

# GARGOYLE'S WRATH

*Nia K. Foxx*

Changeling Press

# **Gargoyle's Wrath**

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## **Gargoyle's Wrath**

**Nia K. Foxx**

What was once thought of as a humorous advertisement has quickly turned into a permanent problem for Aman. Now she finds herself mated to a sexy, mythical man (of sorts) who insists that she belongs to him. The disturbing part is that she's not entirely certain he's wrong.

Sergei considers himself a lucky Gargoyle to have found his mate so quickly while others of his species face an uncertain future. He's determined to do anything to make Aman happy, well, short of agreeing to her ridiculous request that they have time apart. He longs for the day when his little hell-cat will accept their union instead of tormenting him at every turn.

Just when it seems the couple has reached an impenetrable impasse, a snap decision threatens to tear the pair apart permanently and push Sergei to the point of no return.

## Chapter One

Aman didn't bother to look at the bedside clock when she finally surfaced from sleep. What did it matter when every day was the same in her gilded cage? Sergei was long gone, of that she was certain. Although his scent lingered, its alluring, nearly intoxicating aroma was nothing compared to when he was present. She had to admit that it was better than any aphrodisiac.

Amazing that she hadn't notice it before her metamorphosis. It was incredible just how many things were so abundantly obvious now. Her eyesight seemed just short of X-ray vision, allowing her to see in ultraviolet at will. From the penthouse concrete patio she could eavesdrop on conversations at ground level as if she were standing next to the individuals.

The ability provided her with a source of distraction during the day when television became annoying or she'd grown tired of reading. Books arrived on a regular basis thanks to the Web and access to a limitless credit account. It was funny how he was willing to see to her every comfort and indulgence, yet adamant as ever about granting the one request that could ultimately bring them closer together. All she'd asked for was the time and space necessary to digest all that was happening to her. She needed to know that his care for her outweighed his stubborn resolve to dictate how things should be between them.

Aman had become quite accustomed to the routine in their short time together. If the situation weren't so serious she would have been able to find humor in the humdrum existence she led with her mythical mate. Of course she accepted a slight responsibility since she'd refused all Sergei's attempts at outings or social interactions. Her strike was backfiring, big time. By day's end she found herself eager for his return, although she would never admit it. Instead, she waited until the cover of night to

unleash her hidden feelings. It was in those hours that she could give of herself with complete abandon, without feeling she'd compromised her instituted strike. In the light of day the stalemate was reinstated, neither speaking about their fiery lovemaking of the previous evening.

\* \* \*

What started as a dark, dismal morning progressed into a day where the sky overflowed with unforgiving clouds and booming thunderstorms. Sergei listened with half an ear to a weather report that droned on in the background. Torrential rains would drench the city with several inches of water by nightfall. The meteorologist went through a useless explanation of the conditions creating the unusual weather. Sergei didn't accept the explanation, not wholly. There were definitely more significant forces of nature at work, way beyond mortal comprehension.

A full moon would be upon them soon, heralding the mating season for Werekins. Not just any mating season, this celebratory occasion only fell once every ten years, marking the time for an unbound Werekin male to choose his permanent mate.

For a brief moment his thoughts strayed to a longtime friend who would most likely seek out his mate now as he'd done for many years without success. Silently he wished him good fortune in the season. He clenched his fist in frustration at the thought of his own female woes. It had been two months since he'd brought Aman home with him, and still he couldn't convince her they were meant to be together, that The Powers That Be made them for one another. What he wouldn't give to have her return just a modicum of his feelings. She continued to resist him on every point.

A brief solace could be found in their heated lovemaking, and he savored every morsel of her passion, drawing out orgasms until they both panted for release. He grew rigid reminiscing on their latest encounter in the wee hours of the morning when she'd awakened him with a lusty riding. The romp was over so quickly he'd have thought it a dream if not for her warm body collapsing atop him.

It pained him to keep her confined day in and out, yet he couldn't allow her to wander about the city as if she were just some... human. He shuddered to think of the

danger his best friend's mate had been subjected to from a brief lapse. The succubus who'd orchestrated Fatima's abduction was still at large. Until she could be dealt with no Fledgling was safe. He'd vowed to be more vigilant should he have the fortune of finding his Fledgling. Now that Aman was in his life, he would do nothing to jeopardize her safety. Just the thought of her in harm's way made his chest tighten with grief.

The blare of his office phone broke through his contemplation. With a quick press of the remote's power button he silenced the newscast.

"Sergei here." His heart soared with the possibility that it was the very woman who consumed his thoughts.

"Congratulations on finding your mate," Jean greeted in his usual cheery tone.

"I didn't think I'd be hearing from you in a long while." Sergei forced the disappointment out of his voice. With all the commotion the younger gargoyle's ad campaign was causing, he'd expected him to stay incommunicado, at least until Alexi stopped the death threats. Sergei stared wearily at the mountain of files he'd just sifted through. There were still plenty more applicants to be approved or rejected, more than enough to keep him up for many weeks to come.

Apparently Alexi wasn't faring much better with the numerous responses that had been forwarded to him. Sergei was certain that his friend, spurred on by the hope of finding his mate amongst the stacks, had spent many a sleepless night working on the files. Luckily reinforcements would be arriving over the course of the next few weeks as they geared up for the first round of Meet and Greet.

"I must say I'm a little surprised to find you at work at all. If I had a mate at home..."

"I'm certain there's a point to your call. Or were you just feeling particularly annoying?"

"Touchy aren't we? All must not be well in Paradise. You want to talk about it?"

Sergei growled his exasperation. "Jean, you've spent too much time watching Dr. Phil."

"Hey, you could learn a lot from the man; he's tapped into the female psyche."

"He's a quack. Now what do you want?"

"Damn, I nearly forgot." Jean cleared his throat. "Let me be the first to inform you of the birth of Tiberius Jean De LaRue."

"You mean it's happened?" He was stunned. Everyone knew the day was fast approaching but it all seemed surreal, a miraculous event. *The first Protector to be born in centuries.* The thought repeated in his mind. "When?"

"Two nights ago, just before midnight. He's perfect and came in just under eleven pounds, which Fatima promises to remind father and son of for the rest of their lives."

"I want to see him."

"Lorn thought you would. Nice guy that I am, I figured I'd make all the calls so he could be the devoted husband."

"Of course. Give my best wishes to Lorn and Fatima. Tell them we'll arrive shortly." Sergei hurried the other Protector off the phone, contemplating whether to call Alexi. No, he'd leave that to Jean. Right now all he wanted to do was get home to Aman.

He glanced at the clock on his way out the door. Rush hour traffic would be unbearable. By the time he emerged on the rooftop he'd removed his clothing, which he swiftly stashed in a metal bin installed for just that purpose.

Transformation complete, he extended his wings, reveling in their freedom. Thunder rumbled across the sky as the first raindrop splattered against his face. He had one thought on his mind as he launched into the air. Aman.

## Chapter Two

Aman paced the lengthy confines of the condo, venturing outside at different intervals to take in the warm humidity. Even if the forecast hadn't predicted rain she would have known it was coming. The air was heavy, its scent pungent. It started lightly but quickly began to soak the city. She stared out the sliding glass, enjoying the soothing sound as the drops pelted the concrete balcony.

As a child she'd loved to play in the rain, especially on those summer days when it was her only reprieve from the sweltering heat. She smiled impishly as a thought formed in her head. Before she had a chance to talk herself out of the impulsive notion, Aman stripped out of her cotton shorts, giggling with glee as she stepped onto the balcony in nothing but a T-shirt and panties.

A thin puddle covered her feet. The cool wetness only spurred her on and it wasn't long before she was soaked from head to toe. It was like living a youthful fantasy, embracing the elements semi-clad, and she wanted to experience the heady excitement to its hilt. With enthusiasm she flung her head back, sticking out her tongue to capture as much water as possible. If anyone could see her they'd probably think she was a little unbalanced, but she didn't care.

The sky rumbled loudly, and she pretended that it was approval from the heavens. Rain washed over her face, coating her tongue and throat. Another deep rolling burst of thunder reverberated around her, its echo bounced off the surrounding skyscrapers and Aman's heart soared with exuberance.

"Enjoying yourself?"

Aman sputtered as she whipped around to face him, swiping moisture from her eyes. Sergei's arrival must have coincided with the sky's musical display, his scent

masked by the moist air. "What are you doing..." She choked on her last words as she took in his very nude gargoyle form. "Here?"

He smiled in his lopsided fashion that made her heart race. Amazing how it still had the same effect on her no matter his physical persona. "I do live here." His eyes raked over her wet body with slow deliberation.

"That's not what I meant. What are you doing home now, and flying around during the day I might add?" The force of the rain plastered her short hair against her scalp, its ends framing her face, forcing her to swipe at it several times.

"It's dark enough. Is it so curious for me to want to be close to you?" His gaze lingered on her breasts before rising to meet her gaze.

She didn't need to imagine what she must look like to him. It was obvious from his ever-growing erection that he found her wet state arousing. Her oversized shirt just reached the top of her thighs, and clung to her like a second skin, her taut nipples prominent through the wet cotton. She'd probably make the perfect candidate for a wet T-shirt contest.

She could feel her nipples hardening even more beneath his heated scrutiny. "I guess I should get in before I shrivel up into a prune." Although she spoke, she made no move toward the sliding glass door that stood just beyond Sergei's massive frame.

Her heart thumped a bit faster when he took a silent step in her direction. If he touched her she'd be lost to any rational thought. That's how it had been between them from the beginning. She was addicted to his contact, to everything about him.

Aman took a deep breath, registering her mistake as his musky aroma filled her nostrils, primal and inexplicably exhilarating. He continued his silent approach, studying her like a predator would its prey, waiting for any sudden movement. His cock stood at full attention, yet she tried her best to ignore it as she directed her train of thought to something less arousing. She closed her eyes, satisfied as the image of a cold, dark cave formed. She imagined all sorts of creepy crawly things just ready to attack and bats by the thousands.

*That should do it.* Only it didn't work, because an image of Sergei stepped out of the darkness and promptly scared all the nasty little beasties away. The back of his hand brushed her cheek softly. She made a sound of contentment and rubbed her face against it.

"Look at me."

She couldn't resist. Her lids drifted up until she stared into his now very human face. Oh, and what a face it was. Green eyes the color of a rain forest held her captive. His lips descended upon hers. Without prompting, Aman wrapped her arms around his neck, drawing him into her embrace. Large hands reached for her firm rear, pressing her intimately against his stiff cock.

"More," he moaned against her mouth, tugging the hem of her shirt upward.

"Whoa. Get a room, or at least take it indoors."

The sudden appearance of the new arrival startled them both. Aman found herself thrust behind Sergei, shielded in the corner of the patio. "You," his voice boomed in near accusation.

"Live and in the flesh. Did you miss me?"

Aman bit back laughter at hearing her friend's voice.

"While I must say I'm very, *very* impressed by your display of manly prowess, you should probably cover yourself."

"I don't know how you got here, Mage, but I want you gone," he growled.

"Yeah, I missed you too. Now that wouldn't happen to be Aman you're hiding back there?"

"I'm warning you, Mage."

"The name's Sam. I'm pretty sure Aman introduced us over dinner. Surely you remember the night." Aman thanked God for her newly developed reflexes and strength that allowed her to push her way in front of Sergei. Otherwise she was certain her friend would have ended up dangling over the balcony.

"My God, Sam, what are you doing here?"

"Intruding." Sergei didn't try to hide his displeasure.

"You know I tried every scrying spell I could to find you. I came up empty every time." Sam brushed rain from her face unsuccessfully, red hair molded to her scalp and face. "You must have some pretty powerful Elves in your employ." Bright blue eyes looked beyond Aman's shoulders to the tense Protector. "Then I let my fingers do the walking and here I am, interrupting what looked like some pretty steamy foreplay. Lucky for me the protection spells didn't extend to keeping friends out."

Another growl, this time more feral, emanated from behind Aman. "Why don't we go inside where it's less wet?" she urged, in case Sergei decided to act on any thoughts of homicide.

"Quite the exhibitionist you're becoming," the other woman joked. "Sex on a balcony."

"Not anymore," Sergei grumbled, mumbling under his breath that the spells needed to be altered to keep away all forms of nuisance.

"Sam, give us a minute while we dry off and get changed."

"Take your time. I'll just poke my nose around your new digs. I'm not going anywhere."

\* \* \*

"Behave yourself. I haven't seen or talked to Sam in months," Aman whispered as she closed the bedroom door behind them.

"And your point is?" Sergei emerged from their adjoining bath with a towel in hand.

Her eyes narrowed. "My point is I'm tired of being cooped up in here with no human contact."

"She's not human," he reminded her while toweling her dry after she removed her drenched T-shirt.

"You know what I mean." She tried yanking the towel from his hands without much success. He'd once said how much he enjoyed doing things like that for her. "That's enough," she protested when he paid a little too much attention to her breasts.

Slipping into the walk-in closet, she quickly donned another T-shirt and a pair of leggings.

"One thing."

"Can it wait?" She stopped in front of him, arms crossed over her breasts.

He shook his head. "We leave in the morning for France."

"We what?"

"Lorn and his mate have given birth."

He'd spoken of Lorn and his wife Fatima over the past couple of months, even mentioned the imminent arrival of their baby on several occasions. The birth was highly anticipated and meant a new beginning for his species, yet she couldn't build up the same excitement over the event. Though it was selfish, she was a little more concerned with her current predicament with Sergei. "Are you *asking* me to accompany you?"

"Of course. You and Fatima should get along very well, and I think this would be a good opportunity for us to start fresh."

Did he mean what she thought he did? "Fresh?"

He nodded.

Aman gasped at the significance of it all. He was finally capitulating. Her resilience had paid off after all, and just when she thought he'd never see things her way. "Once we're back in the States I'd like to find a new place, and of course a job," she rambled, for the first time looking forward to a future with Sergei, one starting out on equal footing.

She wasn't sure what first alerted her that something was wrong. Maybe it was his suddenly rigid stance, his eerie silence or the way his eyes darkened to a dangerous onyx color.

"Sergei?"

"Let's get a couple things straight. I won't repeat them." The deadpan tone of his voice sent a chill down her spine. "First, *we will* be leaving on an early morning flight to France and secondly, you are my mate, now and until the end of time. The sooner you accept this the sooner we can move on. Now go see to your guest. I have city patrol."

\* \* \*

"I can't believe it's really you. How did you get up here? Sergei called your mother a Mage the night he took me. Is that what you are?" Truth be told she didn't care if Sam announced that she was the reincarnation of Merlin, she was just so happy to see her friend.

"Only half. I'll never have abilities like my mother."

"Well, you got in here through non-conventional means, not to mention the whammy you did to Sergei. That demonstrates some skill. I'm just glad you're here. I wanted to contact you but the lord and master of all he surveys feels it's necessary to sequester me in his ivory tower until I accept him."

Laughter bubbled up and out of Sam. "Leave it to you to be holed up with one of God's sexiest creations and still not put out."

Aman couldn't stop her own laughter from erupting. "Now I didn't say all that."

"Oh... so the ice princess has done some melting."

"Be careful not to step in any puddles," she threw over her shoulder as Sam followed her deeper into the living room.

"Well, hot damn. Here it was I thought you were being tortured and mistreated."

"No, nothing like that. Although I do believe there is such a thing as too many orgasms."

"Bite your tongue."

"Seriously, I'm glad you found me. As large as this place seems, I swear I'm going stir crazy in here. I haven't seen my sister or her kids in ages, and frankly I didn't realize how much I missed them until now. It's almost worth agreeing to be Sergei's docile little woman."

"So does that mean you're giving in?" Aman caught the faint note of disapproval in her friend's voice.

"Not by a long shot, although I'd hoped that he could learn to see things from my point of view." She thought back to the conversation with Sergei before he took off in a huff.

The redhead rolled her eyes. "Please. He's just like every other Alpha creature out there. Trust me. They order, demand, and insist, but never compromise."

In the time that she and Sergei had been together, she'd found him to be very understanding, giving, considerate of all her needs except one. But she suspected that Sam was talking about more than her situation. "Talk to me, girly, what's going on?" Aman asked after settling into the seat next to her friend, tucking her legs beneath her. A distraction from her own problems was welcome.

There was a pregnant pause. "My dad is on his 'it's time for you to settle down' kick, and I'm sick of it."

She couldn't believe her ears. "Since when have you been opposed to meeting the right man and getting married?"

"That's just it. My dad is vehemently opposed to me marrying a man, any man. He thinks it's time that I pick a Were and start pushing out little pups."

Sam stared silently at her friend as if seeing her for the first time.

"Oh yeah, I guess I forgot to mention that my other half is Werekin," she added nonchalantly, as if mentioning a fact of common knowledge.

"Werekin?"

"Yeah, you know, Werewolves, howl at the moon and all that junk? Well, that's an exaggeration, but you get the idea."

Aman nodded but could only claim a partial understanding. She found herself wondering exactly how many kinds of creatures there were running around in human form.

"Up until the night Sergei came to get you, my mother had always been my strongest supporter. With her in my corner she kept my dad appeased. Now it seems even she's turned on me. Hell, she's rationing out my pheromone reducer."

"Your what?"

"It's this mixture she came up with on my sixteenth birthday to suppress the pheromones that would attract Were males. She wanted me to finish college before I chose a mate. After that I just kept convincing her to make more. Secretly I hoped I'd

meet a nice gentle human who would sweep me off my feet before they started up again."

"I see."

"Do you? Ever since she's put me on rations I can barely leave the house without some wannabe Alpha Were sniffing my butt. Luckily for me my dad has refused to let any past the front door. But it's just a matter of time. Then what am I going to do? I'm sure whoever my father agrees to is going to be a true Alpha to the umpteenth power."

Aman stared at her in disbelief. "It's not like they can *make* you do anything. You're a grown woman, for God's sake."

"Yeah, and tell me how that's working for you."

Aman opened her mouth to speak only to shut it again as the truth of her friend's statement hit its mark.

"Look, I didn't mean to snap at you. You're just as much of a victim as I am. The bottom line is once one of these Alphas set you in their sights they're like a dog with a bone."

*Don't I know it.* "Maybe it won't be so bad," she offered.

Sam's eyes flashed at her. "You're kidding right? Let me just enlighten you on some facts about Werekins. Number one, as a mated woman I'll have absolutely no rights. I'll be forced to join my mate's pack and possibly never see my family again. Number two, Were males are very possessive, domineering creatures with short fuses. Just think about a pack of wild dogs constantly at each other's throat to prove who the dominant one is. Not only that, but I'll have to endure being screwed wherever my mate sees fit, regardless of who's around. They're like animals."

"Your father didn't strike me as that sort."

"That's because he's an exception, or at least I always thought so until now. The fact that he's trying to subject his only daughter to that lifestyle speaks volumes," she said dejectedly.

Aman felt helpless. As much as she wanted to aid her friend, the reality of their circumstances weren't much different. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Leave, seclude myself in a nunnery..."

"But you're not Catholic," Aman reminded her.

"I'll convert. Anything will be better than that."

Aman thought on it a moment. "What about magic?"

"With me being only half mage even that would be short-lived."

To Aman, some time was better than nothing. What she would have given for some forewarning of things to come and time to come to terms with it all. Sam didn't know just how lucky she was to have been given fifteen years of a reprieve. "Maybe that will be all you need. What happens if you find a non-Werekin husband?"

"Well, we would still have to exchange the sacred vows of the Werekin and consummate our marriage to permanently inhibit my pheromones. No Were male could even approach me then because as far as they'd be concerned I'm off limits."

"So why don't we start the campaign, go on a full-fledged man hunt?"

"You're kidding."

"Nope, serious as a heart attack. Sergei just dropped the bomb on me that we're off to Europe tomorrow. Why don't you come with us? From what he's told me in the past, his friend lives in a fully staffed mansion."

"Most likely staffed with Elves."

"Are they Alphas too?"

"No, not really. Magical, yes, and from what I hear very sexual creatures, but completely devoted to Protectors."

"Yeah, but they must be able to marry like everyone else."

Sam shrugged. "I guess."

"What about Protectors, will your pheromone issue affect them?"

"Not at all. Protectors may fool around with women of various species but ultimately they're looking for their mates. Since Fledglings are all human descendants, that rules me out. Thank God," she ended on a sigh but followed up with a quick apology.

"Don't worry, I understand. You should be safe in a house full of Protectors and Elves. That should be daunting to even the most persistent Were males."

"Maybe. It's worth a try. There's just one rather large problem standing in the way of your plan."

Aman didn't bother to ask what, knowing Sergei wouldn't approve, not immediately. She'd cross that bridge later. "Let me worry about Sergei."

Sam gave her a mock salute. "He's all yours. At least I know one thing for sure, there's no way a Were male can find me here. Sergei must have some pretty powerful Elves working for him."

"You said that before. What makes you think he does?"

"Well, I tried a few spells while you two were changing and it's as if I'm completely blocked, even from the balcony. I couldn't even use a reversing spell. That's some serious shit he has in place to have adapted to the spell I used to get up here so quickly."

"I knew there was magic at work somehow. I haven't exactly been playing Sally homemaker around here, yet this place is spotless all the time." Aman remembered the woman who was there her first morning. Could she have been an Elf and responsible for the spells?

"Yeah, I can understand that. There are layers of spells interwoven throughout everything here, especially some pretty nasty protection spells. Remind me not to get upset with you while I'm here."

"That bad?"

"You don't want to know. Let's just say anyone planning to do you harm has a not so pleasant surprise waiting for them."

"Hmm, must not work on Sergei because I swear some days he looks like he wants to turn me over his knee."

"Hey, I think that counts more as kink than punishment."

"Maybe, but I know there have been plenty of moments when he's been none too happy with me."

"Not enough to do physical harm, I'm certain. They're not called Protectors for nothing. Overbearing, arrogant and controlling, yes, but completely dedicated to the protection of humans and as his mate he'd probably amputate several limbs to ensure you're safe."

"Whoa, for someone who doesn't like Sergei that borderlined on a compliment."

"Bite your tongue. He's still an Alpha male, and that nullifies any possible redeeming qualities he might possess."

As much as Aman wanted to, she didn't necessarily agree with her friend. In spite of his "one way, my way" attitude, she found several endearing things about him. One could easily mistake her feelings and fondness for love.

\* \* \*

"I thought I might find you here." Alexi's arrogant voice cut through Sergei's silent musings. "Kind of early to be patrolling, don't you think?"

"It's been a little too quiet lately and I don't like it," Sergei responded from his perch atop the Empire State Building's observation deck.

Alexi nodded his agreement. A steady downpour drenched the seemingly unaware pair of giants on the empty platform. Above them a spectacular display of lights danced about the clouds followed by the booming sound of thunder. "You heard the news?"

It was Sergei's turn to nod. "We're heading out tomorrow morning."

"Give my regards."

Sergei turned to observe the other Protector just as a flash of lightning illuminated the sky. He didn't like what he saw. Alexi looked beyond tired. Even in gargoyle form his gray pallor was darker than normal. Wind whipped around him but seemed to have little effect. His thick black mane hung with noticeable lifelessness beyond his shoulders while Sergei's own flew about in haphazard patterns behind him. Alexi was close to turning, and his shifting to gargoyle form would only speed up the process. It was a fact Protectors learned over the years as they watched others succumb to a fate worse than death if their mate couldn't be found.

Alexi was only a couple years his senior, and had he not found Aman certainly he'd have suffered a similar fate. "You won't be coming?"

"No. There is still much to be done here."

"Perhaps it's best if you remain in human form for a while." Sergei kept the concern from his voice, knowing the other Protector wouldn't appreciate any sign of sympathy directed at him.

"And who will patrol this area while you're away, old friend? I cannot allow this affliction to hinder my obligations."

"I'll call for Jean or Suehail to handle my patrol." Before the other Protector could argue he added, "There are other important matters that require your attention."

Sergei watched the protest pass over his face. "You might be right. The meetings are just around the corner."

He was grateful that he didn't have to force the issue. He'd have hated to involve the Council, but their numbers were few and they couldn't afford to lose any more. There was no way he could, in good conscience, allow a Protector to push himself into darkness. As an extra measure, he'd be sure to enlist Suehail's service to watch after Alexi.

"We won't be long," Sergei continued, turning to look down at the night life below. Despite forecasters' warnings, people were out in full force.

"From your presence here I take it that your mate still isn't faring well with her new life."

"She'll come around eventually." For his sake he hoped that time was fast approaching.

"This holiday might do her well. Lorn's mate has adjusted. There's no reason yours will not."

"She is stubborn beyond belief."

Alexi snorted. "She *is* a woman."

Lucky for the other Protector Aman wasn't present to hear his remark. She would have definitely cut Alexi down with that sharp tongue of hers. "So you're planning to stay in the city until after the meetings?"

"For the most part. I will need to return to Chicago periodically. Like you, I don't trust this silence. Every precaution will need to be taken to ensure the safety of the Fledglings."

"I agree. I'm planning a meeting with the Council since many will be in attendance at the baby's Welcoming."

Silence ensued as each pondered the weeks to come. With such important events converging at one time, they would all be very busy and on high alert.

\* \* \*

Aman smoothed her hands over her silk skirt, one of the few she owned. She flitted about the kitchen, effortlessly stirring the contents of two simmering pots before checking the oven for the warming chicken. She'd set two places at the formal dining table, preferring a less intimate arrangement for the discussion to come. A quick check of the clock let her know that it was just after eleven. She wasn't sure when Sergei would return since he normally didn't patrol until after midnight, when he could fly about the city undetected.

She knew the moment he arrived, hearing the gentle sliding of the balcony door, and catching his potent scent mingled with the rain that showed no sign of letting up.

"What is this?" he asked, finding her in the dining room.

"Dinner. You didn't have anything before you left."

Her breath caught in her throat as she took a mental picture of him clad in nothing but his loincloth. He was unbelievably sexy. She'd left a dry towel tossed over the back of a chair for him, and from the looks of his disheveled mane he'd already run the rich terry cloth over it vigorously. Sergei paused in the doorway, his eyes landing on the place settings before meeting her gaze.

She responded to his unasked question, "And I wanted to talk with you about something."

"Perhaps I should change for the occasion?"

Aman shrugged her indifference, although silently she hoped he'd do just that because having him stand there with muscles glistening from the rain and loincloth clinging to his privates was a distraction she didn't need.

When he left she released a breath she didn't realize she held. *You're slipping, girl*, she silently reprimanded herself. *And if you don't get a handle on yourself quickly, you're going to be gone completely*. She tried not to focus on his movements in the bedroom, busying herself instead with laying their meal out. Her keen hearing picked up music coming from the guest bedroom. Truth be told, she wasn't too hungry. An earlier snack with her friend and the anxious knots in her stomach combined to squelch her appetite.

"Better?" Sergei asked, re-emerging in linen pants and little else. He'd taken a moment to brush his hair back into a ponytail.

Aman only nodded, not sure if she could talk past the lump in her throat. She waited while he came around to pull her chair out, as was his habit, something she'd grown fond of in their time together. It took several swallows of water before she could brave speaking. "I want Sam to accompany us to France," she blurted out.

To his credit Sergei didn't show the slightest hint of outward surprise, taking several bites of the salad she'd prepared. Aman waited, knowing he'd heard her perfectly across the length of the table.

He finally spoke, his outward appearance completely unreadable to her. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised by the request."

"She is my friend, and we haven't seen each other in a while."

"And what of her parents?"

"What about them? She's an adult fully capable of making her own decisions."

"I'm fairly certain they wouldn't approve of such a trip, especially now."

Aman shrugged. "Sam thinks it's past time that she branched out. She's well beyond the age of consent."

"It is very different for her kind, Aman. She's an unmated Were, and without the protection of her father or his pack she's vulnerable."

"Not if she's with us."

"And why should I agree to this? It's obvious neither of us have a particular fondness for the other. Why would I prolong our time together?"

"Because I'm asking, as a favor to me."

Green eyes pinned her with a questioning look. Time ticked by slowly and she geared up for an argument. "Fine. She can come. Does that please you?"

She paused. "It's a start." She'd anticipated his refusal, mulling over his various responses as well as coming up with her own rebuttals. What she wasn't prepared for was a quick acquiescence.

"Something wrong?" he asked at her silence.

"No." She studied his face, not quite sure what she expected to find.

"Good. Why don't we finish our meal? Tomorrow will be a long day."

A hush fell over the table as each succumbed to their own thoughts. More than anything Aman wanted some insight into what was going through Sergei's mind. She couldn't help but notice that he seemed a bit distracted, and his lacking protest only enhanced her perception.

"What's going to happen with your search while we're away?" she began when the silence became unbearable.

At first she didn't think he would answer. "Alexi will take over, for the most part. Several others have become involved in various aspects of the Meet and Greet planning." She nodded her understanding, learning from past conversations just how important finding one's Fledgling mate was to the Protectors. She had been a bit relieved to learn that Sergei wasn't the mastermind behind the advertisement posted worldwide for potential mates.

"Has any more thought been given as to how you'll break the news to these unsuspecting women, or is the plan to pick and run?" She realized after the words left her mouth just how harsh they sounded. It was a sore subject between the two of them, and she wasn't sure why she chose to broach it again when it was obvious that neither of them saw eye to eye on the matter.

"Are you looking for a fight?"

"Not at all. It just seems that as your function draws near some serious thought needs to be given to how you will announce your existence to these women, and just how life altering things will become for them. Although if the preference is to stick your heads up your asses and ignore the finesse the situations calls for, you're setting your brethren up for some major problems."

"Similar to our own you mean?"

Aman didn't miss the deep sigh that followed his question. "Yes."

"I'll be sure we take that under advisement." The finality of his statement let her know that she'd struck a chord and he was done with the topic.

"Right." Aman didn't try and hide the disbelief in her voice. The tiny bit of appetite she'd had vanished. "I think I'll turn in now. As you said, we have a long day ahead of us tomorrow."

Although Sergei didn't protest her departure, she could feel his stare on her back. She half expected for him to follow, yet as she settled between their soft satin sheets and closed her eyes she realized that for the first time since she'd come to live with him the night wouldn't end in the heat of passion.

## Chapter Three

"Should I take it as a good sign that both of you are still in one piece?" Sam asked the next morning as the trio made their way down in the passenger elevator.

"Are you sure you don't want to call your parents?" Aman asked, ignoring the comment.

"Maybe later. I'm not in the mood for an argument or lecture this morning."

"I understand." She tried not to focus on the decreasing numbers illuminated on the elevator's console. An eternity seemed to have passed since she'd last tasted any vestige of freedom. As silly as it seemed she found herself wondering if the "outside world" would look any different since her captivity.

The elevator settled on the first floor without the slightest jolt. Anticipation mounted in the pit of her stomach, spreading slowly as she waited for the steel doors to open into the lobby. A complement of doormen and other staff busied themselves with the day-to-day business that kept the wealthy tenants satisfied.

New York greeted her reemergence in its usual chaotic fashion. Even at six a.m. the city was living up to its reputation as one that never slept. A uniformed doorman stood like a sentinel outside the automatic doors. He gave them a cheerful good morning before opening the passenger door to the waiting black limousine.

Poor man. It was already over seventy degrees out and would only get hotter. She doubted his neat polyester suit would offer any relief.

"You're staring out the window like a tourist," Sam commented.

"I feel like one. It's been a while." At her side she could feel Sergei tense as she soaked up the city. It was all as she remembered, yet somehow different. A paradox, much like herself. Different and the same, better even, unbelievably better. Several

times she found herself tuning into sounds and smells. Her stomach's low rumble pulled her back into the present, eliciting a chuckle from Sam.

Aman didn't try to hold back her laugh. "I guess I should keep my nose in the car."

"We can call ahead and have a breakfast prepared," Sergei suggested.

"No, I'll be fine. Besides I'm not too keen on flying and don't want to risk having a full meal."

"You're afraid to fly? You never mentioned this before."

She could feel his gaze on her face. "You never asked."

"Curious, you didn't seem too unnerved by our first flight together."

"Probably because I was still in shock from seeing a seven-foot-tall gargoyle alive and in the flesh."

"Perhaps, or maybe your soul recognized what you choose not to acknowledge. We'll see if you retain that same sense of peace on today's flight."

"I wouldn't count on it."

"I'd be willing to place a wager on that fact."

Aman turned defiant eyes on him. "And you'd lose."

"Are you certain of that?"

Aman didn't miss the glint in his eyes but couldn't back down from a challenge. "Absolutely."

"Hmm, so what should we wager?"

"You don't gamble, remember?" Sam reminded her friend.

"Stay out of this, Mage," Sergei warned but otherwise ignored the other woman.

"I think it's fairly obvious what I want."

Aman saw the immediate tension in his jaw. "Agreed. And what should I ask?" He remained quiet for several moments. "I want an entire day of relaxation with you, no arguments, no false protests and no defenses. Do you think you can handle that?"

"You're assuming you'll win, which you won't."

"So we have a bet?"

"Absolutely." She extended her hand in a show of good faith.

"I'm certain we can do better than that." He hadn't completed his sentence before she was pulled across the short distance and onto his lap. His lips pressed heavily against hers. Unfortunately it was over before she could protest. He easily maneuvered her back into her seat. The smoldering look in his eyes had her turning away without comment.

Aman caught Sam's light chuckle and shot a glare that quickly silenced her. It was bad enough having Sergei pawing at her, but the fact that her friend found humor in her discomfort only irked her more. Well, that and the fact that she couldn't seem to get her racing heart under control. She knew the other two non-humans could easily hear the erratic rhythm although neither commented.

Focusing her gaze back out the window didn't provide the distraction she needed. Every fiber of her being seemed to be in tune with the man at her side. She craved his touch and hated herself for it. Soon enough she would be free, if he lived up to his end of the bargain. Did he really intend to let her walk away after two months of captivity? Hadn't he agreed a bit too easily when normally the mere mention of her freedom set him off? What was he planning?

\* \* \*

"Is something wrong?" Sam asked for the zillionth time since the fasten seatbelt light was deployed.

Something was horribly wrong, she answered silently, choosing to ignore her friend's repeated question. This time Aman closed her eyes and did an internal assessment of her nervous system. Heart rate? Normal. Sweaty palms? Nope. Roiling stomach? Negative there too.

She could feel and hear the private jet's engines ignite moments before they began their ever-increasing speed down the runway. Any other time panic would be setting in, making her ready to climb out of her own skin. Not today. At that precise moment she'd never felt more at peace; well, with the exception of the nagging

sensation that somehow she'd been duped. The plane took off with just the slightest rattling and not even the merest sign of fluttering was present in her stomach.

Her lids lifted slowly. Her gaze found its target, shooting invisible daggers at the very arrogant face across the spacious aisle. He cocked his head, his mouth twitching upward at either corner, before he went back to the writing he'd seemed to be preoccupied with since boarding.

"Aman, what is it?" her friend asked in needless hushed tones.

"Nothing I can't handle." Her frustrated sigh seemed to prevent Sam from asking further questions. She was glad to have the silence. It gave her time to collect herself and think about yet another new development in her life since Sergei entered it. How could she feel so at ease in his presence yet be ready to smack the smug look from his face at the same time? She didn't think she'd ever get used to the contradiction that was their relationship.

Seven and a half hours in the air and she'd felt as content as she would have on solid ground. Much to her disbelief, she felt no reservations about maneuvering around the private plane, and even enjoyed a fairly hearty breakfast while watching a film in the viewing room.

She wasn't surprised to discover the aircraft's rich interior. Like everything in Sergei's world, no expense was spared. In addition to the viewing room and lounge, she'd found roomy sleeping units, a conference room and kitchen. A family could easily call the place home with pride. It was an impressive sight to behold, and she knew most people would think she was crazy not to count herself as one of the lucky ones for having such wealth at her disposal, but she wasn't most people. Sure, she liked having the finer things in life, but not with her freedom as the price.

\* \* \*

"You didn't mention that they lived in a castle," Sam gasped, awestruck as Chateau De LaRue came into focus through massive trees.

"I didn't know." Aman was equally as astounded. Excitement welled inside of her at the very idea of seeing the monument's interior.

"How old is it?" she found herself asking as they pulled through wrought iron gates connected to high stone walls.

"I'm not exactly sure. It's been in his family for centuries."

"Great, an aristocratic gargoyle. He must make you seem a bit less overbearing," Sam added, craning her neck to see out the window.

"Be sure to watch your tongue, Mage. I'll not have you insulting our hosts."

"You want to teach me about manners?" Sam added just enough incredulity to her tone to make it sound like an accusation.

"Don't make me separate you two," Aman chided.

"Promise?" the two replied in unison as the limo stopped in the long circular drive.

They weren't completely out of the vehicle before one heavy wood door swung inward without so much as a warning. The woman who stepped out onto the granite landing wasn't exactly what Aman expected. From Sergei's description she'd conjured an image up of a mousy, submissive sort, not the beautiful, self-confident woman standing with a welcoming smile. Her tall, regal stance reminded her of royalty personified. Someone accustomed to having her demands met without question. Thick curly hair framed her face in springy ringlets and Aman noted she wore the natural look well. She hardly looked like a woman who'd just given birth.

"Nice to see you again, Sergei," she greeted him. Friendly eyes rested briefly on the man only a few steps behind them. "Welcome, ladies." Her eyes seemed to brighten as she looked between the two women making their way up the stone steps. No sooner were they at the top than Aman was gathered in an embrace that left no doubt as to the genuine warmth she'd sensed. For someone so thin the woman had a rather firm hold.

"I'm so glad to finally meet you. I wanted us to talk before you all came, but with the baby plus you and Sergei being so newly mated, who could find the time? No matter, you're here now and we'll make the most of our time."

Aman took a deep breath, absorbing Fatima's speech.

Any response was promptly cut off as the woman directed her affectionate hug to Sam. "And who do we have here? Lorn didn't mention anything about another guest, but the more the merrier." As Fatima released the shorter woman her eyes rounded to the size of saucers. "Are you a Fledgling too? I told Jean and Lorn that there was a high probability that Fledglings weren't just relegated to women of African heritage. If you look at their history alone it demonstrates a greater number of women from European descent being Fledglings, although if my theory is correct it seems that Fledgling births probably go through some sort of cycle."

"I'm not a Fledgling," Sam explained.

"Oh well, no matter. Why don't we go inside? Lorn is with the baby. He doesn't think he's ready to brave the elements."

Aman finally found her voice as they followed Fatima into the entryway. "He's okay, I hope."

"Absolutely. He's been examined by numerous Protectors, Elves, and Fairies. Unfortunately, that hasn't been enough for my over-protective mate. He's planning a full examination by a High Priestess Mage." Fatima led them up a flight of stairs and down a long corridor.

As much as Aman tried to focus on what was being said, she found it increasingly difficult as she took in the beauty of the castle's interior. Finally they stepped into a large room decorated in bold reds, white, and black. Aman's eyes were immediately drawn to the tall muscular man holding a tiny swaddled body close to his chest.

The baby's chubby face poked through the receiving blanket and she could see the infant was fast asleep. The sight had Aman's heart melting in her chest, and she immediately knew that Sergei would make just as endearing a papa.

"Why don't we take him back to his nursery and that way we can spend time with our guests?" When it looked as if he would protest, Fatima added, "He's fed, changed and burped. He'll nap for a while and it's better if he does it in his own bed."

Father reluctantly relinquished hold to Mother, and they walked through a connecting door before re-emerging a few moments later.

"It is nice to finally meet you, mate of Sergei," Lorn greeted her.

"My name is Aman," she quickly corrected before introducing Sam. Lorn looked just beyond them and nodded silently to his long time friend. Sergei was surprisingly quiet.

"Why don't we leave these two alone and I'll show you ladies around, unless you want to go to your rooms first?"

Aman and Sam exchanged brief looks before agreeing to the tour. As impromptu as the trip was, Aman found herself excited about being in a foreign country and an authentic castle. It was definitely a far cry from Brooklyn. It was everything she thought a castle should be, except there was no moat or drawbridge. Fatima was the consummate tour guide, showing them everything from its twin towers to the newly renovated solarium.

Their excursion ended in the modernized kitchen which was a very welcome stopping point for Aman. She paused at the familiar face of the fair-skinned woman laying out the early evening meal. "Hello again," the young woman said with a friendly smile.

"You two know each other?" Sam questioned at Aman's silence.

"Barely. I'd almost thought I dreamt you." Aman spoke slowly, not quite certain if the woman wasn't a figment of her imagination. No, Sam could definitely see her and it was obvious from Fatima's silence and inquisitive looks that she was very much aware of the woman's presence.

"I'm very much real, as you can see." *And I'm sorry that we didn't get a chance to really get acquainted. Sergei felt my presence was a bit much for you to handle.*

The woman's telepathic communication didn't startle her as much this time, and she nodded her acceptance of the mental apology. *As much as I hate to agree with him, he was right. The whole experience has been a bit overwhelming.*

*Fatima felt much the same way, but things have worked out for the best.*

*For her, maybe. At least she seemed happy.*

*But you doubt it true for yourself and Sergei?*

"Sara, you know it's rude to exclude others from your conversation." Fatima's cheery tone intruded on their silent communication.

"Did I miss something?" Sam looked bewildered.

"She's an Elf," Fatima offered.

Sam seemed to lose interest at that point. "Why don't you continue the discussion while we eat? You will be joining us, right?"

"Of course she will," Fatima answered, adding an extra place setting. She moved faster than any regular person and Aman was certain that it had to do with her own transformation.

They'd just begun the meal of brie, croissants, and steamed sausages when a sound had three of the women stiffening. "What is it?" Sara asked.

"Tiberius is awake. Excuse me, ladies. I'm sure my dear mate will beat me to the punch only to find that he doesn't have what our little one wants."

"From the little I've seen of him, Lorn reminds me of my father," Sam said with a note of wistfulness in her voice.

"Is this before or after he became public enemy number one?" The sentence poured out before Aman had a chance to censor it.

"I never said he was the enemy," Sam defended.

Sara cleared her throat, reminding the two women of her quiet presence.

"Sara, tell me what you do for fun around here?" Sam switched gears.

"There are many things."

"Any involve getting dressed for a night on the town?"

"Sam, do you think that's such a good idea? Mating season will be over in a few days."

"And without my mother's inhibitor, I'll still be a sitting duck for any Were in heat. The only option is to find a human mate." Sam's eyes landed on Sara.

"I don't think I should," Sara mumbled aloud, her eyes rounding, although the hint of mischief was present.

"What are you planning?"

"Nothing really, just a little 'operation find a man'."

"Could you two really keep her under the radar?"

"It'll be tricky, but not impossible. I haven't been dancing in a long while. We'll bring my brothers, Spence and Luc, for good measure."

"Perfect."

"Hold on, you two. Sam, we just took a transatlantic flight. Don't you think you should give your body a chance to recoup?"

Sam giggled. "Stop thinking like a human, Aman. We're so much more."

She shook her head at her friend's remark. "All right, I'll go with you then. The more eyes the better."

"We both know Sergei wouldn't be cool with that."

"What Sergei wants isn't my concern anymore."

"How's that?" Sam wanted to know.

"You're forgetting our little wager."

"I'm glad that you bring it up, *RAdost' moyA*."

How could she have been so careless as to let her guard down? Now aware of his presence, she could feel Sergei step further into the expanse of the kitchen.

"Please don't let me interrupt. You were talking about our wager." When he dropped into the empty seat next to her, Aman felt completely on edge.

She almost choked on the lie she was about to tell, almost. "I was just about to let the ladies know you were wrong."

"Really." He didn't seem fazed. Not quite the reaction she'd expected. "It's funny because I didn't sense any anxiety. Well, not the kind induced from fear."

"Maybe your gargoyle senses were out of whack."

He nodded. "Perhaps. What about you, Sam?"

The woman in question raised two hands in defense. "Oh no, leave me out of this."

"Fair enough. Sara? Can you tell me if my dear mate is being truthful or not."

*Sara, you can't.*

*I'm sorry, Aman.* "She's not being honest in her statement."

"Thank you. Why don't you ladies leave us? It sounds like you have a pretty big evening planned."

When Sam would have protested, Aman waved her on. She'd made her own bed and now it was time for her to lie in it. "So you've won, now what? Should I go to our room and play the harlot for you?"

"Hmm, there is a bit of merit to that idea but I have something else in mind."

"Like?"

"For starters, a night out on the town. Isn't that what you were planning before I arrived?"

"I don't understand."

"It's not that difficult a concept, some dancing and a few drinks."

"With you?"

"Is the thought so repulsive?"

"No, it's just that I didn't think you were into that sort of thing."

"I consider myself a very good dancer. Women have always complimented my abilities."

She struggled to suppress the jealousy that coursed its way through her system. She just bet women complimented him.

"Of course, if you'd rather we spend the evening indoors I'm fine with that too."

"No, a night out sounds good."

"Not quite the excited response I'd hoped for, but it will do for the moment."

## Chapter Four

It had been a long while since Aman had gone dancing, even before meeting Sergei. She hadn't brought anything she'd normally consider going out attire. With such slim options, she chose a black mini skirt and an off-the-shoulder top. She teased her short, dark hair until it had a spiky volume reminiscent of alternative bands. Dark eyeliner gave her eyes a sultry appeal. For good measure, she frosted her lips with a light brown glitter gloss.

"You look hot." Sam beamed as she descended the wide staircase.

"Look who's talking." She admired her friend's perfectly coiffed red hair, flat ironed for the occasion. She wore a short white dress with a daringly high split that reached mid-thigh. Next to her, Sara was dressed in a provocative black cat suit that left little to the imagination. Her waist length blonde hair was moussed and waved, making her look more temptress than the innocent persona Aman had seen on their other encounters.

Two other men stood quietly, giving her a cursory nod before focusing their attention elsewhere. They looked similar enough to be twins; both had prominent ice blue eyes and shoulder length hair. Their features were a bit sharper than Sara's but handsome nonetheless.

*Thank you*, the unison response came and she was quickly reminded that she would have to censor her thoughts among this group. "Has anyone seen Sergei?"

"Some other Protectors arrived while you were upstairs. I believe he's in conference with them," Sara offered.

Aman was tempted to suggest they leave without him but knew she would meet with some serious resistance from the Elves. "Which way did he go?" she asked Sara.

"They're in the Great Room, but it's probably best if we wait here. I'm sure it won't be long." Despite Sara's even tone, Aman could hear the hint of nervousness in the woman's voice.

"Nonsense. He has us all waiting while he's chumming it up with friends. I'll be right back." Although Fatima's earlier tour aided her down the segmenting corridors, she knew she could have found Sergei easily enough without it. His scent called to her, leading her to her destination outside the door. She sensed six distinct scents, easily identifying Sergei and Lorn. Inside the room there was silence and she wondered what the men could be doing.

Sergei's voice drifted to her as if he were standing at her side. "You might as well come in since you've taken the time to seek me out, mate."

A deep breath gave her the added courage to push her way into the room where she was promptly greeted by six pairs of green eyes. Each man's expression was completely masked, making them all look particularly stern. Handsome, but stern nonetheless. She wasn't fully prepared for them to look so... well... perfect. Granted, Lorn was just as handsome as Sergei, but she didn't think that would apply to the whole lot of them. "I just wanted to let you know that we're ready to go."

"Gentlemen, I'd like to introduce you to my mate, Aman Jacobs."

Sergei pointed out each Protector by name, who in turn nodded their hellos with eyes that seemed to stare right into her soul. Lorn's brother, Jean, was the last to be introduced and she was surprised to see a warm smile light his face and eyes. She took an immediate liking to him.

"We won't be much longer," Sergei added at the end of his introductions.

"All right. I'll let everyone know."

She was happy when she closed the double doors behind her, never having felt so exposed as she did with all eyes on her. They were definitely an intimidating bunch.

\* \* \*

"Congratulations again on finding your mate. She is a bonnie lass indeed."

"Thank you, Gaylen. Soon enough I hope to extend the same to you."

"We all owe many thanks to you and Alexi for the work you've done thus far."

Jean cleared his throat.

"Ah yes, and to Jean. Albeit an impulsively, fool-hearted venture, a debt of gratitude is owed to ye as well," Gaylen McClintock added.

"Thanks, I think. I'm sure there was a compliment buried somewhere in there."

"Let us quickly conclude this meeting. Sergei will be eager to see to his mate and Lorn looks about ready to bolt in his eagerness to rejoin his own family," another Protector suggested.

"Before we adjourn, I must voice my concerns," Sergei pressed. "I fear that Alexi is very close to the end. Those of you going to the States must see to it that he does less patrolling. Encourage him to stay focused on the upcoming Meet and Greet. You must also stay vigilant. It's been very quiet lately and I believe a lot has to do with the public nature of our search. There are many non-humans who would seek to take advantage. We must employ any means to ensure the safety of all Fledglings."

"Perhaps a more tactful approach should be used," Jean added.

"Any means necessary where their safety is concerned. We can't allow for one Fledgling to fall into harmful hands. Within the next few days, over fifty Protectors will join the efforts of this project."

"I must insist that we include Fatima and Aman's suggestions in revealing ourselves to the verified Fledglings. Sergei and I have experienced firsthand how the shock can affect the Fledglings' acceptance of their new lives. It will hopefully mean a lot less frustration for others," Lorn said.

"I agree. Any help in making these transitions easier will be welcomed. Every effort should be made to follow Fatima's outline," Sergei concurred. He would gladly remove any future turmoil from his brethren's partnerings if he could.

\* \* \*

*Industrial music.* That's what Aman had called the noise reverberating against the walls. Sergei couldn't believe the loud pounding was considered pleasant, yet all around him everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. It was a far cry from Brahms

or Tchaikovsky. The dance floor was crowded with humans as well as disguised shape shifters doing their own forms of dancing. A lot had changed over the last one hundred years, but Aman seemed to be happy and that was all that mattered to him.

"Shall we dance?" he suggested after catching her frequent glances out to the packed arena several times, her fingers tapping the table top with the beat. At first it looked as if she would protest, but the moment quickly passed as she took him up on his offer. His hand rested on the small of her back as they maneuvered through the convulsing bodies.

"Let's try this on for size," the DJ with a very distinct British accent chimed in over the music before it transitioned to a Caribbean flow.

"Do you know how to move to dancehall reggae?"

"Not really," he answered honestly, omitting the fact that he didn't even know what it was. Aman chuckled and he savored the light, airy sound. He'd learn to dance to anything if it meant more of that lovely music.

"Put your hands on my waist," she instructed and he didn't need to be told twice. "Now listen to the rhythm and follow the sway of my hips."

Sergei stood for several stunned moments as said hips gyrated in slow motion with the rhythm. He tried calming his immediately aroused senses.

"Come on," she encouraged, stepping in closer. "It's like making love and I know you know how to do that well."

He smiled at the compliment, willing the thickening in his cock to subside, which was a near impossible endeavor with her erotic movements. He did as she suggested, letting the sounds wash over him and the feel of her in his arms take hold of his motion.

"That's it," she approved and they flowed together in the sensuous dance. Her fingers gripped his shoulders, biting into him as he pulled her closer, cupping one rounded buttock in his hand. Brown eyes locked with his own and there was no mistaking the raw desire in their depths. It was this passion that gave him hope that someday she would accept him completely.

Aman shifted in his arms, allowing her backside to shimmy slowly down his form. The erection he'd fought back burst to life, straining against the confines of his slacks. If she kept it up he'd spill himself right there. Mercifully, the song ended and before she could continue with the next reggae beat, Sergei led them away from the dance floor, passing Sam as she pulled a youthful looking man to the crowded throng, swaying in unison to the beat.

He still wasn't happy about having the female with them, but if it put Aman in high spirits he'd be willing to endure her presence. Hopefully, she would find enough distractions to keep her out of his hair most of the trip. He was sure the mating frenzy would catch up with her soon. He could already smell her elevated pheromones which were probably only dampened because of her mixed heritage, but they were present all the same. She was only fooling herself if she thought that a bit of Elven magic would keep a Were in the frenzy of mating season away, especially an Alpha. Because she was under his protection he would be sure to keep her safe from any unworthy Alphas, but he understood her father's wish well. It would be a fine line he needed to walk, but most certainly not his primary concern.

They slid back into the booth and Aman didn't protest as he draped an arm across the soft leather back, capturing her fingers with his free hand.

"You were good out there. I don't think anyone would have known that it was your first time."

"Because I had such a great teacher."

Aman smiled and his heart lifted, "Yeah, I'm a pretty good instructor. Hmm, maybe that's what I should think about when we get back to the States. A dance academy called Aman's Groove Palace or something equally cheesy."

Her smile warmed him inside and made him forget the world around them. "I'd be your first student. Hopefully I can get a discount rate."

"My prices might be a bit too exorbitant for you, but I'm sure we could work out some sort of payment arrangement."

"I'd be willing to pay any price."

Sergei nearly missed the low curse from across the table, it registering just as the two male Elves rose swiftly from the booth. He followed the path of their gaze, quickly zeroing in on their target before cursing under his breath and reluctantly detaching himself from his mate.

\* \* \*

Aman's response came just after noticing Sergei's distraction, her head quickly pivoting to the dance floor where Sam stood encircled by a group -- no, a pack of men. The man Sam had taken with her to the dance floor was shoved easily aside and into the periphery.

"Stay here," Sergei said as she made to slide out of the booth behind him.

Aman didn't bother with an argument, her head swiveling back to the dance floor where Sam stood looking a bit pleased, despite her defensive posture. If she didn't know any better she'd have sworn her friend was giving each man a lusty once over.

The Elven brothers reached the group first, and as she'd suspected all eyes turned to the two slimmer framed males. Aman knew it wasn't because of the light that the men's eyes seemed to glow.

*Wolves, Sara sent the telepathic message.*

*Very dangerous looking ones. Perhaps we should send word back to the castle.*

*You underestimate my brothers and your mate.*

*The odds don't seem to be stacked in their favor.* The scene on the dance floor pulled her in. Sergei inserted himself in front of Sam. The Elves' diversion tactic complete, they vanished, only to reappear on either side of Sergei. Their disappearing act had the wolves whirling with lightning speed to refocus their attention. The three smaller wolves disappeared into the crowd of oblivious dancers while the remaining two squared their shoulders in anticipation of a battle. Aman gasped at the potential damage that would result from the non-human confrontation.

"We only want the unmated female, Protector. We have no quarrel with you."

"She is under my protection. Therefore, if you wish to take her we most certainly have an issue."

Several glances were exchanged before one male spoke up. He was obviously an Alpha and didn't seem the least bit intimidated by the gargoyle. "Then let her decide."

Aman didn't expect Sergei to step aside, putting her friend back in harm's way. *We need to do something. They're using magic on him*, she implored Sara.

*Just watch. Your mate senses your fear and has asked that you be at ease.*

*Be at ease?*

*Watch.*

She couldn't have stopped watching even if she wanted to. Sam emerged from behind Sergei looking every bit pleased, and Aman stared in silence as she approached the first man, stopping only scant inches in front of him. Placing one hand on his chest, she rose on tiptoes. The large Werekin bent slightly and for a moment Aman thought he was whispering something into her ear until with deliberate slowness Sam stroked her tongue along the side of his neck. After the brief contact she moved to the next man/wolf to repeat the process. With a near military precision she turned to Sergei, shaking her head before uttering the words that left both males fuming. "Neither."

"There you have it. I wish you the best of luck in the season," Sergei dismissed.

"Perhaps we should give that little Elf a try. I've always been fond of their kind," one wolf said in a voice laced with heat.

"Don't even think about it," the Elven males said in unison, the air around them crackling with electricity.

"I'm sure there'll be no need of that. Hear me, Werekin pups. These people are under the protection of gargoyles. Steer clear and warn others."

Sergei waited for Sam to precede him while the Elves pulled the stunned human she'd danced with earlier to his feet. The man stared blankly at the two before nodding and heading off into the crowd without so much as a backward glance.

The group of dancers filled the gap that had been formed by the otherworldly creatures, all seemingly unaware of the averted disaster.

*I used a cloaking spell as soon as the Werekins converged on them, Sara explained. It reduces the number of memory alterations to be done and is quite effective, acting almost like a distortion field that shields anyone outside of the area from what's happening inside.*

Aman nodded. *But what about the man Sam danced with?*

*Unfortunately he was inside of the spectrum of the field. My brothers had to do a memory alt on him. As far as he's concerned, Sam seemed too much of a bitch for him.*

"We should get her out of here now," Sergei began once the group returned to the table. "The contact with the male wolves has sent her pheromone levels soaring."

He was right. Aman could sense the elevation but had initially assumed it to be dispersed amongst the couples bumping and grinding on the dance floor. Her friend's close proximity left no illusion as to the source.

"What's the big deal? I came to have fun tonight. Don't tell me you're all going to poop out!" Sam's gaze danced across the face of her companions before landing on an Elven brother. Her gaze lingered over his lithe physique in a careful perusal. It was obvious that the interest was definitely mutual as the two held each other's gaze. Aman was certain that a telepathic conversation was being had, and that it was probably very steamy, gauging by Luc's own increasing arousal. Sara stepped between the two, bringing them back in focus.

"Why don't we take a rain check on the evening, at least until you're feeling more like yourself?" Sara suggested diplomatically.

"Stop being a mother hen, all of you. I'm perfectly normal."

"And do you think it's normal for your eyes to be glowing?"

Sam giggled, only increasing the feral radiance that had taken hold. "A strange question to ask a Werekins, Elf. I'm a big girl and can take care of myself."

Sergei showed no sign of backing down. "We can do this one of two ways, Sam."

"What are you going to do, toss me over your shoulder like you did Aman? I bet you'd like that, wouldn't you?" She gave a throaty laugh, raising her chin in defiance.

"Sam." Aman's warning was low but seemed to do the trick.

Her friend turned surprised eyes in her direction, taking several unsteady steps away from the group. Her face paled before flushing with crimson. "Aman, I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. Let's just get you back before something embarrassing happens."

"Too late for that."

Aman couldn't meet Sergei's gaze as she escorted her friend out of the hopping club. On the ride back to Chateau De LaRue Sam remained silent, resting her head against a side window.

*I'm certain Sam meant no offense to you, came Sara's soft-spoken message. These mating seasons are particularly intense on Werekins, and from what she has shared her mother has helped ease her through these times with magic.*

*Is there anything you can do to help her?*

*Perhaps, but only a little bit. Her mother is a very powerful Mage and I doubt that what I could provide would help her much. I wonder if it's not just better to allow her to learn how to cope with these emotions now. It will lessen her anxiety some in future seasons if she remains unmated. Don't worry, I will see to her tonight. Besides, I believe she might present too much of a temptation for my brothers all alone, Sara finished with a laugh.*

*Thank you for all your help.*

*No thanks needed.*

As expected, Sam made an immediate escape for her room as soon as they arrived. "Maybe I should go see her," Aman muttered.

Sergei stood directly behind her in the entryway but remained silent.

"I'll make sure she gets settled in," Sara offered, following in the woman's wake.

"She'll be fine with Sara." Sergei's reassuring tone eased her anxiety a bit. "Why don't we go for a walk? Chateau De LaRue is renowned for its gardens."

"Gardens?" She threw a curious look over her shoulder at him.

"Yes, seven in fact." A hand slipped to the small of her back, leading her to an archway beside the staircase. "Lorn's gardener is an Elf, too, but swears he doesn't use

magic to get some of his more exotic plants to bloom. I'll show you some azaleas that seem to always flourish."

"I can't believe what I'm hearing."

"What?"

"You. I mean you're the last person I would have pegged for a horticulture buff."

"Really? Why's that?"

"I don't know, Mr. Big Bad gargoyle/Protector guy."

Sergei chuckled at her side, a sound she didn't often hear but found sexy, lyrical even.

"My mother was the flower buff. I learned about them from her. She could make anything grow. My father often accused her of having a bit of Elven blood."

The smile that lit his face warmed her entire being, and she felt as if she were seeing him for the first time. The rugged structure of his face seemed to soften, his perfect teeth visible beneath sensuous lips.

Sergei pushed open French doors to gain them admittance to a cobblestone patio. "It's there." He pointed to a path on their right, shrouded by tall hedges that walled it in from the remainder of the rolling estate. Under the moonlit sky the garden looked wondrous. The most skilled artist couldn't have captured a more beautiful sight.

"You were right," she said as they stepped into the fairytale-like setting. She inhaled a deep breath. "And the smell is intoxicating."

"I should be offended that you doubted me."

"Don't be. I'm not sure I would have expected this at all. I've never seen anything like it in my life."

"I'm glad you like it."

Aman became distracted by the variety of flowers. She wanted to smell and touch them all. Growing up in the city had provided limited exposure to such a decadent abundance.

"Let me show you my favorite." He led her deeper into the garden, taking another path through a series of tall hedges. She heard the gentle sound of flowing water before they stepped into the colorful assortment of flowers.

"These are called Troll flowers," he provided as they stopped in front of the bright orange array.

"They're beautiful, but please don't tell me that these once were sentient beings turned into flowers."

Sergei's throaty laugh did little to reassure her. She couldn't be certain of anything anymore. Creatures she'd once thought of as fairytale characters surrounded her.

"No, nothing so fanciful as that. The plants are indigenous to my homeland. As for their unusual name, it is merely because they line riverbanks, making it nearly impossible to pass. They are really quite greedy beauties."

Aman nodded her understanding, walking ahead to another grouping of flowers that caught her eye. The move also afforded her the opportunity to put some much needed space between them. She wanted to dislike Sergei, to hate him even for the control he had over her life, but it was times like these that made it damned hard.

"Those are called Blue Mountain Heath, another plant native to Russia. In fact, that is one of the reasons this garden is a favorite of mine. Being here reminds me of my family's estate."

"Sounds like you're a bit homesick. Why not just go there?" As she spoke she knelt to caress one bent petal of a flower that resembled a bell. "It's not like it would take you any time at all to travel there."

His silence had her looking up over her shoulder at his considerable outline. Behind him a nearly full moon shone brightly, shadowing his handsome visage from view. "I haven't been there since my parents died."

She rose slowly at the sadness in his tone, wishing she could see him more clearly. "What happened?" Something deep inside her needed to know the answer.

When he hesitated she placed a comforting hand on his biceps, feeling tension ebb from him.

"I'm not sure. None of us really are. They both seemed so happy, so much in love with one another." He paused. "And she took her own life."

Aman held back her gasp. She hadn't expected him to say those words.

"My father was so distraught. He was the one who found her. A few days later he took his own life in the room they'd shared."

Aman's heart wept for him, to lose both parents to suicide and so quickly. He must have felt completely alone, at a loss for any answers. "I'm so sorry for you." She traced the contours of his jaw with one hand.

"I didn't tell you this for your pity, *RAdost' moyA*."

"And I don't pity you, Sergei. You've survived a terrible tragedy and are a man of great honor."

"That is where you're wrong, little one. I'm not a man at all." She knew his half-hearted attempt at humor was for her benefit. "Let's not speak of it anymore. That is all a part of my past. Now I am looking forward to our future together."

Their future. The idea almost seemed tangible. If only... Her heart skipped a beat when she found herself gathered in his arms.

"You're thinking too much again, Aman. I want you to feel."

She did, could feel every hard contour of his body through their clothing and wanted nothing more than to get lost in the moment, in him. She didn't resist, had no real desire to. Her body craved his.

She tiptoed to reach the kiss she knew would follow and wasn't disappointed to feel his lips press against hers. His tongue prodded its way into her mouth and she received him with the fieriness of a woman acknowledging her core. A carnal growl rumbled low in his throat before vibrating against her mouth. She knew that sound well, had made her own similar ones with him on multiple occasions. It amazed her how responsive he was to her touch, the way his body melded with hers. It was

unbelievable how she hungered for him after only one day without making love. Skin on skin, that's what she wanted and intended to have.

Her attempt to pull away was thwarted by Sergei's firm hold. "Your shirt... off," was all she could manage between kisses.

He grunted his understanding, loosening his grip without fully releasing her. They were still so close that she was having a difficult time pushing the tiny buttons through their holes.

"Too slow," he growled, pulling her close again, trailing kisses down the side of her face and neck.

Aman vaguely registered the sound of fabric ripping and gave a brief thought as to where the noise came from. Brief until she felt the whoosh of air as his wings tore through the back of his garment, leaving the ragged material hanging from his body.

"Now remove it," he rasped, allowing a slight distance between them.

A rush of excitement rippled through her at the very primal act of tearing the remnants of his shirt from him. His biceps bulged beneath her fingers and she took a few moments to stroke his bare arms, staring up into eyes the color of onyx as he held her gaze. He really was a magnificent specimen of man and myth. With his chest bare, she took additional liberties, running fingers up the hardened flesh.

She chuckled when he bent to scoop her up in his arms.

"We need privacy."

"It seems we have it here." Her eyes darted quickly around the garden.

"Not from prying ears. Wrap your arms around me." There was no need to ask why. She clasped her hands behind his neck and they were airborne, making the short trip to the balcony outside their room. The doors to their suite opened automatically and closed just as softly behind them.

"I may be wrong here, but I'm pretty certain all the supernatural ears around can hear us in here."

"Not with Elven spells at work." Sergei sat her on the edge of the bed and knelt to remove her shoes.

"So that means that we can be as loud as we want?" Her smile broadened as his fingers skimmed the tops of her stocking-clad legs, making their way up her thigh.

Unyielding fingers fanned her thighs, pushing their way upward and taking her mini skirt with them. "Be as loud as you want, *RAdost' moyA*." He ended the statement with a thumb pressing intimately against her mound before ripping through the silky material of her stockings. The hole was large enough to allow his fingers entrance to shred the garment from her thighs.

"Tonight doesn't seem to bode well for clothing with us."

"Not at all."

"And if I were to tell you how terribly fond I am of this skirt?"

"Then I'd promise to buy you several in every color."

She practically purred at hearing the skirt suffering the same fate as the ruined pantyhose. The irreparable material was quickly tossed aside and forgotten.

"Lay back."

She doubted she could deny him anything. His arms hooked under her thighs, tugging her forward until her bottom rested half off the bed's edge. With gentle consideration, he pulled her satin panties down her thighs. Kneeling before her, he massaged the soft flesh of her inner thighs before draping her legs over his shoulders.

"Ahh." The sigh escaped at the gentle nipping on her skin. He moved ever closer to her aroused pussy, which hungered for his touch. His first taste of her sent shockwaves throughout her body. Sergei blew a tantalizing breath over her wet flesh, causing her to nearly arch completely off the bed.

"I love your scent." He demonstrated just how much as his tongue vibrated against her distended clit. Heat grew like a slow burning flame inside her. With each flicker of his tongue, she was pushed ever closer to what promised to be a monumental orgasm. She grabbed a fistful of dark hair, pressing him closer as she pushed into his relentless tongue.

"So close," she moaned. She craved the spiraling effect that the climax would bring but wanted to feel him deep inside her even more. The opportunity to verbalize

her wants never came to fruition as his relentless ministrations had the world around her spinning out of control, her body convulsing from the force of the intense release. Her breaths were still coming in short spurts when he rolled her onto her stomach, kneading her round, fleshy rear. She knew what he wanted and was more than happy to accommodate, rising to her knees to give him easier access.

Fingers pressed into her hips as he entered her wet core on a groan that filled the room. She pumped his cock with fervor equal to her mate, loving the friction of heaviness inside her. She'd never been multi-orgasmic, at least not until him. Already she could feel the blissful tension mounting, pushing her again toward a joyous end.

"More," he begged, and she gave it to him until he took over the momentum of their coupling, reveling in each and every thrust. She contracted around his thickness, staving off her own release until he filled her with his hot seed. Inside her he swelled and throbbed, triggering her second orgasm. One arm wrapped around her waist as he thrust a final time into her, resting his weight on a forearm.

She smiled to herself at the care he took with her, kissing the back of her neck, between her shoulder blades.

"No patrolling tonight?" Aman asked, snuggling into Sergei's warmth as he stroked her hair. He'd pulled her down onto the bed, making her comfortable against fluffed pillows before drawing her into his embrace.

"I think it's pretty well covered. There are enough Protectors here to afford us time together."

"Good. I want to wake up in your arms in the morning."

Sergei didn't respond, not verbally anyway, choosing instead to pull her deeper into the circle of his arms.

Aman's eyes closed in contentment only to reopen at a sound that practically set her nerves on edge.

"Be calm, *RAdost' moyA*, it's just Sam. The full moon is almost here and this will be a difficult time for her without a mate."

"Maybe I should go see her."

"I doubt if she'd want you to see her in this state."

She contemplated his response for a moment before settling down. "I thought you said the rooms were soundproof."

"They are enchanted by the Elves to prevent people from listening in, but Sam was out on her balcony."

"How do you know that?"

"I sent an inquiry to Sara. She's given her a sedative that should put her out for the night. She'll feel more like herself in the morning."

"I wish there was something we could do."

"Finding her mate is the only solution."

Aman felt a bit drugged herself. "The last thing she wants is to be controlled by an Alpha wolf."

"Then she will have to suffer through this."

Her lids were getting unbearably heavy. "Well, good thing mating season's almost over."

"*RAdost' moyA*, you don't understand. This is just the beginning for her. The end of mating season will only ease her needs slightly. She'll now have to learn to deal with her Werekin sexual drive and instincts. I'm afraid her mother's intervention may have done a complete disservice to her."

"There has to be something we can do."

"Temporary remedies at best. What she *needs* is a mate."

The protest didn't have a chance to make it through her hazy brain before she succumbed to the seduction of sleep.

## Chapter Five

Aman felt more than a bit negligent of her friend the next morning. Before setting herself on a quest for Sam she'd been easily waylaid by Sergei. First, being distracted by his enthusiastic kisses, next tempted with breakfast in bed, before partaking in a long, shared shower, culminating with sensually lengthy lovemaking. After which she went in search of her friend.

Commotion would rule the day, and she looked forward to some alone time with Sam. Sergei informed her of an afternoon meeting with Council members and the chateau was all abuzz over Tiberius' Welcoming.

"We will speak more of this later. I want to make sure you're prepared for all you'll see," Sergei explained.

"Such as?"

"Fae, vampires, and trolls among some others."

"A veritable fairytale land?"

Sergei shrugged before pulling her into his arms. "While most can disguise their natural forms, some prefer their own shapes and all aren't necessarily pleasing to humans."

"Hmm, tell me you have a picture book somewhere so I won't embarrass myself."

"I'm sure I can arrange something." He placed a sweet kiss on her forehead before letting go.

"Sergei?" She paused at the door.

"Yes."

"You were kidding about the vampire thing right?"

"No."

"Great." Aman rubbed her neck deliberately, much to Sergei's apparent amusement as he gave a husky laugh.

She found Sam, along with Fatima and Sara, in the solarium enjoying the late morning sun. Fatima was the picture perfect image of calm resolve as she nursed her son, sitting quietly with the other women, seeming a bit distracted as she gazed through one of the windows. Not at all what Aman expected from a woman whose home would be overrun the next day with a plethora of creatures.

"I see Sergei's finally let you come up for air, or is it the other way around?" Sam inquired.

Aman didn't try to hide her mischievous grin. "A little bit of both you could say."

"So he's finally gotten his hooks in you completely?"

Aman didn't miss the near snarl in her friend's tone. "Sam?"

"Don't try and deny it. I smell him all over you. The air reeked of your horniness last night. You wanted him to take you right there in the garden like two animals."

*Don't take her words to heart, Aman. It was a difficult night for her.*

*It doesn't sound like the day is shaping up to be any better.*

She heard Sara's mental giggle.

"Can we not have any of that telepathic crap today? We're all quite capable of speech."

"Just as I'm sure we're all capable of a bit of civility this morning," Aman added, effectively silencing her friend as she took an empty chair.

"I have to agree with Sam. Lorn gave us the impression that you were less than happy with your mating."

"It hasn't been easy, that's for sure. And quite frankly I'm not sure if I understand it all. The whole Fledgling thing seems a bit farfetched."

"About as believable as the notion of gargoyles, Elves and Weres." Sara smirked.

"You have a point," Aman conceded. "I don't know how much help I'll be. I still haven't fully come to terms with everything myself."

"You could have fooled me," Sam retorted.

"You're making it hard for a person to be empathetic to your situation, Sammie."

"Well, why don't I make it easier for you?" Her friend vaulted from her chair and out the door in seconds.

Sara halted Aman's attempt to follow Sam. "I'll go."

"You know she doesn't mean any of it. From what I'm told, what she's experiencing is ten times worse than PMS and menopause combined, coupled with being hornier than a battalion of marines on shore leave," Fatima sympathized.

"Anything I can do to help her through this?"

"Not unless you can alter her Were DNA. I'm told her mother is a pretty powerful Mage and helped to suppress it this whole time."

"Yeah, her father finally issued a veto order on that. I've always liked her dad, but watching what she's going through now I can't imagine any parent wanting their child to experience this."

"He's forcing her hand. From my limited knowledge, Sam is going to need to make a decision fairly soon."

"Being permanently attached to an Alpha wolf is the last thing she wants."

"She may not have much choice. She is primed and ready for mating, and if she does so over the next couple days it will be for life."

"Because of mating season?" Aman sighed.

"Mating season comes once a year. This is a bonding season which only happens every ten years. If Sam can't hold out, she'll be permanently attached to the first wolf persistent enough to try."

Aman relayed the near miss the evening before.

"The ones who backed down quickly were definitely Betas, probably hoping that the Alphas would reject her and they'd get a chance."

"Will there be any Alphas at T.J.'s presentation tomorrow?"

"None that aren't already mated. Tomorrow will be a pretty busy day for single wolves."

"And a frustrating one for Sam."

"Sara's working on something she hopes will take the edge off at least, but her contact with the wolves last night was damaging."

Aman shook her head. "What if things aren't as cut and dried as you say? Okay, maybe I'm a Fledgling, but what if Sergei isn't my mate?"

"Why do you say that?"

She could feel the other woman's interest peak. "I'm not sure if this means anything but I've dreamt of gargoyles my whole life, one in particular. And while he resembles Sergei in his gargoyle form, there are some differences."

"Go on."

"I'm not sure how to put it into words. It's like it's him, but not. Is it possible that he has a brother or some other relative?"

Fatima shook her head. "It's rare for gargoyles to produce more than one offspring."

"But Lorn has a brother."

"Like I said, rare. There's only one other set of brothers out there."

"You didn't tell me. What happens if we're wrong?" The question left a lump in her throat.

Fatima looked perplexed as she answered. "I assume that you would be put under the Council's protection until your proper mate could be found."

Aman rolled her eyes. The last thing she wanted was a battalion of gargoyles breathing down her neck. One was definitely enough.

"It really is for your own good. There are things out there that would love nothing more than to get their hands on a Fledgling."

A more unpleasant thought.

"What does your heart say about Sergei?"

Quiet moments ticked by, but abruptly came to an end when T.J. let out the largest burp Aman had ever heard come from such a tiny body. Both women exchanged glances over the boy's head before bursting out into laughter. In retrospect,

Aman couldn't put a finger on what was so amusing. Whatever its inducement, by the time the laughter died down Aman felt surprisingly better. Perhaps laughter *was* the best medicine.

## Chapter Six

Despite reassurance that Sam was being looked after, Aman decided to track her friend down. To her surprise, she found her holed up in the media room watching a marathon of *Gilligan's Island*.

"Don't even say it, I know what you're thinking."

"Really. So is being an telepath a trait inherited from your Were or Mage side?" Aman sank down in the empty seat next to Sam.

"Listen to you, talking like a non-human." Sam smiled. "About my earlier behavior --"

"Don't apologize. I can't even begin to imagine what you're going through."

"Trust me, you don't want to know."

"Fatima said Sara's working on something for you."

"It's nothing like my mother's potion but I'm not as agitated as before."

"But apparently it's made you nostalgic?"

"Who do you think you're fooling? I know for a fact that you're an 80's TV fanatic."

"Yes, but I have the decency to indulge my love when I know there isn't a chance of anyone discovering me."

"That's the difference between me and you. I embrace my weaknesses."

Aman chuckled. It occurred to her that she hadn't done this much smiling in months.

"Speaking of weaknesses, seems like you've done some softening toward Sergei."

Aman fought back a silly grin as she feigned interest in the television.

The room was plunged into silence with a click of the remote. "Don't think the silent treatment will work on me."

"I think I like you better grumpy and brooding."

"Well, get over it. So?"

"He kinda grows on you."

"On, in." She shrugged. "I guess all that matters is that you're happy with how things have turned out."

"I... I guess I *am*." The admission startled her. She'd spent so much time fighting him and her own feelings that she never fathomed how quickly things could change. Fatima had told her to search her heart, but that wasn't necessary. She'd known for months how she felt about Sergei. It was time to quit lying to herself -- and everyone else.

"I just have one question."

Aman quirked a brow.

"Why are you still sitting here?"

\* \* \*

"Jean, right?" Aman asked, stopping the first Protector she saw, which wasn't hard since the castle seemed to be swarming with them. It was amazing how sexy each one was. Each was equal in height and similarly broad with a physique that dared an ounce of fat to be found. Serious emerald eyes graced faces that had their own handsome, yet distinct characteristics. Such striking good looks were probably God's way of ensuring a woman's attraction to her intended mate. It really wasn't fair, if one thought about it. You'd have to be completely blind and deprived of all other senses not to be drawn to them.

"At your service, Madame." He gave a slight bow at the waist. Compared to the other Protectors, Jean seemed almost jovial, not too much of a feat when all the other men appeared to be a brooding bunch of gorgeous stuffed shirts. His English was beautifully accented with a hint of French, as if he'd spent a great deal of time in English speaking countries.

"I was hoping you could tell me if you've seen Sergei recently. His scent seems a bit distant."

Jean's smile broadened. "Hmmm, so you know his scent already?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"No reason. Actually it's perfectly natural. If memory serves me correctly, Sergei was called away to see about a friend."

She nodded, disappointment flooding her as she wondered how long he would be.

"I can say with certainty that the last thing he wanted to do was leave you for a second."

She found herself laughing at his declaration. "With a certainty, huh?"

"Absolutely, but if you'll permit me I'd like to help you pass the time until his return."

"And exactly what did you have in mind?" She added a bit of suspicion to her tone, although she felt that his invitation was completely honorable.

"I was heading to the stables. We have excellent horses at the chateau."

"Oh, I don't think so. I've managed to stay off horses my entire life. I think it would be a little late to take up the hobby now."

"Nonsense. It's never too late to learn to ride. Come and I'll show you."

Hours later a laughing Aman brushed down the gelding she'd ridden across the De LaRue estates with Jean at her side, on a massive horse he called Warrior.

"Not so bad?"

"Are you kidding me? It was great!"

"With a few more lessons you'll be ready to race."

"Whoa, buddy, I think Hero and I are quite content to keep our walks at just that."

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

"Yeah, I'll keep that in mind." She laughed again. "Okay, the brushing is complete. What's next?"

"Feeding. I like to give Warrior an after-ride snack."

"Sounds easy enough." Aman looked around for something resembling food a horse might eat.

"There are oat bags that we can fill up their buckets with, but I like to reward them with a few apples," he said, walking to the far end of the stable to retrieve several large apples. He gave her one for each hand.

"Don't be afraid." He demonstrated, holding another flat in his hand and Hero immediately gobbled up the tasty fruit. Only a few feet away Warrior protested his neglect. "I could never forget you, boy."

As with the ride, Hero proved to be gentle and patient. After gingerly taking the first morsel from her hand he waited while she handed him the second treat, his thick tongue easily lapping up the apple in one bite.

She was about to sneak in one more when she caught a familiar scent. Unable to resist, she turned to the stable's entrance, her heart skipping a beat as Sergei strode inside. He was dressed as he had been that morning, in loose fitting white linen pants and matching black shirt that showed off his powerful forearms. He shot a brief disapproving glance in Jean's direction before pinning her with his gaze. She felt a gentle caress against her cheek and went weak in the knees. Unfortunately it happened to coincide with a slight nudging from Hero who wanted to remind her of his presence. Aman stumbled forward, realizing immediately that she wouldn't be able to stop the inevitable fall.

Arms wrapped around her waist, swinging her up. "You all right?" Sergei asked, their faces only inches apart as he cradled her in his hold.

"Yes." Her answer was a bit more breathless than she cared for.

"I think I'll just take Warrior to his stall," Jean muttered aloud, not bothering to wait for their response as he led his massive horse to the end of the stable.

It wasn't until after he'd left that Aman remembered to speak. "I forgot to thank him for the ride."

"I'll be sure to later."

"Would you mind putting me down? I need to put Hero back in his stall."

Aman felt his reluctance as he let her legs drop gingerly to the ground. "Perhaps you'd like for me to take you riding again before we return to New York?"

"That would be nice, but this was my first attempt so we'll have to keep it basic I'm afraid."

"Of course. I'm sorry I wasn't the one to introduce you to your first experience."

"I'm sure there will be opportunities for us to share many other firsts." She'd just secured the stall door and was surprised to have Sergei right behind her.

"Say that again." Arms wrapped around her waist, drawing her backside into the heat of his body while he nuzzled her neck.

She could barely think with him that close, let alone manage a coherent sentence. The element of surprise was on her side as she ducked under his arms, turning to face him. Sergei gave her a curious look but made no move to pull her back into his embrace. "Jean said you had to visit a friend today?"

"Yes. A last minute request."

"Oh, and who might that be?"

"Alexi. You've heard me mention his name before."

"Ah yes, your partner in crime with this whole campaign stuff. Nothing serious I hope."

"How long are we to make small talk before I am permitted to kiss you?"

"You have something against small talk?"

"I fear what might happen next if I don't get you in my arms soon."

"That dire?"

"Critical."

"Well, I don't want to be responsible for any cataclysmic happenings." She stepped willingly into his embrace. His arms secured themselves around her and she'd

never felt more right in her life. The first contact of his lips on hers was molten and she opened for his prodding tongue, standing on tiptoe to wind her arms around his neck. Sergei was the first to pull away and she sagged against him, enjoying the beat of his heart.

"Now that was a kiss. Come, it's time for dinner."

"Dinner?"

He smiled. "The meal that comes after lunch but before breakfast."

"Smart ass," she mumbled, trying to regain control of her reeling senses.

"You seem to be a bit disoriented. If you'd like, I can carry you."

"Don't flatter yourself. I can manage on my own." To demonstrate she pushed away from his rock solid chest, taking deliberate steps away from him in the direction of the stable's entrance. "Are you coming?" she threw over her shoulder.

\* \* \*

"Okay, I may be new here, but I'm fairly certain that the bright lights behind us is the castle."

"We're not going to the castle."

"I figured as much," she commented at his side as they headed toward the dense forest ahead. Aman smiled as Sergei intertwined their fingers, feeling like a school girl on her first date. "Care to tell me where it *is* we're going?"

"To dinner."

"You're not inspiring a whole lot of faith with this closed mouth act."

"You don't trust me?" He stopped in mid-stride, eyes searching hers for answers.

"Of course I do." There wasn't the slightest bit of hesitation in her answer.

"Good. It's not much further."

The trees blocked out most of the remaining light in the early evening sky. The air around them cooled considerably from the trees' shading. A short distance away a cabin came into view, smoke billowing from its rock-encrusted chimney. "Are we having dinner with your friend?"

Sergei gave a brief chuckle. "No."

The rustic style of the cabin came into full view and she wondered exactly how old the structure was. It was a single level, with a tall roof and practical porch that led to a rather substantial door. Sergei pushed open the entrance, allowing her in first. The open floor plan allowed her to view the interior in its entirety.

To her right was a small kitchen with the bare essentials. The wood burning stove was a throwback from the turn of the century. A quaint table sat in the kitchen's space, dressed with two sturdy matching mahogany chairs. The remainder of the cabin comprised the living and bedroom area. Pushed against a back wall the oversized bed was cozily decorated with a thick fur pelt. The bed faced east, toward a large window, showcasing a spectacular view of a clearing.

Aman could just imagine the stream of light that poured through in the morning, or the rarely observed look at wildlife it permitted. Against one outer wall a fireplace, adorned with several candles on its mantle, blazed with full force. Several more thick pelts lay in a neat arrangement on the hardwood floor in front of its hearth.

"Would you prefer to eat at the table or in front of the fireplace?"

"The fireplace is fine."

"There is a bathroom behind that door if you'd like to freshen up before we start." He pointed to the only door in the open area.

Aman took advantage of his offer to wash away some of the dirt she'd gathered from her ride and their walk through the forest. The bathroom was a bit more than she expected. A sunken granite tub, large enough to fit several gargoyles, dominated the room. It was an invitation for indulgence. Aman washed quickly in the sink. When she finally re-emerged it was to find Sergei putting the final dish in front of the fireplace.

"Are we expecting guests?" she asked, looking at the variety of dishes heaped with food. Utensils protruded from each silver container.

"No, but I wanted us to have enough to last us until we're ready to leave."

Aman dipped her head, masking a blush as she pretended to take in the contents of each dish. There was no doubt as to why he thought they would need so much

nourishment. "It seems you weren't entirely truthful with me about your whereabouts today."

"I didn't want to ruin the surprise. I hope you're not disappointed with the accommodations. It's not the chateau."

"It's perfect."

"I built it after my parents passed."

"This is your home?"

"It was for many years. The De LaRue family was gracious enough to indulge me."

"And you built it yourself?"

"With these very hands. I can't claim to be much of a carpenter but I think it's held up well."

"It's perfect." She pictured Sergei living in such solitude, with only his grief as company. "Thank you for sharing it with me."

"No, it's you who should be thanked. I never thought I would feel happiness again, that I would ever find you. I'm in awe every morning I wake to see you next to me."

Her heart contracted at his declaration, eyes misting over. "Sergei --"

"No, don't say anything. Let us just enjoy the meal. Then I have a surprise I hope you'll enjoy."

During the meal Aman inquired about the Meet and Greet that was fast approaching, considering it a safe topic of interest to them both. "I'd like to be as much a part as possible."

"The Council has decided to be as open with the Fledglings as the situation will allow. They're promising to give the women as much time as possible to come to terms with their new lives. The women will remain under the Council's protection until they can comfortably transition into their new lives."

"Good. That should lessen the turmoil in future relationships. I hope Jean is able to find his mate soon. He seems very nice."

"You sound rather fond of him for such a short acquaintance."

"How could I not be?"

"Indeed. Was it his suggestion or yours that you go riding today?"

Aman didn't miss the edge in his voice. "He mentioned it to help me pass the time. I was looking for you when our paths crossed." She changed the subject expertly. "I don't know about you, but I can't eat another bite. What do you say we store this away for later and you take me to that surprise you promised?"

Sergei stored the leftovers in the antiquated icebox. "You won't be needing these," he said as his deft fingers began unbuttoning her shirt, making quick work of her blouse and jeans.

"Should I be worried that my surprise requires me to be nude?"

"It actually involves both of us being nude, if that makes it any better."

"Much." She wondered if he would take her on top of the thick pelts in front of the fireplace or atop the ginormous bed that looked as if it were straight from the Middle Ages. Either place would add a primitive element to their lovemaking. Her nipples hardened at the thought, which didn't go unnoticed by Sergei, who rubbed the pads of his thumbs against the pebbled flesh.

"Ahh," she gasped as electricity ran through her body, stepping closer into his embrace.

Sergei took a step back, holding his hand out to her. With a curious glance she placed her hand in his, following as he led her from the cabin. The grass and earth were soft beneath her bare feet. The night air had cooled considerably, but she barely registered any of it as her gaze kept drifting back to the gorgeous specimen of a male at her side. They'd walked only a few feet away from the cabin before Sergei pointed. "It's just beyond that boulder."

She wanted to ask what, but knew an answer wouldn't be forthcoming, at least not one that would spoil his surprise.

"Wow." As he promised, her surprise was just beyond the boulder. In its own oasis was a pool steaming water.

"It's a mineral spring. The water is quite warm, and reputed to have healing properties."

"How deep is it?" The spring was large, about the size of an average swimming pool, surrounded by several large boulders that had been naturally smoothed by the ravages of time.

"In the shallow ends, about four feet, but it gets much deeper near the center."

"I think I'll stick to the shallow end," she mumbled, standing at the water's edge as Sergei stepped over the side, sending water sloshing over her toes.

"Why?" He reached up to grab her around the waist, easing her into the warm water.

"I never really learned how to swim."

"No?" Sergei didn't try to mask the obvious disbelief in his voice.

"I wanted to, but there never seemed to be enough time."

"Not even as a child?"

She shook her head.

"And this had to do with your parents' selfishness?" His jaw tightened.

She'd shared some things about her childhood with Sergei before and seen his obvious displeasure with them. She nodded in answer, changing the subject. "This feels wonderful."

She dipped beneath the water until she was completely submerged in its warmth, surfacing in time to see Sergei dive into its clear depths, reemerging several feet away before swimming back to her. His long hair slicked back from his face, and water beaded down his sculpted body in the moonlight. "Come, let me give you your first lesson."

"Lesson in what?"

"Swimming."

"Right now?" He stood naked in front of her, the water dangerously low on his hips. Swimming was the last thing on her mind.

"I want you to lay back in the water. Let your mind drift. Let your mind float with you, enjoy the freedom of doing absolutely nothing."

Soon her body drifted like her mind, floating languidly in the warm pool.

"Beautiful," he murmured. She felt the stroke of his warm tongue on one nipple. Her reaction was instant, back arching on a deep sigh. If not for his steadying hands she would have surely gone under. "Sorry, I couldn't resist."

She did her best to glare up at him. "Well, try. Some people are learning to swim here."

"Let's go back to relaxing."

"Piece of cake. I'm a natural at this." She tried not to focus on Sergei's enticing mouth.

"What happened, *RAdost' moyA*? You're not relaxing."

"So what's step two?" she asked, allowing her feet to sink to the boulders below.

Sergei offered his unnecessary assistance with both hands on her waist. "There is a kicking exercise we could try. For this you'll need to be on your stomach."

She kept her doubts to herself but managed to lie on his outstretched arms with her body partially submerged.

"That's it; just keep your arms at your sides."

"Maybe I should have asked to see your credentials before agreeing."

This got a chuckle from him. "Keep your legs as closed as possible, knees straight, and kick."

She did, feeling completely confident in the support his arms provided. "How am I doing?" She risked a look over her shoulder to find his gaze lingering on her exposed ass. She masked her pleasure and decided to give him a bit more of a show.

She gave a slight squeal when his arms slipped from beneath her, but instead of falling face first into the spring she remained afloat by some invisible force.

"Open your legs."

"But I thought you said keep them closed," she goaded.

"Don't argue with your teacher."

Aman bit back a smile, complying with his request, but not by much.

"Wider." The order came as a hand traced one round cheek, then the other. Water rippled around her as he walked around the length of her body.

She opened wider for him, enjoying being on display for his eyes only. She nearly pouted as he continued the pilgrimage around her body, fingers taunting her skin. He paused as he reached her opposite side.

This time she bit her lip in frustration when he discontinued all contact with her. Ready to verbalize her needs, she stopped as a hand landed firmly on the middle of her ass. Fingers intent on their target slipped between her cheeks, tickling her tight anus before dipping further to find her nether lips.

She jerked in need as he teased the swollen folds before inserting one finger between the lips to ease into her waiting hot core. The pleasure was short lived as his finger retreated.

"More." The request had just passed her lips when that same tease of a finger redirected its focus to her clit, stroking the sensitive nub in long, firm swipes that had her grinding against him.

"Don't stop," she begged when all too soon the sweet torment ended.

"Patience," came his rough reply just before he dropped under the water.

Aman didn't try to disguise her aggravated groan this time, not sure what game Sergei was playing at. The water rippled and settled from his quick descent and she scanned the area around her for any signs of him. She could make out his shape in the deep end of the spring. Steam rose off of the surface of the pool only slightly camouflaging his form. She wondered why he would pick this moment to go for a swim. Still held by his telekinetic energy, she found herself with minimal available movement.

*It's about time,* she thought, as her mate glided toward her beneath the surface. He rose slowly, looking incredible with water streaming from his body and hair. She held back her surprise at his shift into gargoyle form. He released his invisible hold on her, replacing it with large arms that dragged her to him, wrapping around her waist.

"Put your legs around me."

It was a gentle command that she followed almost instinctively. Moonlight streamed from behind her, illuminating his chiseled features. Usually more harsh in this persona, tonight he looked different, gentler. He looked like the gargoyle from her dreams. This time she couldn't hold back her gasp as she soaked in every detail of his face.

"Should I change back?"

"No." She reached up with one hand to trace the contours of his face as if seeing him for the first time.

"I want to have you like this, but if it causes you any discomfort --"

Her finger on his lips stopped the rest of his sentence. She'd never made love with him in his gargoyle persona before. They'd experimented with him in partial form but never going this far. She'd be lying if she said she wasn't curious and yes, a bit leery as to how they would fit. In human form Sergei was well-endowed; partially transformed he'd been even more so.

She brushed a gentle kiss against his lips, nipping his bottom lip before raising the stakes by doing her own aggressive exploration. Her tongue swirled and retreated. Her teeth grazed his lips, his chin, his neck.

"You make me so happy," he growled while her tongue danced along a thick vein.

"This is only the beginning," she promised, returning to his inviting lips that had on so many occasions brought her to the height of ecstasy. Incisors that were normally well-hidden became very visible in his aroused state. She could feel the tip of his cock skim the entrance to her aroused core and couldn't wait to feel him thick inside her, stretching her deliciously to the limits. She did her best to make her desire known without breaking their kiss, but when he continued to plunder her mouth with his tongue the same way she wanted him to plunder her hot cunt, she had to pull away.

"I want you."

"Me too." He dipped his head, his lips latching on to the side of her neck. Teeth scraped her skin a bit roughly but she didn't mind.

Death by torture, that's what would happen if she didn't have him inside her soon. She needed to find the words to get him to relax his hold on her waist. "Sergei, now."

Inch by murderously slow inch he eased her down over his hard cock, his eyes watching her with an intensity that mesmerized her. She knew that he was searching for any signs of discomfort. Surprisingly there wasn't any, not much anyway. He filled her completely and she loved every delicious bit of him. Her hold on his shoulders tightened as she attempted to take over their joining. Her nails bit into his flesh.

"It's okay," she reassured him as he held her in place, continuing the painstakingly slow descent that would eventually allow her to fully engulf him. At that rate she'd pass out from agony before he was through.

Her legs locked tighter around his waist and she squeezed him with her vaginal walls, eliciting a groan that had his incisors exploding further from his mouth until they reached his bottom lip. He relinquished control to her gradually and Aman took full advantage, riding him until they were both in a frenzy. Tension spread through her stomach, stretching through her entire body. She throbbed, but did her best to stave off her climax, wanting to savor every moment.

With each downward thrust she tightened her cunt around him, his abandoned expression only adding to her excitement until she could hold back no longer. The orgasm took her with a force that ripped through her body. She convulsed around him in a series of spasms, riding him harder until he threw back his head, unleashing a growl so loud it tore through the night air. She knew the moment he shot into her womb, coating it with his hot seed.

Aman slumped against him as the spasms began to subside, resting her head against his shoulder. She partially registered his body returning to human form before Sergei dipped them both into the spring again. "Are you okay?"

She made a contented noise in answer, a smile spreading across her face.

"I should get you back to the cabin. You look exhausted."

She wanted to deny it but found herself nodding instead.

She felt the soft pelt of animal fur against her skin and dazedly wondered how they'd gotten back so quickly. She heard the crackling of the fire and Sergei moving about the cabin before joining her on the soft bed. He enveloped her in his arms and she inhaled his scent deeply, unable to think of any place she'd rather be.

## Chapter Seven

The chateau was abuzz with activity by the time the couple returned the next morning. Dragging themselves from each other's arms at the last possible moment, they had just enough time to return to their room to change clothes for the festivities scheduled to begin at noon.

She dressed comfortably in a yellow off the shoulder jumper. Two-inch sling back sandals accentuated her long legs. Sergei couldn't seem to take his eyes off her. She had to admit that she had a hard time not devouring him where he stood. Linen suited him, draping his muscled form. His dark hair hung loose and his green eyes looked extraordinarily bright today.

"I'm sure our hosts would forgive us a minor tardiness," he said after catching her eyes on him more times than she cared to admit.

"I don't think so." Aman managed to sidestep his attempt at a grab, reaching the door. She gave herself a mental pat on the back at her neutral response to all she was seeing and hearing in the large ballroom. Guests had begun to arrive about an hour after she and Sergei made their appearance on the lower level and she had her first introduction to a fairy, a troll, and a vampire, all of whom seemed just as eager to meet her as they were to see T.J.

"It truly is a joyous time for gargoyles," Zacharias, a male vampire only a few inches taller than herself, began. She surprised herself by not acting on instinct and retracting her arm when the vampire turned her offered hand palm side up to brush a kiss across her vein. At his side stood a willowy female who Sergei later explained was his ghoul. Not quite the image she'd conjured up for one, but hell, what did she know anymore?

"I thought vampires slept during the daytime," she whispered when the couple stopped to talk with another group across the room.

"Primarily, but they do come out in the daytime on rare occasions."

"So the sun thing is a myth?"

"Unfortunately not. I'm sure Zacharias traveled underground."

Underground? She would have questioned him further if not for the foulest smell she'd ever had the misfortune of being subjected to assaulted her senses. A large green creature ambled into the great hall. The creature stopped at several guests before making its way toward them with a toothy grin. "Sergei and his mate."

"Aman," she corrected.

The creature let out a laugh, and she did her best not to cringe at the smell which seemed even fouler than his body odor, if that were possible.

"Aman. A beautiful name for a beautiful woman." He extended a bulbous hand to her.

Not wanting to appear rude, Aman placed her hand in his, holding back a shudder at the feel of his slimy skin. She watched in amazement as his body reshaped, taking on a human appearance seconds before his lips made contact with the back of her hand. When he raised his head she was amazed to see a very attractive human male looking back at her.

"Good tidings on finding your mate," he said nodding in Sergei's direction before moving on.

"What was he?"

"Gremlin."

Aman was happy to see the next person who sought them out, even more pleased to see her friend looking more like herself.

"Well, hiya, strangers," Sam greeted them in her cheery tone. "I'd ask what you were up to last night, but I think every sensitive hearing non-human within a forty-five-mile radius knows what you were doing."

Aman blushed, shooting Sergei a dirty look. "You didn't bother with that whole enchantment privacy thingy?"

"Someone with manners wouldn't have eavesdropped." He glared at the other woman.

"Hard not to when --"

"Okay, you two, let's not start. Today is a happy occasion," Aman admonished. "You look great by the way."

"Thank you." Sam gave a slight curtsy in a white, spaghetti-strapped baby doll dress. Its hem skimmed the top of her knees. "And you're looking fabulous yourself."

"Whatever Sara gave you seems to be helping?"

"That, plus a bottle of wine. She did mention something about it wearing off sometime tonight so just call me Cinderella."

"Well, Cindy, it's good to have you back."

"All I have to do now is steer clear of unmated wolves and I'll be fine. The chances of that are good since most will be on the prowl."

"The Welcoming is about to begin," Sergei informed them.

The actual ceremony consisted of blessings by many of the guests as well as gifts. Protection spells were cast by members of the Master Elven Guilds. A hush fell over the room as a High Mage Priestess read the infant's aura. Her steady fingers waved over the baby from head to toe.

"Strength and agility," the Priestess announced and the room erupted into approving applause.

"What does that mean?" Aman asked Sergei.

"Those are the qualities that will stand out the most as the child grows into adulthood. Certain qualities ensure a Protector's seat on the Council of Elders, otherwise the place must be earned."

"What attributes would those be?"

"The list is long, but uppermost among them are cunning, patience, logic and second sight."

"Second sight?"

"It's a rare attribute, but those who were gifted with it could see certain events in the future. The ability has not been seen in many generations."

"So what are your attributes?" Aman could think of a few she'd discovered but doubted those were things a High Priestess looked for.

"Strength and cunning."

The remainder of the Welcoming was more like one large party, with food, dancing and drinks aplenty while mama, papa, and baby returned to their suite. A scavenger hunt made up of teams of three to four would commence at nightfall.

"Okay, I'm done with these," Aman said, stepping out of her shoes and bending to hook her fingers through the straps. "I tell you, this wasn't exactly what I was expecting. Maybe I don't get out enough, but it's one of the best parties I've been to in ages."

At Sam's silence Aman shifted to give her friend a curious look. The woman's far off look had Aman snapping her fingers in front of her face. "Ground control to Major Tom."

"Sorry," Sam said distractedly.

"What's wrong?" Then in a whisper, "Is that stuff wearing off?"

"Not yet, but I think I have another problem," Sam answered, staring just beyond her girlfriend.

Aman turned to see Sergei and another of the towering Protectors with a man -- at least he looked like one. Although not quite as tall, he was equally broad as the two others. His sandy blond hair was partially bound in the middle, while the remainder hung loose. It was longer than anything she'd seen on the Protectors, hanging almost waist length.

"Wolf?"

The reply was slow in coming as the woman's eyes remained riveted to the new arrival. Aman wasn't surprised to see the same enraptured attention being directed at her friend. This was not good.

"Cat."

"What?"

"A Tiger," she said under her breath.

She didn't dare question any further when it was obvious the new guest had Sam in his sights and was undoubtedly eavesdropping on their conversation.

Could tigers and wolves mate?

If the answer weren't already evident by Sam's pallor, her next reaction made it abundantly clear. "I think I'll pass on the scavenger hunt."

"And I'll see you safely to your rooms."

*Too late.* Aman heard Sara's soft chuckle in her mind as they attempted to make their escape through another set of double doors.

"Going somewhere, Aman?" Sergei's light tone put her instantly at ease. Aman turned a brilliant smile on her mate and his companion.

"Actually, Sam has a bit of a headache and I was going to make sure she made it to her room all right."

"I'm sorry to hear that you are unwell." The thickly Russian-accented English purred from the stranger and she could almost see the visible effect it had on Sam.

"Gregori, may I present my mate Aman and her friend Samantha Jennings."

Aman gave Gregori a warm hello all the while taking in Gregori's impressive form. He was definitely a looker. His eyes were more yellow than hazel, and his face could only be described as harsh. A thatch of dark blond hair beneath his lower lip drew eyes to its fullness.

Noticing Sam avoided looking directly at the Were male was enough of an indication as to her friend's distressed state. The incident with the pack of Wolves had caused her more amusement than anger; this was definitely serious.

"Charmed to make your acquaintance." He took her offered hand, brushing his lips against the back. He didn't bother to wait for Sam, instead easily taking her pale fingers in his massive hand. The woman's eyes rounded to saucers as he brought her

hand up to meet his bowed head. Witnessing her friend's visible tug, Aman would have intervened if not for Sergei's restraining arm around her waist.

Everything seemed to slow down as Gregori turned her wrist palm side up. Instead of brushing a light kiss, as he'd done with Aman, a thick, long tongue stretched from between parted lips, taking a leisurely lap up her wrist.

Sam let out a gasp that was nearly inaudible. Yet she'd heard it and was certain the two males had as well. And just like that time returned to normal, followed immediately by Sam looking ready to collapse beneath her own weight. Gregori was the first to steady the woman who looked up at him with luminous eyes.

"No, not you," she choked out.

"There will be no other."

The exchange was not lost on Aman, or anyone within listening range, which only left out a few guests who didn't possess hypersensitive ears. The sheer possessiveness in Gregori's tone alone was enough to spur her into action.

"Excuse us, gentlemen." She managed to insert herself between Gregori and her friend before anyone could think to stop her. "But Sam isn't feeling herself at the moment."

Certain that a protest was imminent, Aman linked arms with her friend, giving the two males a stern don't-mess-with-me look before pulling a willing Sam with her.

"Aman, you don't have to do this." Sam finally spoke when they were safely ensconced in her assigned room.

"Of course I do. You did the same for me," she answered as she busied herself locking the patio door. "All we have to do is get you through one night and you're home free." *For now*, she added silently. They'd deal with the ramifications of a "regular" mating season later. From what she pieced together Weres could freely engage in intercourse during these annual matings, although there was still the risk of getting involved with someone, particularly an Alpha, who wouldn't just walk away after the fun was done.

"Do you remember Sergei's persistence?"

The question got Aman's full attention.

"Were males lack the finesse of gargoyles, not to mention he's a cat." She spat out the last word. "You have no idea how sneaky they can be."

"Well, he'll have to get past the both of us, and to be on the safe side I can always ask Sara."

"None of them will help me. They can't. Weres live by a whole other set of rules. It's one thing for Sara to help ease my discomfort. Quite another for her to interfere. My mother was only able to do what she could with my father's consent, and I doubt I'll be getting it again. Even if I could, it's too late." Sam paced the room like a caged animal.

Her friend's heightened anxiety filled the room and Aman couldn't help but feel helpless. "We could leave," she blurted out.

"And go where? Weres are predators, very skilled predators."

"I'll talk to Sergei. Maybe he can convince this Gregori fellow that he's barking up the wrong tree."

"Why do you think that alley cat showed up here in the first place? The last night of mating season and he wanted to spend it at a baby's Welcoming? Highly unlikely."

Sam's words sank in, settling into the pit of her stomach and Aman felt nauseated before dropping down into the nearest chair. She didn't want to accept the logic of Sam's revelation, but how could she not?

She knew that there was no love lost between the two, but to purposefully put a Were on her scent when he knew it was the last thing in the world she wanted. But it wasn't about what she wanted. Their trip was coming to an end and he probably didn't want to risk having a long term boarder on his hands.

Aman tried to shake away the thought. "So what do we do now?"

"Wait. What else can we do? The cat will make his move before sunrise." Sam stopped in front of the double patio doors to stare out into the night. The full moon illuminated the sky with a dark brilliance that could only be described as beautiful.

\* \* \*

Aman wasn't certain when she fell asleep, or exactly how long she'd been out, but when the sound of morning birds eagerly chirping outside intruded on her thoughts she came to with a start. She went into immediate panic mode when she realized she was in her and Sergei's assigned suite, alone.

Her heart pounded loudly in her chest as she looked down at the outfit she'd worn the night before. "Sam," she screeched, taking off as soon as her bare feet hit the floor. She swung the door open wide, rushing down the hall to the opposite end where Sam was housed. A haunted feeling took hold at the open door and orderly room. She stepped inside on heavy legs, racking her brain for the events of the previous evening.

She came up empty which only added to her anxiety. There should be something, a distant thought before drifting off to sleep, but there was nothing but a dark empty void. As she suspected, further investigation of the room turned up empty. No evidence to show that Sam had even been there. No scent. Nothing.

How was that possible?

*Where is Sam?* She sent the mental message to the Elf before she left the room.

There was a hesitation before Sara responded. *I don't know.*

*But I'm sure you know what happened to her as I'm beginning to believe that I was the victim of your mind alteration.*

*Perhaps Sergei would be the best to answer your questions.*

*Oh, he's definitely going to get a mouthful, but I just want to know if you were a party to Sam's disappearance.*

*No. I consider both you and Sam my friends now. I would never do anything to jeopardize that.*

As nice as the little speech was, it did nothing to reassure her about Sam's well-being. *Would you mind telling me where Sergei is or should I just start yelling his name all over the castle?* She didn't care to sniff him out today.

*The Council called a special session this morning. They should be in the conference room, but I would advise against interrupting them.*

*Your advice has been noted.*

The men, about thirty of them, were indeed in the conference room and deep in discussion when she pushed into the room.

At her sudden appearance, the men shot Sergei a quizzical look before standing. Aman would have much preferred if the enormous men had remained seated, but she wouldn't let their size deter her.

"Where's Sam?" She directed her question to the one man in the room with the ability to take away her anger.

"She's with her mate, where she belongs."

The words were said in a calm matter-of-fact tone that did nothing to put her at ease.

"And who's to say that she's where she belongs? I've known her a far cry longer than you or the Werecat you brought here. She's fought her entire life to prevent last night from happening and because you deemed it time, she's gone." With every word Aman could feel anger building within her.

"Now is not the time. We'll talk as soon as I'm done here."

His dismissal was the final straw. "Don't bother. I'm certain I'll get even less information from you than I am at this moment. I'll find her myself."

"Aman." The call of her name had its intended effect of halting her in her tracks as she turned to leave the room of staring Protectors. "You are not permitted to leave the chateau until we've had a chance to talk."

"*Not permitted?* And by what authority do you think you have the right to order me around?"

"The authority as your mate."

"Funny that you should mention that." She turned with venom in her voice. "It seems that bringing me here has been an enlightening experience. I've learned a lot about being a Fledgling, some pretty interesting facts, actually."

"Fatima," she heard Lorn say under his breath but chose to ignore him, her sights set on her target.

"Perhaps we should leave the two of you alone," Lorn suggested, pushing himself out of his chair.

"No, don't go. I'm pretty sure there should be witnesses for this."

"Aman, think about what you're doing." The warning came from Lorn but she kept her gaze fixed on Sergei.

"I know exactly what I'm doing, ending this farce here and now."

Sergei's eyes spoke volumes although he remained silent.

"I seek the protection of the Council until my proper mate can be found."

The already silent room became eerie.

"I'm certain a lovers' tiff isn't cause for such a request." It was Lorn's father who spoke this time.

"This is hardly a lovers' quarrel. I've had my doubts for some time. It wasn't until now that I've had the opportunity to meet other gargoyles." She tore her gaze from Sergei's, his penetrating silence chipping away at her own anger.

"Fatima and I had a very similar beginning," Lorn added.

"Which thankfully worked out well, and you have your son as proof."

"Tread lightly, Aman." When Sergei finally spoke there was no mistaking the underlying edge in his even tone.

"I believe I'm well within my rights here. Without having the ritual ceremony performed or a child from our union, can any of you say with certainty that we're intended mates?"

Silence followed and Aman knew that everyone mulled over the validity of her words.

"I can." Sergei pronounced each word with a deliberate slowness. "With every last ounce of breath in my body, I know that you belong with me."

"Of course you do." Sarcasm dripped from her voice. "Because *you* decree it so. You've done nothing but impose your will on me since the day we met, without taking my feelings into consideration. Let's just see how certain the other Council members are about this."

"She does raise some valid points." She didn't recognize the Protector's voice, probably a new arrival over the last day or two.

"We can't seriously entertain her suggestion. It will set a precedent for all future joinings the minute a Fledgling's mate upsets her."

"Which is why the protocol should be followed. This is a unique matter indeed." Lorn's father added, "You do understand that seeking the protection of the Council will not grant you the return to your life as it was before meeting Sergei. That you will be assigned a guardian until this can all be sorted out."

Aman thought back on their time together, remembering how only twenty-four hours before they'd been entwined in one another's arms. She hesitated, until she thought about Sam. "I understand," she agreed.

"No!" Sergei's bellow resonated throughout the chateau and Aman found herself staring into eyes darker than midnight. Her heart lurched and regret flooded her. She forced herself to focus on Sam, remembering her friend's adamant desire to remain free. "I will not allow you to do this, any of you."

"I'm sorry, Sergei, but until we can sort this out we'll have to grant Aman's request."

"Then you'll have to kill me. That is the only way that I will let her go." In an instant Sergei transformed into his gargoyle persona, clothes shredding and falling off him in a haphazard display. She found herself thrust behind two transforming Protectors.

From her vantage point she could hear more than see what was going on. Through the gap between her two guards she saw that most, if not all, of the men had adopted their more fierce personas. Grunts, growls, and bellows sounded as bodies made contact with walls. It was a melee caused by her and if anyone was seriously injured as a result she would never forgive herself. As the violent display of exertion died down she could see her guards relax, allowing her a better view of the room.

Several gargoyles were picking themselves up off the floor, shaking off the effects of being knocked into walls. So far everyone looked okay, if not a little bruised.

She gasped at the pile of Protectors on one area. A cursing, moving pile. *Sergei*, she thought and wondered if he was hurt underneath the bodies of several brutes. "Is he all right?" she whispered.

Half a breath passed, followed by an earth shattering cry that seemed to expel bodies from the cluster, sending gargoyles in every direction. Sergei erupted from beneath the horde looking every bit a deadly warrior. His eyes focused on the two guards in front of her.

"Get her out of here!" someone shouted as another gargoyle lunged at Sergei from one side. She was physically lifted and carried through the door where several Elves stood expectantly.

"Don't enter until it's quieted down. You'll be needed." She heard the instruction as she was ushered away from the commotion.

## Chapter Eight

The gentle knock on the bedroom door repeated its steady drumming even after her continued silence. "I'm not going anywhere," Fatima called from the opposite side.

"Come in." Aman tried miserably to muster some enthusiasm.

"It's quite dark in here." Fatima's mock complaint was immediately followed by the clicking of a switch that had several recessed lights blazing down on her. Aman sat tucked in a cushioned chair in front of the room's grand fireplace, squinting until her eyes could adjust to the new lighting. "Holing up in here isn't going to make things easier."

"Who said I was holing up? I'm sure being out of sight makes everyone feel a bit better right now." Aman knew that Fatima was right. For the past week she'd sequestered herself away in the suite once shared with Sergei, taking all her meals in seclusion despite the numerous requests to join the rest of the household.

Though she couldn't spend the rest of her life here, it was the only place her conscience would allow her to be. Truth be told she was never alone, not with guilt and regret as constant companions. If not for her, Sam wouldn't be God knew where, and Sergei... the last she'd heard he was back in New York. She was glad to hear that he'd physically recovered.

"Why do you think that?"

"The glares alone have spoken volumes."

There hadn't been many, but she didn't need a building to fall on her head to know the sentiment was probably widespread.

"Nonsense. You just shook things up a bit, made them all see that the Me Tarzan, You Jane tactics won't cut it anymore."

"A whole lot of good it did."

"So is this your plan of action, to throw a pity party for yourself and fade away?"  
Sounded good to her.

"I can see I have my work cut out for me. Come on, let's go."

Aman wanted to protest but instead found herself asking, "Go where?"

"To do a little guaranteed therapy." At her quizzical look Fatima rolled her eyes.  
"Shopping of course."

"But you can't do that, not with T.J. still nursing."

"You let me worry about that. Be ready in an hour and meet me in the foyer."

Much to her own surprise Aman was showered, dressed and looking forward to their outing an hour later.

"We have about three hours," Fatima briefed her as they took a short Jeep ride to a helicopter pad where a luxury four-passenger helicopter waited. "That should give us enough time to hit several shops."

Being wealthy definitely had its perks, she thought as they swooped in and out of shops. Each store provided them with their own personal shoppers. In the end Aman was outfitted with more clothes than she had back in New York. She had to admit it was a good distraction. Maybe Fatima had a point. She couldn't spend her life locked away. It certainly wouldn't help Sam nor change her circumstances with Sergei.

Beginning the next day Aman set herself on a new course of action. She would find enjoyment in each day, each moment. It was only the evenings that seemed difficult, so she increased her daily activities until by the time nightfall came she could barely keep her eyes open.

\* \* \*

His physical wounds had long healed, one of the benefits of being a gargoyle. It was the gaping hole in his heart that made things unbearable, but he'd soon have a remedy for that. Come what may Aman would definitely be with him again, and if anyone thought to interfere, heaven help them. He'd limited his contact with other Protectors since Aman's declaration, splitting his time between the two continents. As

far as anyone was concerned he'd thrown himself completely into the Meet and Greet just days away, which was what he wanted.

He'd be damned if anyone thought they could keep Aman from him.

\* \* \*

It wasn't exactly a coup but she considered her attempts at staying busy a huge success and gave herself a mental pat on the back for finally moving out of her stupor. An early dinner had been her plan followed by a leisurely ride on Hero before she settled down to a more quiet evening of reading, something she hadn't done since leaving New York. Jean had agreed to meet her in the stables for the next lesson. In actuality she knew that he'd been given the task of guarding her that day but she didn't mind; she liked Jean.

Aman wasn't sure what the protection was for. According to Fatima the Elves wove various spells each morning to protect the land surrounding the chateau as well as the main house from any would-be threats, and with the number of Protectors in and out a creature would have to be suicidal to risk anything.

Aman smiled as Jean's familiar scent greeted her before his entrance. "I thought you were standing me up."

"Never."

"That's only because it's your shift," she threw back at him as she fetched her saddle.

"And I've never been more pleased about an assignment."

"I'll take that as a compliment. Do you want any help grooming Warrior? Seems I have a bit of a jumpstart on you," she offered.

"Someone seems anxious to get started today."

"Nothing like the wind in my hair and bugs on my face."

That got a laugh out of him. It was nothing like Sergei's deep rich sound that warmed her entire being but it was nice, nonetheless.

"Why am I not surprised to find the two of you together?" Sergei's sarcastic tone halted Aman in her tracks. Immediately Jean stepped from Warrior's stall and onto the path between the couple.

"What are you doing here, Sergei?"

Jean asked the question that Aman couldn't get her mouth to form. She felt rooted to the spot and unable to conjure up the sheer will to move.

"Am I not welcome on De LaRue land now?"

"Of course you are, but you know the Council is still at odds over your situation."

"And while they deliberate what are you doing, dear friend, taking advantage of my misfortune?"

"Of course not. You know that I believe you and Aman are true mates."

"I'm glad to hear that. If you wouldn't mind stepping aside, I've come to collect Aman."

"You know I can't let you do that."

Sergei arched a brow before shrugging. "As you like."

He moved with gentle ease as he stepped into the stable, using telekinesis to slam the door shut in his wake. All around her she heard faint sounds like the securing of latches on the doors and windows. They were trapped.

Jean's morphing forced her from her shocked stupor. Too much violence had already occurred over her. She wouldn't be responsible for more. "Wait!" she called, stepping out of reach of both gargoyles.

"Aman, come here." Jean's normally friendly tone held an edge that only made him appear all the more dangerous.

"No. I'm tired of all this fighting. For God's sakes, you're friends." She knew both males watched her intently, waiting for their opportunity. "Jean, go back to the Council. Tell them I've agreed to talk with Sergei."

"What I have in mind goes far beyond talking, as I'm sure you know."

"Aman, you can't go with him like this," Jean argued.

"I offer you this warning as my brethren, Jean. Stay out of this."

Sergei's deathly calm tone sent a shiver down her spine. She shifted from one foot to the next as she pondered her options. It was obvious that neither would back down and without the assistance of other gargoyles she feared the match would be a fatal one. She'd offered the appeasement in the hopes that it would defuse the volatile situation, but it hadn't. "I'll go with you."

"Aman!" Jean yelled and Sergei growled a low, lethal rumbling sound that left the hairs on the back of her neck prickling.

She tried to keep her voice calm while moving closer to the locked entrance, making sure to stay just out of his reach. "Tell the Council my decision, Jean."

She heard the lock disengage before the stable doors swung wide open.

There was no warning, at least none that she recognized, as Jean lunged at his comrade. Sergei, seemingly in anticipation, deflected the blow a full body tackle would have caused. An enormous gust of air escaped from Jean's lungs as he was tossed onto his back.

Sergei's next attack was swift and would have probably done serious damage if not for the ear splitting scream she let loose. It provided just the distraction Jean needed to roll away. She was only able to enjoy several seconds of elation at seeing him stagger to his feet before Sergei directed his attention to her. He shot her a glare that she knew didn't bode well. Fear gripped her instantly and she bolted out of the stable. Unfortunately for her it was opposite of the chateau.

She didn't fool herself into thinking that she could outrun him, just sent up a silent prayer that she could buy herself the precious seconds needed to have others come to her aid. Taking as deep a breath as she could muster while running at top speed, she let out what promised to be another loud screech, only it never made it past her lips before she was literally plucked from the ground, mouth clamped by firm fingers.

"I'm sorry, *RAdost' moyA*, but I've had quite enough of your screams for the moment. Why don't you save them for what I have planned later?"

The chateau faded into the distance, its lights twinkling like far away stars before being enveloped by the darkness. Hope of aid dwindled like the distant lights. Time stilled as they sped over forests, cities, lakes, valleys, and mountains. Her heart rate had long slowed to normal and the strenuous events of the day combined with the monotonous flight began to take its toll, and in spite of her best efforts she fell into a deep sleep.

A cool breeze seeped through the thin shirt she'd worn for riding and she shuddered from the change in temperature. Sergei pulled her closer, sharing his body heat. She could feel the steady rhythm of his heart reverberating beneath his bare chest and realized just how much she'd missed him. She felt silly for even entertaining the thought under the current circumstances. Never had she seen a look in his eyes as she had in the stable.

The descent was quick and with her head buried in the side of his neck she didn't have an opportunity to even get a glimpse of their surroundings. Sergei's transition from flight to full stride was seamless and he just as smoothly maneuvered an arm beneath her knees to cradle her body against him.

His shifting gave her a view of a dark courtyard, one that seemed sorely neglected. She was certain a paved path must have once existed where Sergei walked because it led to a wide alcove that gave way to a dark, ominous door which swung open to allow them admission before closing with a loud thud. If not for a few wall torches the long hall would have been completely dark.

A faint musty odor lingered in the air. The hall led to a large entryway lit with more torches. She was certain if she made a sound it would echo in the cavernous interior. Years of neglect were obvious although she got the distinct impression that recent work had been done to correct the oversight. Marble floors sparkled under the dim lights. Cleaned tapestries hung brilliantly from the stone walls.

She felt like they'd just stepped back in time. While Chateau De LaRue was a beautiful testament to a bygone era, it was also well equipped with every modern convenience known to man. She doubted her current Gothic surroundings included

plumbing. "Where are we?" The question slipped from her lips as he ascended the wide staircase that split before reaching the uppermost landing.

"Home."

The word echoed in her head.

Foreboding filled her as Sergei carried her toward a heavy wooden door at the end of a long hall. Warmth greeted her as he stepped into the room. A behemoth of a fireplace seemed to take up one entire wall, flames sparking and crackling loudly. She half expected him to set her down but saw his intent clearly as his long strides took them to a canopy bed that could easily fit three or four large adults.

To fight him would be a lesson in futility, so she bided her time, waiting until he dropped her close to the bed's center before scrambling to the opposite end. She shrieked a nearly inhuman sound as one ankle was entrapped. In sheer panic she lashed out, but it did her little good. Bedding gathered beneath her twisting form as she was dragged across its length.

"Quit with the theatrics, *RAdost' moyA*." His voice was calm, so much so that Aman felt compelled to stop her flailing. "If I really intended what you're thinking do you honestly believe you could stop me?"

Her mouth went dry as she stared up at him, the truth of his words working their way through her brain. He was larger, faster, and a hunter; all of which didn't bode well for her. It took a moment for her preoccupied brain to register the very heavy, metal manacle he secured around one ankle.

"In case you get any ideas when I'm away." This time when she pulled away she met with no resistance from Sergei, who stared at her with dark eyes. "The chain is long enough to travel through the room. Should nature call a chamber pot is just behind that screen." He gestured to a privacy screen in a far corner of the room.

Did he say chamber pot, as in medieval bathroom?

"Meals will come three times a day. Should you decide not to eat any of them you will have to wait a full twenty-four hours until your next one. A bath will be

prepared once in the evenings. If you're unwilling to take advantage of my generosity another will not be forthcoming until you ask. Is all of this clear?"

"Why are you doing this?"

"Certainly you of all people should know. You summed it up very well by calling me a barbarian. Unfortunately for you, *RAdost' moyA*, this barbarian wants you."

Silence fell over the room as they both seemed to wait for the other to speak. Her mind reeled with things to say but nothing made it past her throat.

"Back to my question: do you understand?"

She wanted to yell "no" that she didn't understand how things could go awry so quickly. How they could go from overcoming a major hurdle and back to square one overnight.

"Yes. It's all clear." Why did she feel like uttering the statement had sealed her fate?

## Chapter Nine

She'd searched the room from top to bottom, frustration seeping in as she quickly learned there would be no escape, not without help. She was alone, had been for some time, perhaps hours. Time eluded her while she rummaged around the room. She'd opted out of wearing a watch earlier when the plans included going for a ride on Hero. Sergei hadn't said where he was going or how long he would be gone, and she didn't bother asking under the circumstances. As time stretched on she acknowledged that she was tired, hungry, and would love a hot shower. Unfortunately, two of the three things required her to call on Sergei. Pushing a nearly immovable chair in front of the fireplace, she settled down to do the only thing in her power, wait for what was to come next.

The loud bang not only roused her from sleep but had her stumbling out of the hard chair that had probably been built as a torture device and not at all for comfort.

She gathered her composure, her posture stiff as Sergei dropped a tray on the monstrosity of a bed before heading back out of the room. This time he didn't bother to close the door, and she soon learned that it was because several large, steaming buckets of water sat outside. She watched in silence as he pulled a large tub from behind another screen. She'd seen it in her earlier investigation and assumed that the thing was in its permanent resting place. Now watching him place it near the fireplace as if it weighed nothing more than a few pounds had her stomach in knots. He didn't look at her as he dumped the buckets of water inside.

"Come here, Aman." He spoke after stacking and putting the buckets back in the hall, a simple task she knew he could have easily done with telekinesis.

"Why should I? I'm tired of playing helpless victim to you, Sergei," she shouted. "You have absolutely no right to be upset with me. If anything I should have you in

these chains so you know what it feels like to be at someone else's mercy. To have your will completely pushed aside." She was on a roll. The more she talked the angrier she became. "Perhaps you'd like to see what it's like to have your trust completely violated."

"Enough," he stormed, picking up the extra slack in her chain, tugging until it was taut and she had only two options. Since the idea of ending up on her ass and being dragged across the room didn't sit well with her, she moved of her own accord, clenching her jaw in frustration.

"You'll bathe first," he informed her when she stopped a couple feet from him. He bent to release the band on her ankle before stepping back to fold his arms over his bare chest. He did in fact look very much the barbarian warrior, sporting a loincloth and nothing else. Even his hair was free of restraint, falling as it pleased. She kept her focus on his face, a bit disturbed to see that his eyes maintained their black color.

She waited for him to leave but found time ticking by without so much as a twitch.

"The water is getting cold," she commented.

"As is your food."

What the hell was wrong with him? Had he hit his head in the brawl?

"If you wouldn't mind leaving."

"I would."

"But you can't just stand here and watch like some peeping Tom."

The look he gave her said, *can't I?*

"Well, you can forget it, buddy."

"You're refusing the bath?"

"No, I'm refusing to take it with you here."

"There is no other way."

She opened her mouth to protest, only to close it again.

"What's it to be?"

"No."

"Your choice."

*Yeah right*, she huffed, half expecting him to reattach the metal on her ankle. When he didn't, she moved toward the bed to get a better look at her dinner. Sergei had always been an excellent cook, but that was in a well-equipped kitchen. Her stomach growled loudly as sight and smell blended. It didn't look half bad, chicken, potatoes, bread and some type of squash. She swallowed in anticipation.

His next words halted her in her tracks. "You'll need to undress first."

"What?"

He looked bored. "Your clothes. I want them off."

"Why? I said I'm declining the bath."

"Correct, but either way you'll surrender your clothes."

"But that's just ridiculous, downright..."

"Barbaric," he supplied. "Yes, we've established. In which case you shouldn't be surprised by my request."

"It's not a request, it's blackmail. If I want to bathe I have to do it in front of you. If I want to eat I have to be naked. What kind of nonsense is that? Am I going to be nude the entire time?" Aman clamped her lips together like a steel trap but it was too late. The words couldn't be unspoken.

"Splendid idea."

She had time to turn, but go where? She was trapped, like he'd wanted. Chin held high she pivoted on her heels only to discover he hadn't moved an inch, had probably not seen the point. Sheer defiance oozed from her entire body as she yanked the shirt over her head. She unsnapped her denim jeans with jerky movements.

"Everything," he said when she stood in her bra and panties shooting daggers from her eyes.

She discarded the undergarments with the same obvious displeasure.

"Now throw them in the fire."

He couldn't be serious. However, when she would have protested, the determined expression on his face stopped her.

The flames crackled loudly from the cloth material before swallowing her garments completely.

"You may eat now."

*What, you're not going to hand feed me,* she wanted to say, but decided against giving him any more ideas.

It was a little unnerving eating with someone staring at you in silence; add being naked with a near seven-foot Alpha male and this got downright uncomfortable. As hungry as she was when she started, Aman could only get through a quarter of her plate, anxiety settling in at the uncertainty of things. How long did he really think to keep her here? Certainly the others would be able to find her without a problem, yet Sergei looked perfectly at ease as if he didn't have a worry. She wanted to question him but instead did her best to ignore him when he picked up the chair she'd occupied earlier and plunked it at the side of the bed.

"How long are you going to play with your food?"

"I'm not," she denied even as she raked through the mashed potatoes.

Sergei gave a grunt but let the topic drop. She hazarded a look in his direction, not surprised to see him looking like the veritable king of his castle.

"Where exactly are we?"

"My family's home. Now our home and that of our descendants."

She swallowed hard but chose to focus on only one part of his response. "You mean Russia?"

"Yes."

He hadn't been there since his parents' deaths, which would explain the condition of the place, although there obviously seemed to have been some work done. The room still smelled old but not as dank and musty as it should after such an extended period. Although it had gone unoccupied for a long time, surely someone would think to look for them there.

"If you're thinking about possible rescue I'd not cultivate the thought too much. Our home has been very well fortified against intrusion even from those with good intentions."

Great!

"Perhaps you'd like to take advantage of the bath now. The water is probably a bit tepid but it can't be helped at this point."

If she said no what would happen next? Not prepared to see what the alternative was, Aman made her way to the bath. To her surprise the water was still very warm and the tub was deep, which she took advantage of by sinking in up to her neck. She heard Sergei moving about the room but refused to look to see what he was up to. Temptation hit hard at the sound of the door closing. She pivoted around in the tub to confirm what her senses already told her. She was alone, but it didn't put her mind at ease as she wondered about her future.

\* \* \*

Astonishingly enough the same question plagued Sergei as he roamed the courtyard below. Yes, he wanted to have Aman with him. He resented having the other Protectors intervene in what was clearly a domestic tiff and frankly he wanted someone to pay. Jean was almost the unfortunate recipient of his anger until Aman redirected his attention. Although he'd come for her he'd been prepared to eliminate any obstacle that stood in his way.

Now that she was here he'd calmed considerably, his anger dissipating to almost nothing. He hadn't expected this, had wanted her to experience the misery he was subjected to in their time apart. He'd played out the scenes in his mind more times than he could count, expected anger, tears, even a bit of begging, but now it all seemed irrelevant. He just wanted her to want to be with him. He was, in fact, faced with the same old question, how to get Aman to accept them as a couple.

\* \* \*

Aman wrapped herself in a bed sheet and pushed the patio door open. She half expected a spell to stop her. When it didn't, she stepped onto the cool stone that

overlooked a garden, or what could have once been called one. It was strange how things had come full circle with her and Sergei. Would they always argue over how things would be between them, always push the other to complete madness? It wasn't how she wanted to live life. Her thoughts shifted to Sam. Was she safe? Would they see each other again? A sound below pulled her from her reverie and Aman found herself searching out the faint noise. In awe she stared as the garden began to move, shifting slowly, nearly imperceptible to the naked eye, but she saw it clearly. The overgrowth began a miniscule but steady retreat. As far as she could see the greenery seemed to take on a life of its own.

"Spectacular, isn't it?" Sergei asked as he stepped onto the patio.

"Yes, but it could put the whole landscaping industry to a halt." She felt him come up behind her and waited for his touch.

"The spell works better in the evening and isn't limited to the garden."

"All the work that's been done?"

"Magic mostly."

"How long before it's complete?"

"Two weeks."

She was sure that, once finished, the estate would be breathtaking.

"There's a chill in the air, Aman. Why don't we go back inside?"

She didn't argue.

"I want to talk to you about the night Sam disappeared."

"I'm not sure if I want to hear what you have to say."

"I think it's the only way we can move forward. After you hear me out, if you want to leave I'll take you back to Chateau De LaRue."

Her knees felt weak and she sank onto the bed. She listened as he told the story of what happened that night, searching her mind for the truth, but only coming up with emptiness. She remembered Sam's agitation, her pacing, but that was all.

"I don't know what to say."

"I'm sure it's difficult for you to believe."

It was hard to accept that Sam would intentionally try to do her harm.

"There's a glass of water on the bedside table. Drink it."

"Thanks, but I'm not thirsty."

"It will reverse the Elves' spell. You'll remember everything from that night."

She turned to stare at the glass of clear liquid before turning back to him.

"Trust me, Aman."

"You have to admit that you've made it a bit difficult tonight."

"I'll accept that, but if you want that night back, it's right there."

She hesitated, mulling over his version of what happened that evening. It was plausible, though difficult to swallow. She could never imagine Sam wanting to hurt her, no matter what the circumstances were. Yet if he was really telling the truth, didn't she owe it to him, to Sam, and herself to know what happened? She swallowed the liquid down in one gulp.

The effect was slow at first, making her feel a bit lightheaded. She closed her eyes tight against the flood of memories that came back to her. She felt as if it were all happening at that moment. Sam's agitation had grown and Aman noticed the perspiration that beaded on her forehead.

"Why don't you sit down? You don't look so good," she'd suggested.

"Sam." The encouragement came again at her friend's silence.

When Sam whirled on her, the sight was frightening. Yellow eyes glowed at her and Sam's once beautiful face had distorted, taking on an animalistic quality. "Goooo now, Aman." The pained words came out as a growl.

"Sam."

She'd seen Sergei transform many times but in no way did he go through the agony that Sam was subjected to. She was torn between going to her friend and getting help. Her hesitation proved to be a costly mistake. The wolf emerged after a series of contortions, with none of the fluidity she'd witnessed in Sergei. It came to all fours with fierce snarls, eyeing her with a wild look that showed no sign of the woman she once knew.

"Sam?"

The beast snarled again, advancing slowly while keeping Aman in her sights.

"Sam, I know you're in there, that you can hear me."

The wolf snarled again and she tried to push back the fear that rose within her. A thought hit her. Just because Sergei's human and gargoyle forms were very much in sync didn't mean that all species worked that way. She needed to get help for Sam but more importantly for herself. She was faster since her conversion. Perhaps she could make it into the hall, alert someone.

No sooner had the thought entered her mind than she was rushing for the door. She felt the cool brass of the knob beneath her fingertips just seconds before she was knocked sideways. The wolf sneered again, revealing very sharp, menacing teeth. Aman was certain that her time on earth was limited and the only thing she could think about was Sergei's handsome face, the way his face softened when he smiled, and the way his eyes darkened when he was aroused. The thoughtful way he saw to her every need. She regretted that she would never see him, feel his lips pressed against her or be held by him again.

The animal's breath was hot as it panted above her, its bulky form heavy and immovable. Then suddenly it was gone. Her frightened mind didn't register the shattering of the French patio doors until after she heard a subsequent loud crash, followed by a wounded yelp. She wasn't sure how long she lay there. Fear was quickly replaced by relief when she felt the reassuring arms of Sergei cradling her. Aman dropped her head to his shoulder, her body a mass of trembling flesh. Try as she might she couldn't find her voice, couldn't get herself completely under control.

\* \* \*

"You carried me from Sam's room?" It was a question and a statement.

"Yes."

"And Sam?"

"With Gregori. I didn't invite him to the Welcoming, Aman. He found Sam all on his own from the night we went dancing. He recognized her as his mate and tracked her down of his own accord."

"But I thought..."

"You were wrong."

She *was* wrong, completely.

"Why would I jeopardize everything?" he asked.

"I'd like to talk to Sam."

"I'll see what I can do."

Fair enough. What more could she expect? "Where does that leave us?"

"That depends on you."

The moment of truth. No more lying to him or herself. She rose, slowly letting the sheet fall away from her body.

Sergei's gaze followed the fabric's downward descent. "As much as I would enjoy nothing better than losing myself in your beautiful body, I need more than that."

"Well, that's a good thing because I'm offering far more than the physical relationship we shared in New York."

"Tell me. I have to hear the words."

There was no doubt, no hesitation, and no turning back. "I want to wake up to you every morning, to be your mate, and the mother of your child. I'll tell the Council and the whole world if need be. How's that?"

A smile spread across his lips. "Music to my ears."

Aman giggled with joy when he lifted her off her feet, wrapping her legs around his waist. "What are you doing?" she asked as he carried her back out through the patio doors.

"Finishing what we started in New York before we were interrupted."

"Hmm, let me see if I remember." She giggled as he sat her bare bottom on the wide cool stone. Her legs unwound from his waist to dangle freely.

"I'll help." His voice dropped to a low sultry sound that set her pulse to racing. It really should be illegal for a voice to ooze sex, for its very tone to seduce.

His kiss came with both demand and promise, lips moving keenly over hers. It was as if he couldn't get enough of her as his lips nipped at her chin, trailing a blazing path down the column of her neck, teeth teasing as his tongue flicked her heated flesh. She would never get enough of his touch and the way he set her body on fire. Her womb clenched and back arched as mesmerizing lips paid homage to the tight peak of her nipple. Sergei steadied her with one hand around her waist while flicking one sensitive bud with his tongue.

"Yes," she croaked. She nearly came undone when he switched his attention to her other breast, treating the nipple to the same torturous teasing that had her writhing. Need built to a boiling point within her. She was on fire. To hell with foreplay, she wanted him inside her. "Please," she begged.

"Not yet, *RAdost' moyA*." He pulled away slightly, yet as he spoke the hot air from his breath on her aroused flesh left her shuddering. Like a man obsessed he continued his focus on her breasts, suckling, tugging and flicking. Her hips were moving of their own accord, undulating as the moistness gathered in her channel.

He spread her legs wider, slipping one hand between their bodies. Fingers glided to her labia folds, slid up and down between her nether lips, coating his fingers with her feminine moisture. Teeth tugged at her nipple as he honed in on her clit. Muscles tightened in her stomach and her hips squirmed in a desperate plea.

He raised his head. Dark eyes met hers with his domineering gaze. She moaned when his finger penetrated her tight sheath. Her vaginal walls clenched around his thick digit. She was burning up, ready and willing to beg him to take her. The familiar tightening of her body, her shortness of breath, was evidence of how close she was to coming apart. As much as she wanted to hold on to her orgasm, her body had other plans. She gave in to the pulsing of her channel. Waves of pleasure racked her body. Before she could catch her breath, his finger was sliding out of her only to be replaced

by the broad tip of his cock. He was thick, hard, and her body welcomed him home with an answering thrust.

Sergei gripped her hips as he drove into her compliant body. "You're mine," he rasped. Inside her she felt him swell with each thrust. "Wrap your legs around me." It was a command, one she followed with enthusiasm. "That's it."

The position allowed her to take more of him, to ride his straining member. His hands gripped her bottom, giving him complete control over their coupling. His gaze was intense, not allowing her to look away. Raw desire, love, and possessiveness were etched in his look. His strokes were deep and long, igniting a new round of pleasure in her. Wave upon wave coursed through her body. She tightened around him, felt the tense reaction in his body. Her second release was at hand and she rode it to completion as it stretched and coiled throughout her body. Her stomach became rigid, muscles constricted. All the while Sergei lifted and lowered her over his stiff cock, pushing her until she threw her head back to scream her release into the night.

She pulsed around him, could feel him growing even more inside her and knew that he was near. His hold on her ass was firm and she could hear the low growl forming in the back of his throat, knew that it coincided with his imminent orgasm. His release vibrated through him as she convulsed around him, milking him of his seed.

Aman sagged against him as he walked on steady legs back into the bedroom. She loved the care took as he shifted her in his arms and placed her on the bed, sliding in next to her. She felt like a love struck teen as Sergei stared down at her, lying on his side, his head resting on a propped hand. "I could spend the rest of my life like this." As he spoke he stroked her hair.

"So could I."

He dipped to give her a kiss. "I mean to hold you to it."

## **Nia K. Foxx**

Nia K. Foxx is the proud mother of three beautiful, very active children, all under ten years of age. They currently reside in a picturesque, small town burg of Michigan, where they enjoy biking, swimming, fairs and traveling in their minivan. Ms. Foxx holds a BA from the University of California, Santa Cruz, in International Politics and Literature. She began an interest in writing romantic stories at the age of twelve, trying her hand at erotica only recently. Ms. Foxx has written several unpublished novellas and novels, mostly writing for her own enjoyment until now. Nia loves to communicate with other readers of erotic romance and encourages anyone to email her at [nia@niafoxx.com](mailto:nia@niafoxx.com) or read free excerpts on her website at: <http://www.niafoxx.com>.