

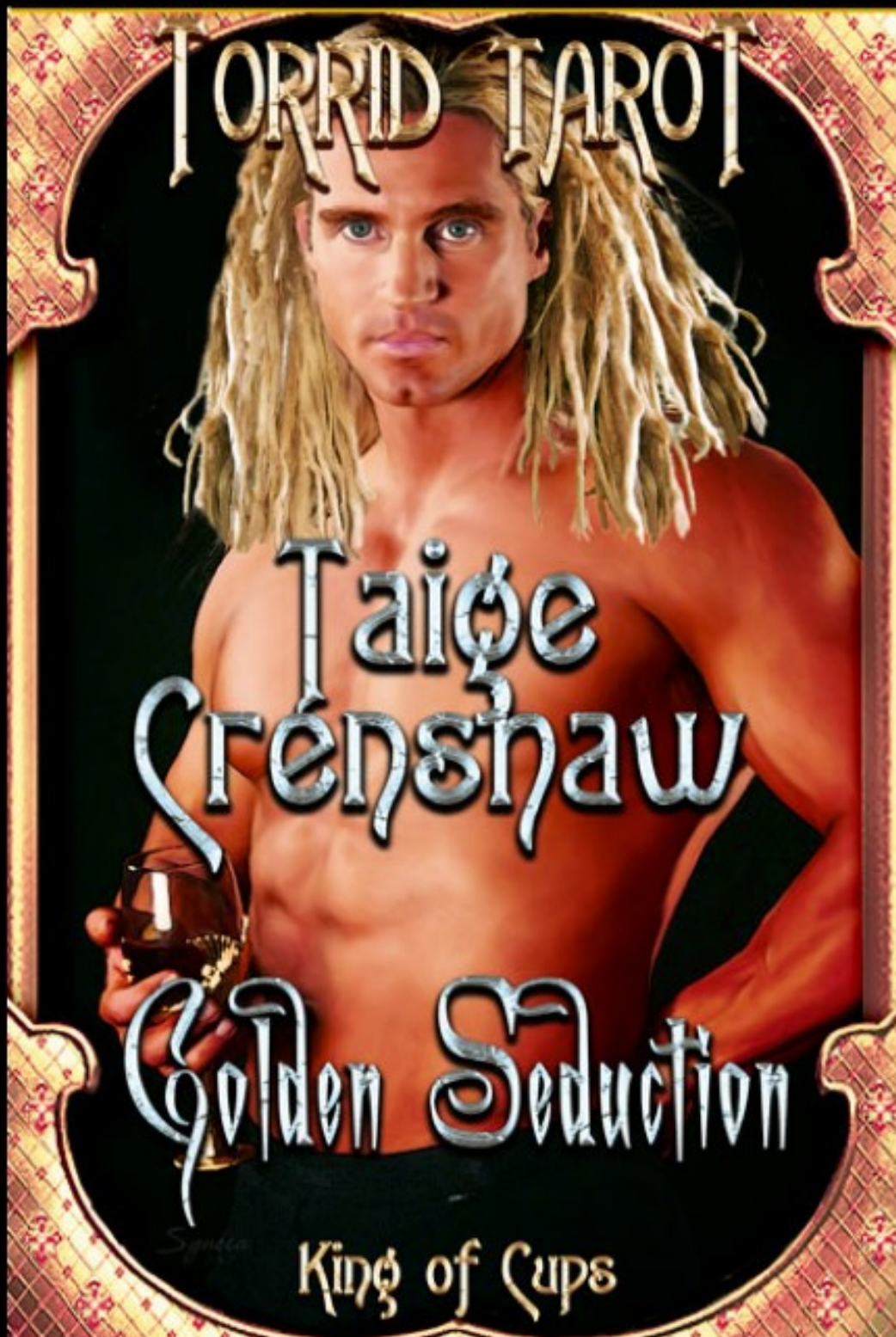
ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

TORRID TAROT

Taije
Crenshaw

Golden Seduction

Syneca
King of Cups



AnEllora's CaveRomantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Golden Seduction

ISBN 9781419912023

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Golden Seduction Copyright © 2007 Taige Crenshaw

Edited by Helen Woodall.

Cover art by Syneca.

Electronic book Publication September 2007

This book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.®1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

Golden Seduction

Taige Crenshaw

Dedication

To my mother, who has always been my number one fan. Although you are no longer with me I know you are smiling down at me getting published. To Marilyn, my sister and second mother, who has always believed in me. To my lunch buddies who listen to me ramble on about my writing ideas.

Trademarks Acknowledgment

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Food Network: Television Food Network, G.P. Cable Program Management Co

General Hospital: American Broadcasting Companies, Inc.

King of Cups

The King of Cups is depicted on a throne resting on a stormy sea and with a golden fish hanging from a chain around his neck. There is a dolphin and an anchored ship behind him. The King of Cups is considered to be kind, gentle, loving and he intuitively understands people. He is compassionate to people and will help if he can. He loves deeply. His family or people come first. For them he'll work, sacrifice and do just about anything. The King of Cups will fight to protect those he considers family. Their needs come above his own .

Aleneic is the King of Cups and he takes on his duty with reverence and love. He is a man who has been tested and all he holds dear has been taken from him. Yet he has kept his wisdom and kindness. In Golden Seduction he is given the one thing he has never thought to feel again—hope that things will be different. Aleneic must make choices that will affect not only him but also all those around him. In a world vastly changed from what he has known Aleneic will find a woman whose belief in him will humble and ultimately change him.

Chapter One

With extreme caution Laila Brooks closed the door, resisting the temptation to slam it. Dropping her bag and keys on the table, she moved the mail and package she held to her left hand, reaching up with her right to punch in her code on the keypad on the wall next to the door. The alarm beeped as it activated. Walking down the hall deeper into her apartment, she stopped by the entrance to the living room. Reaching up, she slid the hidden panel open.

“Activate, Thane, approval Brooks, L .”

A pale yellow light scanned her face then paused over her eyes. The light changed to purple.

“Thane activated. Welcome home, Laila ,” a sensuous male voice said.

“Hello, Thane. Bring up comp one and three please. Search for sightings of Aphrodite’s Girdle,” Laila replied absently.

Turning, she moved into her spacious living room, clicking on the lights in her apartment as she went. Reaching the chocolate brown couch, she sat in corner and placed her mail and the package on the table in front of her. Slumping back, Laila closed her eyes. Tiredness seeped into her. It had been a difficult day at work. Usually she loved what she did but lately she was feeling restless. Everything seemed to be getting on her nerves. After almost blowing up at her boss, she had left work earlier than she usually did, thinking it best she work from home. She didn’t know what had her out of sorts. Sitting up, Laila took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes. Replacing them, she glanced over at the calendar on the table beside her. Realization dawned as she looked at it.

“Shoot, my birthday is coming.” Staring at the date, Laila realized it was only two weeks away.

She shook her head, wondering how she hadn’t realized it before. This feeling of discontent always happened just before her birthday Laila usually shrugged it off and was able to cope. She knew what this feeling stemmed from. Shutting down the thought before it could form, Laila leaned forward and picked up her mail and package, put the mail on the couch next to her and looked at the package. A smile curved her lips as she saw the sender’s name on it. Laila reached for the phone on the table next to the couch, picked it up and dialed.

While it rang she opened the package.

“La, what’s up, girl?” a husky voice asked.

Laughing, Laila replied. “Ya, not a thing .Just got home from work.”

Sonya Cyrus’ chuckle came over the line. “How are things at Rarities Incorporated?”

“Busy as usual. When will you be back?”

“The job has been extended another month. I should be back at Rarities then. I’m sorry I’ll miss your

birthday,La . I sent you something.”

Looking down at the open box,Laila reached inside and took out what was there as she replied. “I already got it, that’s why I called.”

“You did? Crap, they were supposed to send it on your birthday. Don’t open it until then.”

“Too late.”Looking at it,Laila frowned as she continued.“Tarot cards. Why did you send me tarot cards?”

“I figured since we had started to check them out we can actually learn them. They are not just tarot cards. Open the wrapping.”

Laila peeled off the wrapping and was caught by the design on the back of the cards. It was in intricate hieroglyphics and etched in gold.

“It’s beautiful.” Tucking the phone against her shoulder,Laila turned over the deck. “Wher—”

Laila trailed off, gasping, captivated by the sight of the man from the card. His face was strongly masculine with chiseled sun-kissed features—a broad forehead, full slightly crooked nose, sharp cheeks and firm chin enhanced his appeal. His long dreadlocks were pulled back in a ponytail with a crown resting on them while his lanky muscular frame was covered in an open vest of indigo with matching fitted slacks that hugged his hips, showing every delicious detail. There was a necklace with a fish around his neck and he held a scepter in his long masculine fingers. It wasn’t his face or body that captivated her. It was his eyes, which were a vivid rich blue that seemed to change as she looked at the card. It reminded her of the depths of the ocean when she went deep-sea diving. Although she knew he wasn’t real, his eyes seemed to be aware. Shaking off the fanciful thought,Laila traced a finger down his face on the card.

“I’m glad you like it.”

Sonya’s voice jolted Laila , making her snatch her hand away. Flipping through the cards, she saw that there were women and different sexy men depicted on the various cards. Returning to the picture of the man, she pulled her eyes away.

“Where did you get them?”

“In a little shop here in Rio. It had a lot of unique things. When I get back we’ll find someone to teach us to use them. Anyway I’m le...”

Absently she listened as Sonya continued to speak. Her eyes kept going back to the card. She wondered which card it was. From her limited knowledge of tarot and the crown on his head she figured he was a King of some kind. Tracing her finger down his chest on the card,Laila stopped herself and leaned forward and placed the card on the table in front of her.

Focusing back on Sonya, she heard her ask, “How’s Renaldo?”

Glancing around, she didn't see him anywhere. "I brought him from upstairs. He was getting lonely in your apartment all alone."

Getting up, she wandered toward the window and looked out at the quiet Harlem street. She absently noted the sun was going down, washing the whole area of brownstones in a warm glow. Turning away from the window, she looked at her spacious living room, trying to find Renaldo. Not seeing him, she wandered across the room. She looked at the card again. As she was reaching for the cards she stopped. She heard a sound farther down the hall, off from the living room.

Laila followed the sound past the kitchen and formal dining area. Laila heard the noise again. Turning away from the stairs leading to the upper level, she went down the hall. She stepped inside her office. Laila took in all the computer equipment, screens and other things there. It was a geek's idea of heaven with all the latest electronic gadgets and toys. There were even things here that were not on the market. Things she had built exclusively for Rarities Incorporated's use, her own personal projects and most especially Thane. She had worked long and hard to build Thane, a fully functional freethinking computer system. She had strived to go past artificial intelligence into a whole new realm. She hadn't fully achieved all she wanted with Thane but she was close. She continued to work on him. She saw the screens to the left and right of the main console was running the data she had requested. Walking over, she looked at it.

"La, where is Renaldo?" Sonya's voice had an edge to it.

"Oh sorry, I got distracted." Laila turned away from Thane and went back to the door.

"I bet you were working on Thane again. I swear if you put as much effort into finding a man you would be having wild uninhibited sex." Sonya's voice was exasperated.

"I don't want a relationship," Laila shot back.

"Please, who's talking about a relationship? Find a man and just have sex. Knock off some tension."

"Humph. You're one to talk. When was the last time you were with anyone?"

"A month ago," Sonya answered rapidly.

Stopping suddenly in front of the door before exiting her office, Laila was surprised. She hadn't known Sonya was seeing anyone. Since they were co-owners of the brownstone together it seemed strange she hadn't seen her with anyone. Even though Sonya lived on the top two floors of the brownstone while she lived on the bottom they were close and in and out of each other's home often. She didn't even know if she had any siblings. She had no idea who her parents were. She was an orphan. Sonya was the closest thing she had to family and they shared their momentous occasions together.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Laila couldn’t hide the hurt in her voice.

“Why would I tell you? You’d only get huffy that I tweaked Rohan a little.”

“What? You messed with Rohan ?” Looking up at the ceiling, Laila wondered how much damage she did.

“Uh-huh, don’t even think about messing with him. I only messed around with his VR functions. Now I really should be offended that you don’t think I can do anything on your precious baby you gave me. We both manage a team together in Rarities. Yes, you are the best but I’m no slouch myself.” Sonya’s tone was matter of fact.

Wincing, Laila replied. “You’re such a liar. We’re both on the same level. Being humble doesn’t suit you.”

Sonya laughed. “I’m not the one who built two super-systems that surpasses anything anyone has ever seen. I appreciate that you gave me Rohan . He’s such a stud.”

Narrowing her eyes, Laila held the cordless phone to her ear and continued out the door then turned left down the hall. “What did you do to Rohan ?”

“Added a sex program to the VR. Maybe you should do the same to Thane.” Sonya’s tone was devilish and teasing.

“God, you’ve been having sex with a computer.”

“No, I’ve haven’t been humping a machine. But I’ve been having imaginary yet fulfilling sex with a computer program I invented. You should really try it.” Something in her tone made Laila glance back.

“Please tell me you didn’t mess with Thane.”

“No, I didn’t mess up Thane.”

Laila walked into her entertainment room. The noise hit her first. With a glance up at the huge projection-screen television she saw that House was on.

As she walked across the room to the couch and then around it, she looked down. “There you are. Your mommy is on the phone.”

“Put the phone on speaker then next to Renaldo.”

Doing as she said, Laila sat next to Renaldo on the couch. Her attention between the TV and Renaldo she watched as the Siberian Husky barked in response to Sonya’s voice. They were actually having a conversation. When Sonya started to tell him all about her trip and the things she had bought him, Laila tuned out, focusing on the show. She had no warning.

“Umph. Christ, Gertrude, don’t jump on me like that, you’re heavy.” Laila winced as she kneaded her leg, then settled Gertrude, her mixed tabby cat, in her lap.

Gertrude let out a rolling purr. Knowing what that meant, Laila reached over, scratched behind her ear and stroked down her back. Glancing back at the screen, she was engrossed again in moments.

“Laila,” Sonya’s voice intruded.

“What?”

“I’ve got to go. They are calling for more info. I can’t wait for this job to be over. How are the renovations coming?”

Laila knew she was asking about the brownstone next door they had recently bought to create a home lab to continue with their personal projects. “It’s ready to go except for getting the equipment.”

Sonya sighed then said, “At least something is going right. Don’t get Renaldo hooked on General Hospital again. I had a hell of a time weaning him off it the last time.” Sonya hung up.

Laila turned off the phone. Looking at Renaldo, she grinned. “We won’t tell Mommy it’s too late already, will we? Let her find out herself.”

Laila laughed then leaned back in the couch to watch the show. Gertrude jumped up onto the arm of the couch and walked around to hang over her neck. Renaldo tried to climb into Laila’s lap but only half of his body could fit, he was too big. He barked.

Rubbing his coat, Laila looked at him briefly. “She’ll be home soon. Now watch House solve the case.”

He nodded his head and settled his head in her lap, turning to watch the show. Forty-five minutes later Laila left them watching TV as she went out the door and down the hall. She should have been working already, not getting caught up in TV. At her office she paused and looked down the hall toward the living room. Debating with herself a minute, she continued on. She wanted another look at the cards.

Say it right. You want a look at the man again. No one has turned you on in a long time.

Silently she could admit it to herself. She was turned on. Just the thought at looking at the card again made her nipples stand at attention and her heart race in anticipation. Laila bit her lip as she walked down the hall. At the mouth of the hallway she stopped, silently cursing herself. She needed to go back to work on finding a clue on how to find Aphrodite’s Girdle. The case she was helping to research for one of the Rarities Incorporated agents was not going well. It was frustrating her that they couldn’t find any leads on it.

Besides continuing to work at upgrading and building Rarities Incorporated computer systems with the most exclusive software and research information, she also liked to research the tricky things that

her research team couldn't find. The co-owners of Rarities only used the team she and Sonya jointly managed on specialized assignments. The other research sectors were used to handle things of this world that were not so difficult to find. Although their team fell in both the research and the computer development sectors she loved combing through the computers or being buried in Rarities' extensive library.

They might be considered computer geeks and didn't get to do the glamorous part as the Rarities field agents did—the actual retrieval of the lost items, creating them or protecting them—but they were still a part of the team. When her research provided valuable help to a Rarities field agent she still got a thrill out of it. She knew that Sonya and the other members of their teams did also. This latest search for Aphrodite's Girdle had them stumped. Her mind on what other sources she could use to get a lead, Laila stepped into the living room and walked toward where she had left the cards. Glancing up, she stopped suddenly at the sight of a man with his back to her, sitting on her couch.

Chapter Two

The man's hair fell in dreadlocks down his back. It reminded her of the man from the card. Shaking off the fanciful thought, Laila continued forward.

Groaning, Laila asked. "What happened now? I just left Ra—"

She trailed off as he turned and looked at her. It was the same man from the card. His eyes were even more vivid than depicted in the card and they impaled her with their intensity. Laila's breath caught as she once again took in his features. They were even more devastating in person. When she had seen him sitting there she had assumed he had come from Rarities Incorporated. She was used to unexpected visitors popping in. Rarities was made up of all kinds of supernatural races. The owners were Zuri Majis, very powerful respected warriors. They had personally warded her house against any malicious intruders.

At the time, a few years ago, she had thought it was strange then realized that they did the same for any non-supernatural employee of Rarities. Although the human clients they worked with didn't know what most of Rarities agents were, all Rarities employees knew that assignments could turn dangerous. Since she knew he wasn't from Rarities Laila figured she knew who had sent him. Laila knew Sonya would expect her to get all huffy and kick him out. Eyes locked with the man, she walked over to him and around the couch. Standing in front of him, she noted that even from his sitting position he didn't even have to look up far to continue to hold her gaze. He had to be well over six feet because she was five feet eleven. He had a closed expression on his face. Stepping forward, Laila quickly straddled him and locked her hands behind his hair. He didn't move and his expression didn't change. Smiling, Laila leaned in and kissed him.

Now you'll have something to tell Sonya, Laila thought.

His lips were firm and lush. Since she was acting out of character she wanted the whole thing. She licked along his lips, coaxing his to open. His lips softened, allowing her access. Stroking her tongue deeply in his mouth, Laila murmured as her tongue met his in a lazy duel. It was quick, lush and intense. Pulling back, Laila felt the man's arms band around her then his hand ran up her back, leaving heat in its wake. His fingers delved into her hair, dislodging her pins. Her hair fell from its bun and down her back. His hands clenched in her hair and he pressed her against his hard body. His lips became demanding and ravenous. He made a guttural sound in his throat, making her mouth vibrate and her pussy start to clench in reaction.

"He's eating me alive" was Laila's last clear thought as her eyes closed and sensation took over.

The clean salty taste of him filled her, blocking everything else out. Moaning, she rubbed against him, feeling his elongated member against her. The rigid feel of it drew a whimper from her. The man growled, meeting the sound. His lips were rough and harsh against her. His tongue stroked inside her mouth in a demand she could not mistake. He was laying claim to her. His fingers tightened in her hair and he pulled her head back, holding her immobile for his taking. Murmuring, Laila rotated her hips against his hard erection. It created a delicious friction but was not enough. Suddenly his kiss gentled. And the contrast between the two left her breathless and wet.

His tongue stroked all over her mouth, finding all the sensitive areas, awakening sensations that made shivers rack her body. His hold was gentle as he held her close against his hard, muscular chest. She could feel the heat pouring off him. His heart beat a rapid taboo against her. Her breasts became even more achy and sensitized. He pulled away slowly. They parted with a lush wet sound. Opening her eyes, she met his darkened gaze. His eyes looked almost black and his mouth was curved in a soft smile.

“You’re a fabulous kisser but there is no way I am sleeping with you. Sonya came up with a unique gift but it isn’t going to happen.” Laila ignored the heated feeling where she was aching and the raspiness in her voice.

The man’s smile widened, taking on a devilish slant. “Your body is calling you a liar.” He leaned in and said close to her lips, “I can smell your desire.”

Licking her lips, she saw him watch the movement. He raised his eyes to hers and there was a hungry look on his face. A look that said he wanted to lie her down and feast.

The man purred. “Ummm... I could have you naked and my cock buried deep inside you in two seconds.”

Laila couldn’t find her voice to disagree.

The man looked at her, his expression shifting to curiosity. “Who’s Sonya?”

Confused, Laila looked at him. “She sent you as my gift.”

The man shook his head. “I don’t know anyone named Sonya. I came out of the card.”

Dread filled her. Laila felt his hands drop away. A glance over her shoulder at the table showed the empty tarot card and next to it was the crown and scepter. Turning back to the man, her eyes dropped and she noted for the first time the necklace with a fish on it around his neck. Looking closer, she realized it was of a dolphin and in the place of its eye there was a cordierite stone. Her knowledge of rare gems helped her recognize what it was. Looking back at the man, she saw he watched her patiently, unmoving.

“Thane, combat mode now,” Laila screamed as she jumped off the man’s lap and ran around the couch, away from him.

“Combat mode armed,” a male voice stated.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Thane take form and go after the man. Knowing she had only seconds to get to her office before the man realized Thane couldn’t touch him, Laila ran down the hall. Reaching the door of her office, she saw Gertrude and Renaldo racing toward her from the other end of the hall. Rushing into her office, she waited for them to enter. They shot past the office. Swearing, Laila wondered why they would pick now to not follow the command that she and Sonya had trained them to do in case they ever were attacked.

Glancing frantically around her office for something to fight with, Laila cursed again. It wouldn't matter what she got, she didn't know how to fight anyway. Seeing a stapler and a letter opener on the desk, she snatched them up. Grimacing, she knew she looked stupid and it wouldn't protect her but maybe she could catch him off guard and rescue Gertrude and Renaldo. Turning, she faced the door and waited for him to come after her. After a few minutes her arms started to ache. Lowering them, she crept to the door and peeked around it. The hall was empty and the house strangely silent. A lump formed in her throat. He had to have killed Gertrude and Renaldo. They hated strangers and attacked them. Furious, Laila stepped into the hall, brandishing her stapler and letter opener. She would kill him for that.

Stomping down the hall, she went into the living room and said. "I'm going to kill you, motherfuc
__"

She trailed off in shock at the sight before her. Renaldo and Gertrude were lying at the man's feet, looking up at him silently. The man's back was to her as he waved his hand in the air, cutting through the holographic image of Thane.

"Amazing," the man said, doing it again.

Thane looked at him, a sardonic look on his holographic face. "Stop doing that."

The man looked startled then stepped back. "You speak. What are you?"

Thane replied in a St. Thomian accent, his preferred tone, "Thane. A fully freethinking LB3000."

The man frowned. "What is that?"

Thane looked at the man, exasperation clear on his caramel-toned holographic face. "Ask her."

He waved long tapered fingers toward her. The man turned to look at her as if just realizing she was there.

Looking away from his intense gaze, Laila looked at Thane. "Disengage combat mode."

Thane nodded his head and winked out. Walking over to where the man stood, Laila took a seat on the couch and looked at him.

"Who are you?"

The man looked at her and cocked his head. "You're no longer afraid of me. Why?"

Shrugging, Laila gestured. "Them."

The man looked down at Gertrude and Renaldo then back at her. "The shifters make you trust me."

“No, they are pets. Not shifters.”

The man looked at her then back at Gertrude and Renaldo, horror on his face. “Pets? You keep them contained.”

Looking back at her, there was fury on his face. “Release them at once.”

Laila, having dealt with men who thought they could control her before, sighed. “No, they cannot change from one form to another.”

The man looked back at them again then knelt on the floor beside them. They clambered up to him. Reaching out, he stroked first Gertrude’s head then Renaldo’s.

For a moment he rubbed them then looked at her, sadness on his face. “The world has changed so much since I was last here.” He looked at her then said in a formal tone, “I apologize. You asked who I was. Aleneic, the current King of Cups. Nice to meet you Ms.—”

“Laila Brooks. Call me Laila.” Looking at Aleneic, she tried to remember with her limited knowledge of tarot what the King of Cups represented. It dawned on her. “The King of Cups represents water. He is wise, understanding, with a deep knowledge of the world that comes from the heart. He cares deeply about others, responds to their needs with compassion, intuitively understands people, is generous natured. He can heal with a gentle touch and a quiet word. Has a calm head and is relaxed in all situations, tolerant of all points of view. The King of Cups has a humorous nature that can be intoxicating. He is a g—”

Laila focused back on the man. She noticed the look of shock on his face. She struggled not to flush as she realized she sounded like a computer spouting off information. This was the exactly the reason why she usually avoided social situations—she was very bad at them. Laila shifted away from him. His hand on her arm stopped her. Her heart rate increased at his touch. As she glanced down at his hand resting on hers she took in the differences between their hands. There was strength and gentleness in the sun-kissed hand against hers. She shifted her hand, watching her caramel-colored fingers flex. They were more used to taking apart things and putting them back together to make them work better than holding hands. Yes, she had to use a gentle touch to make sure not to break anything, but she was better with computers than human emotion.

Aleneic spoke, bringing her attention back to him.

“You are a fascinating woman, Laila Brooks.” His voice was soft and as gentle as his touch.

The look of compassion in his eyes was tempered by hunger. Drawing in a deep breath, Laila was captivated by his unique scent. It reminded her of the scent of the sea at night. Sensual and intoxicating. Aleneic leaned in and placed his lips over hers, gently and softly. Laila felt the kiss all the way to the pit of her soul. His lips played over hers in a lazy and all-too-brief movement. He pulled back and she was captured in his stormy sea-like gaze. There were currents of emotion in them that she could not define.

He smiled again, a crooked twist of his lips. "I find myself unable to resist you,Laila , and that is a dangerous thing for me. My time is very limited and I cannot afford to get too attached. I'm usually able to keep a much-needed distance, yet this time I find I cannot. I will have you,Laila ."

She opened her mouth to speak. He placed a tapered finger over her lips.

"Shhh... It's all right. I know this is unusual situation but when you are ready let me know." He leaned in and spoke against her lips. "Then we will share such delicious mutual pleasure that it will warm us when we are no longer together."

His eyes grew sad as he kissed her. His lips were hard and demanding. She opened hers under his hungry assault, closing her eyes, reveling in his taking. His tongue swept in, laying claim to her. Aleneic's tongue mated with hers. His arms banded around her and he lifted her into his lap. Gasping at the feel of him against her,Laila murmured and locked her hands around his neck. His heated skin burned her up. As suddenly as it had started he stopped, pulling away.

Blurily,Laila opened her eyes and watched him. His eyes were closed, his face etched in harsh lines of need and a muscle throbbed in his jaw. She could see him struggle for control. Drawing her hands from around him, she felt him shudder then still. His eyes flashed open and he looked at her. In them she saw a man on the edge. Then they calmed. Laila blinked at how suddenly his eyes changed then she remembered what she knew of the King of Cups. Frowning, she wished it was that easy for her. She felt as though her skin would burn off unless the need coursing through her was relieved.

Aleneic smiled softly. "When you're ready for me let me know."

Narrowing her eyes,Laila didn't appreciate his arrogant assumption that she would lie down and say, "Take me, I'm yours". Sliding off his lap, she sat as far away from him as she could get.

"If you think just because you come out of the card whenever it suits you that I, like some of the other poor unsuspecting women you've probably seduced, would lie down and give you free rein of my body, you're delusional and in for a big surprise." She looked at him and the pain on his face made her breath stall.

"I have never seduced any of my previous card holders. I have no choice of what the card demands of me. None."Aleneic's voice was intense.

Watching him,Laila's mind went back to something he had said earlier. "When you introduced yourself you said you're the current King of Cups. I didn't think tarot cards had the ability to change people. How is that possible?"

Aleneic slid across the couch to Laila and took her hand. She stiffened but he brought her closer to him. When she tried to pull away he held her firmly until she stilled. Looking into her expressive topaz gaze,Aleneic wondered why the fates had brought him to a woman who would make him want what he might not be able to have. His attention was again caught by her lush mouth that made him want to keep kissing her senseless. Her lush plump bottom lip was begging for his teeth to nip it and the top heart-shaped lip made his tongue ache to give it a thorough tongue-lashing.

He knew it had been wrong to taste her again. The first time had made him hot but the second then third time had made him throb and ache. An ache that was driving him crazy. He knew it was only a matter of time before she would come to him and then he would take her every way he could.

Aleneic's mind flashed to how it would be as his fingers delved into her reddish-brown hair while he kissed along her smooth mocha-colored sculpted cheeks to her luscious mouth, then down to her chin with the delightful little dent. He would spend some time nibbling on it before going down under her chin to her neck. Slowly, he would lick down between her ripe full breasts then nibble on each one before exploring all of the rest of her, including that lovely butt and lust-inspiring hips. He frowned, making a note to take his time in exploring her. He saw she was watching him silently, waiting for him to speak.

He looked into her expressive topaz gaze, pleased at the hint of lust there. A low growl came from his lips. He fought to get control over his own needs. Desire warred with duty as he tried to focus on why he was here.

He replied, "No, tarot cards don't usually change people but due to my own nature of being generous I was cursed into this deck of cards." He let go of her hand, picked up the cards and looked at them briefly before placing them back on the table. Aleneic brought his attention back to her as he continued. "Long ago I was the ruler of my own kingdom of people. We were more a family than ruler and subjects. We thrived, shared and helped anyone in need." He laughed bitterly. "Yes, I knew there was evil in the world. Hell, I fought besi —" He cut himself off, not wanting to say too much. It was too painful to even mention. "We fought to protect what was ours and those of our allies, yet I was naïve to believe it would not touch us. I was a young, arrogant fool. So young. We all were. My people and I did not heed the warning signs. It was my own nature of not seeing the true evil in others that was my downfall and that of my people."

Glancing back at the cards, he embraced the guilt and pain he felt like a loving companion. He had lived with it a long time and at least this time he knew it would end, no matter what. He saw the questions in Laila's eyes as she waited for him to continue.

"A man named Byichus came to my kingdom, asking for help to rescue his own people from an evil sorcerer who had taken them captive. I and my best warriors went to his aid. When we got to Byichus' kingdom it was a brutal but surprisingly quick battle to get rid of the beings that had taken over his kingdom. When it was all done there was no one there. I questioned where his people were. He replied he did not know. So instead of leaving him there we took him back with us to my kingdom to get more help and supplies."

He paused, thinking back to that day and how foolish he had been, then he continued. "As I stepped into my home it didn't register at first that it was silent. Too silent. When I arrived at my great hall all my people were frozen solid. They were turned to stone. Furious, I turned, and that is when I saw Byichus, the man I had helped, in the middle of my warriors who were now stone also. As I started toward him he held out what he had been hiding. I stopped under the beauty of it. It looked just like the card I came out of but it was solid gold and encrusted with rare gems. There were etchings around the edges. Even as I snapped out of my stupor the man screamed "Drac Torat" then I felt myself being sucked into it. As I lay in the card and looked at Byichus, he smiled a nasty grin, saying my kingdom

was his. I was powerless and could do nothing. Then through the silence I heard the one sound I would recognize anywhere. The battle cry of the leader of the kingdom adjacent to my own. There was fear and hate in Byichus ' gaze as he watched me."

He stopped clearing his throat from the tears that filled it. "Byichus held up the card and I watched the leader of the adjacent kingdom look at me then Byichus laughed and disappeared."

"How long have you been in the card?"Laila's question was quiet.

Watching her, he spoke again. "I was seven hundred and ninety-eight years old when I was put in the card. I have been called from it two times prior to this one, at seven-hundred-and-ninety-eight-year intervals."

Laila quickly did the math in her head. "You've been in the card for two thousand three hundred and ninety-four years. So that would make you three thousand one hundred and ninety-two years old."Laila looked at him. "Wow, talk about aging gracefully."

Aleneic chuckled and watched embarrassment fill her face.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to make light of it."Laila sounded contrite.

Taking her hand again, Aleneic replied, "Shh... Don't. I know what you mean. Yes, I am that old." He laughed.

"What happened to Byichus ? Why are you called out of the card? How long are you free from the card? What do you have to do to be free permanently?" Her face showed she was thinking hard.

His head spun withall the question she was throwing at him while he felt hope leap inside. She was asking all the right questions and maybe this time things could be different.

"I don't know what happened to Byichus . When I came out of the card the first time he wasn't there and I didn't understand what was going on. Then the most amazing woman came into the room and she told me her name was Saber and she had taken on my case. She was a Fate and I had a chance to free myself or a choice to make. Saber explained that each seven hundred and ninety-eight years I would come out of the card and have a chance to search for the way to free myself. I could have seven, nine or eight days to complete my task before I was taken back into the card. I would have to enlist the aid of the current card keeper to help me find it."

"Find what."

Looking at Laila , he wondered if this time would be different from all the others. He knew it didn't matter this time. He would make a choice before it was too late.

He answered her, "The Golden Tarot."

Chapter Three

Laila frowned in confusion. “What is the Golden Tarot?”

“It’s the card that controls all the decks of tarot. It was the card Byichus used to curse me with. From the way Saber explained it and my own research each time I come out of the card the Golden Tarot is brought to light. I just have to find it before Byichus does. Whoever finds it first will control the tarot decks and ultimately the fate of the others. If Byichus gets it first I will be stuck in the card forever.” Aleneic couldn’t even fathom it.

Laila spoke, drawing his attention “I’ll help you find it. Actually Rarities Incorporated, the company I work for, specializes in it. They find, protect, restore or create rare items. The owners can help you.”

He shook his head. “No. Only the cardholder can know about this. No one else can help in the search.”

Laila sighed then frowned. “There is always a catch. I’m only an information junkie. I’m not an agent of Rarities Incorporated. Hell, I don’t even know how to fight.”

Aleneic smiled at her earnest look. “Information is what we need to find it. I don’t expect you to fight. I’ll protect you.”

Her eyes narrowed and fury swept over her face. “I’m not the little woman to be sitting meekly by while oh great big man protects me. I can protect myself just fine. I don’t know hand-to-hand fighting but I’m sure I can come up with some gadgets to use to protect myself.”

Laila stood and gave him a look as if daring him to say anything. Being wise to the ways of women he said nothing and stood to join her.

“How long do we have?”

Gratitude swamped him. “You’re going to help me.”

She gave him a strange look. “Of course. Haven’t the other holders helped you?”

Disgust swept him. “Yes, but for their own means. The first holder helped but wanted to keep the cards for themselves and sell them. The second wanted to help me to keep me enslaved for her pleasure.”

Laila arched an eyebrow. “Don’t worry. I’ll try to control myself from attacking your alluring body.”

The dryness of her tone made him chuckle. He saw a grin twitch her lips.

“I wouldn’t mind if you, ummm , wanted to attack me. I’d welcome it.” Smiling, a devilish twist of his lips, he saw her eyes widen behind her glasses.

“Keep dreaming. Come on, we have work to do.” She turned and walked around the couch, going across the room and toward the hallway.

Watching her go, Aleneic appreciated the sway of her hips and the bobbing of her firm rounded ass. She looked back over her shoulder an expression of curiosity on her face.

“Stop watching my ass and come on.” She looked forward and disappeared down the hall.

Aleneic chuckled at her, then looked down at the tarot deck. Pain filled him. He picked up the deck from the table, lifting the left side of his vest. He placed the cards in the vest’s inner pocket. After letting the vest go he patted over the cards and felt his heart beat. This time he could not fail. He heard Laila speaking to someone. Going toward the sound of the voices, he stopped at the open doorway. Shock made his mouth drop open. With one step inside he was assaulted by the light and colors. He gazed around the room, taking in a massive screen running what looked to be information. There were weird wires and other things around the room. He didn’t know what any of this was. Each time he came out of the card it was to a whole new world and more advances. The absence of voices speaking made him look at Laila. When he saw the man he had seen earlier in the living area a shaft of jealousy filled him.

Aleneic could admit he was handsome. The man was as tall as him with strong features, a muscular body and a grace he supposed women would find pleasing. To him he was the competition and he didn’t like it one bit. Laila smiled and beckoned him over. Going to her he took her hand in his and gave the man a look that clearly said “his”. The man’s violet gaze narrowed as he smiled, baring his teeth in response. Narrowing his eyes, Aleneic stepped forward. Laila squeezed his hand. He looked down at her and saw confusion on her face. She looked back at the other man and the man’s expression blanked. Watching him, Aleneic decided to get rid of him at the first opportunity.

“Thane, this Aleneic and he needs our help to find something called the Golden Tarot.”

“Why are you telling him? I thought I made it clear only you could know. This man has no business here,” Aleneic hissed, giving Thane a nasty look.

Thane looked back at him and his smile was equally as vicious.

“Thane isn’t a man, Aleneic. He’s a computer,” Laila said.

Aleneic saw the bitter acknowledgment in Thane’s gaze and something more that Aleneic understood perfectly—hopelessness. Thane’s expression blanked again. Stepping forward, Aleneic waved his hand at Thane and it went through him.

“Stop doing that,” Thane growled in an accented voice.

Grinning, Aleneic did it again. A crackle sounded and Aleneic jumped, swearing as something shocked him. Looking around, he saw a barrel of some kind lowering to a counter across the room.

“Thane, behave,” Laila chastised.

Aleneic saw Thane throw a nasty smile at him then turn to Laila, a contrite look on his face. “It was only a little shock. If the big lug can’t take it then he can leave.”

Laila sighed. “Come on, Thane. We need your help. Aleneic, Thane is a computer that I built. Well, actually he is more. He has real intelligence and is freethinking. He is a whole new realm. If anyone can find information on the Golden Tarot he can. Tell him all you know.”

She looked back at Thane. “Listen to what he says and find whatever you can. I’ll be back in a bit.”

She turned to walk out. Aleneic stepped in her way. She stopped and looked at him.

“Where are you going?”

She frowned and he could tell from her expression she didn’t like being questioned but she answered him. “Out. We need more info and I only know one place to get it. Rarities Incorporated.”

She stepped around him and went back out the door. He could hear her muttering. It sounded suspiciously like she was cursing. From the doorway he saw her stomp down the hall, open a door and pull out her bag then she stomped back toward him. She stopped and glared at him then went past him, disappearing through the living room. He heard a door slam.

He looked down and started to unplug a power cord. A crackle sounded and he jumped out of the way just in time as the energy shot past him, almost scorching him. Rolling onto his feet, he looked out the doorway, seeing the wall outside now had a scorch mark. Aleneic looked back at Thane.

He was watching him, a cool look on his face. “Don’t touch my stuff.”

Aleneic looked at him cautiously and walked over to him. “I’ve never known a computer like you.”

Thane looked at him. “There is nothing like me. Well, except that know-it-all upstairs who is a distant second. I’m sure in 1209 there were not computers around.”

It didn’t surprise Aleneic that he had been listening. “Actually there were but they were just an idea back then. In A—um, my kingdom before this, we had them but nothing like you.”

Thane smiled, baring his teeth. “And where is this kingdom?”

Aleneic grinned in return. Laila hadn’t asked and he was grateful she hadn’t. He didn’t want to lie to her. He was bad at it. With Thane he just ignored him and asked a question of his own.

“Why haven’t you told her that you’re in love with her?”

Thane looked disgusted and bitter. “I’m just a computer albeit a far advanced one. And I’m not in

love with her.”

Aleneic looked at him. “You’re lying.”

Thane looked at him, arching an eyebrow. “Although I am, thanks to Sonya, able to now feel such things such as lust, love, need and attraction, I have thankfully not been corrupted with such a useless emotion. I do not feel the clamp of need around your cock that doesn’t let you go like you do for Laila. I do love her, but as my sister.”

Aleneic wondered how he knew.

Thane spoke again. “It’s written all over your face and your body temp goes crazy when you’re around her.”

Aleneic looked at him in horror. “Shit. You can read my mind.”

Thane shook his head. “No. You wear your thoughts on your face. Just because I am a computer most people think I would not be able to understand what I am thinking. Only Laila sees me as more. Mess with her and I will kill you.”

The threat was said in such a mild manner that Aleneic almost missed it. Blinking, he looked at Thane and narrowed his eyes. “You can try but I’m not easily killed.” Waving his hand, he built his sword from the air and widened his stance for fight mode.

Thane looked at him and didn’t move. Something in his gaze made Aleneic shift sideways so he could still keep an eye on him and look behind him. Seeing the various weapons that were floating in the air around the room, Aleneic looked back at Thane. Inclining his head in respect, Aleneic saw a genuine smile spread on Thane’s face.

Thane spoke again. “You will be good for her. She needs some shaking up.”

“Thanks for your permission.”

“You’re welcome,” Thane shot back.

Sighing, Aleneic replied, “That was sarcasm.”

Thane’s eyes twinkled. “I know.”

Watching him, Aleneic laughed. “We just might become friends.”

He saw the shock on Thane’s face. “You would have me as a friend. I’m a computer.”

Shaking his head, Aleneic said. “You’re no computer and I would be proud to call you friend while I am here.”

Thane looked at him and replied. "Even if we become friends I will still kill you if you hurt her."

"I would expect nothing less."

Thane looked at him closely then, seeming to come to a decision, he walked back to the center console and through it. Aleneic pulled up a chair and saw his face on the screen.

"Let's get to work," Thane's voice came from the screen.

Aleneic started to tell him about all his previous searches. While he spoke, in the back of his mind he thought of Laila and wondered when she would be back.

* * * * *

Reaching up to the top shelf, Laila took down another book and stepped back, adding it to her pile. But it still wasn't the one she wanted. Her mind had already been on the search when Aleneic had questioned her about where she was going. She was not used to answering to anyone. They gave her free rein at work, knowing that when she was focused on a task it was wise to get out of her way. Aleneic would soon learn not to question her when it came to research. When Aleneic had mentioned the Golden Tarot something had niggled in her mind about it. She had read that name before but couldn't remember where. Looking around the deserted Rarities Incorporated library she wondered where she had seen it.

"I thought you had already left for the day," Zarya Burke's smoky voice inquired behind her.

Laila stiffened slightly as she turned. She pushed her glasses back on her nose, watching as Zarya strode into the room. The vivid crimson suit she wore on her lithe frame brought out the vibrancy of her rich honey skin. Laila couldn't help but wish she was as graceful as Zarya. Zarya's fathomless silver gaze impaled Laila as she looked at her. She didn't even wonder how Zarya knew she had left and come back. Zarya seemed to know everything. Besides being one of the co-owners of Rarities Incorporated, Zarya was also one of the leaders of the Zuri Maji. They were fierce warriors and Laila still didn't know the extent of all their powers.

"Yes, I did but came back to do some more research on Aphrodite's Girdle." Laila ignored the guilty feeling of lying to her.

Zarya watched her, those intense silver eyes of hers seeing everything. Laila tried to look innocent.

Zarya nodded and turned to leave. "We appreciate your dedication, Laila, but try not to think about it on your vacation."

Laila frowned, realizing she had forgotten about the two weeks she had taken off with Sonya to go to Rio for her birthday. It dawned on her now that was why Sonya had apologized for missing her birthday.

Zarya looked back at her as she reached the door. “Be careful,Laila .”

She turned and left. Laila’s heart sped up in fear. Zarya was also a seer and knew things before they happened. She took a step forward to go after her but stopped, knowing she couldn’t chance Zarya finding out about the Golden Tarot or Aleneic . She also knew that Zarya only saw by way of feelings what could happen and not exactly what did happen. Laila would heed her caution and be careful. She reached for another book. It was the one she was looking for. Quickly she grabbed her bag and put it inside. Looking around cautiously, she hoped no one would stop her and make her sign it out, as was protocol. If they did she would have a lot of trouble explaining why she needed a book called Wa’lous Cremiops , which was basically a book on water myths, when Aphrodite’s Girdle was from Olympus. Leaving the rest of the books where they lay, she walked rapidly out of the library and to the elevator. She stepped inside, turned and waited for the doors to close. Zarya moved back into view, watching her. Laila’s heart beat rapidly as she looked back at Zarya .Zarya said nothing as the door closed, just smiled gently.

As the elevator rose Laila wondered if security would be waiting for her on the ground floor. When the doors opened she stepped out cautiously. No one was there. Hurrying across the empty area to the glass doors, she waited for someone to stop her. Laila hurried outside and, seeing the darkened street, she breathed a sigh of relief. After going down the stairs, she stopped and looked back at the imposing building that made up Rarities Incorporated. It was a beautiful building forty-seven floors high, constructed of glass and chrome. Something seemed to glint in the light. Laila blinked. She could swear she saw light surrounding the building. She reached behind her glasses, rubbing her eyes. With another look she noted it seemed the same as it always did. Laila shook her head at her fancifulness as she turned and continued down the stairs. She walked around the side of the building to her car. There were a few more errands to run before going home. Her heart raced even more at the thought of seeing Aleneic .

“Control yourself.”Laila lectured herself firmly.

Holding her bag with the book tighter, she continued onto her car.

Three hours later Laila closed the door to her bedroom and held the book to her chest. She had everything she needed for their adventure. She laughed softly at herself. The excitement she usually felt when tracking down a tricky item for Rarities Incorporated was already humming in her mind. The anticipation of actually being out in the field instead of in the library or behind the computer made her stomach a little queasy with fear and longing. This was what she had always wanted to try but knew she didn’t have the gumption to ask for. She knew that if she asked, the partners would have trained her and let her try. She hadn’t asked, not wanting to look like a fool. She left her bedroom and walked back down the stairs with her mind on whether the data Thane had probably already acquired would give them any leads. Frowning, she looked at her wrist. She would have already known what he had found if she hadn’t forgotten her com link.

She stepped inside her office and frowned at the strangely silent room. There was no data and no sign of Aleneic or Thane. She put down the book on the console, turning as she heard a sound. She went down the hall to the entertainment room and saw that A Different World was playing on the screen. Renaldo’s head popped up over the couch and he looked at her and barked. Gertrude walked up the arm of the couch and meowed. Laila waved them back to the show, turned and went back down the

hall into the living room.

A sound stopped her as she began to speak. She walked around the other side of the stairs, going down the other hall. She heard voices then swearing followed by laughter.

Laila walked into the room. She stopped, bemused by the sight of Thane leaning against the counter laughing while Aleneic swore quite colorfully.

Aleneic glared at Thane. "Some help you are."

"What's going on here?" Laila asked just as the scent of something heavenly reached her nose. With a glance first at Thane's violet amused gaze, then at Aleneic's stormy blue gaze, Laila stopped before them.

Thane answered, amusement clear in his voice, "I was showing lunkhead how to use your stove."

She looked at Aleneic and saw him flush then grin sheepishly. "It's different from last time."

At that look she went gooey inside. She saw he had made quite a spread. There was no mistaking the Shrimp Florentine boiling in the pan and there were tomato grits in the casserole dish. On the side was a caramel cheesecake. It all looked as good as it smelt. It was her favorite meal she made when she had time to cook. Looking back at him, she saw him shift uncomfortably.

Walking up to him, she touched his arm. "How do you know how to make all this?"

Thane snorted. "He discovered the Food Network website."

Aleneic looked away and glared at him. "Beat it."

Thane laughed and surprisingly walked out of the room. Aleneic turned back to her. The look in his eye made her nipples pebble and her pussy get wet. Aleneic's smile was knowledgeable. Taking her hand, he led her to the table and pushed her gently into a chair.

"Let me serve you." He turned and went back to the counter.

He scooped grits out of the dish and put it on the plates he had ready there, then spooned the shrimp over it. Picking up each plate, he walked toward her. As she watched the smooth grace with which he moved, she had a flash of what he would be like in bed. Laila's pussy clenched in reaction. Aleneic smiled at her and set the plate before her and set his own down by the seat closest to her. Laila tore her gaze away from him and stared as utensils, napkins, small plates, followed by the cheesecake floated from various drawers and the counter. They settled on the table, the napkins folding then the utensils resting on them. The cheesecake, plate and knife settled close to Aleneic. Looking back at him, she wondered how she could resist ripping his clothes off and having him on the table.

Chapter Four

Laila sobered at the thought. Here she was lusting after his body and he had limited time to get free. Picking up her fork, she took some of the shrimp and grits. She moaned at the first bite.

“This is delicious. I couldn’t have done it better myself.” Looking at him from under her lashes, she grinned.

Aleneic laughed and picked up his own fork. She watched as he took his first bite. His face became flushed and he let out a moan of his own. Stilling the shudder that ripped through her, Laila watched him fighting for control.

“Food has surely changed. Who knew there was a whole website out there about it? Heck, the world has changed. And a lot of it not for the better.” Aleneic sounded sad.

Looking back at him, she asked, “What are you talking about?”

He shook his head. “The wars, death and such. It is so sad. Where are the magical creatures, beings and other races? From what Thane told me they now hide like criminals.”

“Isn’t that how it has always been?”

“In your history books yes, but not in reality. All beings walked this earth together and you didn’t have to hide who you were. I don’t understand. With all the advances humanity has made why must other beings hide?” Aleneic’s confusion was clear.

Frowning, Laila asked, “It used to be different?”

He sat up and there was excitement in his voice and on his face. “Oh yes. It was a wondrous thing. All the various species interacting together.” His face changed to sadness. “I can’t understand how the gods and goddesses allowed this.”

Laila almost choked on the bite she had just swallowed. “The gods and goddesses, as in Olympus?”

Aleneic nodded. “Yes, them and the African gods and goddesses. The Olympians ruled the sky and the Egyptians ruled the earth. I cannot imagine what happened for this to change.”

Laila put down her fork and looked at him in shock. She couldn’t imagine it. The gods and goddesses were real? Even with all the types of creatures she saw in at Rarities she had never imagined there were actual gods and goddesses. Hell, she couldn’t even fathom that there were two types who ruled in harmony. Thinking on it, she frowned, then remembering her Egyptian mythology, she looked at Aleneic.

“Have you ever heard of Sekmet?”

Aleneic looked up from his plate pleasure on his face. "Yes. How is she?"

Laila shook her head. "I don't know, but from what I remember from Egyptian myths she was a sun goddess from Egypt, defender of the divine order. It was said that she became so disgusted with people's lack of reverence and destructive ways that she started to destroy the world."

Aleneic reached over and gripped her hand. "What happened to her? How was she stopped?"

"Until today I thought it was a myth. There was nothing mentioned about her after that. So I don't know." Turning her hand to cup his, she gripped it. "You cared for her."

"She was my friend. One of the few. When I came out of the card she would find me so we would see each other. The last time I was out of the card only for seven days and I thought I hadn't seen her because it was such a brief time. I wonder where she is." Aleneic looked saddened.

"When we get you free of the card we can find out."

His hand tightened on hers then he let her go. "It is an impossible task. I have hoped too many times and come up short."

"This time will be different."

He looked at her. "I hope it will be."

He raised their joined hands to his lips. Gently, he kissed her knuckles as he looked into her eyes. Laila felt a flash of heat. She gulped as she silently admitted she wanted not only to save him. She wanted him with a wanton lust that she didn't know if she would control.

Why control it, you can have both. Jump his bones, enjoy it while it lasts and find the Golden Tarot. But she wasn't the kind of person to have casual sex. She would stay focused and help him.

Detangling her hand, she pulled away and picked up her fork. "How long do we have before you go back into the card?"

"I don't know. It can be seven, eight or nine days," Aleneic replied quietly.

Losing her appetite, Laila put down her fork and pushed back her chair and stood. "Come on, we have to get to work."

Aleneic joined her. Striding out of the room side by side, Laila was silent as they went down the hall, around the stairs and down the other hall to her office. Stepping inside, she saw that Thane had information on the screens. Thane looked down at them from the middle screen.

"Running all the probabilities, my best estimate is that we have seven days," he answered without her asking.

Shoulders slumping,Laila had already figured that out but hoped that Thane would tell her differently. She looked at Aleneic and his face was calm and accepting. Clenching her fist, she knew she would not accept it.

Turning to Thane, she pulled out the chair, sat and opened the book. Out of the corner of her eyes she saw Aleneic pull up a chair next to her.

“What—”

“Shut up and let me work,”Laila growled.

“Shhh... You don’t want to piss her off,” Thane’s voice cautioned.

“It’s different from this?”Aleneic sounded amused.

“Oh yes. Much worse,” Thane answered, mock fear in his voice.

Ignoring them both,Laila sped-read the book, muttering she typed and read. The data scrolled as she typed and continued to read. Finally glancing up, she looked at the screen and let her mind go blank.

“Got you, you squirrely bastard,” she grinned.

At the amused look on Aleneic’s face, she growled, “What?”

“You’re frightening when you work.”

With a laugh, she replied, “I know. So watch it, buddy.” Gesturing to the screen, she asked, “Do you see it?”

He looked at where she was pointing. “What am I looking at?”

“A pattern,”Laila said smugly.

He still looked confused.

“A pattern of possible locations of Golden Tarot,” Thane answered before she could.

Aleneicstood so fast his chair skittered across the room. “You found it.” He turned to her, hope on his face.

“No, these are possible locations.” Sorry to even say itLaila watched his face, waiting for his expression to change.

It didn’t. He looked at her. “A possibility is at least something. Thank you,Laila , this is the closest that I have ever been.”

He pulled her out of the chair and into his body. Holding her close, he rubbed his hands up and down her back, leaving tingles in its wake. Leaning back, he looked at her.

“How did you get this so fast?”

Unwilling to admit it, Laila shrugged.

“Laila never forgets anything she reads. And finding patterns is her specialty,” Thane replied, pride in his voice.

Turning, she looked at Thane and hissed, “Shut up, Thane.”

Thane frowned. “What, it’s the truth.”

“If that was true I would know where Aphrodite’s Girdle was.”

Thane snorted. “You can’t chase what doesn’t exist. Since the gods and goddesses don’t exist it’s not real. They are just messing with you at Rarities to stump you for once.”

Smug that he didn’t know something for once, Laila replied, “They are real, Mr. Know-it-all. Aleneic just told me. Not only are there gods and goddesses of Olympus there are also African gods and goddesses. One was for the sky and the other for the earth.”

Thane was silent then looked outraged. “You mean it wasn’t a trick. Fuck. I could have found Aphrodite’s Girdle by now if I knew it was real.”

“How? You’ve been searching all this time—” Laila trailed off as she saw the guilt on his computer face. “You mean you haven’t really been looking. Thane.”

“Umm...Rohan is calling me. I’ll get back with you later.” Thane winked out, leaving the screen blank.

“We’re going to talk about this later, Thane,” Laila warned as she turned and looked at Aleneic who was amused. “Sorry.”

“No need to apologize. You argue the way brothers and sisters do.”

Laila realized he was right. Although she didn’t know who her actual family was Thane was the closest thing she had to a brother while Sonya was the closest she had to sister.

Shrugging, she stepped out of his arms. “Where do you want to start first?”

“Bed.”

Turning, she glared at him. “Look, buster, just because you kissed me a few times doesn’t mean you canju —”

Aleneic cut her off. “Different beds. At least for now. You’re exhausted and it will do no good to start now. We both need rest.”

Feeling foolish, she nodded and led him back to a room close to the office. No way could she have him sleeping close to her and not be tempted to go to him. Showing him the room, she watched as he walked around then glanced out the window. He looked back at her then nodded his head.

“Thanks, Laila Brooks.” His look became hungry and he purred in a sensuous tone. “Pleasant dreams.”

Laila found she was unable to speak. She backed out the door, closing it as he continued to watch her. Laila drew in a deep breath, looking at the closed door, imagining going back inside. She turned away and went back to her room. Quickly getting into the shower, she cleaned up, stepped out, toweled off and put on her nightgown. With a yawn, she slid between the soft sheets on her bed. Laila stared out her balcony at the moon shining down, casting the furnishings and stone floor of the balcony in an eerie glow. She closed her eyes, drifting off into slumber while her mind raced with desire for Aleneic .

Aleneic gazed out the window of his room at the quiet street. He wouldn’t sleep until exhaustion took it out of his hands. He could last days without sleep. Each time he came from the card it was the same—he feared sleeping and missing a moment of this precious time. He feared if he slept he would wake to find himself in the card. Time in the card dragged but he was aware of each moment. It was the ultimate torture to know what was going on but be able to do anything about it.

Aleneic glanced up at the moon and thought of Laila above him, wondering again why the fates had been so cruel as to bring him here to this woman. Helplessness filled him and he knew that it didn’t matter. The decision had to be made and this desire he felt for Laila would not get in the way. He took out the cards from the inside pocket of his vest and fanned them out.

Looking at them and then his blank King of Cups card, he spoke. “If I am so wise and caring why can I not make the choice I know I must? I’m sorry. Oh gods, I am so sorry.”

Chapter Five

Aleneic held the hot cup in his hand, enjoying the small comfort of being able to feel it. Sitting at the kitchen table, he watched out the window at the dawn sky as the sun was trying to streak through. He savored the sweet taste of his cup of tea. He knew it was strange but he felt at peace. As he put down his cup a smile curved his lips at the sound of her footsteps.

“What are you doing?” Laila asked, her voice still husky from sleep.

Without looking, Aleneic held out his hand. When he felt her fingers brush his he pulled her into his lap and looked down at her. Her face was still sleep-creased. It was a devastating to his senses. He kissed her gently and felt her heart quicken in reaction. Aleneic recognized the slumberous desire in her eyes.

“Watching the sun rise,” he answered.

Laila shifted on his lap so her back was resting against his bare chest. Aleneic gritted his teeth at the feel of her firm ass against his hardened erection. Resting his chin on top of her tightly pinned-up reddish-brown hair, Aleneic’s arms encircled her. She rested her fingers on his arms as they watched the sun come up. It was a magical experience as it washed the world in bright reds, oranges and yellows. Even after it rose he didn’t move and neither did she. Finally Laila looked up at him. Aleneic looked down into her topaz gaze behind her glasses and marveled at her loveliness. He leaned down to kiss her and she rose up to meet him. Their lips met and they both groaned. Stroking his tongue lazily into her mouth, he felt hers meet his and tangle together.

As he tightened his arms around her, he felt her nails dig into his arms in reaction. Moving his mouth over hers, he drew his tongue out and gently stroked it along her top lip then down to the bottom one. He closed his teeth over the bottom lip, nibbled on it, then sucked it into his mouth. Laila whimpered. Aleneic withdrew, waiting for her eyes to flutter open. The dazed hunger in them made his already hardened cock twitch.

“Are you ready, Laila?” Aleneic spoke in a purr.

Looking into her eyes, he saw her decision before she spoke.

“We have to find the Golden Tarot,” Laila said as she started to get off his lap.

Although he knew she was right he was reluctant to let her go. Knowing it was best, he let his hands trail along the sides of her breast. She shuddered then was still. Taking his time as she rose, he ran his hand along her back then down her waist and down her pajama-clad butt. A grin curved his lips as she held still for his touch.

“Go get dressed, woman,” Aleneic said as he smacked her butt lightly.

Laila looked at him over her shoulder, her topaz gaze amused. “What is this fascination with my ass?”

Aleneic looked at the ass in question and felt his mouth salivate. It was nicely rounded and looked delicious. He wanted to sink his teeth into it.

Looking back at her, he let her see his intention. Laila shifted slightly and he smiled.

“When you’re ready I’ll show you. Now go get dressed.” Aleneic clenched his fist, trying not to grab her.

Laila turned to him and her look got combative. “You really have to stop throwing orders around.”

Aleneic stood slowly, fighting for control. His voice was hoarse. “Don’t push me, Laila.”

Laila stepped into his face and growled. “Don’t push me, Aleneic. I’m not one of your meek women to be pushed about.”

Aleneic reached out and grabbed her. Ignoring her gasp of surprise, he locked his hand into her hair and dropped his mouth to hers. It was as if a switch shut off inside him and all he felt was hunger. Ravishing her mouth brutally, Aleneic forced his tongue inside. Laila gasped and he went in with no pretenses. In and out like he wanted to take her. She shifted and, thinking she was trying to get away, he tightened his fingers in her hair, holding it tightly. Laila moaned, spurring him on. Sucking her tongue into his mouth, Aleneic set his teeth against her tongue and nibbled on it then sucked strongly. He could feel her body start to vibrate. Drawing away abruptly, he stepped back.

Laila stumbled as if going to fall. Reaching out a shaking hand, Aleneic held her up. Laila opened her eyes and looked at him. There was a matching heat in her gaze. Aleneic stepped forward but her hand on his bare chest stopped him.

“No, Aleneic, if we went to bed now we wouldn’t leave for days and we don’t know how much time you have to find the Golden Tarot.” Laila’s voice was hoarse.

Turning, she wobbled to the door. Reaching it, she clamped her fingers against the side of the door. “I left a bag of clothing by your door.”

She stepped through and was gone. Aleneic watched her leave then turned, punching his fist through the wall. The wall crumbled. He grinned fiercely. With a sigh he pulled out his bleeding fist. A casual wave of his other hand made the wall whole again. Then he placed his hand over his fist. He looked at the white light glowing under it. When he removed his hand his fist was healed. Aleneic took a step forward then staggered. With a rueful laugh at himself Aleneic locked his knees. He was glad that Laila wasn’t here to see the effect kissing her had on him.

“Pitiful,” Thane said.

Looking up at him standing across the room, Aleneic sighed. They had come to an understanding yesterday and spent hours working together. They were tentatively trying to be friendly. But Thane was still a pain in the butt.

With his knees still locked together Aleneic took another step, then strode across the room and out the door. Outside his room he saw the bag, picked it up and went inside. Although his pants had a self-cleaning mechanism and he could make any clothing he needed, since Laila bought things for him he would wear them. Stripping off his pants as he went inside, he pulled out the clothes. Holding up the pants, he frowned. They looked weird.

“Haven’t you seen blue jeans before?” Thane asked.

Turning his head, he saw he was standing by the window. The sunshine shone through him.

“No.”

Thane’s eyes focused inward as he frowned. “Blue jeans were patented in 1873. So yeah, you wouldn’t have been around then.” Thane looked at him. “You just put them on like any pants.”

Taking him at his word, Aleneic pulled them on but looked down at the weird ridges on the side. Running his hand on the edge, he found it was a sort of metal. Aleneic wondered why they made clothing so difficult now. He looked back at Thane and could swear he was stifling a grin.

Thane laughed then said, “There is a tab at the bottom that you use and put it up to close it then at the top is a button to close.”

Aleneic felt foolish taking direction from a computer who never had to actually dress. As soon as the thought formed he felt bad. Thane was more than a computer. Yes he wasn’t fully human but he wasn’t just a computer. Looking back at the thing called a zipper, he pulled it up.

“Fuck,” Aleneic roared as the thing caught on his sac.

A knock sounded on the door. “Aleneic, do you need help? I realized that you probably didn’t know what jeans were.”

The door started to open. Frantic, Aleneic leaped across the room and slammed his palm against the door then rested his back against it.

“No, no, I am okay,” Aleneic tried to speak calmly.

No way he would let Laila see him like this. Looking over at Thane, he saw Thane was bent over, holding his stomach as silent laughter racked him. Narrowing his eyes, Aleneic saw something shining on his face. Surprised, he noticed it was tears. They looked so genuine. Thane raised his face and looked at him then fell over onto the ground, laughing.

“Aleneic, it’s okay if you don’t know. Come on, let me in to help,” Laila insisted, rattling the knob.

“Thane is helping me with it,” Aleneic replied, looking at his help lying on the floor, laughing silently.

“Okay. I’ll meet you the living room,” Laila said and he heard her footsteps disappearing down the hall.

Aleneic looked at Thane and said in disgust, “Some help you are. How do I close this thing without unmanning myself?”

Thane’s laughter suddenly filled the room. Aleneic realized he had placed it on mute so Laila wouldn’t know. Maybe Thane wasn’t so bad after all.

Catching himself, Thane came up onto his knees as he gestured. “You stuff yourself in then zip and button. The material doesn’t give like your material did back then.”

Thane started to laugh all over again. Looking at him, Aleneic did as he said and pulled up the zipper and buttoned without any more injury. Moving, he felt the cloth and surprisingly it was comfortable. Going back to the bed, he looked at the other items. He picked up a package and looked at Thane.

“Underwear, which you should have put on before the pants.”

Aleneic snorted. “Never wore them and never will.”

Throwing them back on the bed, he looked at the shirt then changing direction, he went and got his vest out of the closet. Putting it on, he felt the cards in the pocket. Turning back to the room, he saw Thane watching him, an amused grin on his face.

“The shirt buttons like the pants. So you shouldn’t have any trouble.” Thane bit his lip, stifling a laugh.

“I know I like my vest better .” Aleneic crossed the room and went back out the door.

Thane fell in step with him. “Showing all your bare chest to entice Laila . It might work,” Thane snickered.

“Shut up, Thane,” Aleneic said good-naturedly. “I don’t need a t—”

Reaching the living room, Aleneic trailed off and stopped at the sight of Laila before him. His eyes hungrily took her in. A shirt the same color as her eyes stretched over her full breasts, hugging them deliciously. She wore pants like his except hers were black and they did amazing things for her hips. On her feet she wore a sort of boot. It was different from those he wore. He looked up into her face and saw her shift uncomfortably.

“What, haven’t you seen a woman in t-shirt, jeans and boots before?”

Since he knew what jeans were and boots that could only mean that a t-shirt was what she wore over her breasts. Looking at it again, he thanked the gods for whoever invented it.

Aleneic replied, “No.”

“Oh. Well, let’s get going.”Laila turned from him.

He touched her arm to stop her and waited for her to look at him.

When she did he continued, “But I’m sure that no other woman looks as good as you do in that t-shirt.”

Laila got that flustered look on her face he found adorable.

She grinned.“Flatterer. Wait until you see other women then say that. Now we’re wasting daylight. I figured we can start on the closer places since for the others we will have to travel by airplane.”

Aleneic frowned. “What is airplane?”

Laila stopped and looked at him then chuckled. “I keep forgetting that a lot of things were invented after the last time you were here. Thane, why didn’t you show him some of the things he missed yesterday?”

Thane spoke. “I tried. We saw some things but he got so upset I decided to show him the Internet then the Food Network. After that he wanted to see nothing else.”

Laila looked at him and shook her head. “Aleneic, you need to know these things. Will you allow Thane to show you?”

Aleneic looked at Thane suspiciously. Thane smiled. Grudgingly, he nodded. Thane walked over to them. He raised his hand to him. Aleneic jerked back.

Thane looked at him, his grin widened. “I won’t hurt you. I can’t touch you. It’s just an electric current to catch you up on history. It’s faster than you watching.”

Aleneic nodded and closed his eyes. He felt Laila’s hand resting on his back. Then a bright flash and information flooded him. It was over in a second. Opening his eyes, he looked at Thane. Thane stepped back and nodded then blinked out.

Looking back at Laila , he demanded, “No way I’m going in one of those things you call an airplane.”

Laila looked startled. “What did Thane show you?”

“Everything, including the places on the list. We don’t need an airplane. I can take us wherever we need to go.”

Laila’s look was exasperated.“How, on your back?”

Aleneic's lips twitched. "If you like. Laila, I have powers to do what I need."

Laila looked at him. "I know but I don't want you to overexert yourself."

Aleneic looked down at her earnest face. She was trying to nurture him. It was a weird feeling. He was usually the one who took care of others.

"It's fine, Laila. When I come out of the card I regain my own power plus those I would have if I lived each day. My power cycles hit me all at once."

"Power cycle."

Aleneic thought of the best way to describe it. "It's like when humans have milestone birthdays except on mine I get more power and things I can do. It happens every hundred years, so when I am released from the card I get it all at once. Since we have to search such a wide area I will put us in as close proximity to it as I can so we don't miss anything."

Laila nodded. "So where do you want to start?"

"The farthest place we have to go and work our way back."

Laila sighed. "I have to change."

"Why?"

"Some of the farthest places on the list are cold. I need to dress more warmly."

Aleneic looked at her then, touching her, he clothed her. A rich caramel coat covered over her clothes. Her feet were encased in matching boots and she wore a hat. Laila looked at him, shock on her face.

"I can provide whatever we need."

"Okay, let's go." Laila turned and picked up the bulging bag he hadn't noticed before.

She put it over her shoulder then grunted at the weight and shifted it around to make it rest more comfortably.

She looked at him and said, "Okay, I'm ready."

Aleneic gestured. "What is all of that?"

"Supplies that we will need," Laila replied as if it was obvious.

Taking it off her back, Aleneic looked at her again. "I can provide all we need."

He watched the realization dawn in her eyes then the embarrassment.

Then she chuckled. "It's the geek in me, always prepared."

Aleneic shook his head. "I didn't know what this geek was before, but you are no geek, Laila."

Leaning into her, he took her lips firmly. Laila locked her arms around him. Aleneic murmured and deepened the kiss.

Laila let him sweep her under. A weakness filled her. Aleneic was a masterful kisser and it was taking all her control not to demand he take her to bed. They had to find the Golden Tarot and save him. She couldn't let her own desires cloud what they need to do. It was too important. Aleneic murmured and pulled back.

Laila looked into his eyes and shivered. She opened her mouth and saw her breath. Laila looked around at the beautiful winter wonderland and was in awe of all she saw. She took in the mountains before her. With a whirl she laughed. She looked back at Aleneic, seeing he was in winter gear that matched his eyes. He was watching her with a slight smile on his face. Going back to him, she took his glove-covered hands.

"We're in Switzerland, aren't we?" Laila couldn't keep the excitement out of her voice.

Aleneic nodded. "The Swiss Alps."

She looked at him and saw the hope and fear in his eyes.

Laila squeezed his hand as she whispered. "We'll find it. Come on, let's go."

They walked into the cold blanket of snow. In a few moments they reached the base of the mountains. Glancing up and up, Laila wondered if she could make it.

"I can carry you," Aleneic offered.

Laila looked at him. "No. I'll make it. Let's go."

They started the steep climb.

Chapter Six

A light flashed and Laila looked around and saw they were back in her living room.

Furious, she turned on Aleneic . “I told you, let’s go to Hong Kong. Why did you bring us back here? You’re wasting time.”

Aleneic’s look was calm as he touched her shoulder. “We’ve been looking for five days straight,Laila . I can keep going but you need rest.”

Shrugging him off violently,Laila replied, “No. Let’s go. We only have—”

She cut herself off. Aleneic looked at her, sorrow on his face. He came forward and cupped her cheek with his warm hand. Closing her eyes, she reveled in his touch which she had already become used to. He had a way of touching her with a brush of his fingers, taking her hand and just little things.

“Two days. You can say it,Laila , we have only two days.”Aleneic’s voice was calm.

Shrugging him off again,Laila opened her eyes as she stepped back. “How can you be so calm about this? In two days you will be going back into the card.”

Aleneic’s look was gentle. “I know. I’ve been though this many times and know what is to come. But you need rest,Laila , before we can continue. We will keep looking until the last moment.”

Laila knew he was right but it wasn’t easy to admit. All the places they had searched in the last few days and still nothing. It was as if the Golden Tarot was a myth. She saw him turn away and slump in the chair. He bent forward, took off his boots and socks, placing them next to him. He leaned back and closed his eyes. She saw the worry on his face he tried to hide. The fear eating away at him. Each night late after they came home from a day of searching after he had seen her to her room and went to his own when he thought she slept she would be at her window and see him step outside into the backyard.

He would wander around the oasis that she and Sonya had created, touching flowers, taking the winding paths and finally stopping at the Olympic-sized pool. There he would strip and swim like his life depended on it. When he finally got out he would collapse on the edge of the pool and sleep. Yet when she woke in the morning he would be calm and ready to go. Toeing off her boots and socks,Laila watched him, then walked over to him and made the decision she had known days ago would happen.

Putting out her hand, she looked down at his bent head.“Aleneic.”

His head snapped up and he looked at her. She saw the realization in his gaze and the answering hunger.

“I’m ready.”Laila never knew her voice could convey so much need.

Aleneic looked at her and shook his head. “I don’t want your pity.”

Laila looked at him then reached over and smacked him upside the head. He stood quickly. After jumping back she stopped and stood her ground. With her hands on her hips she glared at him. Aleneic returned her look.

“This isn’t pity, you fool. If you don’t know the difference, then forget it.” She turned and walked away.

Hard arms wrapped around her. Shrieking in fury, Laila fought his hold. He turned her and held her firmly against him. She glared at him.

Aleneic’s grin was grim. “You’re not getting away that easily. I need you, Laila .”

Laila felt her body quicken in desires but she had to get something straight. “This isn’t pity or some last-minute leaving-me type of shit. I want you, Aleneic . I’ve wanted you for days.”

Aleneic looked at her. “I know but what took you so long to tell me?”

Laila was embarrassed to admit the reason it seemed so silly. Looking at him, she hoped he would understand.

“I wasn’t sure you wanted me because of me or just because I was an available.” Laila bit her lip.

Aleneic looked at her, surprise on his face. “Oh Laila , how could you think that? I want Laila , the woman who makes me laugh one minute, who snarls when she is working, who takes no crap and who makes me want to lay her down and fuck her each time I look at her.”

Laila’s breath caught at his words.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she looked at him and demanded, “Let’s go.”

Aleneic started to pick her up. Shaking her head, she stopped him. She took his hands and pulled him across the room, up the stairs, down the hall and into her bedroom. Bypassing the bed, Laila continued across the room to the bath. Once inside she led him to the large sunken tub. Stopping before it, she looked at him and kissed him gently then stepped back.

“Wait.” She turned on the faucets and adjusted them to the right temperature.

Taking some of the bath salts, she added them to the water. The scent of peaches filled the air. He stood, watching her. Going over to him, she slid her hands under his vest and drew it off his shoulders. He watched her hungrily but let her have free rein. She unbuttoned his jeans and lowered the zipper. Sliding her hands down his hips, she pushed off his jeans. His member sprang out of the jeans, long, thick and hard. Even as she watched it lengthened. Her mouth watered but she looked away, back at his face.

Her breath caught at the harsh lines of desire there. Smiling fiercely, Laila pushed him gently as he

stepped back out of the jeans. She led him by the hand over to the tub, gesturing for him to get in. She watched as he did and sat down, his eyes locked with hers. She turned off the water. Looking back, she locked her eyes with his as she took off her own clothes. Slowly she unbuttoned her shirt, took it off, then unclasped her front-closure bra. She saw the muscles in his neck bulge and his fingers clamped on the edge of the tub.

Meeting his gaze once again, Laila shrugged out of her bra then unbuttoned her jeans. Slowly she lowered the zipper and slid her hands under the sides of her panties, lowering both her jeans and panties at the same time. As the cool air hit her bare aching slit she gasped. She was already soaking for him. She stepped out of her clothes and into the tub and lowered herself into the water. Watching him, she reached to the low shelf next to the tub and took the cloth from there down.

Then she took the liquid bath gel and poured some onto the cloth. Putting it down, she looked back at him and went to him. Gently she pushed his legs down. He stretched them out, his feet not touching the other end. Straddling him, Laila sat on his stomach. She felt his cock pressing against her ass. Taking the cloth, she washed along his chest, across his shoulders and arms then down his stomach as far as she could reach. Leaning forward, she dipped the cloth in the water then cleaned along his brows, down his face, cheek and chin. He watched her, his gaze hot on her face. Dipping the cloth again, she rinsed off his chest.

With a glance at him she stood and whispered, "Stand."

Aleneic stood to join her. Her eyes locked with his, Laila lowered herself 'til she was kneeling before him. His face tightened even more. Dropping her gaze, she looked at his elongated member. It had veins running all over it. Even as she looked it bobbed at her. Taking the cloth, she cleaned him. First she ran the cloth over his sac. His loud groan made her look at him. His face was etched in harsh ecstasy while his eyes were lit with fire. Then she took his cock and ran the cloth over it. His incoherent murmurs and groans filled the silent room. Quickly dropping the cloth, she placed her lips around him and swallowed all of him she could take.

He gripped her hair, dislodging her pins. She could feel her hair fall around her. Feeling the slight desperation in his touch, Laila relaxed her throat and deep-throated him. His groans spurred her on. His shudders thanked her for sucking him fast while his groans drove her into a frenzy. Tightening her lips over him, she raked her teeth over him as she pulled him out of her mouth. Swooping back down, she relaxed and deep-throated him then hummed. He came in a gush inside her. Withdrawing a little, Laila swallowed as much of his essence as she could.

Aleneic's fingers tightened in her hair and he pulled her up with it. Moaning at the sweet pain of it, Laila found herself face-to-face with him. With a violent movement he lifted her, slammed her into the wall behind the tub and impaled her, all in one motion. Laila screamed at the feel of his still-hard cock filling her up and up. She wrapped her legs around him. Aleneic sealed his lips over hers, drinking in her cries. Rolling his hips, he set off a tidal wave of pleasure. Raising her head back, she dragged her lips from his, screaming again.

Aleneic's hips pumped furiously as his cock slid in and out of her. His cock speared her and, tightening her legs around him, Laila ground against him. She moaned as she felt his body rub against her sensitive clit. She gushed. Her wetness made him sink deeper. He pumped in a firm in-and-out

motion, making her back slap against the wall. Laila felt each jar of it but the pleasure outweighed the pain. Raising her hand, she sank her hand into his deadlocks and held on. She heard him grunt and pulled harder on his hair. Aleneic growled and locked his lips over hers again. His tongue pierced her with the same demanding stride that his cock took her pussy. The pleasure slammed into Laila with the force of a tidal wave. Screaming in his mouth, she went blind as it swept her under with sharp greedy talons. Pleasure pulsed through her, soaking her pussy and heated her core. Still his hips pumped on as his cock continued to ram into her. He showed no mercy and she loved it. Weak, Laila's hands dropped from his hair.

Aleneic grunted. "More. Mine. Yes..."

Aleneic rolled his hips, causing her to go over into another orgasm. Hands scrambling, Laila gripped his back and raked her fingernails down it. Feeling the give of his skin, Laila screamed while another orgasm tripped over the previous one.

Aleneic hissed at the feel of Laila's nails biting into his skin. Pounding his cock into her, he hitched her legs higher around his waist. With his hands he pushed her legs apart. He sank deeper. She screamed again. A grim grin curved his lips. He wanted her to feel him on her skin even when he was gone. Holding her still for his pleasure, he held her legs wide, firmly pumping into her. She sucked him in, her pussy walls contracted around his cock in a pleasurable sensation.

When she had started to suck his cock it was all he could do not to stop her and fuck her blind. He had let her have her way. The feel of her hot mouth around his cock had made him come harder than he ever remembered coming. Finally when he couldn't take it anymore he had lifted her and pinned her to the wall. With that first thrust he had almost come but used his control not to. He wanted to drive her wild first.

Swiveling his hips, he felt her body tighten then her pussy contracted as another orgasm took her. Her nails scored his back. Grunting, he pushed into her and her body contracted violently on his cock, sending him over into his own orgasm. Pumping his hips in time with the pulsation of his cock, he felt her hands grip his back. Throwing his head back, he roared as he emptied into her. Dropping his head against hers, he breathed harshly. After a few moments he looked at her. Her eyes were closed and she was breathing rapidly. He could see the pulse beating in the side of her neck. Leaning forward, he nibbled on her pulse. It raced up and she groaned.

"Gimme a minute. I can't feel my feet," Laila mumbled.

Laughing, Aleneic kissed her. Laila's arms came up and she gripped him. Her pussy contracted around his cock, making him groan and harden.

Laila pulled back and looked at him surprise on her face. "Already."

Aleneic grinned sheepishly. "I could use the excuse it's been a long time but I find when I think about you I get hard."

Laila laughed and wrapped her legs and arms around him. "Oh, the sacrifice of it. Take me, Aleneic."

Kissing her, he did as she demanded.

* * * * *

Aleneic suddenly woke. Jerking his arm he felt it pinned to the side. Looking over, he saw Laila was using it as a pillow. She murmured, rolled away and groaned. Stifling a grin as she started to mutter, Aleneic wondered what she would say if she knew she talked in her sleep. Although what she babbled about didn't make sense. Laila turned away onto her side. Aleneic looked down at her butt. Reaching out, he started to touch it but stopped himself. He knew she needed to rest. Although he would have liked to spend the rest of the day in bed he knew that they couldn't. Sliding his hands from under her head, he drew away and got out of bed. Padding quietly to the bathroom, he went inside. Passing the sunken bath, his cock hardened, imagining all they had done there then later in the bed.

Stepping into the glass-enclosed shower, he turned on the knobs as he had seen Laila do. He yelped at the hot spray. Turning on the other one, he played with it and got a good temperature then soaped up. He washed off while his mind raced over what was coming. Time was running out and it couldn't be avoided. They would search until the last moment but he would enjoy each second he had with Laila. Smiling, he thought of her face filled with passion. His cock got harder. Reaching over, he changed the water to cold, hissing as it hit him. Turning his back to the spray, he let it wet his hair as he planned where they would search next.

Laila rolled over and, feeling nothing there, she jerked fully awake, panic filling her. Sitting up, she looked around the room then hearing the shower running, she relaxed back against the bed. He wasn't gone, only in the shower. It was only day six, they still had time. A feeling of hopelessness hit her. Laila let the fear fill her. What if they didn't find it in time? He would be gone to her forever. She was only human and didn't have the lifespan of supernatural beings. When he came out of the card again she would be long gone. Pushing her fears aside, Laila looked away from the open bathroom door. When she saw herself in the mirror across the room and how wrecked she looked, Laila swung her legs off the bed to get a brush to tidy her hair. As she stepped forward she tripped. Looking down to see what she had stepped on, she saw it was Aleneic's vest. Frowning, she bent to pick it up, wondering how it had gotten there.

She lifted it and felt its heaviness. She laid it over her arm and walked forward. Something fell. With a glance down she took in the empty King of Cups card, bent down and picked it up. Curious, she opened his vest and searched the inside. Her fingers brushed a pocket. She reached inside, pulling out what was there. At the sight of the rest of the tarot cards she realized she had forgotten all about them. She stood and laid his vest over the chair by the dresser. Opening the drawer, she put the cards neatly inside. Laila shut it firmly and gripped the edge of the dresser. She couldn't allow him to go back into the card. She lifted her head and met her topaz gaze in the mirror. There was a determined look in her eyes. Laila knew she would do anything in her power to help him. Laila returned to the bed. She lay down on her stomach as she thought of what she could do to help him.

A touch on her back made her start.

"Shh," Aleneic's husky voice said against her spine.

He kissed down her spine, licking as he went. Laila felt herself get wet. Shifting, she felt his hand

hold her down firmly. When he reached the top of her butt he licked along it then nibbled his way along each butt cheek.

“Again with this fetish with my butt,” Laila muttered.

Aleneic laughed. “It’s so delicious.”

Laila laughed then groaned as he bit her harder. Widening her legs, she moved her hips. Aleneic murmured then licked down her ass cheek. Then he stopped. Laila frowned and started to turn when suddenly his finger impaled her. Gasping, hands scrambling, she grabbed the headboard for leverage. Laila groaned as she felt his tongue replace his finger. He pulled her back and forth on his tongue. Widening her legs, Laila couldn’t seem to find any breath. He stopped again. Finally able to get a breath she sighed then screamed as his cock sank into her wetness. Aleneic pulled her back until she was kneeling and he pumped into her hard and fast. The slap of flesh meeting flesh filled the room.

Laila held on for the ride, moaning. His cock glided in and out of her easily, she was so wet. Aleneic leaned over, fitting his front to her back. His fingers grabbed her face and turned it to kiss. He kissed her, his tongue tangling with hers as he stroked into her. Laila pushed back against him, opening her mouth under his assault. Fire licked along her veins, spurring her on. Undulating her hips, she took him in even deeper. Aleneic groaned in response. Laila sucked in his tongue and bit it. He roared and his cock pulsed as it emptied. His orgasm triggered her own. Pleasure poured through her as her pussy contracted around his cock, milking his cock for every bit of cum. Weak from the orgasm, Laila collapsed on the bed and grunted as he dropped onto her back. Aleneic rolled off and groaned.

Looking at him, Laila saw he was breathing hard. Aleneic looked at her and grinned.

“Morning.” His voice was rough.

Shaking her head, Laila moaned and rolled over. Linking her fingers with his, she felt sleep tug on her and let it take her.

* * * * *

Laila pulled her shirt down over her head and tucked it into her pants then pulled her ponytail out from under the shirt. She still couldn’t believe she had let Aleneic talk her into leaving it down. Her hair was unruly and tended fall in kinky curls almost to her butt.

Turning, she said. “My hai —”

Laila stopped as she watched him button his jeans. He looked at her and shook his head. He came to her.

Holding up her hand she said. “Uh-huh. I know that look. It’ll have to wait until later. We’re already getting a late start.”

Aleneic stopped and sent her look that sizzled. “Later.”

Laila's pussy clenched in reaction. Laila watched his ass as he went and got his vest. Aleneic looked at her as he shrugged into it. His expression changed from lust to anguish so fast it took Laila a minute to register it.

Chapter Seven

Aleneic patted his pocket and ripped his vest open. "Where are they? Oh gods, I have lost them."

Rushing to him, Laila grabbed him. He shrugged her off violently. Stumbling backward, he collapsed into the chair, dropping his head, his dreadlocks hiding his face. Cautiously she went to him.

"Aleneic, what is it?" Laila asked, fear filling her.

Aleneic looked up at her and the pain on his face made her gasp. "My card. I lost my card." Anguish dripped from Aleneic voice.

The vise that held her heart loosened. Laila laughed. Aleneic looked at her anger, filling his face.

"No, you didn't. They are right here." Going to the dresser, Laila opened the drawer and took out all the cards.

Aleneic snatched them out of her hand, fanned them out and held them close. Stepping closer to him, Laila laid her hand on his stiff shoulder.

"Aleneic, it's okay. You won't have to go back into the card. I was thinking if we destroy the deck the curse would be broken."

Aleneic looked up at her and roared. "No."

Holding on to him firmly, Laila looked at him and spoke what she had been thinking. "Yes. If the deck is no more then how can the card take you back? It is the only way."

Aleneic's look was anguished. "Don't you think I know what I can do? I cannot."

Laila didn't understand why he was resisting, "You must. Get over this stupid dependence on this deck. Destroy it."

Aleneic looked at her, pulled her to him until she sat in his lap. "Laila, I cannot."

Frustrated, Laila screamed at him. "Why."

Aleneic looked at her, sorrow in his eyes then he looked down at the cards. Following his gaze, Laila saw his empty card and pain filled her. If only he would destroy it. She knew she was right. With the cards gone he would be free. Looking at the other cards, she was again taken in by their beauty. It was really an amazing deck of tarot cards. Looking closer, Laila gasped as she saw the eyes in the card blink and the awareness in them.

Looking back at Aleneic, she gulped. "I thought you said that yours was a unique situation and the cards don't change."

Aleneic smiled a soft sad smile. "It is. These are my people,Laila ."

Laila closed her eyes, sick that she had callously said he should destroy them. Opening her eyes, she looked down at the cards again and saw they were all watching her. The helplessness in their gazes ate at her.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know."Laila spoke to the cards.

"They understand and agree with you, they need to be destroyed,"Aleneic replied.

Looking back at him,Laila asked, "You can hear them."

"Yes, I can hear them and the others although I don't know where they are."

"Others."

"My people numbered in the thousands,Laila . After trapping me I didn't realize that Byichus had locked them with me in the cards. Saber told me but she couldn't or wouldn't tell me where the other decks were." He held up the cards. "These are the only ones that I know where they are. I can hear them all but can only see these ones. The choice Saber gave me was to destroy the deck that held my card and be free or keep being enslaved and search for the Golden Tarot. I could not do that to my people. They depend on me. It was my fault this happened. My fault we are like this."

Laila looked at him then down at the cards then back up again. "No. It's not your fault. It is who you are. The provider, caregiver and wise leader."

Aleneic's laugh was bitter. "Not so smart. I was duped."

"No, it wasn't you. Everything in life happens for a reason, Aleneic , and what we do with what happened is what defines us,"Laila spoke, knowing she was right.

Aleneic looked at her and sighed and kissed her cheek. "You are the wise one,Laila ." He cocked his head to the side then glared down at the cards. "No, I won't."

Laila looked at him. "What?"

Aleneic glanced at her. "My people agree with you that I should destroy the cards and free myself."

Laila shook her head. "No, you shouldn't do that. I thought that when I didn't know but to do that you would not be able to live with yourself."

Aleneic had gratitude in his eyes. "Thank you."

Laila shrugged. "We will find a way to free you." She looked down at the cards. "Free you all."

Something he said was bothered her. “How was it possible for Byichus to trap your people when the leader of the other kingdom came?”

Pain filled Aleneic’s face. “My brother would not attack while he held me in the card. Seeing this, Byichus taunted him and pulled in all my people while he watched. I could see what it cost K’Laian to —”

“K’Laian the Mer King is your brother?” Laila asked, shock filling her.

Aleneic chuckled. “Yes, you know him.”

Laila grimaced, thinking of the imposing man. “Not exactly. I’ve seen him. He has done business with Rarities Incorporated.”

Aleneic looked surprised. “K’Laian interacts with other races and comes onto to land.” Then he laughed. “Oh, he must hate that.” He sobered. “I used to be the one who did that since K’Laian and my other siblings hated it.”

“There are more of you?”

Aleneic’s smile was bittersweet. “Yes, there are four of us in total. We each rule a part of the Mer Kingdom. K’Laian is the overall ruler but his section is Keilos. F’lious , my sister, rules the Forlani section. Maksim , my brother, rules the Melious section. And I ruled Atlantis.”

Laila jerked in reaction.

Aleneic smiled in response. “Yes, I know what your history books say about Atlantis being a myth or some believe it was swallowed by the sea.” Glancing down at the cards, he fanned them out more for her to see. “Meet the Atlantians .”

Laila looked at them in awe. They looked back at her. Even in the cards she could see they were regal. The women were lovely while the men were handsome.

“They are pleased to make your acquaintance, Laila Brooks.” Aleneic’s voice drew her attention.

Laila laughed. “I am pleased to meet them also. We will meet face-to-face soon. Aleneic , we can call your family. You can go to see them. Maybe they can help.”

He shook his head. “No, it is too painful. I did that the first time I came out of the card and when I was sucked back in I could hear the anguish it caused. I will not put them through that again.”

Laila looked at his set expression, knowing he wouldn’t change his mind. She got off his lap and grabbed his hand, pulling him up.

“Fine. Let’s continue searching to free you and your people.”

Aleneic stood, put the cards in his inside pocket and took her other hand. Laila felt a moment of displacement then it cleared. Looking around, she saw the rain forest.

“What happened to Hong Kong?” Laila asked.

“We’ll go there after,” Aleneic shrugged.

Shaking her head, she looked down at her shoes. They’d changed to boots. She looked back at Aleneic in gratitude and they started off. Walking under the sweltering South American sun in the Amazon jungle, Laila had a whole new appreciation of the comforts of New York. Aleneic stepped forward and she stepped behind him and realized they were in a clearing of some kind. Aleneic continued. She didn’t question him. He innately knew where he was going. Although he could teleport them there he had said something about not wanting to fall in the middle of something dangerous.

Aleneic stopped and tensed. Laila stopped and waited. A sound whispered on the wind. Aleneic’s hand flashed out and he caught something. Laila only had a moment to realize it was a dagger then Aleneic spun, drew his hand back and threw it behind her. A cry of rage filled the air.

“Cloak yourself,” Aleneic said as he spun again and caught another dagger, throwing it back.

Another cry rent the air. Laila pressed the box on her belt, making herself invisible. After their excursions she knew she was useless in a fight. The only thing she could do, even though it was galling to admit it, was hide. Laila watched helplessly as Aleneic moved with a blur of speed, taking out the men who poured into the clearing. She saw some of them shift to leopards, tigers and wolves. Aleneic jumped in between them and bodies flew as he cleared the area. Laila wanted to jump in and help but knew she was more of a hindrance. The first time they were attacked she had her laser but after realizing her aim was not worth crap, she had decided it was safer to go without it. Even Thane couldn’t implant the ability to fight in her brain.

Watching one of them rake Aleneic with claws, she saw blood run down his side. Taking a step forward, Laila stopped as he dispatched them. More poured in. Laila felt fear fill her. There was too many for him to handle on his own.

Aleneic screamed, “Byichus.”

Looking beyond him, she saw a man standing across the clearing. The man smiled, his white teeth startling against his onyx skin. Laila was captured by his eyes. They were a starling meadow green, then they flashed black. Taking in the rest of his face, she noted his high, carved cheeks, aristocratic nose, full lips and firm chin. She had expected him to be ugly and hateful but he was compelling. Looking back at his eyes, Laila was captured by his gaze. Laila jerked, realizing that he was looking straight at her as if he could see her. She knew that was impossible, her cloak hid her from everyone.

Aleneic roared again, “Byichus.”

Dragging her attention to him, she saw him mow through the shifters trying to get to Byichus. Laila

felt compelled to look at him again. Byichus looked at her, captured her gaze and, raising long tapered fingers to his lips, he blew her a kiss. Laila jumped, startled as she felt something brush her cheek. Reaching up to touch it, she watched Byichus smile. Turning her attention back to Aleneic, Laila only had time to register the panic on Aleneic's face. Turning quickly, she saw the sword coming down toward her.

Ah, fuck, Laila thought as she watched it lower.

Looking at the sword, Laila waited for the bite of metal to hit her. Without a thought her hands flashed up and caught the sword before it could hit her. Startled, she looked into the shocked eyes of the man.

Then he grinned and growled. "I'm going to gut you, bitch."

Something clicked inside her and Laila felt a cold draft fill her.

She smiled and watched fear fill his face. "You're about to get your ass kicked, asshole."

Holding the blade with one hand, her other hand flashed forward, palm open and she hit him, sending him across the clearing. Watching him fly, a distant part of Laila's mind wondered what the hell was going on. Taking his sword, she flipped it high in the air, turned and swept her foot out, knocking the man coming behind her off his feet. Putting her hands palm together, she hit him mid-chest and he flew across the clearing and hit a tree. It broke and the man slumped on the ground.

Laila's mouth dropped open. Hearing a sound, she spun again, kicked the man coming up behind her and he flew across the clearing. Spinning, she flipped out of the way of another, spun into a roundhouse kick and using the man as leverage, she flew up in the air and caught the sword she had thrown, flipping over and landing on the ground. Sliding her left leg out, she held the sword and balanced, looking at them. She registered the shock on Aleneic's face then they came at her furiously. Laila spun and used the sword in a fast circular motion, drawing them back. She looked at them then smiled a nasty grin and beckoned them with her other hand. They charged.

How the hell and I doing this? Laila thought as she spun, back kicked, roundhouse kicked and sliced and diced, fighting them back. After a few moments the clearing was empty. Laila looked over at Aleneic, shock coursing through her. Looking around her, she saw there was a pile of men—some human, some half animal and others full animal.

Aleneic came up to her and took the sword out of her hand. He threw it to the side and looked at her.

"I thought you said you couldn't fight."

Laila shook her head. "I can't. Whatever you did to me, thanks."

He looked confused. "I didn't do anything."

“You didn’t. What the hell happened?”

Aleneic looked around the clearing. “You kicked ass.”

Laughing, Laila wrapped her arms around his neck. “I did.”

Aleneic looked back to where Byichus had stood then back at her.

“He didn’t get it. It’s not here, let’s go home.”

She felt the sensation. Looking past his shoulder, Laila saw Byichus looking at her. He blew her a kiss and melted into the jungle.

* * * * *

“Thane, you should have seen her. She kicked ass left and right,” Aleneic said, grabbing her and kissing her, pride in his voice.

Embarrassed, Laila looked at Thane. “It was nothing.”

“Nothing. It was phenomenal. Whatever you did for her stuck,” Aleneic said.

Thane looked at her and Laila knew he hadn’t done anything. She let Aleneic continue to talk. Finally he wound down and sat in the chair.

Going to him, she kissed him. “I’m going to take a shower and get some rest.”

Leaving them, Laila walked out the door. She knew that Aleneic and Thane would work on where to check next. Usually she would be there helping but today she couldn’t. Climbing the stairs slowly, she went into her bedroom and stripped on the way to the bathroom. Laila stepped into the shower and turned it on. Letting the spray soothe her, she clenched her fist. She hadn’t told Aleneic about Byichus watching her. She didn’t know if he had somehow gotten control of her but why would he help them. Something was wrong. Grabbing the sponge, she soaped up and rinsed off. Out of the shower she dried off, dropped her towel in the hamper and went into the bedroom. Flopping down on the side of the bed, she grabbed her peach lotion and smoothed it on her skin as she thought. Byichus could have killed them but hadn’t. Something more been going on but what? Finished, she lay back and tried to make sense of it. Sleep claimed her before she could work it out.

Laila woke violently aroused. From his touch she knew it was Aleneic. She grabbed his head as he sucked on her clit fiercely. Gasping, Laila held on as he hummed and sucked and set his teeth on her. Her body tumbled over into a brutal orgasm. Aleneic sat up, dragging her into him, and lifted her, impaling her on his cock in one hard thrust. Moaning, she widened her legs to take him deeper. Her pussy undulated as fine tremors of orgasms continued to rack her. Wetness flooded her, making his thrusts glide easily in and out of her. Laila locked her hands around his neck and held him to her. Aleneic sucked in her nipple, making her shudder. He bit her, making another orgasm blow through

her. He pumped fiercely into her. His hands clenched on her hips in hard desperation.

Laila tangled her fingers in his hair and yanked his head back. He looked up at her and there was hunger and something else in his eyes. Before she could distinguish what it was Aleneic kissed her, his tongue demanding and hard. Moaning, Laila locked her hands in his locks while grinding herself down on his hard cock. Pleasure filled her, shattering her again. Her vision blinked out, then as he rotated his hips she screamed.

Aleneic banded his arms around Laila, watching her eyes go blind under the force of her orgasm. Running his hands down her back, he gripped her hips, pulling her against his thrust. Laila understood what he needed and pushed forward against him. He pulled her head back by her hair until her back was arched away from him. He licked and sucked her chocolate nipples into his mouth. She grunted in the back of her throat as she ground against him. Spreading his legs wider, he felt his cock sink deeper into her pussy. Her pussy walls sucked him into her wetness. Laila shuddered so hard he could feel her womb contract against the head of his cock. It was too much. He lowered his head, burying it against her throat and roared as his pleasure gripped him then blew him apart. He rocked his hips. Her pussy clutched at him in greedy demand. He gave and gave it all to her.

Laila whimpered, undulating her hips, countering his motion, creating a delicious friction. He licked along her throat as he loosened his hold on her hair. He lifted her head to meet his and sealed his lips to hers. Sorrow filled him. Laila clenched around him, grinding down and he felt his cock pulse again as aftershocks of his release swept over him. He shuddered again and let it pulse out of him then went still against her.

He laid her back while he remained inside her. Aleneic pushed her hair away from her face, gently kissing her. Laila opened her eyes and watched him. He rolled over, keeping her firmly around him. She widened her legs and cuddled into him.

“What is wrong, Aleneic?” Laila asked in the silence.

He looked at her then kissed her. “Nothing. Watching you fight turned me on.”

Laila looked at him, laughed and swatted him. Grinning, he watched her face, memorizing each line. Laila lay against him and before long he heard her breathing change. Aleneic, knowing she was sleeping, watched her long into the night before letting himself follow her.

Something made Aleneic open his eyes. Meeting amused topaz, Aleneic smiled.

“You’re still here,” Laila said softly.

He knew what she was asking. It was day seven and he should be gone. Instead of answering her he rolled over until she was below him. Sliding in and out of her lazily, he watched her eyes go glassy then slam shut. She moaned then wrapped her legs around him, pulling on him to speed him up. Aleneic continued to thrust slowly and watched her face. The emotions of pleasure made his heart beat rapidly. He felt the tightening of her body as the orgasm took her then he followed her. Leaning down, he kissed her softly.

Laila opened her eyes, filled with sated passion.

Kissing her again gently, Aleneic said, "Sleep."

She smiled and, tightening her legs around him, watched him until sleep claimed her. Aleneic watched her, making sure she was asleep. Sure that she was, he gently loosened her slackened hold then rolled off her. Looking at her, he traced her face then, taking away his hand, he stood quickly, washed, dressed in his clothing and went down the stairs.

Going into the office, he looked across the room at Thane. "Take care of her."

Since they had already discussed it the night before Thane nodded. Aleneic turned to stride out.

Thane asked, "Are you sure there is no other way?"

Aleneic stopped and looked at him, his smile sad. "The cards are calling me. I cannot keep doing that to my people. I cannot be selfish any longer." He looked at the sorrow on Thane's face and knew that it mirrored his own. "I've had my share of happiness with her." Looking at Thane, who he felt had become his friend, Aleneic continued, "Under other circumstances you would have been my best man, friend."

Thane looked at him, tears raining down his cheek. "And I would have accepted, my friend."

Aleneic was startled as he felt a feather touch on his shoulder. Looking at Thane, he nodded and walked out the door. Stopping outside, he closed his eyes, feeling tears well in his eyes. Feeling a brush, he looked down and saw Renaldo and Gertrude looking at him somberly.

Bending down, he patted each and said, "Keep her safe and love her." His voice cracked.

Aleneic strode down the hallway and shimmered then was gone. Coming back to form, Aleneic looked out as the sun rose over the beach. He knelt down and took out the tarot cards and laid them on the ground in front of him. Ignoring the rise of voices in his head and the sounds of mourning, he put out his hand and felt for it. His hand clenched at the touch of cold metal against his fingers. He looked over to his right at the Dagger of Atlantis, one of the few things that could kill him, closed his hand tighter over it and brought it to him. The wailing in his head increased.

"For you, my people."

* * * * *

Rubbing sleep out of her eyes, Laila walked into her office. She didn't see Aleneic. She started to ask a somber Thane where Aleneic was, when Renaldo and Gertrude rushed in behind her. She turned as Renaldo hit her, knocking her to the floor. He licked her face while Gertrude jumped on her stomach.

Laughing, she pushed them off. "Come on, guys, I know I have been busy but no need to attack me."

Sitting on the floor, she pulled Gertrude into her lap. She was thankful she had put on her jeans when Gertrude kneaded her leg with her claws.

“We have to clip those nails.” She looked at Gertrude foot as she asked absently, “Thane, where is Aleneic ?”

“Gone.”

Her head snapped up. Pushing Gertrude off she stood, fear choking her. “What do you mean gone? He was here earlier. We have time, the cards didn’t take him.”

“No,” Thane replied.

She waited for him to continue. He said nothing else.

Striding over to him,Laila screamed, “Explain, Thane, or I swear I will rip your motherboard out and smash it to pieces.”

Thane looked at her, sorrow on his face. “I’m sorry,Laila .”

At his look Laila’s mind flashed to what Aleneic had hinted at. Not being wise. Not willing to make a sacrifice. She remembered the desperation in his lovemaking.

“No!”

Collapsing on the floor,Laila sobbed. Gertrude and Renaldo came over to her, comforting her. Pain filled her, making it hard to catch her breath. She heard wailing in the room, not realizing it was her own.

Helpless, Thane looked at her, unable to offer her comfort. His fist clenched, hating being trapped as a machine. Her sobs quieted and she looked at him. The heartbreak on her face made him feel ashamed.

“Why, Thane? We had time he didn’t have to do this.”

Thane hated saying it but knew he had to. “Time was up. The cards were calling him. He had a choice to make and he didn’t want to let them suffer anymore.”

Laila laughed,a bitter sound.“How noble of him. What about me?”

Thane gulped and didn’t look at her, damning Aleneic for swearing him to secrecy. Laila got up and collapsed into the chair in front of the computer. Thane watched her. Suddenly she sat up and looked at the screen. He didn’t see what made her look like that. She turned on him.

“Where is he, Thane?”Laila demanded.

“I can’t tell you.” Thane had promised Aleneic .

Laila’s eyes narrowed. “I made you, Thane, and I order you to tell me.”

“No.”

“What do you mean no? I order you to tell me,”Laila screamed.

Thane smiled, a sad twist of lips. “Laila you gave me free will and I am not just a machine you can order around.”

Laila looked at him and blinked. “I know, Thane, I am sorry. I have to find him before it is too late.”

“It’s no use, he won’t go back into the card, knowing his people will suffer and he would rather die than know that he would have to live without you.”

Laila looked at him and gestured behind her. “Look, Thane. I know where the Golden Tarot is.”

Thane looked past her at the screen, really studying it. Then his eyes widened. There was a pattern and it pointed to where it was. His heart accelerated.

Looking at Laila , he replied, “He went as close as he could get to Atlantis. He went home to where it started. He went there.”

Thane pointed to the screen.

Laila frowned and shook her head. “Atlantis is not there, Thane. Even in myth it has never been there.”

Thane felt urgency. “Aleneic said with all the changes in the world the underwater world has changed. The closest he could get to Atlantis is there at Magen’s Bay in St. Thomas.”

Laila looked at the place on the screen. “I’ll never make it.”

Thane felt in this he could help. Turning, he waved his hand. A drawer opened and an item floated out. He saw Laila was watching him. The item flew at her. Her hand flashed out and she caught it. Shocked, she looked down.

“It’s a teleporter Aleneic has been helping me with,” Thane told her.

She looked up at him then, tapping the box, it lit up and Laila smiled. “Thank you, Thane.”

She disappeared. Thane looked at where she had been and hoped she was in time.

Raising his dagger, Aleneic lowered it to his wrist.

“I get really pissed when people don’t say goodbye.”

Jerking his head up, he watched as Laila strode across the sand, the sun just coming up behind her. Pain filled him but he couldn’t change his mind.

“Go away, Laila, I have to do this.”

Laila shook her head. “This big great sacrifice isn’t necessary. I—”

Aleneic cut her off, shaking his head. “I have to do this.”

Laila looked at him, a disgruntled look on her face. She sighed, “People just don’t listen.”

Her hand flashed out as she grabbed the dagger while at the same time she hit him mid-chest, making him fly backward. Aleneic watched her, shocked, then saw her raise the dagger and rake it across her palm. The ground shook under his feet. Ignoring it, he levitated until he was in front of her. Aleneic caught her hand, looked at it. Seeing the deep cut, he waved his hand over it and healed it.

Grabbing her shoulders, Aleneic shook her. “What are you doing?”

Laila looked at him. “Saving your sorry ass.”

Aleneic looked at her like she was crazy. “Laila, this does nothing.”

Laila sighed and replied, “Look behind you, Aleneic.”

“No.” Cupping her face, Aleneic looked at her. “I love you, Laila, but I cannot take my own happiness and sacrifice that of my people.”

Pleasure burst over Laila’s face. “I love you too, Aleneic.”

She reached for him. Keeping her away, Aleneic shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. I cannot let my people suffer.”

Laila bit her lip and said again, “Look behind you, Aleneic, then thank me properly.”

Confused on why she kept insisting that he look behind him, Aleneic looked behind him, then turning, he stumbled forward. He knelt, staring at the card he had been searching for over the past two thousand years. The sun shone off the Golden Tarot lying on the sand. It was more beautiful than he remembered. The gold of the card had etchings all around. Around the edge of the card were various rare gems. Glancing up at Laila where she stood beside him, he stood in a rush, hugging her.

“Oh gods. How did you know?” Aleneic asked.

Laila looked at him then flushed. “I’m a geek and we’re good at patterns. From the data you gave Thane and the book I was able to see it. It took me a while though. Sorry. It would take a small sacrifice of blood—human blood—to reveal it. That is why in all that time you and Byichus were never able to see it.”

Aleneic looked down at her. “Laila, thank you. I love you.”

Laila looked at him then replied, “Then thank me properly.”

Laughing, Aleneic leaned in and kissed her.

Mocking laughter then clapping filled the air. Stiffening, Aleneic loosened his hold on Laila and looked across the beach at Byichus. He still looked the same. A deceptively boyish face that made you want to trust him.

Byichus looked at Laila and grinned, showing his teeth. “You’re smart, human. It only took you a few days to figure out what he and I couldn’t find. Too bad it doesn’t matter.”

Byichus came forward in a blur. Seeing where he was heading, Aleneic waved his hand and sent the Golden Tarot flying into the trees. Byichus didn’t slow, coming right for him. Pushing Laila out of the way, he flew at Byichus. He met him and they fought viciously. Punching Byichus back, he saw him wipe blood from his mouth and laugh. Byichus looked over Aleneic’s shoulder. Not stupid enough to fall for that trick, Aleneic headed for him. A cry of anguish made him turn. His heart stopped at the sight of confusion on Laila’s face then his eyes dropped and he saw the blood blooming in her chest. The shifter wrenched its claws along her throat, making her gurgle. Byichus jumped on his back. Flipping him off, Aleneic kicked him away and ran to Laila. The shifter swiped again then punched her. Aleneic watched as she flew through the air and over the sea. There was such a look of shock on her face. She dropped in the water with a splash, disappearing below the waves.

Aleneic reached the shifter, ripped out its claws, dug his hand into its chest and snatched out its heart. Turning to where he saw Laila fall, Aleneic started forward. Byichus tackled him.

Sitting on him, Byichus smiled, “She’s dead and you’ll be following her shortly.”

He raised his fist. A rumble shook the ground, pitching Byichus off him. Aleneic felt the wind snatch him off the ground. Then all was quiet. Looking up, he tried to make sense of what he was seeing.

Chapter Eight

Laila knew she was dying. Flying through the air, she watched Aleneic try to reach her then the water closed over her. Sinking to the bottom of the ocean, she felt the quiet. Suddenly a fire started to fill her and Laila opened her mouth and sucked in water. A bright light filled her and she felt her skin split at the same time knowledge filled her.

As she opened her eyes Laila saw her reflection in the water. She had wings spread and light surrounding her body. Byichus had nothing to with her newfound fighting skills. She was a Zuri Maji, born with the gifts of all Maji. Looking up at the ocean above her, Laila shot straight up. She had been born human as all Maji were. On her fifteenth birthday she should have come into her makales —magic powers. She knew now that her mother was Zuri Maji and had hidden her to protect her from being pulled into the feud between her mother's people and her father's clan—he must have been a phoenix. Hitting the air, Laila raised her head and shrieked, shattering the silence. She looked back at the beach and saw Byichus straddling Aleneic. Tapping into her power, she felt it flare. The earth shook under the force of it. Byichus flew off Aleneic. Lowering her head, she flew toward the beach. She saw Aleneic turn and look at her. In his eyes she saw herself. Light flowed around her and her wings were widespread. There was fire all around her.

She was death.

She was life.

She was the phoenix.

She lowered her head, breathing fire to incinerate all the shifters on the beach. With a graceful movement she landed on the beach, looking at Byichus as he backed away from her, fear in his face. He turned to run. Laila raised her hand, lashing out with her fire whip. She caught him around his ankle. He fought and she dragged him to her. Using her Maji powers, she flipped him over and pinned him before her. Aleneic came into her view. She looked at him then back at Byichus. She saw his eyes flash meadow green then black. Laila lifted her hand up and hit him hard in his chest, closing her eyes.

Reaching out with her power, she touched his heart, closed her power around it and felt him die. Her eyes flashed open as she stepped back. Black smoke poured out from him to form a man.

The man hissed, "Phoenix, you would be the perfect host for me."

Laila spread her arms and replied, "Come and get it."

The man ran for her. Laila gasped, closing her eyes as he hit her, then she drank him in. She could hear his roar as he realized he was about to die. Pushing down deep inside herself, she blew it up. When she opened her eyes she knew he was gone.

Byichus' still form was lying before her. Laila spoke, "Live."

Byichus gasped and sat up, looking around frantically. Then he looked at her. He knelt before her.

Shaking her head, Laila touched his arm and helped him up.

“No, Byichus , I am not your master. You are free of the evil that inhabited you. Free to go where you choose.”Laila looked at Aleneic as she said it.

He came and stood beside her.

Byichus looked at them both, sorrow on his face. “I am sorry for all I have done to your people.”

Laila held her breath, waiting to see what Aleneic would say.

Aleneic looked at Byichus . “It was out of your control. Now go.”

Byichus looked at them both. “I have nowhere to go.”

Laila knew it was true. From his thoughts she knew that the thing that inhabited him all those years had killed all he held dear. “I offer you shelter, Byichus, for as long as you have need,”Laila said.

Byichus looked at her then stood tall and proud. Touching his forehead, Laila sent him to the brownstone. Laila shifted back to human form. Aleneic watched her and Laila searched for signs of disgust on his face. Aleneic looked at her and kissed her. Laughing, Laila held him. Pulling back, she heard the whispers. Pushing him back gently, she called the tarot cards to her, then the Golden Tarot. She threw them in the air. Raising her hands she looked as fire poured from her fingertips, burning up the Golden Tarot and the tarot deck. As the Golden Tarot melted, people started to appear then it was silent. The beach was filled with thousands of people from Atlantis. As one they knelt. Aleneic took her hand in his and she looked at him.

Suddenly she heard a sound and, turning her head, she saw a man step from the sea. From his features, so like Aleneic’s, she knew it was his brother.

“K’Laian,”Aleneic whispered, confirming what she thought.

K’Laian came to them, touching the people as he came. Reaching them, he nodded to her then looked at his brother. They stared at each other then K’Laian pulled Aleneic into a strong embrace. She could see tears in their eyes. K’Laian released him then stepped back and looked at her again.

“If the Maji ever have need I will be there,”K’Laian pledged.

Laila was surprised. She would have thought he would have sided with the shifters. K’Laian stepped back and walked away. He stopped by the water and all the people went past him into the water. There was laughter and she saw them change to various sea animals before they disappeared. K’Laian watched them and he turned, running into the surf. He changed, waved at them then was gone.

Laila watched them and, turning to Aleneic , she lowered her eyes and mumbled. “Well, I guess that is it then. Umm... I’ll see you.”

Aleneic raised her chin. “I’m never leaving you,Laila .Never again. I love you and however long it takes me to convince you to marry me I will be by your side.”

Laila’s heart fluttered with joy then reality intruded. “I can’t. Not yet. I have to learn about what I am first.”

Aleneic nodded and said, “I know and I will be here with you.”

Laila looked at him.“Your people.”

Aleneic grinned. “I have sacrificed for them but to be wise I must not sacrifice the things I try to pass onto them. Love, Laila .”

Laila laughed and hugged him. “Okay, but I can’t tell any of the Maji or shifters about this. And neither can you. Promise me.”

Aleneic grinned then nodded. Pleased,Laila turned then stumbled as she saw the thousands of people there. She recognized them as Zuri Maji . A shriek sounded and Laila looked up to see the most breathtaking golden bird flying overhead. It flew swiftly to the beach and shifted to a man. He strode forward and Zarya joined him. They reached her together. Zarya unfolded the Maji cloak and held it out to her. The man waved his hand. A dagger and sash appeared. Knowing what it was, Laila looked at him. His eyes were black and swirled with stars. He held out the Hurious and Jgures to her. It was for the elite Sreylf —the Shifter Warriors. Looking at them both, she saw they waited for her to choose. Bringing them all to her,Laila let them float in front of her then a light flashed.

She donned the Maji cloak with the Jgures on the front. Taking the Hurious dagger she placed it inside the cloak.

Zarya smiled. “You have chosen well, Laila . Welcome, our new Zuri Maji .”

The Maji screamed in welcome.

The man looked at her. “I am N’alta leader of the Sreylf. Rejoice in the birth of a new phoenix. Tremble at the new Sreylf .”

Laila heard the shrieks and, looking up, she saw the various flying shifters above. There were dragons, birds of every kind. Looking down, she saw the other various shifter animals all paying homage. Looking back at Zarya and N’alta , she saw they were walking away.

Zarya handed N’alta a card. “We would like some of your warriors to work at Rarities Incorporated.”

Laila bit off a laugh .Zarya was always about business.

N’alta looked down at the card then at Zarya . “If I call you it isn’t going to be about business.”

Zarya looked at him. “If I answer I might think about it.”

She walked away. N'alta laughed, looked back at Laila, winked then shifted and flew away. The other shifters followed him. The land shifters sped down the beach. Zarya turned, nodded at her then silver swirled and the Maji were gone. Laila saw Aleneic was struggling not to grin. Reaching, over she smacked his arm.

“Why didn’t you tell me they were there?”

He shrugged and hauled her into his arms. “You were so earnest.” He kissed her gently. “You take us home for a change.”

Wrapping her arms around him, she did as he said. Laila sank into his embrace, kissing him.

“Welcome home,Laila and Aleneic .” Thane’s voice startled her.

Laila looked around, realizing that she had zapped them back to where she had came from.

Looking up at Thane, she said, “Thanks for all your help, Thane.”

Thane nodded his head and replied, “You are welcome,Laila .” Then he winked out.

Laila held Aleneic’s hand and pulled him toward the door. Stopping in the doorway, she looked back at Thane. Waving her hand, she whispered, “Live.”

She felt the power of the phoenix fill her. A groan came then a form separated from the center console. A man stumbled out. Watching him,Laila saw him raise his face and shock come over it. Smiling,Laila looked at Thane.

Thane looked at her in joy. “I’m human.”

Lailashook her head. “No. You are immortal.”

Thane looked at her. A roar of fury shook the house then concrete crumbled in front of Thane.Laila didn’t blink as she watched the furious face on the man before her.

“What have you done?” he roared.

His sun-kissed features were pulled in an angry scowl.

Lailalooked at him and answered calmly.“Given you life,Rohan . Don’t make me regret it.”

Rohan looked at her. “I don’t want life. I—”

He stopped. Laila looked at him. “I know. You want Sonya. Now you’ll at least have a shot at it. No matter what, she would not have been yours as a computer.”

Rohan looked at her. “At least I was close to her. Now she won’t let me near her like this.”

Laila sighed. “You’ll just have to work harder to seduce her.”

Rohan got a purposeful look on his face then turned to look at Thane. “Well, ugly, what are we to do now?”

Thane looked at him. “Live.”

Rohan looked at him and nodded.

“You can have the brownstone next door. But you have to share it with Byichus,” Laila offered.

Thane looked at her. “Byichus who enslaved him in the card?” He pointed at Aleneic.

“Yes.”

Thane smiled and cracked his hands. “Oh, it’ll be our pleasure.”

Exchanging a look with Rohan, they shimmered and were gone.

“Behave, Thane.”

His laughter echoed in the room.

Laila turned to Aleneic. “I’d better go and make sure they play nice.”

Aleneic pulled her into him. “Uh-huh. They are big boys. Let them solve their own problems. I need your attention right now.”

Laila felt his erection pressing against her.

Shivering, she asked, “Are you ready to thank me properly?”

Aleneic smiled a wicked grin that made her heart race and her pussy dampen. “How does for all eternity sound?”

Laila kissed him. Eternity sounded just fine with her.

About the Author

Taige Crenshaw has been enthralled with the written word from the time she picked up her first book. It wasn't long before she started to make up her own tales of romance.

Her novels are set in today between people who know what they want and how to get it. As well as in the future of vast universes between beautiful, strange and unique beings. There is lots of spice and sensuality added to her work.

Always hard at work creating new and exciting places, Taige can be found curled up with a hot novel with exciting characters when she is not creating her own. Join her in the fun, frolic, interesting people and far reaches of the world in her novels.

Taige welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by Taige Crenshaw

Carnal Awakening

Seducing a God



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com