked the roast. “Do you prefer your meat less or more done?” I asked and they nearly to a man all replied less. “Good.” I replied and opened the second oven then slipped the pies in and set the timer. I went back to the island and used a napkin to clear off most of the crust crumbs. Then I sipped my wine and looked around the room. Several men had not yet offered up any information and I glanced at Aerandir with a lifted brow. He dipped his head and smiled.

“I once asked the Lord of Air and Darkness’ sister to marry me.” He replied while Cursed turned to look at him in amazement. “She of course, refused.” He replied with a sad smile. I sipped my wine and did not know what to say to him. His pale green eyes stared back at me and he replied. “Nothing is required. As Lord Roral has said...it was a very long time ago.”

Lira watched us closely, his eyes sliding away from mine as if he feared I was still angry with him. And in fact, when I thought of it...I may well be. He dipped his head and muttered. “I was once an apprentice Mage. Fourth level. However I was not well suited to a life of books and solitude and chose not to pursue that path. It was where I obtained these.” He told us and ran his fingers over the tattoo over his brow and down past his ear.

“And do they mean something?” I asked and his face looked pleased at the question or perhaps he was simply happy I was speaking to him.

“Yes.” He replied and met my eyes but did not elaborate.

Stela glanced around and shrugged. “When I first crossed over, I liked to hoard gold.” He replied. “Until I became a fertility god and had it heaped upon me by adoring followers. Ah...those were the days.” He sighed while I frowned and he looked unrepentant.

“I did not realize we were keeping you from your true calling...” I told him with a touch of sarcasm.

“Oh no, my Queen.” He replied with a grin. “I have found the only gold I require, and am most pleased to be here with you.” I gave him an exasperated look and

he chuckled. I pulled my eyes from him and looked to Talon who seemed unwilling to participate. He frowned and crossed his arms over his chest as if he was protecting his virtue or something.

He muttered something low then growled out. "I have not always lived in the Oiotellad." He replied then firmly clamped his lips shut while the rest of us simply stared at him. After several seconds it was clear he was not going to add anything and I glanced at Roa' who was staring at the table his head lowered. He must have sensed my gaze on him because he slowly raised his head and his silver eyes met mine. His face looked determined and I wondered what he was thinking that caused him to look so serious.

Chapter 28

“I wish to declare.” He told me while Talon jerked in his chair and around the table everyone seemed to hold their breath. Talon looked shocked then his face filled with dismay. I glanced between the two of them and did not know what to say. “Like Lord Aerandir I do not require you to say anything. The choice is mine to make. And it is done.” He replied more firmly and I knew he was not speaking to me, but to Talon, who looked like he’d swallowed a lemon but held his tongue. Talon shot Stela an angry look and I realized...the episode in the car had been the last straw. Stela merely looked amused and leaned back in his chair with a sly smile.

Politics, I thought with a disgusted grimace and went to the cupboard and pulled out several loaves of French bread. As I worked I couldn’t help wondering...what Stela had to gain by goading Roa’ to declare. Across the room Kit cleared his throat and the sound drew my eyes.

“Seven down Mistress...only three to go. And two of them are less than ten minutes from here.” He informed me and I glanced at Stela who gave me a hungry look.

“Soon, the summer solstice approaches.” He promised while I swallowed and glanced back down at the knife in my hand. Perhaps I should have simply sent Stela to retrieve my Drakes since he seemed so all fired in a hurry. And what did the solstice have to do with anything? My thought caused him to nod and smile.

“I will go. I welcome the challenge.” He replied while I imagined what that might look like, and the ramifications to us all. A Dragon attacking Valentine’s mansion would surely make front page news. And shortly after that we’d all be hunted into extinction. Note to self, everyone here needed to pass the Hunter test and become certified. It was the only way to protect them. I’d have to discuss that with Gareth, assuming he ever forgave me for slamming the door on him earlier. I thought with a grimace. Perhaps he could simply run them through their tests and...well several of them were going to have to do some studying. It didn’t do any good to swear to obey the laws if they didn’t know them. I pictured them seated at classroom desks and shook my head realizing my mind was wandering and pulled myself up short.

“Stela, I believe I told you your first task would be to tell me about the court you served upon. We have not had the opportunity to discuss it. Perhaps you will enlighten those of us that are not familiar with the internal workings of previous courts upon the world you came from?”

Stela placed the tips of his fingers together and pressed them against his lips. His pale bronze eyes watched me closely for several minutes then flicked to Talon who was still looking angry with him. “Where would Your Majesty like me to begin?” He asked.

I continued slicing the bread and told him. “Just start in the middle and work your way out.”

Stela leaned back in his chair and nodded. “You do realize we were not able to shift to these forms.” And he waved his hand down his body. “Until our world was no more and we crossed into the Everlasting?” I nodded and leaned my hip against the counter. “Iorcai is what we called our world. I supposed you would translate it to mean...Spring. We were the most advanced race native to our world. Our race was old, even when I was hatched. Which was a very very long time ago.” He added with a wry

grin. Our society was based around the care and protection of our Queens. Life within a Court consisted mostly of hunting, honing our skills, the education of our children, and ensuring she was protected from...poaching.”

“Poaching?” I asked and frowned. “I thought you were the most advanced race? Were there others upon your world that hunted you?” Stela looked amused and glanced around the room thoughtfully.

“No Your Majesty, there were no other race upon our planet strong or foolish enough to hunt Dragon.” He remarked and held out his hand, waving it around the room, mostly at the non-Drakes. “Poaching by other males.” He replied. “We spent a good portion of our time...defending our right to our position within the Court. A position, which allowed us the opportunity to mate.”

“When we weren’t busy currying favor.” Talon added with a grimace to which Stela nodded.

“Yes, with some Queens that was nearly a full time job.”

“What exactly does currying favor mean?” I wanted to know. Talon glanced at Stela who raised an eyebrow and replied.

“I would not have called it thus. I would have termed it...ensuring the Queen’s needs were met and that she was pleased with our...attendance.” He remarked then smiled brightly.

“So...Dragon sex?” I asked and he chuckled and shrugged.

“Was but one way.” He offered while I frowned and wondered what else there could be than that.

“So while you were...raising the kids, feeding the masses, and defending your right to do so, what exactly was the Queen doing?” I asked.

Stela and Talon exchanged a telling glance and Talon shook his head. Stela looked at him and then back at me. “Being the Queen.” He replied with a sly grin. “What else would there be for her to do?” And he gave me an innocent look which I neither trusted nor believed. My eyes move to Kit who raised both eyebrows and placed his hands palm down on the table.

“Testing them....and deciding their fate Mistress.” He told me while Stela and Talon turned to look at him and both narrowed their eyes.

“Deciding their fate how?”

Kit looked around the room, his eyes hesitating on Amras and Cursed. “I believe you are just starting to realize...no Court is without its politics. Look around you Mistress....every man here wishes to be with you and only they know their reasons. When the time comes...how will you decide? And if you find yourself with one...not of your choosing...how will you react?”

I frowned and stared back at him considering his words. “Since I was little I’ve known my duty. I knew there were those that were made for me or so I believed. I never considered the elders...but that is neither here nor there, since the goal was to save the Dragons from extinction. There are five others in this room that were created just for that purpose.” I reminded him.

“I don’t know all that will be expected of me, nor how I will deal with it when the time comes. I suppose the best I can do is take one day at a time. You ask how I will decide and yet you say I may find myself with someone not of my choosing. It is unclear to me how it can be both and not one or the other. Something is happening to me. I feel it building inside me along with my power, which has been steadily growing since my first night here with Gareth and Jace, a byproduct of my frequent liaisons. I don’t know how long this will continue, or where it will end. It is all happening very fast. Sometimes it is difficult to remember that a good number of men in this room, I have only known for a day or two, some of you even less. And a month ago none of this existed for me. I think the best I can do is ensure we don’t allow anyone within our Court that would not be acceptable to us all. As it seems we might be stuck with each other...for some time.”

Around the room several of the men nodded. Stela looked pleased and even Talon seemed to relax a bit and the tension left his shoulders. Kit gave me a small smile and a nod and looked pleased with my answer.

Dane walked to the refrigerator and pulled out the huge bowl of salad along with several bottles of dressing. “Meat is done Lassie.” He replied and carried the salad to the table. I rooted around in the island drawers for hot pads and when I stood up Arrin was holding out his hands.

“Let me do this. Why don’t you go sit down?” He offered handing me my refilled wine glass with one hand and holding out the other, palm up, for the hot pads. His dark bronze eyes met mine and he smiled. When I reached for my glass his fingers brushed mine and I felt the spark of current that seemed to mark the meeting with each of my Drakes. His eyes widened slightly then he tugged the pot holders from me gently and turned his back to me.

I moved out from behind the island and went to seat myself in Gareth’s chair. Leaning back and curling my feet under my dress. My toes were cold from standing on the marble and since I’d left my shoes in the other room, I was happy to get off them. I could smell Gareth’s scent and closed my eyes while around me my men chatted. Stela and Talon had questions about what they had seen above ground and Marcus and Owen were attempting to assist them with understanding our world. It was a conversation of interest to several of the Elves also. I listened distractedly for a couple minutes then tuned them all out.

I sat there breathing in Gareth’s scent and thinking about the feel of his body next to mine. I missed him and didn’t like that he was angry with me. I was worried about both he and Jace and wondered where they were and what they might be doing. Both had been worried about meeting the Council. Were they in danger? Would Valentine bring my other Drakes as he had done to Marcus? Were they safe from Belinda? I wondered if his Demon might be there and who exactly Kazef was. I had never heard of him, but that was not surprising as I had not heard of Kit or Knight before either. In fact, I knew very little of Demons period. Jace was the expert, I thought and my mind reached for him calling out to him across the distance that separated us.

Lexi? Stars and seas, now is not a good time! Jace’s voice breathed across my mind and I had a brief view of a large room and several people I had never seen before.

It was as if I was seeing through Jace's eyes. I made a startled noise and my eyes popped open while I shook my head and blinked several times. I stared down at the table in surprise and the connection was lost. All eyes turned to me inquiringly.

"What did you just do?" Marcus demanded and I swear his face paled.

"I...I don't know." I told Marcus and I wasn't sure who was more surprised, him or I.

"Who was that?" Arrin asked quietly as he set a platter of sliced roast beef on the table.

"Jace, her Green. You did not meet him earlier but this is his home." Owen offered.

"I thought...then who is Gareth?" Arrin asked and I remembered it was not the first time he had inquired after Gareth. I supposed he was hearing a lot about him and had not had the opportunity to meet him earlier. Probably because Gareth was busy with Jace upstairs dealing with whatever problems had happened while we had been gone.

"Gareth is her Blue and he and Jace live here. They are both Elders and were the first men I allowed near my Mistress." Kit added while several men turned to look at him. "They were the first men good enough to touch my Mistress. Unlike some ex human mongrel immortals whom I could name." He muttered under his breath while I turned to look at him where he slumped in his chair. His moods had swung like a pendulum that evening. It was clear he was very upset over Claudius and Alan.

"Your entire life I have strived to keep men such as these two away from you!" He told me angrily. "Of course I'm upset. You've given us over to one of them. How long will it be before the other has you right where he wants you? I cannot protect you if you won't let me!"

I winced and stared back at him. "You could protect me." I told him quietly. "If you would just tell me the secret Kazef and Valentine hold over Marcus. Help me save my Copper and White." I told him, and his face went blank while his eyes dropped to the table in front of him. "Fine then. Gareth and Jace are somewhere in this city meeting with the Council and Valentine is there with them. I fear the only man that stands

between Valentine and my Drakes tonight is Claudius. An ex human. And it is he that keeps them safe for me, and will ensure they return to me by morning. You chose them for me Kit. How can you be angry at me for doing what I felt I had to in order to assure their safety?" I asked him in a quiet voice.

"Lexi...leave it." Owen advised. "He feels badly enough without you adding logic to the situation and making him feel guiltier than he already does."

"And while you squabble over something we cannot change." Cursed reminded us. "You completely miss the point."

"And what is that?" Aerandir asked him from where he sat, down near the other end of the table. His pale green eyes were sharp with interest and the muttering around the room ceased as all eyes turned to Cursed who stepped behind my chair and placed his hands upon my shoulders. His long delicate fingers slid up my neck and into my hair for a moment before he replied.

"Lexi just sent her mind into Jace's from across town. And if I am not mistaken, she saw through his eyes if only for a brief moment." He informed them all. "She has never done that before, have you My Lady?"

"No....not like that." I swallowed and glanced down at my plate while the rest of the food was delivered to the table and Arrin pulled out his chair and seated himself. He placed his napkin in his lap and replied in a matter of fact voice.

"Why don't we eat first and discuss this later? Her Majesty has only eaten once today and I can hear her stomach rumbling from here." He replied then gave me a wry grimace when I glanced at him gratefully. "If today is any indication of the care she has been receiving...it seems to me it is no wonder she has had to step outside her Court for assistance." And with that bombshell I grabbed my head and moaned as their mental voices nearly made my head explode. I slammed both shields closed and rubbed at the space between my eyes.

Arrin! That was not nice! I thought at him and around the table my youngest Drakes all jerked along with Stela who looked like he wasn't certain if he should be offended or not, possibly because he had been a member for barely twenty four hours.

Arrin's dark bronze eyes blinked back at me and he propped his chin in his palm on the table. *Not nice, but true my Queen. I have only been here a matter of hours and it seems to me that none of the criteria for past Courts are being met.* His mind whispered across mine. *In fact, with the exception of sex, I fail to see what exactly it is that these men have done for you.*

I swallowed my sip of wine wrong and started coughing. Amras who was seated at my right looked alarmed when I couldn't seem to stop choking and my face turned red. "What did you say to her?" He demanded turning to glare at Arrin whom he must have guessed was speaking to me based on the indignant looks he was getting from Dane. Marcus and Bryce seemed interested though neither of them was annoyed while Stela was starting to take offense. Down at the other end of the table Roa' leaned forward and informed Arrin.

"The Queen is...quite headstrong. Protecting her will not be as easy as you think." He replied. "She is not without skill and it has made her...dangerous to herself and others. It is most unnatural."

I turned slowly to Roa' and if looks could kill he might have spontaneously combusted right there in his chair. His silver eyes stared back at me calmly and he lifted an eyebrow and leaned an elbow upon the table. "You know Roa' it occurs to me that you and I never got the opportunity to cross swords in the Everlasting. Oh wait...was that because you were locked in a cell where I put you after having nearly choked the life out of you?" I hissed while he grinned back at me and nodded.

"That is true." He replied and his eyes nearly twinkled with amusement.

"What is so funny?" I demanded. The man never smiled and here he was insulting me and grinning like an idiot.

"I merely spoke the truth and I am no idiot." He remarked with a sigh and his smile dimmed slightly. "I was merely enjoying the way your eyes flash when you are annoyed. It is most impressive. And I welcome the opportunity to cross swords with you. Though I do not think you will find me as easy to beat as you did Talon." He

responded while Talon nodded from across the table. I might have thought the comment would have annoyed Talon, but in fact, he looked almost pleased at Roa's words.

"And what makes you so certain?" I asked leaning back in my own chair and wrapping a strand of hair around my finger as I watched him through narrowed eyes.

"Perhaps because I enjoy having my....man parts squeezed and my hair pulled. Which is I believe, what you did to Talon. It is a fact, that he definitely does not find pleasure in those things. And since I do not intend to rape you...I doubt very much you will want to reduce my size permanently. Especially since you so obviously seem to enjoy...large men."

I think my jaw nearly hit the floor, and around the room dead silence met his words. Even Kit seemed shocked. I'm not sure who chuckled first, but it spread quickly. And soon they were all roaring with laughter, while I sat there and felt my face turn red from embarrassment. I couldn't help wondering why I subjected myself to this kind of torture. I never seemed to make it through a meal without becoming the laughingstock. To my right Cursed sobered and reached for the platter of meat, heaping several slices on my plate and then his own before he passed it to Marcus to his right. To my left Amras did the same with the potatoes. I stared down at the food and realized...once again, I wasn't really hungry.

"Eat My Lady." Kit urged. "It seems...you are going to require your strength should you wish to satisfy your newest Drake." And his comment sent everyone into gales again. I reached under my dress and calmly pulled my knife from its holder. I grasped it with two fingers and sent it flying down the table where it buried itself in the back of the chair a mere inch from Roa's head. It vibrated for several seconds while his silver eyes stared back at me calmly. He hadn't even flinched damn him.

"As I said...a danger to herself and others." Roa' replied and grinned at me as he reached for his own food.

When the timer went off I pushed back from the chair and went to pull the pies from the oven. Instead of placing them on the counter to cool, I calmly carried them one

by one to the sink and dumped them in, then turned and left the room. No one followed me, for which I was grateful.

I went to Gareth's room and ran the bathtub thinking I wanted to get the smell of Drakes off of my person. I was not in a happy mood. I found the cinnamon bath scent he had used for us the first night I'd been there and poured several drops into the bath. Once I'd crawled in, I rested my head against the side of the tub, closing my eyes and doing deep breathing exercises to purge the anger from my mind. With the smell of cinnamon filling the air I dropped both shields and reached for Jace feeling a slight sense of vertigo as my mind slipped into his.

Lexi what are you doing here? He demanded urgently and I mentally blinked and found myself staring out through his eyes.

I am worried about you. I told him.

You need to leave.

Why?

Because you can't be here! He told me and his mind was frantic as he moved his head and through his eyes I saw Gareth kneeling on the floor his neck exposed to a woman who had her hands upon his shoulders, as she bent toward him fangs poised.

Chapter 29

“No!” I screamed and found myself standing naked and dripping wet in the middle of a cold room filled with at least twenty other Vampires and Weres. In addition my two Drakes were there and both looked shocked to see me standing there in my birthday suit. “Get your damned hands off my mate!” I screamed and sent the force of my will into the woman who I flung like a rag doll across the room and into the far wall. Pandemonium broke out around me as guards lunged.

I raised my lower shield, shifted and struck out with my tail sending several men sailing through the air. Gareth and Jace yelled sharply. I reached out and wrapped my tail around Gareth shoving him backwards into my side. I looked over my shoulder and found Jace staring at me in horror. “Get over here now!” I growled at him and he glanced around and vaulted over a chair to reach me as I turned my head and grabbed a Werewolf out of the air with my teeth, snapping his back before flinging him across the room. His body knocked down several others in the process.

“Stop!” A man with a very deep voice screamed. I roared then curled my body around Gareth and Jace and turned to glare at the Vampire, mentally yelling for Kit as I did so. He appeared in front of me with an impatient look which quickly shifted to alarm as his eyes widened and he glanced around. I used my snout and nudged him over next to Gareth who was looking pale but did not say anything.

“Who are you?” Hissed the woman I had sent flying. She looked worse for wear and extremely pissed and I unfurled my wings and glared back at her.

“Your worst nightmare if you so much as blink in my men’s direction.” I informed her then glanced around the room. My eyes met Claudius and narrowed slightly, before moving on to Valentine who was inconveniently across the room. Too bad I would have loved to feel my teeth tear through his body and hear his bones crunch as I ground them into ash. His eyes met mine and he crossed his arms and looked pleased. As if this was exactly the reaction he was hoping for.

“How dare you!” Breathed the woman who looked to be all of what, five feet nothing?

“How dare you!” I roared and stood up on my hind feet and spread my wings. The air I displaced shoved at everyone there and this time I flicked her across the room as if she was a paper doll on the wind and when I settled back down Claudius moved to stand before me.

“Lexi my dear...that is the head of the Council you just insulted.” He informed me calmly.

“And I am Queen of the Dragons upon this world! How dare she touch what is mine! She, who owes her very existence to my blood!” I informed him coldly. “You said they were under your protection else I would never have allowed them to be here. I suggest she immediately apologize for her insult to me, before I become truly angry and relieve her of her duty to your Council... forever.” I informed him in an icy voice.

“You may not harm her.” Claudius informed me and I tilted my head to the side and stared down at him. My lips pulled back from my teeth and I made an awful noise as I gnashed them against each other.

“No Claudius...you do not understand.” I informed him in a voice that vibrated with anger. “I will kill her. I will kill them all.” I assured him. “And I will feel no remorse in doing so. They have insulted me by daring to touch my Drakes. These men have declared and are mine. No one may have them, no one may touch them! Our laws supersede yours as they have been in existence much longer than any Vampire. In truth there would be no Vampires if not for the blood of Dragons. So do not presume to tell me what I may and may not do as it relates to my men.”

Amusement flashed in his hazel eyes, quickly covered by something much more serious as he bowed from the waist, then turned to the members of the council. There were seven of them, including the woman who had once again picked herself up off the floor and stood trembling with rage. I growled softly and stared back at her realizing the end of my tail was flicking like that of a stalking cat. She was petite and had had, before I sent her flying across the room, her hair stacked upon her head, likely in an attempt to make herself appear taller. She was wearing a slinky black dress which covered very little and was by human standards beautiful. Small and petite with a baby doll figure. I knew if I left her alive she would hunt me to the ends of the Earth.

“Apologize now.” I informed her in a deadly serious voice hoping to goad her. “Apologize now or die.” She pulled air into her lungs and stared back at me with a haughty look and I realized she would never apologize and smiled. “So be it.” I informed her then mentally reached for her and ripped her heart from her chest. She stared down at it in shock as it hung outside her body for half a second and then she screamed once as her body imploded into a fiery ball and gray ash exploded from her, coating those closest. The remaining six Council members stared back at me in shock and dismay.

I turned my head to the man with the booming voice who glanced at me warily. He was perhaps Spanish or Italian with dark hair and eyes and was stuck at a perpetual thirty something age. “The Council begs the Queen of the Dragon’s pardon. We did not realize we insulted Your Majesty by honoring your...Drakes.”

“You are now in charge?” I asked and he glanced around at the other members, all of whom were men, each of them nodded. “Congratulations upon your recent promotion.” I informed him and dipped my head. “I am Queen Lexi Helyanwe. You may call me Your Majesty.” I informed him while he seemed to stiffen, likely because Claudius had called me Lexi.

“Yes Your Majesty.” He replied while I stared at him expectantly until he got the hint and went to a knee before me. One of the others hissed and I tapped a claw upon the floor and pulled it back across the marble slowly. It made an awful scritch noise that made every Vampire and Were in the place moan in agony. He dropped to the floor along with the others and my head turned until every person in the room was upon their knees with the exception of Valentine and his pet....the Demon Kazef.

The Demon was about Amras’ size, pale and as beautiful as any previous angel could be. His hair was not as long or as fine as Kit’s, nor his eyes as lovely in shape or color. He watched me jealously. As if my actions...excited him. And of course they would. For what could excite a fifth level Demon more than...wrath and destruction?

I ignored Valentine and focused on his Demon. “Greetings Kazef fifth level Chaos Demon of the order of Wrath. Former Archangel, servant of that thing next to you, our city’s most insane occupant.” I greeted him and his smile was full and lovely and he bowed from the waist to me. While beside him Valentine nearly foamed at the mouth which only seemed to make him happier.

“Greetings Queen of the Dragons upon this world. It is an intense pleasure to meet you.”

I eyed him thoughtfully and replied. “You have something that belongs to me. Be careful they are not harmed while you are in thrall to this one. Your time in his position is limited. And, it would distress me to lose one as beautiful as you.” I informed him while his red eyes widened and he flashed his perfect white teeth at me.

“I understand Your Majesty. And may I wish you success. For I believe I will enjoy an end to this....position greatly.”

I narrowed my eyes and reached for him, mentally brushing my imaginary hands over his chest and up into his hair. My lips nibbled at his earlobe and I pressed my full breasts against his body while he stiffened and held completely still. “Thank you Kazef your words please me greatly.” I told him while next to me Kit placed his hands behind his back and grinned like a Cheshire cat.

“I apologize.” I told the others. “Please rise.” And I watched as the occupants in the room regained their feet. Looking around I realized...I’d killed the only other woman present. I sighed and nudged Kit who turned to me and stroked his hand over the scales between my eyes. I shifted and was once again naked and dripping wet. Kit took one look at me and snapped his fingers and I found myself clothed in something so shocking I nearly strangled him.

The dress was a two piece. The top a zip up corset made of black leather with a golden zipper. It cinched in my waist and shoved my breasts up my chest. The thing ended a mere half inch above my nipples and I was certain if I bent forward they would spill over the top. The skirt was also black, of some gauzy material that was basically see through. It was form fitted from just above my pelvic region to the floor with a slit up my right side that went all the way from the floor to the top of the skirt. The only thing holding it together was a golden buckle at my hip. It left revealed a good two inches of skin all the way from my waist down my side to the floor. And that was while I was standing still. I could only imagine what would happen were I to take a long stride.

Kit had provided me black silk stockings which ended mid thigh with lacy elastic garters and spiked satrapy heels. The knife Gareth and Jace had given me was attached to my thigh and poked through the gap in the skirt like some kind of body jewelry. I had on long gloves, also black, and my neck was as bare as it could be. He’d piled half my curls upon my head while the other half trailed down my nearly bare back. I felt the familiar weight of a crown of some sort. Long black diamond earrings brushed my naked shoulders and he’d changed my bracelet to match. It went without saying...he’d neglected to provide me underwear.

I closed my eyes briefly then reached for Gareth and kissed him as if to wash away the vision of that other woman so close to him. Had he wanted to take me there in the middle of the room, I would have let him. So excited did his kisses make me. When he released me, his eyes were whirling. He stepped back and Jace ran his hands up my body and buried them in my hair just before he pulled me against him and proceeded to send my pulses skyward. I know it was naughty of me, but I cracked open my red door and fanned my lust at him making sure it gently spread across the room. He growled and shoved his hips against me.

Gareth placed himself behind me so that I could feel his erection pressing against my bottom though the thin material. I pulled my mouth from Jace who lowered his lips to my neck and shoulder. My head dropped back against Gareth and his lips nipped at my jaw and neck. Neither of them had spoken except for one shout each since I'd arrived. But words were not necessary just then. We stood that way for several silent moments until I lifted my head and turned to the Council.

"Now where were we?" I asked and flicked my eyes to the dark haired Vampire whom I'd elevated to the roll of head Council member. He looked dazed and shook his head while my eyes flicked to the other Council members. None of them looked like they knew what had hit them and when I glanced around the room it was pretty much the same. A couple of the guards looked like a strong breeze would knock them over while the rest of them just looked...hungry. I looked them over thoroughly smiling when a couple of them met my eyes. One of them went so far as to brush his hand down the front of himself so that my eyes followed the movement to the bulge in his pants. Another unclasped his hands and moved them to his back and it wasn't hard to tell his reaction.

One of the men eyed me angrily and my eyes widened till I realized he was standing over the body of the Were I'd bit and flung across the room.

"Is he breathing?" I asked and watched as the Were's blue eyes narrowed. I wasn't certain he was going to answer but he finally nodded. I moved suddenly, causing Jace and Gareth to release me. Gareth followed me as I held my dress down and moved

quickly toward the man who bared his teeth at me and looked like him might attack. “I wouldn’t advise it.” I warned him bluntly.

“Do not touch him.” The man who was nearly as big as Nick growled.

“I would heal him if you would get out of my way. You prolong his suffering with your foolishness.” I informed him while his eyes narrowed and he glanced at Gareth over my shoulder.

“Move back so she may help him.”

“Why would she want to help him?” The Were demanded. “She tried to kill him!”

“I was merely defending myself.” I informed him calmly. “Please move.” He stared down at me then finally stepped back and I knelt and winced at the damage I’d caused. “I am sorry.” I whispered and placed my palms upon his shoulder and lifted his shirt so I could be in contact with the skin at his waist. I pushed the healing into him and felt the rebound of a broken back and damaged internal organs and swayed. Gareth’s hands on my shoulders steadied me and I stared down into wary hazel eyes. “How do you feel?” I asked and dropped my lower shield releasing the rest of the rebound. Across the room several Vampires made strangled noises.

“Fine.” He replied and sat up on his elbows slowly. My eyes moved to his friend who glanced between us and looked, uncertain. “I apologize for attacking you Your Majesty.” He replied cautiously. My being so close to him was obviously making him nervous.

“Whom do you guard little wolf?” I asked curiously and watched as his eyes flicked toward Valentine across the room and I remembered to raise my lower shield.

“Mr. Loveless, the Master.” He replied and I placed a knee upon the floor and gave him a once over with my eyes. He was well made, strong and likely over six feet when he stood. His body was well muscled...with dark auburn hair and freckles. He reminded me of Marcus and I had to wonder....

“What is your name?”

“Sean.” He replied.

“Well Sean, you are very brave and quite bold. I like that in a man.” I informed him and he nearly flinched and I felt compassion fill me. “How long have you been in your current job?” I asked my tone matter of fact and as non threatening as I could make it.

His eyes burned with a near hatred for a second and then he blinked and muttered. “Three years.” His eyes dropped to somewhere around my cleavage but I doubted he was actually seeing what was displayed there.

“Three years can be a lifetime.” I informed him softly and he raised his eyes to me with a touch of resentment. “Tell me Sean, if you had the chance would you be interested in a career change?” He stared at me and looked uncertain. “Come now.” I leaned forward and told him softly. “I have stood naked before you. Tell me you did not notice the difference?” He nodded slowly but did not respond and I considered him for a moment more before smiling slyly. “I commend your bravery and would like to give you something in appreciation if you will but allow me? I will not hurt you.” I told him while he eyed me nervously.

“Yes.” He finally replied while I waited patiently with one eyebrow raised in challenge. I smiled and raised my left glove to my lips and teeth and slowly tugged each finger free while he watched. When my glove was free I laid it across my knee and reached for him, my fingers splaying across his chest. He held his breath and his eyes widened. Behind me Gareth shifted his fingers tightening on my shoulders as I slowly ran my hand down the center of his body, over his stomach and to the waist of his pants.

“I need to touch you.” I informed him softly and his eyes widened in surprise while I calmly smiled back at him. “I promise you will not regret it.” Above me Gareth growled and Sean’s eyes flicked to him. “Undo your pants...free yourself to my touch.” I coaxed softly.

His hand slowly moved toward his waist and with a flick of his fingers the button came loose and the sound of his zipper was very loud in the silent room. He hesitated then his hand fell away as my fingers brushed the skin below his belly button and I slowly moved them lower. He was very tense and therefore lay nestled within his curls

as if hiding from me. “Relax Sean.” I whispered and opened my door slightly breathing just a hint of lust toward him. Enough so that his hands clenched and his body tightened beneath my fingers. His eyes slipped closed briefly and he seemed to sigh as he began to grow, pushing against his pants and seeming to reach for me. I waited until he was at his full length and then dipped my fingers beneath his zipper and wrapped them gently around this length. He made a strangled sound causing me to smile as I closed my eyes then forced my will into him and wished for him to grow thicker and longer. It only took a second and I released him and reached for my glove, slowly pulling it on while his eyes grew wider.

“There now.” I teased. “You have something with which to be bold.”

The man next to us made a strange noise and I glanced up at him inquiringly.

“What did you do to him?” The other guard demanded.

“I merely rewarded him for his bravery.”

“How?” The other asked.

I flicked my eyes between the two and Sean glanced up at him while his cheeks turned pink before he dropped his gaze back down to himself. “I made him bigger...permanently.” I told him calmly and around the room shocked mutters erupted which were quickly silenced. Gareth assisted me to my feet and when we would have turned away Sean stopped me.

“Wait.” He spoke urgently and I glanced down at him. His face was full of wonder. “It is permanent?”

I nodded then thought about it and explained. “You will...wax and wane as normal but when excited...this will be your new permanent size.” I told him while he looked incredulous. “It is my gift to you, because I appreciate bravery.”

He swallowed and nodded. “You asked if I would consider a career change.” He told me and I nodded. “Were you offering a job?” He asked and I flicked my eyes to Gareth and he looked thoughtful but finally gave the nod of approval.

“Perhaps, that will be up to you. You will be required to prove yourself.” I informed him while across the room Valentine interrupted us.

“He already has a job.” He informed us in an angry voice which caused Sean to flinch.

“Have you sold your soul to the Demon and his insane sidekick?” I asked Sean who shook his head quickly. While Valentine hissed, and Kazef chuckled across the room.

“No...I was merely hired as a guard. I signed no contract with anyone.”

“Perfect.” I informed him. “I love this country...personal freedom and the right to choose is a lovely thing...one that all free citizens can claim. One I am more than happy to assist you in enjoying.” And turned to Kit and told him. “I require Owen please.” Kit nodded and snapped his fingers and Owen was suddenly standing beside me. He was wearing only pants and his long yellowish hair was unbound. He crossed his arms over his massive chest and his dark brown eyes flicked around the room. His eyes hesitated on several people, before he turned back to me then glanced to the man at my feet who still had his pants open and was now, thanks to me, happily poking through his zipper.

He dropped to a knee and looked up at me. “My Queen how may I serve you?” He inquired with a carefully neutral face. I reached to cup his chin in my hand and he raised an eyebrow.

“This is Sean.” I informed him indicating the man he was kneeling next to. “He has been a guard for Mr. Loveless for three years and has been...misused I suspect by a certain Red we both know. He has shown himself to be brave and has been...enhanced by your Queen for his actions.” I told him while his eyes widened then narrowed. “He wishes to change careers and Gareth has graciously accepted, much to his former employers dismay.” I told him and couldn’t help the satisfied smile covering my face. “He requires transport. Take him to Nick and keep him safe for us will you?” I asked and he nodded. “Go now.” I told him, and he blinked and both he and Sean were suddenly gone.

“Kit?”

“Yes Mistress?” He replied in an amused voice.

“What is the punishment for forcing oneself upon another without their consent? Someone who belongs to another? Someone not their mate?”

“A trial by Court. If the offending party is found guilty, the punishment is ultimately death at the Court’s hands.”

“And do these laws apply to all Dragons?” I asked calmly.

“Every Dragon...everywhere...as far back as Dragon lore has been recorded.”

He replied.

“It seems then...that we have been remiss in our duties.” I replied thoughtfully.

“How so Mistress?” Kit inquired.

“No Queen, no Court...no enforcement of our laws. A duty which I was unaware of until this moment. I believe I will need to rectify that immediately. And I believe we will begin by looking into a certain Red’s behavior.” I remarked and turned to glance at the six remaining Council members who looked back at me curiously.

I moved back to Jace’s side with Gareth behind me and glanced around the room again. Not surprising, Kazef looked intrigued while Valentine appeared angrier than ever. I suspect he’d believed the head of the Council was going to save him from me. Or maybe he just thought the Council would be so angry with me that they’d forget his transgressions. And now he had lost both the only other woman here as well as one of his long time guards to me. One who I suspected held many secrets I was eager to learn. Too bad for Valentine. My eyes swept across Blake who was standing apart from Valentine his arms crossed over his chest. His face looked...like Owen’s had, carefully neutral. But his eyes were focused on me and held an amused glint.

Claudius was staring at the floor and when he felt my eyes on him he flicked his glance at me for just a second and I realized...they had sifted and he was struggling to control them. I chewed my lip and reached out to him giving him a sharp tug on his hair. He pulled breath into his lungs and shook himself then glanced at me through his normal hazel eyes. His head dipped in my direction and I blinked to acknowledge his thanks. Behind me Gareth tensed and his arm snaked around my waist painfully. Apparently he’d seen Claudius’ eyes too, and was unpleasantly surprised. I reached behind me and

slid my hand down his thigh giving him a reassuring squeeze and pressing back against him while Jace eyed us both curiously.

“Perhaps we might start with introductions?” I offered and glanced at the new head of the Council expectantly. I may not be fond of politics, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t willing to play that game to my own advantage. Now was the time to use my political power to impose my will upon these others, even in the face of Valentine’s opposition

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DRAGON PRIDE

By Kelly Armenta

Coming soon

Chapter 1

“I am Jules Vallejo Your Majesty.” The new head of the council informed me, and then proceeded to introduce the others from left to right. “Phoenix King, Darius Shade, Felix Serrano, Alexander Morelock, Nicholai Moretnsen.” They each bowed their head to me in turn, and I looked them all in the eye briefly before moving on to the next. They ranged from my height to Owen’s and several had hair nearly as long as my own. Felix had no hair at all. In physical age they looked to be in their late twenties to early forties though their true measure in years was anyone’s guess. One must assume to become a member of the Council they had lived...a very long time.

“It is a pleasure to meet you gentlemen. I apologize for my abrupt arrival and for causing a disruption to your meeting. As my Guardians are required to be here, I should also like to stay if that is acceptable to you all?” I asked and flashed them a smile that promised more entertainment should they allow me to remain.

Jules didn’t even bother looking at the others, he simply nodded. “We would be delighted Your Majesty.” He informed me. “Tonight was merely the chance for us to

renew acquaintances and perhaps begin the dialog. I believe we would each welcome this opportunity to also make new acquaintances.”

I gave him my sunniest smile and held out my hand toward Kit. “Then please let me introduce my familiar. This is Kit. He is a second level Chaos Demon of the Order of Limerence. And the man that was here earlier with the pale yellow hair was Ve. He is I believe, partly responsible for the Human race.” I informed them while their eyes widened in shock.

Jules stroked his chin and stared back at me calmly. “You appear to have some very interesting associates.”

“Yes. I am indeed fortunate.” I informed him.

“If I am not mistaken, your Mother is also an Elven Princess?” Alexander asked. He was one of the few there that had blonde hair and was well over six feet in height. His eyes were cornflower blue and with his aristocratic nose and cheekbones he looked like royalty. Perhaps Russian.

“Yes, heir to the Seelie throne of Air and Light.” I replied then turned to Claudius who had moved silently to our side. My elbow turned cold and goose bumps dotted the skin on my arms to announce his close proximity.

“Would you like something to drink?” He asked politely.

“A glass of wine would be nice.” I replied and his eyes shifted to my men. Gareth and Jace seconded my request while Kit declined.

Claudius smiled and turned to glance at one of the Weres who nodded. “White, Chardonnay. Pull a bottle from my private stock.” He called to the wolf while his hazel eyes held mine. Gareth’s grip on me tightened and he leaned forward, pressing his cheek to mine. Claudius smiled softly then turned to Kit to ask him a question, effectively breaking the tension.

When I glanced over at the council members I realized they had shifted and three of them were now in conversation. Another two approached Valentine. That left Phoenix King who was the second tallest Vampire there, and moving toward me across the floor like a large cat. He had hair as Dark as Kit’s which moved about his narrow

hips and drew my gaze. His skin was not quite as pale as the others. His eyes were the color of topaz and dominated his broad face. And when he smiled...there were dimples. His appearance was of a man not much older than me. He brought with him the cold of the tomb and I shivered against Gareth and felt goose bumps break out over my arms again. My reaction seemed to confuse Phoenix and his eyes clouded briefly.

Claudius shifted so that he faced Phoenix who reached for my hand then lifted it to his lips. His kiss upon my knuckles was quite courtly and I watched him though narrowed eyes. "It is a pleasure to meet you Your Majesty." He informed me in a voice that was smooth like creamy chocolate. I met his eyes and immediately felt the pull of his power. I tilted my head to the side wondering just what he thought he was up to.

"Hmmm." I replied calmly and raised an eyebrow when his power focused a little more firmly upon me. I had been around Vampires in one form or another since I was a teenager and knew that this was a game they liked to play. Being immortal, I was fairly immune to it though every once in a while the right power might roll me as Claudius' had done. Of course he was very old and not without significant power himself. Beside me he lifted his hand and rubbed at his face, covering up his smile while his hazel eyes sparkled with amusement. I sighed and nearly winced when Phoenix turned his gaze upon Claudius and realized...they both could hear me.

"So Phoenix, what brings you and the Council to our lovely city here by the bay?" I asked. He pulled his gaze off Claudius and turned back to me and I could swear his power...expanded. Even Gareth must have felt it because he tensed and stopped breathing behind me. Beside us Jace shifted slightly his body now facing Phoenix. Kit rocked forward on the balls of his feet and flicked his eyes between myself and Phoenix. Wondering no doubt, if I was about to find myself in trouble.

"Mmmm." I purred. "That was....very nice. But you are making my men nervous. And as I already find you attractive, it seems hardly necessary." I informed Phoenix who looked surprised by my honesty. Kit gave me a dirty look, then rolled his eyes. Claudius chuckled and turned to the Were who was holding our drinks on a tray. He lifted a glass of wine and held it out to me.

“Thank you Claudius.” I told him warmly and lifted my other arm so it could rest at my waist over Gareth’s. My fingers stroked his wrist and the pressure eased slightly.

“Charming.” Phoenix replied and took a glass off the tray himself. He stared down at the golden liquid for a moment then looked back up at me. “There have been rumors...we came to investigate. I’m sure you would not want me to bore you with the details of our system.” He replied with a wry smile.

“I have studied your system and do not find it boring in the least.” I informed him as I sipped at my wine. “In fact I commend you for upholding the laws and for balancing the needs of your people against the safety of the public. I know it was not always this way and that you have been forced to change with the times. I myself am quite pleased you are here. I eagerly look forward to justice being served.” I admitted and my tone left little doubt I expected that justice to be served quickly and efficiently. He stared down at me and raised a dark winged eyebrow while I turned my head and glared across the room at Valentine.

“You do not care for the Master of this City?” Phoenix asked in a quiet voice.

“What a quaint way you have with words.” I replied with a slight drawl. “No Phoenix...I am most anxious to see him pay for his crimes.”

“And what crimes would those be?” He inquired and his voice seemed cooler than it had just a moment earlier. As if he’d switched to business and left all thoughts of pleasure in the dust at our feet.

I pulled my eyes from Valentine who was glaring back at me from across the room. Near him the other two Vampires had also turned and were looking at me...waiting for my response. My eyes turned up to Phoenix and I replied simply. “That will be up to you to determine. I will not have it said that I swayed you unfairly by sorcery or...some other means. I too am sworn to uphold the laws, or his ashes would already be decorating the carpet along with your former Council member. But know this, should your justice fail me I will hunt him to extinction as is my right. His interference with my Court will not be tolerated.”

Phoenix seemed to consider my words and nodded. “You told his Demon he had something of yours? Can you tell me what that might be?”

“I can, but perhaps you would prefer to ask him instead. I offered, glancing up at his topaz eyes through my lashes. “I would not wish to bias your perception of the truth. They were made for me and are mine. They came seeking me and were intercepted before they could find me, I can only assume it was through deceit. I will have them back alive and whole. He has cost me one already...should these two be harmed...” And I stopped and took several deep breaths to calm myself, realizing my blood was pounding in my temples. It was not a good thing to do amidst a roomful of Vampires. Phoenix licked his lips delicately and I caught a flash of fang. His eyes looked...intense. “Forgive me.” I told him with a small smile. “I did not mean to distress you.”

He pulled air into his lungs and stared down at me. “You smell of cinnamon and cloves. A unique combination, I wonder...” He replied and turned to glance at Claudius with an almost envious look. Claudius gave him an innocent smile and I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. No, it wasn’t hard to imagine what Phoenix was wondering. “Excuse me.” He replied and dipped his head to me. “It has been a pleasure to speak with you.” And he turned and glided away through the crowd moving in the general direction of Valentine.

“Claudius. I am very angry with you.” I informed him crisply while he grimaced and nodded his head.

“And you have every right to be.”

“I will assume you now understand what I mean when I say ‘mine’?” I asked and he chuckled.

“I believe everyone in this room understands fully the meaning of ‘mine’ as it relates to you Your Majesty.” He told me with a grin.

“No hard feelings?” I asked and leaned my head back against Gareth.

“She was given ample warning. There will be no retribution for your actions as you provided her every opportunity to...do the right thing.”

“Actually from my point of view...she did.” I told him calmly. “You know I could not have left her alive.”

“It was a good death.” He informed me. “I doubt anyone will miss her especially not her servants. She was not well liked. And I am sorry. I did not realize Claire would require...homage. And when she demanded Gareth...” He replied with a shake of his head. “There are plenty of others here who could have served the purpose. She chose him out of spite. She got exactly what she deserved.”

“Spite? Why would she demand Gareth out of spite? What reason could she possibly have for being spiteful towards him?” I asked and my body tensed as Claudius flicked his eyes at Gareth then quickly away. Behind me I felt Gareth also tense and my temper started to escalate. I looked at Jace who shied away, his green eyes looking guilty. “Let go of me.” I hissed and Gareth held me tighter.

“Lexi...please not here.” Gareth breathed against my ear and I suddenly felt as if it had been my heart ripped from my chest. What a fool I was!

“Damn you Gareth let go of me. This is the second time you have done this to me. You would think I might learn from my mistakes.” I replied bitterly.

“Yes and with similar results both times. Please Lexi...calm yourself, I know you do not want to cause a scene.”

“No Gareth, because my arriving naked in the midst of a roomful of strangers to save you wasn’t bad enough. Not to mention the little dog and pony show I put on with Sean to impress them. Sweet Danu, just get your hands off me! I cannot bare this.” And I closed my eyes and wished for my secret place then felt my world shift and dropped to the sand on my knees and let the tears come. I sat there for several minutes, feeling the pain crushing me down, and then the smell of cloves wafted over me just as Kit’s hands reached to pull me against his chest. I cried against him for some time before my sobs turned to hiccups and then died away altogether.

“If your intent was to get him beat to within an inch of his life I think you may have succeeded. I’m not sure who was more angry, Claudius or your newest friend Phoenix. He wasn’t certain what had happened, but he was not at all pleased with

Gareth.” Kit informed me. “Amazingly neither was any of the Weres. I believe you’ve gained yourself a secret fan club.”

“I hope they beat him senseless.” I moaned while Kit made tsking noises.

“I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“You left him there?” I asked realizing Kit was here with me.

“A little humility will do wonders for him. And Jace will see he makes it home. They aren’t children you know.”

“No they aren’t children. It would be so much easier if they were. At least this time I actually killed someone he’d slept with.” I muttered dejectedly.

Kid didn’t say anything for a few seconds and then he replied. “I’m sure it was a very long time ago.”

“Are you? He seemed willing enough to bare his neck to her. He would have let her...” I gagged, I couldn’t help it I simply turned and threw up the wine and the little bit of I dinner I’d choked down earlier while Kit once again held my hair and muttered obscenities under his breath.

“Here.” He told me, holding out a wash cloth and bottle of water. “I’m not sure why I’m the one always holding your hair.” He replied with a sigh.

“I’m sorry Kit.” I muttered miserably.

“I could turn him into a statue like your Grandfather was if that would make you feel any better. He would look good in the corner of the front room. And set a good example for the others.” He offered.

“I’ll think about it.” I told him and shoved sand over the mess I’d made. I yanked off my gloves then reached for my zipper and removed my top. I tossed it beside me then unclasped the buckle at my hip and released my skirt.

“Can I help you with your shoes and stockings?” He asked politely and I smiled tiredly and leaned back on my elbows on top of the material so he could assist with removing my shoes. His fingers whispered down and then back up my silk covered leg several times before he finally told me. “This is nice I like it here, where are we Mistress?”

“My room.” I told him and his fingers stilled on my ankle.

“Your room?”

“Yes.” I replied and dropped my head back, then stared up at the half moon overhead. The waves lapped at the shore not far from us while Kit finished removing both my shoes.

“This is where you were earlier today when you disappeared? Where you met the animal that you spoke of at dinner?”

“Yes...there is a cottage just down the beach with a rose garden in back. Areth created this place for me so I could have a vacation.”

“A vacation away from us?” He asked calmly.

“From the testosterone you all manufacture.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Dinner was a disaster.”

“The roast and pie were very good. In fact everything tasted wonderful. And we learned some very...interesting things. I think we should play your game at every meal. Who knows what we could discover?”

“An Archangel?” I asked and glanced at him questioningly.

He grinned and shrugged his shoulder. “I make a much better Demon.” He informed me and I nodded.

“So where did you get those peaches from?” He finally asked.

“I picked them off one of the trees behind the cottage. I figured you’d salvage the pie, which is why I didn’t feel bad about tossing it in the sink. I was annoyed. Were you serious about the rest of the food being good?”

“Yes, you may cook for me anytime. You seem to have an aptitude for it. Who would have guessed?” He teased.

I eyed him skeptically and informed him. “It’s been another long day.”

“You know...I think Roa’ was hoping to spend some quality time with you tonight.” Kit informed me as his fingers soothed my stocking clad foot. “Perhaps some hair pulling and...man parts squeezing would make you feel better.”

I fell back on the sand with a groan. "Please tell me he was kidding."

Kit chuckled and undid the lower buckle on my thigh. He removed my knife and set it to the side as he sat back to admire the garter about my lower hips which were still holding up my stockings. I watched him from under my arm and couldn't help thinking how beautiful he was in the moonlight.

"I love you Mistress." He informed me calmly. "I have loved you since you were a snot nosed little brat."

"Please Kit, I was never a snot nosed little brat. Mi would never have allowed it." I replied.

"I suppose...that is true. And besides it is a nasty visual. When what I mean to say is, to me you are the most beautiful woman in all of existence. I know you are angry and hurt about tonight. But I am so very proud of you. You handled yourself...right up to the end...just like a Queen. I have to admit, I lied earlier when I said I did not know who was madder, Claudius or Phoenix. The truth is I was angrier than both of them combined. I did not think you wanted me to follow you, but it was that or seriously damage Gareth."

"He has been alive a very long time. I can't go through life killing all his ex lovers...can I?" I asked and turned my head toward him with a hopeful expression.

"It might solve our problems and prevent me from having to hold your hair again in the future." He replied while I thought about it.

"Perhaps you could just...snap your fingers and send them all to Siberia?" I half heartedly teased.

"Yes I could do that." He assured me.

"It is very tempting."

"Yes...very."

"I wouldn't want them hurt...just gone."

"I would not even muss their hair."

"Would that make me a bad person?"

"No...just the opposite. You will likely be saving their lives."

“I don’t want to go through tonight ever again. It is very distressing. I still can’t believe I showed up in nothing but dripping water!” I growled.

“I will see to it immediately.”

“Good...no wait! What if one of them is a scientist? And she is destined to find some impossible cure?”

Kit thought about it for a moment and replied. “Then she will find it...in Siberia. It is not a bad place to live Mistress...think of it as...enriching the Russian culture. After all...they could probably use an important scientist. Who knows what manner of diseases they might have there? In fact they probably have a much greater need that we do.”

“Fine, but neither of us can ever tell.”

“As you wish Mistress.” He replied and snapped his fingers before I could change my mind.

“Kit?”

“Yes Mistress.”

“Can you give me a charm, a...Russian bear? I don’t wish to forget this night...ever.” Kit snapped his fingers and my black diamond bracelet returned to having my Dragons. I suspected if I looked closely the Blue had been replaced with a brown bear.

“It’s done.” He told me and linked his fingers though mine.

“Kit?”

“Yes Mistress?”

“I love you too.”