



## **Shifting Winds**

A Danny Lee Novel

Mara Lee

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## Prologue

It was just about the ugliest thing she had ever seen, and it was currently staring right at her—staring and salivating.

Danny sighed, and ignoring the sharp, burning pain shooting through her body, she strengthened her wards. Warding herself shouldn't hurt this much. Why it did right now, well, that was a question left for another day ... a day when she wasn't trying to vanquish an enraged demon that seemed hell-bent on eating her alive.

The demon let out a horrendous scream and began to thrash in its invisible prison. She wasn't worried. She had done this before and she knew how strong her wards were. This demonic pus bucket wasn't going anywhere, save back to its maker.

"You're a feisty one, aren't you?" she muttered, taking out a charm and readying herself.

"Danny? Are you certain you don't need any help?"

Danny shook her head. "I'm fine, Sabine, thanks." No, she could totally handle this. She wasn't about to get Sabine embroiled in this messy business. No, an *Airok* needed to keep her hands "clean"—relatively speaking. Danny was well aware that Sabine had contacted her for that very reason. Sabine had told her she had done questionable things, and to that, Danny had no doubt, but the *Airok* had to appear untainted and she certainly had to deal with politics in her Coven, just as Danny had to deal with politics in her Pack. It wouldn't do at all to have the *Airok* seen handling a demon. That was Danny's job—well, it used to be Danny's job, a job she had, and it seemed, still, was good at.

"Gotcha, you ugly motherfucker." Danny cast quickly and wrapped the threads of her ward even tighter. She watched as the demon began to writhe and smoke. It was working. Seconds later the smoke completely covered the demon and the room began to smell like charred flesh—lovely. "Hope it burns like hell," Danny said with a smile as the demon melted away—literally.

"Mother help me," Sabine whispered. Her hand was pressed to her chest.

"You've seen demons before, haven't you?" Danny asked, wiping her sweaty and salty hands on her jeans.

"Never this close."

"Really?" Danny was surprised, although she wasn't sure why. *Airoks* did not associate with demons. Unless of course they were leaders of black Coven'sCovens, and black Covens were ostracized along with their *Airoks*. Black Covens practiced the dark arts and were considered no better than the evil they associated with. "Okay," Danny clucked her tongue and regarded Sabine intently, "would you mind telling me how in the world you ended up having a demon after your ass?"

## Chapter One

*Asmodai, Asmodai, where are you?* Complete silence met her. Danny wasn't standing for it. Sabine had had no idea why a demon had infiltrated her Coven, or why she seemed to be targeted, but Danny knew to whom she had to go to for some answers. Sometimes it was good having an "in" with the ones below, especially when those "ones" controlled the demon horde that sometimes escaped to Earth. *Great, you're invasive, intrusive and totally don't understand the boundaries of personal space, but when I actually call for you, you don't answer. Asmodai? Get your ass out here!* Danny waited. She didn't have to wait long after that.

*Amour ... you are upset?*

Danny took a deep breath, allowed the flames to flow through her, and moments later found herself standing on familiar ground—the Burning Fields.

*This is getting easier*, Danny said, as she watched the river of fire flow. She dipped her foot into the river and sighed in pleasure.

*I told you it would, my amour. You are their queen; they rejoice to have you home.*

*I'm not staying*, she retorted.

*Yes, I know.* Asmodai's voice was filled with sadness. *Yet, you are here now. Why are you here, my dear one?*

*Ha, like you don't know!* Danny rolled her eyes at Asmodai's blank expression. *Oh, come on, the demon, hello...*

*Hello, what?*

*God help me*, Danny muttered. *Listen, did you or did you not send a demon after my friend.*

*A demon?*

*Yeah, a demonite ... or whatever you call them down here. I just dispatched one not but two hours ago. It was sent after my friend Sabine.* Danny narrowed her eyes when she saw the slight stiffening of Asmodai's shoulders. *Uh-huh, I thought so. So spill, what the hell is going on? Why in all that is holy, or in this case, unholy, would you send a demon after Sabine? She hasn't done anything to you, and she's my friend,* Danny finished softly.

*I sent nothing after your friend, amour.*

*Don't lie to me.*

*I would not dream to do so.*

*Asmodai, are you really looking into my eyes and telling me that you had nothing to do with the demon?*

*I did not say that.*

A dull throb began to pulse in Danny's frontal lobe. *You just said ... all right, what did you say, exactly, then?*

*I said that I sent nothing after your friend.*

*But you do know something about the situation, right?*

Asmodai nodded curtly.

*Well?*

*Well what, amour?*

*Are you going to tell me?*

*Do I have a choice?* Asmodai asked with a slight smile gracing his beautiful face.

*Yeah, you do. You tell me, and I don't kick your ass. Or I kick your ass, and then you tell me ... your choice.*

Asmodai laughed a deep and rich laugh. *Ah, your choices seem to lack finesse.*

Danny shrugged. *Finesse isn't needed in this situation.*

*Just so, Asmodai sighed, yes, I do know something of this rather interesting situation regarding your friend, amour.*

*Yes...?*

*It really is your fault, my amour.*

*My fault?* Danny's mouth dropped open.

*Yes. You made a deal with my father, and my father is making certain that you hold up your end.*

*What deal?*

Asmodai sidled closer to her. *Have you already forgotten?* He reached out and fingered a long lock of her hair. *You are so beautiful, my amour. Your hair is like midnight and silk...*

*Would you stay on topic, Asmodai! Midnight and silk, jeesh, you're just as bad as—* she stopped abruptly.

*Yes, you were saying?* Asmodai's voice had gone eerily menacing.

*No, you were just saying, you were the one that got off subject.* She waited, hoping he would let it drop. She did not want to deal with his jealousy or with the subject of Savior right now.

Asmodai raised one patrician eyebrow but snorted. *Fine, we shall do it your way, for now.*

*For now.* Danny knew that he wouldn't let it go forever; they would have to deal with the subject of Savior eventually.

*My father allowed you to leave our realm on one condition. You agreed to—*

*Oh, my God! Tell me this isn't about pimping for your brothers.*

Asmodai visibly winced. *Please do not utter His name here, and no, you are not pimping for my brothers.*

*This isn't about finding your brothers suitable, uh, amours?*

*Well, yes.*

*Then this is about pimping.*

*You are not a, a, pimp.*

*You're damn right I'm not!* Danny poked him in the chest. *Let your brothers find their own women.*

*They are ... with your help.*

Danny cocked her head to one side just before her eyes went wide. *You've marked Sabine,* she croaked.

*I've not marked your friend.*

*No, what I mean is that you've tagged her, you've decided she's a match for one of your brothers.*

*As I said before, I've done nothing. You were the one that made the deal with my father, and you were the one that brought your friend to our attention. Remember, my amour, I can see you. I can see your thoughts.*

Danny narrowed her eyes. *Yeah, don't remind me, you ass. I'm working on that.*  
He grinned. *You're succeeding. I have a harder time penetrating lately than I did.*  
*You're guarding well.*

She wasn't sure if she believed him, but for the sake of her sanity she would have to take his word for it. She needed to believe that she had some privacy, if only just a little.

*You've been staking out Sabine through me, haven't you?"* She shook her head, disgusted. *You don't even have to answer that question. I already know the answer. You bastard.*

Asmodai regarded her coolly. *I do not understand your ire, amour. You knew this to be a condition to your release, and yet you rail at me. It is quite irksome.*

*Irksome?* Her fury began to rise.

*Yes. Why are you angry?*

Why was she angry? He had sent a demon after Sabine. He had been spying on her. He was manipulative and sneaky and now his brothers were trying to drag her friend to hell.

*I took nothing from your mind that wasn't offered, or left unshielded.*

*Oh, so that makes it all right. You can't just mosey on through whenever you feel like it. For fuck's sake, Asmodai, this is my mind we're talking about!*

*You are angry because of this privacy that you had told me you wish to have.*

*Yes, that's part of it. Part of it is about privacy. The other part of it is about common frigging decency. You sent a fucking demon after my friend.*

*I sent nothing—*

*Oh, whatever! You may not have sent it directly, but you had something to do with it. My father...*

Danny nodded slowly. *I see, your father sent it. Did dear old dad think past trying to nab a bride for his son, to see and think about the fact that an Airok cannot dispatch a demon, not without tainting herself? Did he think about that? Did he think perhaps that the demon would eat my friend? Or maybe just suck her soul out entirely? Or perhaps he didn't care. Perhaps he wouldn't mind my friend being situated within a demon when she came to your brother's bed,* Danny spat out.

*Amour...* Asmodai held out his hands helplessly.

*No, I'm utterly disgusted with you right now.*

Asmodai sighed deeply. *I see that we have handled this wrong.*

*Ya think?* Danny ground out sarcastically.

Asmodai continued. *My father thought a test was necessary.*

*Your dad and tests.* Danny rolled her eyes.

*Yes, he wanted to see how capable your Airok was. He also believed that a closer link was necessary between the Airok and my brother.*

*A closer link?*

Asmodai nodded. *He saw how it turned out for us, and he thought the same would be true for my brother.*

*Wait, he was going to have the demon mark my friend and then he was going to have your brother suck out the demon's memories?*

*Something like that, my amour.*

*This is totally sick.* Danny began to pace. *I can't believe you guys. I can't believe your gall. You are totally nutso!*

*It would have worked, amour, if you had not interfered.*

*If I had not come and saved my friend from being devoured, you mean.*

*Devoured? You are being dramatic.*

*I'm being realistic, you ass. Sabine could not deal with that demon. Do you get that? She's an Airok. She's an Airok of a very powerful Coven, if I may add. She has to remain clean, untainted.*

*Do not fool yourself, amour. Your friend has done things...*

*Has she had dealings with demons? Danny asked coolly.*

*No, that she has not done.*

*I thought not.*

*That does not mean she is clean, amour.*

*Don't try to worm your way out of this one, Asmodai. I want you to stay the hell away from Sabine.*

*That I can do. However, I cannot promise you that my brothers will do the same.*

*Danny buried her head in her hands. You're going to drive me crazy. You are going to drive me absolutely fucking crazy. She stiffened when he took her within his arms.*

*Amour, do not worry. All will be well.*

*Danny lifted her head. Will it? Will it really? You're talking about sucking Sabine down to hell, submerging her in that black goop and perhaps burning her alive.*

*No, I do not believe that would be her fate, amour. She has immense power, and I believe she will survive the transition.*

*You believe, but you don't know. Danny swallowed. Your silence is answer enough, Asmodai. No. You can't do it. You can't chance it. Not to mention, did you ever stop to think that Sabine may not want to be the bride of a prince of Hell?*

*No. Asmodai said simply.*

*It's like talking to a brick wall, Danny muttered, infuriated.*

*Am I not handsome?*

*Danny snorted. Don't go fishing for compliments.*

*Asmodai grinned. Are my brothers not handsome?*

*She rolled her eyes. Yeah, maybe, a little.*

*Then why would your friend have any arguments?*

*You think that's all that goes into it? Really, don't be stupid, Asmodai.*

*Did you just call me stupid?*

*Sort of. I said, don't be stupid. You have to see that making a connection goes deeper than physical appearance. This has nothing to do with your brothers' appearance. This is about you crossing the line, invading Sabine's personal space, and hell, about attacking her. You could have killed her.*

*It would never have gone that far. She would merely have been marked. You really did all that work unnecessarily. In fact, Asmodai sighed, my father was rather upset about the loss of one of his minions. I think your habit of destroying his fold is beginning to wear on him.*

*Ask me if I care, Danny shot out sharply.*

*You should, my amour. For what my father has sent out thus far, is nothing compared to what he could send your way. There are nightmares that fear my father and his fold. My father is the dark which eats all.*

*Danny stiffened. If you think you're scaring me, you're not. I've seen the dark,*

*Asmodai, and I know what lives there.*

Asmodai leaned forward. His eyes bore deeply into her. *You have not begun to know the dark.*

*Is that a threat?*

*No, my amour, it's the truth, and the truth ... you will take it as you will, but the truth it shall remain.*

Danny balled her hands into tight fists. *And here is my truth, Asmodai. If you or your damned brothers do anything to harm or hurt my friend, she allowed the flames to fill her eyes, I'll make sure you know exactly what your queen is capable of, and to hell with our bond and anything else that comes along with it!*

\* \* \* \*

She was exhausted. Her entire body was racked with fatigue. For as easy as it was to transition to the Burning Fields, coming back ... that was an entirely different story. Asmodai had seen to that. He had made her journey back to Earth as difficult as possible. Yeah, they hadn't left on jolly joy, joy, terms. He was angry that he hadn't been able to convince her that his little kidnapping plan was feasible and a good idea, and she was still royally pissed off that he had known his father was going to sic a demon on her friend. Their conversation had certainly not ended with a meeting of minds, or any type of harmony.

Danny ran a hand haphazardly through her disheveled hair. God, what was he thinking ... was he thinking at all? He couldn't have been, not if he truly believed he could just kidnap brides for his brothers. And where did he get off? The nerve of him, traipsing around her mind and spying on her! No, he was entirely in the wrong here. He was lucky she didn't fry him for good measure ... not—Danny thought sourly—that any of her flames would work on him.

She flopped down on her bed, reached for the telephone, and dialed Sabine's private number. The *Airok* answered on the third ring.

"Hello?" Sabine's voice was cool and soothing.

"Sabine, just wanted to let you know that everything has been taken care of."

"Ah, so you spoke with your prince of Hell." There was laughter in her voice now.

Spoke? More like railed, cursed and yelled, but spoke would do. "Yeah."

"And things are now settled between the two of you?"

"As settled as they're going to be at this juncture."

"That does not sound promising, Danny."

No, promising was not in Danny's vocabulary of late. Everything seemed to point to her downward spiral into total and abject misery.

"It's taken care of Sabine, that's all you should be concerned with."

"Somehow I believe that there is a lot more to it than that, Danny."

"Nothing that I can't deal with."

"Why should you be the only one dealing with it? This demon came after me, correct?"

"Yeah," Danny said shortly.

"Then I believe I am also wrapped up in this business. Please, Danny, tell me."

Danny hesitated. She didn't want to get Sabine involved, but Sabine was right, she was involved whether she wished her to be or not. Seconds later it all spilled out. She told



Sabine about what had transpired in the Burning Fields, and about the deal she had supposedly made with *Saitaine*. She told her all and waited, waited for the inevitable fall out.

“So, I am to be a bride for one of the princes of Hell.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Did your prince tell you which of his brothers had been chosen for me?”

Danny frowned into the phone. “No, I didn’t really give him much of a chance to speak once he spilled the beans about the demon.”

“I’ll be over in a minute.” Sabine paused before adding, “Make that fifteen minutes.” She hung up.

Danny hit her head with the phone. “Dumb, Danny, dumb, dumb, dumb. You just told your soon to be ex-friend that she’s been targeted by a demon and is supposed to marry a devil.” She was beginning to get the impression that it was time to seriously rethink her life ... rethink her life? God, that was a total laugh. Even if she did want to change, how would she do it? How did you get rid of, or change, an integral part of yourself? The answer was that you didn’t. You just sucked it up and dealt with it like a big girl, uh, wolf.

“Danny?”

Danny turned toward the voice. April was standing hesitantly in the doorway. “Hey, April.”

“I, well, I just wanted to let you know that it’s three o’clock and that—”

“Shit, its three o’clock already?” Danny bolted out of bed and vaulted toward the door. “How was he this morning?”

“Well, he’s, uh...” April’s voice faltered.

“That good, huh?” Danny sighed. *It just never ended*, she thought, as she walked through the door to the bedroom next to hers. “Good afternoon, Alex,” Danny spoke softly, respectfully, to her Alpha.

Alexander, her dear, sometimes tyrannical Alpha, lay watchful on the bed. His eyes were deep and searching and his body tightly coiled. He said nothing and yet he needed no words to convey the depth of his feelings, emotions, and raging anger. Oh yes, he was angry, or perhaps more appropriately said, beast-ridden.

Danny rubbed her aching temples. She took a seat, carefully, on the side of the bed and kept her eyes trained on him. His form was now human, but there was very little of him that actually was ... human. His eyes, the expression on his face, everything about him was feral, beastly. With Sabine’s help, Danny had been able to rouse enough power (without calling on the flames) to shift Alexander’s physical form. She was able to bring him back to his human body. She had not, however, been able to bring him back to his humanity, that. That was an entirely separate matter, a matter she was afraid would only be resolved with the Grand Dame. And fuck if she didn’t want to deal with the Grand Dame or what the Grand Dame expected from her. She was still hoping to find a way to resolve the situation without resorting to the measures the Grand Dame insisted she resort to.

Alex narrowed his eyes and began to sniff her hand. He growled deeply, but it was not a menacing growl. No, he recognized her scent, he recognized her implicitly and he was calling to her ... he wanted her. Nothing had changed. Funny how that worked. He was beast-ridden and still ... nothing had changed. He still sought her. He still called to

her. He still tried to mark her.

Danny had managed to keep Alex's condition secret from the rest of the Pack. Although, she was afraid that this was a secret she would not be able to contain for very long. She was *Roit*, and she had been tested and tried in battle, there were few—if any—that who would question her word, or her commands. The Pack knew only that their Alpha was *indisposed*, but that would stand for only so long, and God help them all if there were any Pack matters that would call for the Alpha's attention. There would be no way Danny could keep Alex safe then, and yes, what she did now was to keep him safe. If any dominant knew that Alex was beast-ridden they'd challenge him for rule, and they'd be in their right to do so. A weak Alpha was a dead Alpha. Danny feared greatly for Alex in the condition he was in right now.

"How long can I keep them at bay?" she murmured. "How long, Alex?" Danny held out her hand hesitantly and waited. When she saw that he made no move to attack her, she rested it gently upon his cheek. "Alexander Holt ... Alex ... my, my, friend, you have to come back to me. Please Alex, please..."

Alex rumbled. The sound started from deep within his throat. He captured her hand within his and moved it to his chest, where he held it, tightly, desperately. His eyes had deepened further, and began to dilate.

"No, Alex." Danny tried to pull her hand free, but his hold was firm and unyielding. He was not ready to give it back. "No, you have to fight it, Alex. You must fight the beast. You are our Alpha," she spoke quietly now, "you have the power, the strength ... you have everything. You can fight against the beast that rages upon you. I know you can. Alex, Alex, you must." She watched for any signs of understanding, but came away empty. "It has been two days, and they will not be appeased for much longer, already some of the Pack is growing restless. I can't—" Her voice broke, and she tried again. "I can't do this without you. I ... I, oh God, I need you, Alex. I need you. You have to fight this." She thought nothing of telling him that she needed him, not now, not like this, for it was true ... she did need him. She could not go this alone. She was *Roit* now, and she held a position of great honor in the Pack. She could not continue (not after the many years of running from responsibility and Pack politics) to navigate the intricate web of deceit and workings that was the inner sanctum of the Pack. She needed a guiding hand ... she needed Alex's guiding hand—the same hand that had hurt her, could now help, if only he could control the beast and bring back the man.

Alex growled and shifted even closer to her.

Danny blinked and leaned into him. Was there a spark of understanding there? Had she seen it, if only for a minute? His eyes were swirling turbulently, and yes, yes, right there beneath the surface Danny could sense the calm, sense the power that was inherent to an Alpha. He wasn't lost. He was there. Thank the Lord. He was there.

"I see you, Alex." She returned his grip and smiled into his taut face. "I see you there. Don't worry..." She closed her eyes for a minute and took a deep, cleansing breath. "Don't worry, I won't leave you. I won't leave you like this." *I can't leave you like this.* The words echoed in her brain, a litany, a refrain. He was her Alpha ... he was her, her Alex, and she would not let him suffer like this, not if she had it within her power to help him.

*Oh, God! Oh, dear God!* The enormity of her realization momentarily took her breath away. It came to her in a wash of panic and fear, what saving Alex would mean,

what it would mean to her life, and the course of her life.

Danny licked her lips. She looked down at Alex, who was still staring at her intently. It seemed as if he was aware that something was happening, but he did not know what, and in the state that he was in right now, could do nothing about.

Breathe, she just had to continue breathing.

A crash sounded from down below shaking her into action. "Alex, you must let go of my hand now." Danny tugged, but Alex's grip was firm. "Alex, please, if there is anything left of the man I know, you must let go of my hand. I promise, I will be back." She felt his hold slacken slightly and she breathed a sigh of relief. She did not want to expend any energy fighting him right now. "Let go, my Alpha, and I will return, I give you my word, the word of your *Roit*." She did not let go of her flames, but she did allow the power of the wolf, the power of the Pack, to flow over him. She needed him to see that she was his *Roit*, and that she understood his wolf and that she would return to him.

Danny breathed a large sigh of relief when he released her hand. "Thank you, Alex." She rushed from the room and raced down the steps, stopping abruptly at the scene that met her eyes. Sabine was standing in the doorway. She stood still and seemed outwardly calm, but Danny knew better. The pretty *Airok*'s power was a fierce thing, and Danny could feel it from her place on the steps. Confronting Sabine was Titus, one of Alex's sentinels. He was fast becoming quite the fixture in the Pack. He was powerful, and physically intimidating, and Danny was beginning to think that he'd probably soon make the move from his position as first sentinel to Alpha's second. Danny wasn't sure how she felt about that idea—yet. Mostly because she wasn't sure how she felt about Titus. The large wolf was cool and aloof toward her (not that she minded his attitude at all) in fact, she wished more of the Pack would take up Titus' attitude. It would mean a lot less work on her part, and perhaps less fewer challenges to boot.

Titus was radiating the power of Pack. At least Danny now knew where the source of the disturbance was coming from. She could also clearly see that he was directing his power and his rage at Sabine. Sabine, for her part, seemed to take it all in stride, although there were some tight lines around her eyes as she was clearly working on deflecting his attack.

"Stop!" Danny shouted, rushing the rest of the way down the steps. She moved to place herself between Titus and Sabine. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?" She snarled.

Titus growled and his power magnified, swelling, pulsing throughout the room. "The witch is the cause of the Alpha's pain. Kill the witch, eliminate our Alpha's suffering."

"Thinking of re-enacting Salem?" Sabine asked smoothly.

"Sabine." Danny rolled her eyes. That was all she needed right now, Sabine egging on an enraged wolf. "Titus, I asked Sabine to come, she is here on my wishes." Not entirely true ... but it would work, for now.

"You brought this witch here? She is foul."

"I'm hurt, and here I am, having just taken a shower," Sabine countered.

"Sabine—"

"I know," Sabine held up her hand, "I'm not helping. I do apologize, Danny. *He* got under my skin, what with his horrible manners. I do believe I'm perspiring."

Danny cast a glance quickly in Sabine's direction. "You are," she said brusquely. Sabine sighed. "He's quite powerful."

“Yeah,” Danny said darkly, “he is.”

“I didn’t expect the welcoming committee to be quite this forceful.”

“Well, we do our best to accommodate our guests,” Danny said with choked laughter. “Next time I’ll throw in a demon or two. How would that be for a welcome?”

“Oh, lovely, perhaps I’ll even try to vanquish it myself, who knows, I may need to broaden my horizons a bit.”

Danny nodded. “Don’t worry, after your first, well, the rest are a breeze.” Danny caught the bewildered look on Titus’ face and couldn’t help but laugh. “Titus, could you dial it back a bit? Ease up, will ya.”

Titus’ jaw worked back and forth for a moment before his power began to dissipate. His innate power was like a storm that breaks and then fades into a breezy dawn.

“That is much better,” Sabine said.

“Yeah, it is.” Danny took a deep breath. “Thank you, Titus,” she felt compelled to add.

“I still do not like it. She is the cause of—”

“No, Titus, she is *not* the cause of anything. In fact, without her the Alpha would have been truly lost.” It was obvious to Danny that Titus did not believe her. Danny looked between Titus and Sabine and made a decision that she hoped would not result in bloodshed or death. Somehow she knew, deep in her bones, that this wolf was one that who would be very important in the days to come, and would play an intrinsic part of the Pack that Alex was trying to build and mold. She was going to have to trust him. Frigging A, she was going to have to trust him. “Come with me, Titus.”

“Why?” he asked, suspiciously.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake. Fine, don’t come, but if you truly care about our Alpha, and you wish to know what is happening, then you’ll follow me. Otherwise, just stay there and be ignorant and, and, a stoic pain in the ass.” She wasn’t sure if it was the sincerity in her voice (yeah right) or the “stoic pain in the ass” that did it, but Titus nodded curtly.

“Are you certain that this is a good idea, Danny,” ?” Sabine asked quietly.

“Nope. In fact, it could be a really, really bad one, but,” Danny threw up her hands, “I’m going to do it anyway. Come on, time to show the big man what’s going on.”

## Chapter Two

Alex growled menacingly when the three of them entered the room. April was standing by his bedside, her hands twisting nervously.

"Oh, thank the mother that you're here," April said. "I've kept him as calm as possible, but, but, what with the power emanating from below and everything else..." she sighed, "I don't know, I've never encountered anything quite like this before, Danny. I don't know how to help our Alpha," she finished. There was deep pain lacing her words, she was obviously guilt ridden over her inability to heal Alex.

Titus had reached Alex's bedside, his shoulders were stiff with tension. "He is beast-ridden," he said quietly.

Danny began to pray, pray hard. Please, Lord, let her have not made a huge mistake in trusting this man. "Yes, I know."

"How?" Titus turned to her. He was frowning deeply. "How did he get this way?"

"It was worse, he was wolf bound but a day ago. Sabine and I managed to shift him back to his human form, but I could not restore his humanity."

"Mother help us, in this condition he could..." Titus' voice dropped off.

"Yes. He could be easily challenged and perhaps even defeated." She wasn't going to let that happen, though. "I have trusted you with the Alpha's secret, are you wolf enough to keep it, Titus?" Silence met her words and for a moment Danny felt her world crumble with the thought she had just killed Alex and destroyed her Pack.

"Yes, *Roit*, I will keep our Alpha's secret." Titus straightened his shoulders. "However, this is not a secret that will keep for long. Something must be done. Even now the Pack grows restless, and I am not the only one that who believes that the witch had something to do with our Alpha's indisposition."

"Why are you blaming me?" Sabine asked, seemingly genuinely bewildered.

"You were seen in our Alpha's presence," Titus answered truthfully, "and few trust you, or Covens for that matter."

"I see." Sabine's voice had chilled considerably. "Should I be worried?"

Before Titus could answer, Danny did. "No. No, you have nothing to fear from us. We will not harm you or yours."

"You do not have the authority to—" Titus began, but was cut off.

"I do. I am just as prominent in Pack as you, Titus. In fact, my status and position overrule yours. If you feel the need to pursue this, then we can settle it in a more traditional fashion. I would rather not, though."

"Afraid?" Titus asked.

Danny snorted, but her gaze was level. "Do I look afraid to you?"

"Unfortunately, no. It would be so much easier if you were." Titus turned his attention back to Sabine. "We have long distrusted the Covens. Even before our Alpha arrived, there was no love between us. Can you say that you and yours see us any differently?"

Sabine sighed. "No, you are correct, we have been aloof toward you, but mainly out of self-preservation. We are both elementals. You are wolves, we are magic wielders, yes, witches, if you will. We are both strong willed and dominant beings. It is never a

good idea to mix dominants.” Sabine’s words were for Titus, but her eyes fixed on Danny and Danny could read the message loud and clear; be careful.

Danny was standing on very, very, precarious ground. She was involved with more than one very dominant being, and she, herself, was beyond dominant. Sabine was correct, dominants didn’t usually mix, because relationships between them often ended in bloodshed, or worse yet, death—two strong, forceful, like powers could rarely co-exist peacefully.

“Tell me that you have a plan,” Titus narrowed his eyes, “one that extends further than locking the Alpha away and telling Pack that he is indisposed.” Danny was annoyed that he mocked her decision. It had been the best one she could manage on short notice, and so far it seemed to be working. “Do not think that this will hold for long. Sooner or later—and I’m inclined to lean toward sooner—one of the Pack will be up here and through that door, and then where will you be. Did you invite the witch here to solve this problem for you?”

“First, why I invited Sabine here is none of your business. Secondly, Sabine has a title; you can address her as *Airok*.”

“Thank you,” Sabine said.

Danny inclined her head. “Don’t mention it.” Titus said nothing, but the tightness in his face made clear his anger at her words. “The Grand Dame is coming—”

“The Grand Dame is coming here?” Titus’ voice was clearly disbelieving.

“Yes and she—”

“The Grand Dame,” Sabine repeated in wonderment. “I cannot remember the last time a *Highect Seere* came to this domain.”

“Our former Alpha did not invite her presence,” Titus said quietly.

Yeah, Draco had been a stand-up wolf, a real peach of a guy. Danny didn’t doubt that he hadn’t wanted to “invite” the Grand Dame’s attention. The Grand Dame would have taken away a lot of Draco’s control if she had been witness to what had been going on in his Pack.

“I have heard a great many things about the *Highect Seere*. Although, I have never met her, so I have not been able to confirm any truths,” Sabine said finally.

“Be glad,” Danny said dryly, “that you haven’t met her.”

“The Grand Dame is an amazing—” Titus began.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve heard it all before, you can save the exalted speech, okay? Trust me, you guys have not spent enough time in her presence to really get her ... and pray that you never do.” Oh, yeah, pray hard. The Grand Dame was the one person that Danny had the sense to fear. She had raised her (if having her beat up and knocked down every day was considered “raising”). Her power was fierce and her form of justice was brutal, swift and merciless. Oh, yes, one would be a true fool not to fear the Grand Dame Roberta Wick.

Sabine placed a hand on Danny’s shoulder. Her eyes were kind and knowing. “You don’t have to say any more, Danny.”

For a moment words were lost to her. There, in Sabine’s eyes, was the shadow of a former friend. The same tenderness, the same knowing, the same generosity was present there, and her throat grew tight. No. She could not do it again. She could not allow herself to be trapped in the web of friendship again. Not again, not like it had been before ... with ... with...

“Keeping the Alpha up here like this is asinine. Thank the mother the Grand Dame is coming.” Titus spoke and his words shook Danny out of her morose thoughts. This ... this was something she could deal with.

“Asinine? I’m amazed that you know the word, let alone can use it in a sentence,” Danny shot back. Oh yes, let her have anger, she could handle the anger, and she could deal with one pissy sentinel. Titus began to growl, to which Danny only grinned. “It seems that you do want to handle this the traditional way. Shall we take it outside, or do you think our Alpha can deal with our enraged beasts here and now?”

“Enough, Danny,” Sabine said, but there was laughter in her voice, she was aware that Danny was now in her element. “This will not help the Alpha. You are both radiating waves so strong that I’m amazed the entire Pack hasn’t rushed the room already. Stop acting like little children. Danny, you trusted this wolf and let him in on the Alpha’s secret, so whether you like it or not, he is now here ... one of us. And you,” she turned her icy gaze to Titus, “you should be honored. Danny doesn’t give her trust easily ... if ever, but for some reason she gave it to you. Instead of lashing out at her, you could help us devise a way to keep this secret at bay for a little while longer.”

Danny wrinkled her nose. God, how was it possible that this delicate, pretty thing could turn on the “mom chastising routine” and suddenly not only put one someone in their place, but make them feel horrendously ashamed.

“You’ve got a gift,” Danny said dryly. “That was quite a flaying.”

Sabine shrugged delicately. “One of my many talents. Now, boys and girls, are we in this together ... or do we just leave the Alpha to rot?”

Danny stiffened at the mention of Alex. “The Alpha is going to be all right. I didn’t save his butt just to have him be torn apart on me now.”

“I will not make a move against him,” Titus spoke quietly. “I will hold your secret, and I shall help you keep it for as long as possible. Let us pray it is not too much longer,” he looked over at Alex’s raging form, “we will all need to pray.”

\* \* \* \*

Sabine took Danny by the hand and ferreted her off to an isolated corner. Once there, she turned on her, eyes full of searching. “I understand that the Alpha’s degenerating state is of the utmost concern at this moment, however, I cannot help but be concerned with well, my state.”

“Your state?”

“Yes ... my state. Will it remain as it is? Or should I be anticipating any unplanned trips in the near future?”

“He wouldn’t dare, not now.”

Sabine smiled. “I take it you had words with your prince of Hell.”

“Words? Yeah, something like that. Suffice to say, if he tries anything I’ll...” What would she do? “I’ll do something.” She was going to have to coming up with something better than, “I’ll do something,” especially if she was going to try to cross Asmodai.

“I do not want you to get hurt because of me, Danny.”

“I don’t want to get hurt because of you, either,” Danny said with a smile. “Don’t worry about me, seriously. I don’t think Asmodai would hurt me ... not intentionally at least.”

“Asmodai ... your...”

“Yeah, my prince of Hell, as you called him.”

“What does he look like, your prince of Hell?”

“Imagine the most amazing looking guy ever ... do you have a picture of him in your brain?”

“Brad Pitt, Johnny Depp, Christian Bale with a hint of Jude Law, you know, for the prettiness.”

Danny’s eyes widened in surprise. “My, my, I didn’t realize the local *Airok* was up on Hollywood.”

Sabine blushed prettily. “Well, Danny, a good-looking man is a good-looking man. I may be an *Airok*, but I’m not blind, nor am I oblivious to the outside world. I’ve seen enough pictures to know what I,” she cleared her throat, “like.”

“Well, your choices are pretty hot, I approve. Now I know we can take in a movie or two.” Danny adored the movies. She didn’t get to them often, (try never, of late) but she adored them all the same. There was something to be said for the way humans escaped from reality. She especially enjoyed sci-fi and fantasy movies ... although she tried to stay clear of movies about werewolves. They usually just pissed her off, or made her want to eat someone.

“I would like that,” Sabine said.

“Oooohhhh, buttered popcorn, the drippier the better.” Danny couldn’t suppress a shiver of delight at the thought.

“Do you realize how bad movie popcorn is for you?”

Danny rolled her eyes. Oh yeah, she had almost forgotten what a health freak Sabine was. Ugh, how did she live on the nuts and berries that she consumed? A girl had to have some grease, right? “Grease is good, Sabine. When was the last time you had a slice of pepperoni pizza, or a double cheeseburger with bacon and cheddar cheese?” Danny snorted. “I can see by your adorable expression that the answer would be never.”

“Your body is a temple, Danny. You must treat it as such.”

“My body is a temple? No, Sabine, my body is a machine, and to keep it running I need fuel ... lots of it ... and really I don’t care what sort of fuel it is as long as it’s plentiful and filling. I mean, come on, I’m part wolf, who knows how long I’m going to live, but I bet it’s pretty frigging long.” Her head was beginning to hurt. Just the thought of life, or lack thereof, was enough to make it ache. Did she know how long she was going to live? No, not really. What was the life expectancy of a *magi* wolf? She had never looked into it, and to her knowledge, no one else had either. “I’m not going to debate a couple of calories with you, Sabine.”

“Try a couple of hundred thousand calories,” Sabine countered.

Danny cast her eyes heavenward. “Whatever. Listen, you wanted to know what Asmodai looks like, here it is. Imagine all those beautiful men that you listed and now imagine those faces are nothing, nothing compared to the man who stands as the prince of Hell. This is a man whose beauty cannot be expressed in mere words, a man so stunning one sometimes fears to look at him.”

“I see,” Sabine said slowly. “And his brothers...”

“Much the same, though I think Asmodai has them beat in the beauty department hands-down. Of course I may be a little biased.”

“A little biased, *you*?” Sabine smiled slightly. “He said nothing about which brother had contracted for me?”



“No. When I found out that he was in on the kidnapping attempt I sort of lost it.” Danny ran her hands through her hair and then narrowed her eyes. “You seem uncommonly calm, why is that?” *Uncommonly calm, and surprisingly interested.*

“I’m not certain. It’s just that, for some reason, the thought of...” She stopped talking.

“What? The thought of what? Tell me, Sabine.”

“No, it’s ridiculous.” Sabine looked suddenly flustered. “The mere thought is ... is ... I cannot believe that I’m even having such thoughts.”

“And those thoughts would be?”

“I mean... I’m an *Airok*, an *Airok* for goodness sake. I have responsibilities and, and, and I must keep a clear and cool head. I cannot consort with the dark.”

“You plan on consorting with the dark?”

“Yes, no, I mean no, of course not.” Sabine shook her head. “I ... it’s the strangest thing. It’s as if I have this longing, this need to ... to know the flame better. I can’t describe it, and it is making me crazy, Danny.” There was very real fear and bewilderment staining Sabine’s eyes. “I’ve never felt like this, and it pains me to admit that I’m not quite certain what to do. As you are the only person I know who has ventured below, I turn to you now to explain to me what is happening.”

How did she explain something that she didn’t entirely understand? What Sabine was going through sounded strangely familiar. Sabine was experiencing some of the symptoms that she had experienced when she had been “marked” by Asmodai, but she knew that her friend hadn’t been marked yet—physically at least. Of course, did that make her immune to the effects of the princes of Hell? If they wanted her ... they would have her.

“I, I—” Danny searched for the right words. “I think that you are being worked upon.”

“I have fields to protect me from unwanted magic.”

“This is not magic that you understand or can withstand, for that matter. Did you not say that you don’t know what’s going on? Well, that’s because this magic comes from a source unlike any you have ever dealt with before. How do you protect yourself from the flames that come from the pit?”

“What flames, what pit?”

“Exactly,” Danny murmured. “You don’t even know what I’m talking about. You can’t possibly protect yourself. I think that is what they’re counting on, your lack of understanding, your inability to fight them. You have to fight them, Sabine.” Danny saw the understanding dawn upon Sabine’s face.

“Oh, dear mother,” Sabine whispered.

Danny nodded. “They are strong, Sabine, and, it seems, very, very determined. I think that they’re trying to break you down.”

“Is this why I long for things I’ve never longed for before?”

“I can’t speak to your longing, Sabine, only your physical ailments, but yes, I believe that they are working upon you. I felt the flames just before I arrived in Asmodai’s domain.”

“Is there any way to combat them?”

*You could get kissed and suck in the flames.* “Fortify yourself to hell and start praying.”

Sabine laughed a dry and brittle laugh. "Is that what you've been doing?"

"In part, yes, but now, well, I have Asmodai." *Sort of, she sort of had him.* "He's been working with me to control the power that he forced upon me. I've been rather reluctant because," Danny ran a hand through her hair, "hell, I've been reluctant because I, myself, don't fully understand what has been going on. It happened very quickly. One minute I was a carefree mercenary, and now I'm locked into Pack and bound to some very interesting men. I haven't wanted to acknowledge that I need him, Sabine, but I do. Damn it all, I do need him. The transitions to the Burning Fields have become a little easier, but nothing changes the fact that now, now I have this deep, dark magic that I don't know how to entirely handle."

"Dark magic," Sabine said quietly.

"Yeah, dark magic. It's been a bitch. It doesn't want to listen to me. It's very stubborn and determined."

"Sounds familiar, like someone I know," Sabine said with a smile.

"Ha-ha, funny. No, really, this is serious. It's an entirely new playing field, Sabine. Apparently Asmodai believes that I'm some sort of queen."

"Queen?"

"Ridiculous, right? He says that I am the first woman in a long, long, time to be able to endure and handle the fire of the Burning Fields. Apparently that makes me the "it" girl. I, of course, turned down the rather dubious honor."

"Do they believe that I would be able to handle these flames? Is that why they've chosen me?"

Danny nodded. "It seems so. It has to do with mental power and strong magic. You have to have both to withstand the transition to Hell, otherwise you will," Danny cleared her throat, "burn before you arrive."

"Lovely..."

"I know. I wasn't too happy about that particular tidbit when I learned about it."

"They are not going to give this up, are they?" Sabine's eyes were solemn and her voice even more so.

Danny swallowed. "I don't think so." Already she was replaying the fight between Asmodai and his brothers in their father's great hall. No, she didn't think this was something that they were going to give up on. Either her friend would withstand the transition ... or she wouldn't. Damn it, everything was so frigging complicated.

"I can see all I need to know in your eyes, Danny." Sabine smiled then. "All right, well, since we have cleared that up, we can move onto a new issue ... the Grand Dame."

Danny groaned. "Can't we spend more time discussing your torturous decisions and possible life altering escapades?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Sabine laughed. "Danny?" Her voice brooked no argument.

"Fine, fine, be that way. The Grand Dame is coming. She has decided that Alex and I must mate, and she will not take no for an answer."

"Oh, my—"

"Fucking God," Danny finished for her. "That's about right. We're going to kill one another." She took a deep breath. "I'm afraid that we're going to kill one another. I won't stand his domination and *I will not submit to his will*. He, in turn, will not stand for my

nature ... we are like dynamite and a match when you put the two together..." Danny shrugged. "You get the idea. It's going to be awful. I'm still trying to figure out how I can get out of it."

"You can't."

"Excuse me?"

"You can't get out of it, Danny."

"I can't and won't accept that."

Sabine straightened her shoulders and took Danny's hands in hers. "You must. You know that the Grand Dame would never have insisted that such drastic measures be taken unless they were absolutely necessary."

"What the hell do you know of it?"

"I know you, Danny, and I know the Alpha well enough to understand what has been going on, and what will happen if this course is the course that you continue to take. He is beast-ridden. Do you remember how much power it took to subdue him and then to shift his form? We almost couldn't do it, and that was together, with our combined powers. Even now he remains in the throes of his animal. If the Grand Dame says that the only way to restore your Alpha to himself—and let's face it, restore his humanity—is to sleep with him ... just sleep with him, Danny."

Danny yanked her hands free. "Just sleep with him!" she shouted. "Just sleep with him? Why don't you just sleep with him, if it's that fucking easy? This isn't about sex, damn it, Sabine, it's never been about sex."

Sabine nodded. "I know, I know, Danny, but how long can you run from it? How long do you propose to let this go?"

Danny swore long and hard, remembering her own thoughts but an hour before, her own realizations. She had promised herself, and she had promised Alex that she wouldn't leave him alone, that she wouldn't allow him to falter and fall into the dark and be lost in his beast. If this was the only way...

"I'm not saying that it will be easy, or that you will not be scarred both emotionally and possibly physically, I am saying, though, that you do not seem ready to let the Alpha go."

"I'm not," Danny whispered.

"I didn't think so. If you're not ready to let him go, then save him, Danny. Just do it."

Danny closed her eyes and clenched her hands into tight fists. *Just do it. Just do it.* Yes. She hated it, and she hated the fact that Sabine seemed to understand implicitly what was happening when she herself was so damned confused about it. "Why do you care about this, Sabine, about Alex?"

Sabine smiled beatifically. "I don't care about the Alpha, Danny. Haven't you figured it out already? It's you. It's you I care about."

\* \* \* \*

Sabine's last words had left Danny more confused than ever. In fact, her head was swimming with the implications and the strange light she had seen in her friend's eyes when she had spoken those words to her.

They were friends, right? That was all, just friends, and goodness knows she didn't have many of those.

“What will you have?” The bartender’s voice interrupted her strange musings.

“Crown and Coke.”

“You got it.”

Danny watched the bartender’s efficient movements, and within moments had her drink before her.

“That’ll be eight dollars.”

Danny whistled. Savior had to be raking it in with these prices.

“I’ve got it, Bristol, it’s on me.”

She recognized that voice, and a small smile crawled up her face. Turning, she came face-to-face with Thad.

“It’s been too long. It’s good to see you, Thad.”

Thad’s smile was as wide as the Pacific. “It’s really good to see you, Danny. Come on, follow me.” Thad led her over to a dark corner. Taking a seat on the leather sofa he beckoned Danny to follow, she did. “You look good. Hell, you look really good.”

Danny scrunched up her nose. “Whatever.”

“No, really, you look amazing. Uhm, not that you haven’t always looked amazing, it’s just now you look hot. I mean, you look hotter...”

She laughed. “It’s okay, I get it. Thanks,” she said, finally accepting the compliment for what it was ... a compliment. “How have you been, Thad?”

“Pretty well. Not bad. I don’t have many complaints.”

“Has the big cheese been treating you all right?”

Thad laughed. “The big cheese? Savior? Yeah, as bosses go, he’s pretty cool.”

Cool? Savior? It wasn’t exactly the word she would have used to describe the enigmatic master vamp, but okay. “So you’ve been all right here.”

“If you’re hedging for information, Danny, you don’t have to. Just come right out and ask. You always did just barrel in.”

“Hey!”

“It’s true. What do you want to know?”

“I just want to know that you’re okay, really, that you’re really all right.” Maybe then the guilt would begin to lessen. Maybe then she could forgive herself.

“I’m fine, like I said, he’s a good boss and I’m lucky, luckier than some ... most.”

“How so?”

“I could have been turned by someone not as ... understanding as Savior.”

Understanding. Another word that she didn’t often associate with Master Vampire, Savior Knight.

“Thad, I... I...”

Thad shook his head. “No way, don’t apologize, not you, I don’t want to hear it. This is okay. In fact, it’s better than okay. Hell, I make a great vampire,” he smiled, flashing fang, “don’t you think? Not to mention I never have to worry about my weight again.”

Danny grinned at Thad’s reference to his love of food. He had always had his head stuck in her fridge. It was like he said, now he didn’t have to worry about his weight. Of course, he also couldn’t fucking eat.

“Well, enough about me,” Thad leaned back, “tell me what has been happening in the very twisted life of Dennison Lee, *magi* wolf extraordinaire.”

“Twisted life is right.”

“That good, huh?”

Danny snorted. "Better. Basically, my life, which was already complicated, has become nearly unmanageable. I'm in some deep shit."

"When aren't you in deep shit?"

"Hey."

Thad laughed heartily. "Well, it's true, when aren't you knee-deep in some ridiculous situation?"

"Okay, so I have really weird life, but I'm working on stabilizing it." Thad blinked rapidly before breaking out into peals of laughter. "It wasn't *that* funny," Danny spat out grumpily.

"Oh, yes, it was. Oh, oh, that's rich. You're working on stabilizing your life. Oh, Danny, haven't you realized it already? You cannot stabilize your life. It is impossible. You cannot stabilize something that was never stable to begin with."

"Well, thank you fucking Freud, but I didn't ask for your damn opinion."

Thad shrugged. "Just stating the facts, Danny."

Danny knew that her brow was furrowed. When had Thad grown a set? He never used to be so easy and casual and blunt in her presence. He most certainly would never had cracked a joke, at least without apologizing for it immediately afterwards.

"Being dead has made you a real asshole," Danny snapped.

"Among other things," Thad shot back dryly. "Hey, now I can contend with you. Though I have a ways to go before I'm at your level of bitchiness."

Wow. She was impressed. Danny tried not to smile, just because she was impressed didn't mean she wanted to encourage him.

"Ah, young one, monopolizing my mate, are you?"

Both Danny and Thad froze as Savior's beautiful voice swept over them. It truly was one of the most potent weapons in Savior's very impressive arsenal. His voice was magnificent and continued to shake Danny to her foundation.

"Hello, Savior." Savior slipped down next to her. "I see you've redecorated—again."

Savior smiled that incredible smile of his. "Yes, it was time for a change. Do you like it?"

"It's very ... you."

Savior laughed. "Ah, the answer that isn't really an answer. You are so very good at those, my *ashleya*."

"God, Savior, are you really that rich? I mean you change décor every month, it seems." The moment the question exited her mouth she wanted to slap herself on the forehead. Of course he was that rich. He was a fucking Master Vampire, had lived for who the hell knows how long, and had just about more power in his pinky than most beings had in their entire bodies. Yeah, he was just that rich.

"Not every month, *ashleya*. I find that since most things in my life remain quite ... stagnant ... it is nice to change what I can."

A surprisingly truthful, honest and straightforward answer coming from him. Danny nodded. She could understand that.

"I see my youngling has been keeping you company."

"Yeah, Thad seems to have upped the asshole factor since joining your ranks."

Savior's mouth pulled up in a small smile. "Indeed, he has shown some true metal."

Danny didn't like the sound of that. "Has he needed to?" she asked suspiciously.

"Our world is not so unlike your own—"

“Don’t try to tell me we’re alike, Savior,” Danny interrupted him.

“Our systems share some commonalities. Our politics ... are not so dissimilar. After all, they are both contact sports.”

“What are you trying to say, Savior? Get to the point.”

“Merely that young Thaddeus has taken the steps necessary to survive in our complex society.”

Danny looked over at Thad. “If they’ve been—”

“They’ve done nothing that hasn’t been needed, Danny,” Thad said quietly. “I believe someone once told me that it’s a ‘kill or be killed, world.’ You either step up and survive, or you lay down and die.”

She hated having her words thrown back at her. “I just don’t like to think of you...” Her words trailed off, the rest left unsaid.

Thad smiled. He nodded. “I know... I know, Danny.”

Ugh. She was getting mushy in her old age.

“Well, now that we have exchanged pleasantries, would you like to see the back rooms?” Savior raised an eyebrow. “They, too, have changed considerably.”

“Oh?” A fluttering of anticipation grew in her belly. “Yes, I think that would be lovely.”

Thad cleared his throat. “Well, then, I think I’ll go see if I can steal a dance from Celia. It’s been wonderful, Danny. I’ll see you soon?” he asked, a hopeful note in his voice.

“Definitely, Thad.” Danny watched him stride off.

“He will be fine, *ashleya*, and no, I’m not reading your mind. Your care of him is written quite plainly on your beautiful face.”

Danny turned toward Savior. Her expression had hardened. “Tell me now that he hasn’t been harmed.”

“*Ashleya*...”

“No, tell me, I’ll believe it coming from you.”

“He is fine.”

“But...”

“Nothing, Danny. He is one of mine, and I protect what is mine.” Savior took her hand and pulled her up. “Do you not think it high time that he grew up, my dear one?”

“No,” she said petulantly, realizing how silly she sounded.

“I see, so you believe that he should remain silly, ignorant and naive for the rest of his eternity...”

“Savior—”

“*Ashleya*, he is not a boy, he is a man, and he has joined our ranks. Do you understand what that means?”

Danny nodded slowly. She did, she did understand, that didn’t mean she liked it. “He’s ... he’s like...” *Family*. The words would not come.

“I know, my love, I know.” Savior pushed her forward. “Now come, ease your mind, all is well, and all will be well. Let me show you my new quarters.”

“Trying to distract me?”

“Most certainly. Is it working?”

A slow, sensual smile crawled up Danny’s face. “Let’s find out.”

### Chapter Three

The room was all black and silver. Danny whistled slowly as she took in the lush carpets, rich fabrics and costly furnishings. The room reeked of money, lots, and lots of money.

“Can I take it that you approve?”

“Not what I would have done, but it’s okay.”

“Ah, and what would you do?”

“Make it a little less Cirque du Soleil,” Danny said dryly.

Savior’s eyebrows rose. “Cirque du Soleil?”

“The circus with all those sick, double-jointed people painted up and dressed in wicked costumes.”

“I am aware of what Cirque du Soleil is, *ashleya*.”

“Oh, thought you were asking.”

“I admit some surprise that you think my chambers look like a circus.”

“A cool circus, Savior.”

“Oh, then, that makes all the difference.” His tone was bland and cool.

“Definitely.”

To that, Savior laughed. “How do I argue with that reasoning?”

“You don’t,” she answered blithely.

He nodded. “I don’t,” he parroted.

“Hmmm ... you changed the sheets,” Danny said, eyeing the bed.

“Indeed.” Savior held out his hand. “Would you like a closer look?”

Danny eyed his hand for a minute before nodding. “Yeah, yeah I would.”

The expression on Savior’s face was positively radiant. “Then come, my love, come.”

\* \* \* \*

Danny was hard pressed not to roll herself up in the luxurious fabric of the sheets. The cool, sweet, silk caressed her body, and she almost moaned her delight—almost.

“You are so beautiful, *ashleya*.”

Danny looked up into his deep, fathomless eyes and shook her head. “You are the beautiful one, Savior.”

Savior preened.

Danny rolled her eyes ... men, dead or alive, they were all the same—egos, egos, egos.

Savior trailed his fingers down her chest, smiling when Danny shivered. “You have the softest skin, my love.”

“Uhm, I don’t do anything to it,” Danny murmured. In fact, she was amazed that it was in as good a condition as it was, all things considered. Danny gasped when Savior’s mouth followed his fingers. His lips were soft and his breath warm against her flesh. She wanted more. Her body yearned, and her beast screamed in desperate need.

“Yes,” Savior murmured against her skin, “yes, my *ashleya*, I am going to give you

so much ... and you will fill my every need.”

“Will I?” Danny gasped as Savior began to suck and bite her nipples. “What ... what if I don’t...”

“Don’t what?” Savior parted her thighs. “Want me? Is that the case, my *ashleya*? Do you not want me? I’ll stop, my love...” Savior located the hard bud nestled within the soft folds of her slick flesh and flicked it.

Danny moaned, arching desperately against his hand.

“Tell me, tell me you don’t want me and I’ll stop now.”

Danny dug her nails into his back and pulled him forward—forcefully. “Stop talking already and fuck me.”

Savior’s face broke into a glorious smile. “Oh, yes ... we are getting there.”

“Getting there?” Danny began to pant as Savior expertly rolled her clit between his fingers. “No, no, I need you inside me!”

“So impatient, my love. No, we will do this the right way,” his eyes glittered, “*my* way.”

Danny’s eyes went wide as Savior’s mouth followed the path his fingers had taken moments before. She felt his tongue, whisper soft, against the folds of her slick, wet flesh. She quivered as she waited for what would inevitably come next.

She was not disappointed.

Savior began to explore the recesses of her body in earnest. His tongue began to dart in and out of her pussy. When her hips jerked in response, he steadied her with his hands, and eased up on his strokes. They became languid and soft, his tongue making circles around the bud of her clit and his mouth sucking and pulling gently.

Danny felt as if her entire body was going to burst into flames at any second—maybe it would. Her heart was beating wildly and she knew that she was on the edge about to tumble over.

“Savior!” She screamed his name. Her hands were twisted in his hair and she pulled at him, desperate to get closer, desperate to finish what she needed so very badly.

Savior’s answer to her plea was to renew the assault with more vigor. Both his tongue and lips were at work, manipulating her, bringing her right to the edge and then easing her back. It was torture, sheer torture.

“Yessss...” Savior hissed, giving her one more long, slow lick before taking the entire hard, tight, bud of her clit into his mouth.

Danny couldn’t stop it. It came rushing, barreling, careening toward her. It was stronger than a tidal wave and her entire body began to shake with the force of the oncoming quake. She locked her legs around his head, pressed his face deeper into her body and screamed so loudly she was shocked the roof did not come down upon them. Spasms rocked her body. Her chest heaved and she turned glassy eyes upon his very satisfied face.

“Oh yes, *ashleya*,” his eyes burned brightly, “*you* are the beautiful one.”

\* \* \* \*

She wasn’t quite sure how much more of this she could possibly take. Her body was still quivering from the effects of Savior’s recent ministrations, and now, now she watched as he walked over to her. In one hand he held a candle, in the other, a small bowl of ice cubes.



“Oh, no.” She started to get up and was shocked (it was still unnerving) at how quickly he moved. He was straddling her naked body in a millisecond.

“My *ashleya*, where do you think you are going?”

“Somewhere empty of candles and ice cubes.”

“I promise you, my love, you will enjoy every minute of this.”

Danny shook her head. “Have you been planning this?”

Savior placed soft kisses on her cheeks. “My love, we are always in such a hurry, or you are always in some sort of life-threatening predicament ... such situations do not leave room for seduction, or the care that I would like to show you.”

Her heart softened. “Okay, I can get that.” She cast suspicious eyes toward the items laid beside the bed. “Those ... I don’t get. I don’t, uh, well, I don’t need any props to get off, Savior.” No kidding. She was wolf, and wolves had very, very strong sexual appetites, appetites that had to be fed—often.

Savior laughed heartily. “Of that I am quite aware. I think, however, that you will find that some small things make all the difference.”

Danny opened her mouth to protest, but Savior had already lit the candle. He was holding it, watching the flickering flame.

“This...” she swallowed, “is like some bad scene out of Basic Instinct, and not the good Basic Instinct, the really rotten one, the one that Sharon Stone should have—” Her words cut off in a gasp, a hiss, as Savior dropped hot wax on the sensitive flesh of her belly.

“You were saying, *ashleya*?”

“I...” Danny swallowed. “I was saying...” She groaned as he did it again, but this time, he followed the path of the wax with an ice cube. “Oh, my God!”

Savior chuckled. “He has nothing to do with what is happening between us right now.”

She could argue that ... but now was not the time for a theological debate. Danny almost jumped off the bed as hot wax hit the inside of her thighs.

“You are breathtaking.” Savior circled one of her hard nipples with an ice cube, stopping every now and then to nip at the taut flesh with his teeth.

Where she had been moist before, she was now dripping. She was tossed upon a sea of incredible warring sensations and she couldn’t stop the bombardment, she did not wish to stop the bombardment.

She needed more.

“Yes, I will give you more, my love. You are so stunning like this, open, holding nothing back. Your body is artwork.” Savior put the candle and ice down, and returned to her heaving form. He widened her legs and gently began to pet the springy curls at the apex of her thighs.

“Now ... Savior ... now...”

“Yes, now.” With one sure thrust he imbedded himself deeply within her body. “You are so hot...” Savior stilled himself, holding her steady with his hands, smiling as he thwarted her efforts to move.

“Fuck! Stop fucking teasing me,” Danny screamed.

“Now, now, what did I say before about patience?” He punctuated each word with a hard thrust.

“Please...” It was building—the tension in her body.

Savior's jaw clenched and he nodded. "I need it too," he said finally. His thrusts became surer, stronger.

Danny moaned as Savior's cock delved deep. She felt as if he were touching her belly button. It was deliciously, wonderfully, painful. She locked her legs around him and arched her back, rising up to meet his every thrust. She welcomed it, wanted it, needed it with every breath in her body.

"Ohhhhhh ... ohhhhhh, yessss..." Danny began to pant. She heard a deep rumbling noise and realized that that too was coming from her ... she was growling her satisfaction.

Savior was pumping furiously in and out of her body. His hands were kneading the soft flesh of her breasts, and at times pinching, almost to the point of pain, her sensitive nipples.

The muscles low in her belly clenched hard, and her pussy began to quiver ... she was close ... so close.

"Yes, my *ashleya*, yes, my love, come for me."

She could not have stopped herself if she wanted to. She crested, broke over, and was washed away.

Savior followed suit, roaring as he came.

\* \* \* \*

Danny smiled, taking in his beautiful face. "Definitely a good way to relieve stress."

Savior grinned a surprisingly boyish grin. "Perhaps they should prescribe it, sex on the doctor's orders."

"Look at you, Mr. Humor man."

"Am I being humorous?"

Danny chuckled. "I believe you are."

Savior caressed her face and pressed a soft kiss to her forehead. "Only with you, my love. Only you make me feel this way ... this comfortable. I feel as if I can be..." he sighed, "myself with you."

She nodded her agreement. Yeah, it was pretty much the same for her. There was something comforting, lovely, about being with Savior.

"I don't have many friends," she finally said, softly, slowly. "And those that I do count amongst my closest comrades, well, let's just say friendship with me isn't easy. I'm not about to cast any blame, just lay it down, as it is. I'm a hard person to know, really know." That was an understatement. Great mother protect anyone who tried to break past her steel-enforced barriers. "But you, I don't know." Her smile widened. "When I don't want to kill you for being presumptuous and a total dickhead, you are pretty much one of my closest friends." Danny swallowed when silence met her words. Had she gone too far? *Damn it, Danny*, she thought, *what a totally stupid thing to say*. She had just fucked him and then gone all serious and mushy on him.

"I am quite speechless, my *ashleya*." Savior's beautiful face broke out in an astonishingly bright smile. His beauty was magnified to epic proportions. "I believe that may be the sweetest thing you have ever said to me—and the most honest."

"Oh, well, I mean, it's nothing..." Danny felt heat crawl up her neck. Fuck, was she blushing?

"No, my *ashleya*," he said seriously, "It's everything. You are everything."

\* \* \* \*

Had she ever been someone's *everything*? Her mom, ah yes, her mom. Basically mom had been a nine-month incubator and that's about it. She had never shown her any love, care or consideration. In fact, she had always gotten the distinct impression that good old mom resented her, perhaps even hated her. She had done her "mom duties" until she could foster both Danny and Daniel off onto somebody else and then she had split. Of course, everyone knew where Danny's mom had gone; she had run to the Bostri Clan in Chicago, and into the arms of Ulrig Bostri, the second son of the Pack's Alpha. She might as well have moved to the moon, for Danny and Daniel didn't see their mother again. She had effectively washed her hands clean and begun her life anew—minus the responsibility of raising children. Even Danny's adopted Pack ... they had all wanted something from her. She never felt needed (not in a good way), or loved—just coveted.

*Weighty thoughts, amour?*

Danny sighed. *Yes, Asmodai, weighty thoughts indeed.*

*Has the Alpha gotten any better?*

*No.*

*I still think that you should consider letting him go.*

*Well, frankly I don't care what you think, Asmodai!* The nerve of him, telling her that she should just cut Alex loose. *This isn't your affair.*

*No, my amour? I must disagree. I believe that this is very much my affair. You and I are involved. Your Alpha currently stands as a thorn in your side, and thus, he stands as a thorn in my side. What affects you, affects me, amour.*

*You are to stay out of this matter, do you understand, Asmodai?* That was all she needed right now, a meddling prince of Hell. *I have things under control.* Danny frowned when Asmodai began to laugh.

*Do you? If I recall correctly, you and your dear friend could do little but restore your precious Alpha's form. How is that a demonstration of your control, amour?*

*Now you are really pissing me off! And you are intentionally provoking me right now. Questioning my abilities, questioning the abilities of my friend and basically just being a total dickhead. If you have nothing else to say, you can just be on your way.*

*Amour, be reasonable. You must see the futility of the situation.*

Danny was never one to let a dead dog lie, and stubborn should have been one of her names. Asmodai's attitude was only making her dig her heels in further. Hell, she grumbled, he should know this about her by now. He should know that she was not one to give up, and not one to cave under a little bit of pressure.

*I am merely concerned over your welfare.*

*Fine, great, be concerned, you can still go now.*

*Ah, my love, you have a hard heart.*

He didn't know the fucking half of it. *You're just coming to this discovery now?* Danny Lee hold a grudge? Never! *Goodbye, Asmodai.*

*Indeed, I believe I shall take my leave of you. We will continue this discussion when you have taken the time to mull over the wisdom of my words.* He abruptly severed their link.

Danny knew her mouth was gaping open. She probably looked like a trout—a very disgruntled trout.

"Danny, oh God, Danny, thank goodness you're back." April came running up, eyes

and hair wild.

“Whoa there, what’s going on?”

“Alex, the Pack, I don’t know ... it was so fast, and then, Titus...”

“April,” Danny grabbed the tiny healer’s shoulders, “calm down and breathe. Now, try again, complete sentences this time, please.”

April took a deep breath. “I was administering to the Alpha, and, and Willow tried to enter the room. She wanted to speak with the Alpha. I admit I may have panicked, and thank goodness that Titus arrived at that moment. He steered Willow away.”

Fuck. Fuck. This was bad, this was really, really, bad. “Go on...”

“The, uhm, the phone rang...” April began to gnaw on her lower lip. “You know, *the* phone.”

The Alpha’s phone. Only a select few would have the Alpha’s phone number, and even fewer would actually use it.

“Did you answer it?”

“Are you kidding?” April asked incredulously.

Danny snorted. Yeah, stupid question. April would never be so audacious as to answer the Alpha’s phone. On the other hand, she knew who would. “Titus, Titus answered the phone, didn’t he?”

April nodded. “Yes, uhm, they’re waiting for you.”

She was confused. “*Who* is waiting for me?”

“Titus and, and the Grand Dame. It was the Grand Dame who called.”

ShitCrap. “All right, thank you, April. Are they in the Alpha’s room?”

“Yes.”

Danny nodded. “Okay, I’ve got it from here. If you could come with me, to watch over the Alpha, I’ll deal with Titus and the Grand Dame.”

April nodded and followed Danny into the house.

Danny felt the power immediately, short, staccato bursts of power that hit rapidly. It was a mix of the old and new. She recognized Alex’s power. It was a familiar call. The new, she pinpointed it as Titus’ power that was stirred in with Alex’s. It was a heady mix, and she saw how the power was affecting April. There was a fine sheen of sweat on the pretty healer’s forehead, and her mouth was pursed tightly.

Danny opened the door to Alex’s room and saw Titus immediately. He was holding the receiver of the telephone in a death grip, and the expression on his face was cold and stiff. Ah yes, it was very obvious that he had been talking to the Grand Dame.

“She wants to speak to you,” Titus said coolly.

“I bet she does,” Danny muttered. “Titus, I’ll take the phone call in the office. Will you guard the Alpha’s door while April administers to him?” Titus’ jaw worked back and forth, he obviously was not happy. Would he listen to her? Was it too much to ask of such a dominant wolf? She hadn’t ordered him, she had asked him ... but in a dominant wolf’s life it was difficult to distinguish between the two. Danny breathed a sigh of relief when Titus nodded curtly. “April, careful with him, and if he gets worse, step back. I mean it. Don’t take any chances with your safety.” Danny took a deep breath and exited the room. She was already mentally preparing herself for the Grand Dame.

Danny walked into the study, closed the door and locked it behind her. She wasn’t stupid. She knew that if someone wanted to eavesdrop they would, and they’d be successful too. Wolves had incredible hearing, there wasn’t much that could escape their

notice, but Danny was relying upon her own sensitivity to magic to be able to tell if there was a prying wolf at her door.

She picked up the Alpha's phone. "Grand Dame."

"Dennison, I am much put out with you. How dare you allow that plebian to answer the phone. You have obviously not done a good job of showing him his place."

Danny rolled her eyes. "Grand Dame—"

"Do not interrupt me, child. If the Alpha cannot come to the phone then you are the only one who answers my calls, you know that. I have taught you that."

"Yes, Grand Dame."

"Don't yes me, child. Don't try to placate me. Where were you?"

"I had an appointment."

"An appointment?"

Danny could see the Grand Dame's face in her mind. Her eyes would be narrowed now, and lines would be marring her forehead.

"Yes, an appointment."

"With whom?"

She almost said, *none of your damn business*, but wisely (and shockingly) held her tongue.

"I'm waiting, Dennison."

"It did not have to do with Pack, Grand Dame."

"Even more suspicious."

"Grand Dame," Danny swallowed, "I was gone for a short while. I left Alex in good hands."

"Ah yes, the new healer. I believe Brenton told me her name is April?"

Brenton, the Grand Dame's messenger, spy and confidante. It had been a long time since Danny had seen Brenton.

"Brenton is still with you, it seems."

"Of course, where else would he go?"

*Where else would he go?* It was so simple in the Grand Dame's world. Everyone bowed down to her. Danny frowned. If you worked for the Grand Dame you *worked* for the Grand Dame. You would never be let out of her service ... unless, of course, she let you go, or you died. Usually, if you were let go, it was because you died, because she disposed of you—permanently.

"He's been spying on us?" Danny asked coolly.

The Grand Dame laughed. "Spying? Absolutely not, what a vulgar word. He's been keeping me abreast of the situation, Dennison. He has reported that the new healer is competent, if not a bit young."

"She is."

"Is what, competent, or young?"

"Both," Danny answered curtly.

The Grand Dame sighed. "You are still a difficult child, aren't you?"

"If you say so, Grand Dame."

"Yes," there was iron in the Grand Dame's voice now, "I say so. Enough of this," the Grand Dame snarled, "I am arriving early tomorrow. Have everything prepared." She hung up.

Danny stared at the phone, and shook her head in disbelief and resignation. Oh yes,

nothing had changed in the Grand Dame's world, certainly not her opinion of her one-time charge and ward.

It was time to make ready for the *real* queen, the mother of all wolves, and the bitch of all bitches.

## Chapter Four

It was like watching a mad, crazed bride on her wedding day.

Danny watched the circus, half amused and half nauseous. It really was a circus—a wolf circus. The entire Pack was in uproar and totally freaking out at the impending arrival of the Grand Dame. As Titus had informed her, it had been a long time (and many of the Pack had not been part of Pack) since the Grand Dame had graced them with her presence.

“Satin sheets?” April held out a pile of cream-colored, satin sheets for Danny’s inspection.

“You don’t have to be responsible for the sheets, April,” Danny grumbled. They were wolves, not damn maids.

“Oh, no, it’s an honor,” April said, her tone solemn.

Danny sighed. “In that case, yes, the satin sheets. Make sure that there is some redwood oil by her bed.”

“Redwood oil,” April nodded, “of course.” She scurried off.

“Dennison.”

Danny turned, and came face-to-face with Titus. “Yes?”

“We have prepared the bunks for the Grand Dame’s men. Will they need anything else?”

“No. Her *flank* will bunk in the bunkhouse with the rest of the soldiers. Her administrative staff will stay in the main house.” *Close to her*, damn it.

Titus nodded. “Very well.”

“Her *flank* will want to spar, I’m sure, in the morning with you.” Danny watched an anticipatory light enter Titus’ eyes.

“I would be more than willing to spar with them.”

“I bet you would.” It was obvious that Titus was looking forward to “fresh meat.”

“With the Alpha laid up, it has been a while since I—” He stopped abruptly, as if realizing the implications of what he had almost said. “I’d welcome the exercise.”

“Don’t let Brenton’s size fool you,” Danny said.

“Who is this Brenton?”

“He’s the Grand Dame’s favored. He’s been with her ... well, for as long as I can remember. He’s deceptively small and slight.”

“Go on.”

Danny shrugged. “Not much else to say. He’s deadly, and he’s good, really good. He doesn’t say much, in fact, he may not speak at all during his stay, but if asked, he’ll spar...”

“And win?”

“Most likely. Many tend to underestimate him, and therefore he usually enters the ring with an advantage.”

Titus inclined his head. “I’ll keep your words in mind, Dennison.” Titus turned to leave and abruptly stopped. “Dennison?”

“Yes?”

“How dangerous is this, for us?”

She clenched her jaw. How dangerous? Try end of the world proportions. No, no, no need to make it any worse than it already was. God, who the heck was she trying to kid. "You want the truth, Titus?"

"Always." Titus had turned back to face her. His face was solemn and hard.

"Okay, so here is the truth. I fear nothing."

"Dennison—"

"Let me finish. I fear nothing. I have learned to look past fear, work past fear, live past fear. You cannot survive what I have survived unless you shut out everything and live on what seems to be guts alone. This is how I have lived. This is the wolf I have become. I fear nothing," Danny straightened her shoulders, "but the Grand Dame. The Grand Dame is wolf kind. She is the very essence of what makes us who and what we are. When the Grand Dame walks ... the Earth quakes, when she breathes ... we still, and wait. The Grand Dame is..." Danny shook her head, "she just is ... there are few words, I have said them all."

"You truly do fear her," Titus said finally.

"I would be a fool not to, and I would never accept what is to come if not brought to me by her hands."

"What is to come?"

"Yes. It seems the Grand Dame has plans for me, plans that she insists must be brought to fruition."

"You are unhappy about these plans."

"I still have not accepted them." *Even though I know she won't let them go.* Danny didn't want to think what would happen to her, to Alex, if she did not accept the Grand Dame's plans. No one had ever defied the Grand Dame. Was she prepared to be the first one—the first person to tell the Grand Dame, no?

"You are your own person, Dennison Lee, and I believe you are one of the strongest individuals I have ever met. You will make your own choices and accept nothing less. Mother help the person who tries to stand in the way of your independence."

Danny stared at Titus. She knew that her shock had to be written quite clearly upon her face. Now here was a side of Titus she had never seen. Perhaps she shouldn't be so surprised (considering how he had handled the Alex situation so far) and yet she was. This was cold, hard, Titus. This was the Titus she saw moving his way mercilessly through the ranks of Pack. This was the wolf whose face had shown nothing when Carlton had been slain. This was that wolf. "You do not know the Grand Dame. You listen, and you obey. You do not question the Grand Dame."

"You do."

"I do? What?" Danny asked.

"You question, you think for yourself, and don't try to tell me that you have always obeyed the woman."

"No," Danny murmured, "I have not always obeyed her." *Doesn't mean I haven't always feared her.* "She is a force to be reckoned with, the Grand Dame."

"It sounds that way." Titus ran his hand through his hair. "Will she harm our Pack, Dennison?"

"I don't know." The words were out before she could stop them, but it was the truth—she didn't know, she really didn't know. Her life was so strange, so unpredictable. The Grand Dame was part of her life—her unpredictable life, and, God, it sucked! "If I



do what she wants, then everything should be fine.”

“*If* you do what she wants,” Titus parroted. “And can you do what she wants? Somehow I don’t see you as a “yes” girl.”

She wasn’t, but it was the Grand Dame they were talking about ... and when the Grand Dame commanded, you obeyed.

“The caravan has been sighted!” April came running at full speed toward them. “Oh, my God, they’re coming, and we’re not nearly ready. Danny, what are we going to do, I still have to—”

“Okay, calm down. Everything is just fine. We are just fine.” Danny took a deep breath. What *were* they going to do? “The rooms are ready, the barracks are finished, we’re good.” Okay, she just had to keep telling herself that. Perhaps if she kept her mind off the Grand Dame she could pretend that the woman wasn’t coming here to ruin her entire life. *Grand illusions. Stupid illusions. She had to remain focused and calm.* “Let us meet the Grand Dame,” she finally said. She was proud at how calm and controlled her voice sounded, even to her own ears.

A small, smile had crawled up Titus’ otherwise stoic face and he nodded curtly. “Yes, let us meet your Grand Dame.”

\* \* \* \*

The scene was oddly familiar to her. She was surrounded by flowers, beautiful, blooming wildflowers, and the scent of the earth filled her nostrils and assailed her sensitive senses. She took in the glory of the Mother’s morning and tried to imprint the memory of the flowers and the scents of nature to memory. She must have succeeded, because here she was, remembering it all vividly.

Just as suddenly as the memory of the flowers came to mind, it was replaced, changed, and altered. Now the scent that filled her nose and drew shivers down her spine was that of blood ... thick, metallic blood, her blood. She could see nothing but red, and all the blooms were soaked in blood. Then there was pain, intense, horrible pain, and the sounds of shouting and jeering. She looked up, cracked open her bloodied, bruised eyes and saw them, saw her, the Grand Dame.

“*Do you see the futility of the situation, my dear? If you would only accept what is to come, this would not have to happen.*” The Grand Dame’s voice alternated between soothing, motherly, and brutally harsh and cold. She saw her holding out her hand, and just before the blow struck her, she remembered shaking her head and rasping out, “Go to Hell.”

She didn’t remember much more of what had occurred that morning. She only knew that she had defied the Grand Dame, and had suffered the consequences. She had been a mere pup of ten ... but it was a lesson she would never forget—could never forget, even if she tried.

“You look at me as if you do not truly see me.”

Danny blinked owlishly, and tried to shake the memories away. She had too much to handle in the here and now to be concerned with childhood nightmares. If she wasn’t careful, the Grand Dame would give her new nightmares to contend with. As it was, they were already lucky that the Grand Dame had insisted on a “low key” entry to Clannahd. This way, they were able to effectively deflect any questions about Alex’s absence. The Grand Dame had claimed that she was to meet with Alex privately, and receive her

welcome one-on-one ... no one would dare dispute her claim.

"There are age-old sorrows in your eyes, Dennison ... come greet me properly, and let the sorrow be."

Danny walked slowly toward the Grand Dame. It was awe inspiring and terrifying how age had not touched the woman who had been as close to a mother as she had ever known. The Grand Dame's face was untouched by lines, wrinkles or any other blemishes. Her hair was a mass of silver, worn elegantly in a chignon that always seemed to stay in place (unlike Danny's own rats' nest). Her eyes were a deep penetrating blue, deeper than the richest sapphire, and sharper than the deadliest of razor blades. Nothing got past those eyes of blue. She was all that was young and old in one, and when you looked into her assessing eyes, it was as if eternity stared right back. How old was she exactly? Who the hell knew, and no one would dare ask.

"Benedi, Hight Seere." Danny dropped to one knee, dropped her head and offered her vulnerable neck.

"Benedi, Dennison Lee, my child."

Danny felt the Grand Dame's hand on her head and she waited, waited for her to move to her neck, to take what was offered, what was her due. It never came. The bite, the hold ... the pain, it never came. She lifted her head to meet the Grand Dame's eyes.

"You remember the Mother's tongue."

Yes, she remembered. She had tried for years to drum it out of her head, to banish the words from her mind ... but still they remained. The tongue that the Grand Dame said the ancients had used when they were mere beasts roaming the earth, the tongue known to so few. "Couldn't forget it if I tried."

The Grand Dame sighed. "I had hoped you would find some comfort in my presence, but I fear your heart is still hardened against me."

She had to choose her words carefully. "I am grateful beyond words to have your help, Grand Dame. I..." God, this was hard. "I need your wisdom here."

"But you are not glad to see me." The Grand Dame cast a quick look around, taking in everything in mere seconds. "Let us resume this conversation inside. I wish to see Alex."

"Of course, Grand Dame." Danny noticed how still and silent it was, but knew that dozens of eyes were watching their every move. It was definitely time to move to a more private venue. "Alex will be glad to see you. I believe he has felt your coming." She could feel the Grand Dame and her entourage behind her, a silent, but forceful presence.

"Indeed."

Danny climbed the steps and stopped abruptly on the second floor landing. "Have you been working on him?" The thought had just occurred to her. Stupid, how had she not seen it until now?

"I have done what I can for him. The rest is up to you."

Cold seeped through her body, ice replaced blood in her veins, and a familiar migraine began to pound through her head. "I still don't believe it."

"You must."

"I can't." If the Grand Dame was to be believed then all was lost. Life as she knew it would never be the same again. Her entire existence would change. Her entire world would shift. Danny stiffened when she felt the Grand Dame's hand on her shoulder. She did not want comfort. She wanted rage. She could always count on her anger to get her

through. All she needed was to remember the rage, and the rest would take care of itself. “Don’t touch me.” She growled, the rage surfacing.

“Mind your tone.” The Grand Dame’s voice was frigid, power started to pulse in steady waves ... pain followed.

Shit. It was one thing when her anger affected no one but her, another thing entirely when the Grand Dame decided to punish the entire Pack for her runaway tongue, and there was no doubt in her mind that Pack could feel the Grand Dame’s power pulsing brutally away.

“Alex is this way.” Put it off for as long as possible. She had to get her bearings. She just needed a little bit more time.

Time. God, she was running out of it.

The moment they entered Alex’s room, his beast was upon them. It rolled over them, each person staggering under the weight of its ferocity.

“Alex.” The Grand Dame was at his side immediately. “All of you may go.”

Danny snorted when the room emptied immediately. Again, no one disobeyed the Grand Dame. There *was*, however, one person that who remained. Brenton. Quiet, still, nearly invisible, he stood like the good sentinel he was in the corner of the room.

“There isn’t a moment to waste, Dennison. We must proceed with the *Lunes*.”

“I can’t.”

“Do you not see what terrible condition he is in? You must do this for him, for Pack, or you will all lose him forever.”

“There has to be another way. Mother’s sake, you’re the Grand Dame, the *Higheest Seere*. You have to know of another way to bring him back.”

“I am all you have said, and more, child, but even I in my glory cannot bring him back. He needs *you*. Will you abandon him here, at this threshold? He *is* at a threshold, Dennison, and he is about to choose his path ... and it is not one that will lead him back to us.”

Could she do this thing? Danny looked him over, taking in his beast-ridden eyes and feral visage. What choice did she have? She spoke of choices all the time, told anyone and everyone who would listen, she had choices, she made her own destiny. Was it all a fucking crock? God. Oh, God.

“Fine,” she spat, “let’s do it.”

The Grand Dame nodded, and by the expression on her face she was clearly pleased. “I shall set the circle, Dennison,” her eyes glowed brightly, “you will do the rest.”

\* \* \* \*

She was oh-so-aware of the eyes that followed her every movement. They burned into her and made shivers break out upon her flesh. She hated this. Hated them. Rage and self-pity threatened to overwhelm her.

“We do not have all day, child.”

Danny flinched at the sound of the Grand Dame’s voice. “Give me a fuck—” She stopped abruptly, realizing what she had been about to say, and to whom she was about to say it. “Give me a moment, Grand Dame. I’m having a bit of performance anxiety,” she muttered.

“Did not realize that anything made the great *magi* anxious.” Brenton’s voice broke through the silence. It was the first time he had spoken since arriving in Pack.

“Be my damned guest!” Danny spun around to face him. “Get naked, jump on the bed and you do the *Lunes* because it is just that fucking easy!”

Brenton shrugged. His face was a mask of calm, but his eyes betrayed him. He was excited. There was no hiding his mounting arousal. “It is nothing we haven’t seen before, *shaera*, and you are beautiful. You should not be ashamed of your body, or what you shall bequeath to the Alpha with it.”

Danny dipped her head. She did not want to stare into those bright eyes any longer. *Shaera*—an endearment in the old tongue—only Brenton called her *shaera*. When she was a pup she had found the endearment sweet, now it was just a painful reminder of what she had once had, and was long lost to her. She was no longer part of the Grand Dame’s Pack. She was no longer family. Even the Grand Dame had disposed of her, passing her onto Alex. In her way, the Grand Dame was just as culpable as the rest of the cruel world for Danny’s bitterness and cynicism. Everyone was the same—they all failed you in the end. They all used and abused you. Such was life ... her life.

Her mind roared its fury. She walked toward the bed, the bed that held her twisted fate. *Oh, Mother, help me, help me now.*

She knew she had to stop this now. She had to strengthen herself. Danny took several deep breaths, and pushed aside the panic. She worked on calming her frayed nerves and fortifying her reserves.

“Alex,” she murmured. She was standing at the edge of the bed. She had crossed the circle the Grand Dame had made and was now protected, blessed, ready to begin. The *Lunes* was upon her.

There was no turning back.

\* \* \* \*

Alex was burning up. His flesh was hot to the touch, and although his mouth was twisted up in a feral snarl, and his humanity seemed long gone, he remained still and quiet under the explorations of her hand.

Danny knew the Grand Dame was impatient, and that Brenton was nearly ready to pop out of his skin, but she couldn’t go any faster ... not with this.

It was the first time she had ever touched Alex thusly—with the intent to finish what they began. She felt as if she was touching him in a new way, with new eyes, and it scared her. He *was* beautiful. Not in the way that Savior or even Asmodai was beautiful, but in the way a wolf is beautiful to another wolf. God, he even smelled wonderful.

“You must do more than touch him, child.”

Danny ignored the Grand Dame. In fact, she ignored everything but the feel of Alex’s skin, and his intoxicating scent. She was amazed she was able to block out the *interruptions*. She may have been forced into this situation, but she would damn well do it on her own fucking terms.

She licked her suddenly dry lips and watched Alex’s eyes follow the movement of her tongue. Gathering her courage, she leaned over and placed her lips to his.

It was electrifying—literally. Sparks flew and Danny gasped. She tried to move back but Alex grabbed the back of her head to keep her still.

What was happening to her? Danny suddenly felt Alex’s hands, they had moved to her breasts, and were lovingly cupping her soft, and supple flesh. Warmth had spread throughout her body and her beast, already eager, began to growl approvingly.

“Dennison...” Alex’s voice was feral and rumbling ... but it was out, he was speaking.

“Alex,” Danny murmured as she pulled back slightly to look into his eyes. They were still swirling turbulently, but she thought she saw a glimmer of recognition and understanding present in their murky depths. She opened her mouth to speak, but suddenly found herself flipped over, with Alex’s mouth crushing hers in a passionate and all-consuming kiss. It was incredible. The warmth was gone, replaced by raging fire. Her body was hot, and needy, and this felt right.

Alex used his knee to push open her thighs, spreading them apart. Never breaking his kiss, he began to explore her soft and satiny flesh. His explorations were gentle, almost whisper soft, and they only seemed to fuel her further. She wanted so much more.

Danny gasped when she felt him slip one of his thick fingers into her aching pussy. She arched her back hoping to get closer, feel more. There was a devastating desire to have all of him, immediately. Was this her? Was her body speaking? Or was it the *Lunes*? At this moment it didn’t seem to matter. All that mattered was Alex’s body, and her body, and the need that pulsed between them.

Two more fingers joined the fold, and Danny could not stop the cry she emitted. Her heart seemed to be beating impossibly fast, and she wanted to feel him inside of her.

“Alex, oh, merciful Mother you feel...” She could barely get the words out. Grabbing the taut flesh of his buttocks within her hands, she tried to yank him closer to her writhing form, but he refused to be budged. He was in control, and he was demonstrating that fact now.

Danny screamed when Alex’s fingers located the taut nub of flesh hidden under her soft folds and began to pinch and manipulate. Her entire body began to shake and quiver, and she felt as if all the blood in her body was rushing to her head. God, it was too much. If he didn’t take her she would go crazy.

She felt his lips, tender at first, locate the pulsing point in her neck. He caressed her gently with those soft, full lips of his, and shivers broke out all over her body. Between his hands and his lips, she was desperate. The storm was building and growing to epic proportions, and she knew it would break soon ... she would break soon.

At that moment, Alex drove his cock deep within her body with one sure thrust, simultaneously sinking his teeth into her neck. Danny screamed as the incredible sensations began to hit her one after another. She felt impossibly stretched, full, and it was fantastic. Alex had wrapped his arms around her, keeping her locked against him, and his mouth was still savaging her neck. His cock was growing thicker, fuller within her, and she met each one of his thrusts vigorously, eagerly. This is what she had needed, what her beast had been begging for. And as the pleasure took her over, Danny became slowly aware of the fact that her beast was not railing at her ... in fact, she could barely hear her animal call. It was just her now—just her and Alex, and this moment between them. How wonderful ... how strange.

Alex took that moment to penetrate the tight pucker of her ass with one of his fingers. Danny exploded. Her orgasm was hot, heart-stopping and completely overwhelming. A moment later Alex erupted with a shout, spilling himself into her.

Danny lay there, heart beating incredibly fast, feeling as if she had run a great long race, and gotten fucked really hard—oh wait, she had gotten fucked really hard. She started to laugh. She couldn’t help herself. Her body felt fabulous. She felt languid and

delicious, and wished the feeling could go on forever... It couldn't. Reality was already beginning to seep through her sated state.

Good God, reality was a bitch! She had just slept with Alex. No, she had completed a *Lunes*—even worse. All this time she had denied him, run from him, battled him. She wouldn't be bound. She wouldn't give up her independence. She would be free. No longer. For now, no matter how many times she denied him with her words, her body, her beast, would be tied to him. A *Lunes* assured that fact.

"Short, but sweet." Brenton's deep voice penetrated her haze and her turbulent thoughts.

"I wanted her too much to prolong it, and I regret nothing. I have had no better than you," Alex said, looking down at her.

"You're back." Her own voice came out quiet and reserved.

"Yes."

"A *Lunes* will always restore the natural order of the wolf." The Grand Dame walked forward, there was a large smile gracing her face. "Very well done, you two."

"Grand Dame," Alex bowed his head, "you honor us with your presence."

The Grand Dame's smile grew, if possible, even wider. "Have I finally succeeded in giving you your heart's desire?"

Danny looked between Alex and the Grand Dame. She did not like the look that passed between them. "*Get off me.*"

"Dennison..."

"Just get the hell off me." She began to struggle and tried to unseat him. The enormity of what she had just done had sunk in, and she was furious, overwhelmed, saddened, and more than a little freaked out. Alex rolled to his side, allowing Danny to scoot out from under him. She jumped off the bed, and began to glare at the three of them. She had done this thing, she knew that, and yet it didn't seem to make a difference to her mind or to her heart. She felt as if she was suddenly sinking. It was absolutely terrifying, this feeling of losing complete control.

"It will be all right. I promise, *Kyra*, all is righted." Alex was holding out his hand, and there was a beseeching look in his eyes.

"Indeed, my child, all is righted. Do you not see your Alpha?" The Grand Dame was smiling broadly. "Really see him. He is stronger, fiercer, and better prepared to deal with all that is to come."

"Don't call me *Kyra*." It made her shudder, the truth. For she recognized the words the Grand Dame spoke to be the truth. Alex was standing tall, proud and strong in front of her. There was an unmistakable aura about him, an aura that had not been present before they had completed the *Lunes*. Their mating had definitely evened out something within him, if not fixed it completely. He was now in control of himself and her. Merciful Mother, he was in control of her.

"I need to run." Danny headed for the door, only to be stopped by Brenton's strong hand. He was holding onto her arm in a nearly punishing grip. "Let me go, before I do something that I won't regret."

"The Grand Dame has not excused you."

"Grand Dame, tell your goon to let me go, or I'll fucking kill him, he's dog meat."

The Grand Dame sighed deeply. "So angry ... so dramatic. Child, you must accept certain truths that cannot and will not be changed. You cannot run from this situation."

You must stand and face what has happened.”

“Only truth I know,” Danny growled, “I was forced to fuck Alex, and now I’m trapped.”

“Not true, child. You were not forced into anything. You did not have to complete the *Lunes* if you did not wish to.”

“Oh, how rich!” Danny scoffed. “Now you’re putting this on me? You told me I had to sleep with Alex or he’d be lost in his beast.”

“Yes.”

“Where is the choice?”

“You did not have to comply,” the Grand Dame said simply.

Danny stilled completely. She did not have to comply? God, the Grand Dame made it sound so simple. There was nothing simple about the situation she found herself currently in. Not comply? No, that was never even an option. And the thought of leaving Alex lost in his beast was similarly horrifying. The Grand Dame spoke simply of choices, but she was not the one stuck with a domineering Alpha holding her reins.

“I will not cage you, nor will I ever hurt you, *Kyra*.”

“Stop calling me that!” The mere fact that by sleeping with Alex she had gone from Danny, to *Kyra*, infuriated her. It was as if he was already disassociating her, that her personality was being pushed aside to make way for the position he had given her. Already he was exerting his control. “I’m leaving now. Do not try to follow me.” Danny looked pointedly at her arm and then at Brenton. “I’m way past my patience point. Get your fucking hands off me.” Brenton looked over at the Grand Dame who nodded curtly. A second later he had released her. “*Ofshe ana vistana*.” I will never forgive you. Danny directed her words at the Grand Dame.

Watched as she stiffened and said quietly, authoritatively, “We shall see, child. We shall see.”

## Chapter Five

“You are mine, but not mine.” Savior’s words were cold and solemn.

“Fine fucking welcome,” Danny snapped, she had already begun to pace.

“I am sorry, *ashleya*, but I can sense the difference in you. Something has happened. Something has happened which has changed the course of our bond.”

“How?”

“It is as I said, you are mine, and yet you are not mine. There is something tangible upon your skin, a scent ... a marking that is not mine alone.”

God, if that wasn’t the truth. “Listen, Savior, I can’t do all this metaphysical shit right now, okay?”

“That is quite amusing, my *ashleya*, considering you live in that metaphysical shit, so to speak. You are a *magi* wolf. Your life will always be tied to the metaphysical.”

“Fine, fine,” Danny threw her hands up into the air, “fine, I am a basket full of fun, a true melding of metaphysical madness. Happy now?”

“Not really,” Savior said dryly.

She sank down, collapsing onto Savior’s bed. “Oh, Savior, it’s bad, it’s really bad.”

“Speak to me, my love.” He came to sit by her side. “I have tried to speak with you, but you have not let me in.”

“I couldn’t.”

“Why not? What has happened? What has changed?”

“Everything. Mother take me, everything has changed.” Danny took a deep breath. “I slept with Alex.” She waited for the blowup, the storm, the inevitable rage, and was surprised and wary when she got none of those things.

“I see.”

And strangely enough, she felt as if he really did see. “You’re not, uh, angry with me?” Why she cared she didn’t know, but she did, she did care. The thought of Savior being upset with her, it did funny things to her stomach.

“I shall admit a certain amount of unease for this new development, but anger? No, *ashleya*, I am not angry with you. If anything, I fear for you.”

“Don’t, I can take care of myself.”

“That is why I fear for you. The Alpha, I take it that it is his mark I taste upon your skin now.” Danny nodded slowly. “He has claimed you as his mate. Just as I have marked you, so too, has he. You are tied to him fully. And as you are an independent creature, one who is unused to complying, or compromise, I fear that the Alpha’s control will be unbearable.”

It was her worst fear as well, Alex dictating her life, telling her to fall into line. “He promised that it would not be like that.” Did she believe him? Oh, God, she was so screwed now.

“For your sake, for all of our sakes, I hope so.”

“All our sakes? What the hell do you have to do with this? Besides the fact that we’re sleeping together, you and Alex have no part in one another’s lives.”

“You are not that naïve, *ashleya*, are you? You and I share a mark, and you and the Alpha share a mark. We are all tied together, and the link that forges us as one, is you. I



do not know what is to come, however. I have never been in a situation such as this, before.”

“Never?” Danny knew Savior had been around a long time. She found herself curious as to his history, his past.

“No, *ashleya*, never. This is new territory for me. I have always kept myself rather distant from the wolf Packs. It wasn’t until you entered my life that this curiosity grew, that I found myself wishing I knew more about wolf kind. I can feel the change between us, but I cannot tell you what this change will mean for us.”

“Great, just great.” All she could see was incinerated bodies and all she could smell was charred flesh. Just like when Asmodai gifted her with a kiss of fire, she was once again swimming in mysterious waters, waters in which she had no idea how to navigate. She had just jumped in and added another new insanity to her life. “Will Alex be affected?”

“It would stand to reason that he would feel something.”

“Something like, oh, a pinprick, or something like a massive, frigging, magical earthquake?”

“Truly, I do not know.” Savior put his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him.

“How is my wolf going to handle this?” Danny muttered.

“Just fine, my love. Your wolf will handle it as she has always handled it.”

“Fine is not how she has handled things up to now, Savior.”

“Then she will learn to accept it.”

“Ha! Fat lot you know. My wolf is like me,” Danny smiled slightly, “very obstinate, extremely stubborn and more than a little bitchy. I don’t know how she is going to deal with a vampire mark *and* a beast binding.”

“I take it you have a ritual?”

“What?”

“A ritual that is tied to your bonding. Do you have one?”

“Yeah.” Did she tell him? “It’s called a *Lunes*.” Decision made. “It’s the reason the Grand Dame came to Pack. She needed me to sleep with Alex. It was the only way to bring him back. He was beast-ridden.”

“And he is well, your Alpha?”

“Just dandy. He’s back to his annoying, Alpha self. A real peach.”

“Your sarcasm is not lost on me, my love.”

“Goody.” Danny dropped her head to his chest and sighed. “I’m being a total bitch, I know. It’s just that I feel absolutely...”

“To use your word, freaked?”

She chuckled. “Yeah, absolutely freaked.”

“It will be all right.”

“You keep saying that. How in the world can this be all right? How can any of it be all right? You don’t know Alex. Not the way I do. He does not share well.”

“Neither do I, *ashleya*. I do not share.” And Danny heard the iron in his voice. He meant what he said. “But I understand there is no other way to handle this current situation. We do what we must.”

“Yeah, I guess we do.” She couldn’t stop the bitterness that swept over her.

“*Ashleya*, what’s done is done.”

"It's not that simple, Savior."

"It is, my love. It could be. You must let it go and move on."

"With Alex ... move on with Alex? I don't know if I can do that."

Savior cocked his head to one side and regarded her with a steady look on his handsome face.

"And what will you do instead?"

"Huh?"

"What will you do instead, if you cannot 'move on,' so to speak?"

"I..." Danny gritted her teeth. "I hadn't gotten that far yet in my thought process. I'm still working on formulating a plan."

Savior began to chuckle. "Formulating a plan?"

"Yeah, have a problem with that?"

"No, my love, I think it is very *reasonable* of you."

"I can hear the smirk in your voice," Danny mumbled against his chest. "Even if I can't see it on your face right now."

"*Ashleya*," Savior moved her to arm's length so he could look into her face, "you worry about things you cannot possibly change, some of these things have not even occurred yet. I suggest that we meet with the Alpha to—"

"WHAT?" Danny shrieked, pulling away completely. "You want to do what?"

"I believe the three of us should meet, talk."

Visions of mangled, bloody bodies began to swim through her head. "No."

"No?"

"No, Savior, not a good idea."

"No for now, or no forever?"

"I'll start with no for now. Meeting with Alex is not a good idea. Especially since he's been sane for, oh, a day!"

"You worry for nothing. I can handle myself."

"Yeah, yeah, you can handle yourself, I can handle myself, and Alex can handle himself ... we can all handle ourselves right into an early grave." Danny rolled her eyes. "This little situation we've got here, Savior, it doesn't make for a great date. It's not like we're all going to get together over a cup of coffee and exchange war stories. You'd both go for the jugular, and I'd be left cleaning up the mess."

Savior clucked his tongue. "You give us little credit, *ashleya*. We are all much too civilized to go for the jugular." His eyes glittered with amusement. "At least on the first meeting."

"Ugh! You're hopeless. I'm done talking with you right now."

"Again, you came to me, my love."

"Uh-huh, and I'm realizing what a big mistake that was." Why the hell did she always go running to Savior when she needed to talk? It wasn't as if he made her feel better—not usually.

"You cannot help yourself, love. We are tied, you and I. And we love," he smiled, "deeply, truly, eternally."

"Waxing poetic again," Danny said softly, managing to ignore the fact he had intruded into her mind.

"With you, it is easy."

"Oh, Savior..."

“What do you truly fear, *ashleya*?”

The cage. Her loss of independence, the death of her woman, and the freedom of her beast, she feared it all.

“The truth now, *ashleya*.”

The truth. “That I can’t do it.” Her words came out in a mere whisper. She lowered her eyes so he wouldn’t see the turmoil in them. “That I ... I ... don’t, won’t, have the capacity. I am only ... me.” Now her words came out desperate, and she looked up at him. “What if it isn’t enough? What if I’m not enough for...”

Savior came forward and cupped her cheek. “For?”

Danny jerked away from his touch. “This, all of this.” *You*. The word lay unspoken between them. God. It had only been her before. She had no one to disappoint and no one to hurt but herself. That is what came of depending upon no one. You never had to deal with the fallout. If you fucked up, it didn’t matter. You didn’t get anyone killed, you were responsible only for your actions, and if you died ... well, tough shit, that was your problem. It was different now. She had Savior, and Asmodai, her Pack ... and Alex, she had Alex now to think about. She couldn’t do what she had done, or think the way she had been thinking before she had so much responsibility. Now her ties extended beyond just her, and people relied upon her abilities, her sanity and strength to get them through. It had all changed.

Change. God, she hated change!

“Do you not see how capable you are, how incredible?” Savior sighed. “Do you not believe you have enough love for us all?”

“Enough love?” Danny laughed a brittle laugh. “Hell, Savior, I don’t know if I have enough love for me, let alone for all of you.”

“You do.”

“You sound awful sure of yourself.”

“That is because I am, *ashleya*, I am sure. I am sure that you have enough love for us all, and that you have enough strength and fortitude to see yourself through this. And whatever you don’t have,” he took her hand, “I’ll give you.”

“This isn’t something you can give.”

“It is. You have all of me, *ashleya*, you always have.”

“Now that’s just silly,” she smiled, “we haven’t always known one another.”

Savior placed her hand that he was holding over his heart. “Are you so certain of that, *ashleya*?”

She tried to pull away, but he wouldn’t let her. “I can’t deal with this right—”

“Now, yes, yes, I know. But you can never deal with things when they get too ... heavy for you. You run. You always run.”

“That isn’t true,” she spat out.

“It is, my love. I, too, can speak the truth.”

She continued to struggle, trying to yank away. “Let go.”

“No.”

“I...” She took a couple of deep breaths. “I can’t breathe.”

Savior grinned boyishly. “You seem to be breathing just fine, my love. You are no child easily moved to fainting.”

“You’re being a total ass.”

“Ah, there is my Danny. You would rather call me names than speak the truth with

me.”

“I don’t agree with your truth.”

“That is fine as well. We can agree to disagree on this point.” He winked. “But eventually you will come around.”

Danny’s mouth dropped open in shock. For a minute she just stared at him, finally giving in to a smile. “I want to be mad at you right now.”

“But my undeniable charm makes it impossible.” Savior pulled her close, and his smile widened further.

“Yeah, something like that,” she grumbled.

“Ah, my flower.” Savior pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “You must go back and face him.”

Why the hell did she always have to *face* Alex? It was beginning to get really tedious. Not to mention, every time she faced him things just seemed to get worse. She was starting to expect the Apocalypse.

“Trying to get rid of me?”

Savior laughed. “Never, my love. I do, however, believe that the longer you put this off, the more painful it shall be for you.”

“Do you get paid by the hour for this?”

“No, although I’m beginning to think I should charge for my advice.”

Danny slapped him on the shoulder. “Fine, fine,” she was aware her voice sounded petulant, “I’ll go back into the wolves den.”

“I shall be there with you, my love, if you let me.”

Danny rested her head against his chest and sighed. “I know, Savior. I know.”

\* \* \* \*

The moment she entered *Clannahd* she felt the difference. The sun was cresting and a fine glow emanated from everything. How had she not felt it, sensed it, before? Perhaps her anger and fear had stifled her senses? That was the only answer she could find, because the change was so strong it was impossible to deny. Even the air smelled different. It filled her, wafted over her, caressed her body and brought calm and peace.

She was home. She was really home. This was her Pack. She could claim it as such. It felt right. And just as she knew that this Pack belonged to her, she knew that she belonged to the Pack, fully, absolutely. She wanted to scream, she should, right? The walls of her cage were getting closer and closer, tighter and tighter, and yet, yet, she felt peaceful. This sense of belonging was beautiful.

“*Kyra*.”

Danny whipped around. *Kyra*—one beloved by the Alpha, his mate. It made her skin crawl just to hear herself addressed as such. “Please don’t call me that, April. I’m still just Danny.” April’s eyes were lowered and her head bowed. She was supplicating herself, and Danny hated it. “Stop. Just look at me. I haven’t changed.”

“Yes,” April whispered, “you have. You are our *Kyra* now, and that is a good thing, a wonderful thing. But it has changed things. You are the mate to our Alpha.”

“Damn it!” Danny shouted. “I’m still me! I haven’t changed just because I’ve fucked Alex.”

“*Kyra*—”

“STOP! Oh God, just stop.”

"I don't know what you want me to say." April swallowed. "I should just go."

"April..." Utter helplessness washed over her. Finally, she straightened her shoulders and put on her cold, hard, mask. "Go, then." She watched as April scurried off. The moment she was out of sight, she dropped the mask and allowed the sadness to invade her once again. "Damn you, Alex," she muttered. "Damn you."

"I will not apologize for what has happened, *Kyra*."

And speak of the Devil. "Don't call me that."

"You are."

"I don't care what I am. I still have a fucking name and you can use it." Danny turned to face Alex. God, he was handsome, beautiful, in fact. Even now she wanted to run into his arms, embrace him. She wanted to feel his thick hair in her hands, feels his lips upon her, and relish the sensation of his body filling hers. She wanted...

Fuck!

Danny shook her head to clear it. This wasn't like her. Yes, Alex was handsome, yes, she had always desired him in a way ... but this all-consuming need had never been there. Obviously she was being affected by the *Lunes*. It was the only explanation for the burning need that snaked through her. She had to get a hold of herself.

"Do not be ashamed because you want me, *Kyra*."

"If you don't stop calling me that, you sonofabitch, I'm going to tear your throat out." That would stop the annoying name-calling.

Alex sighed. "You will be the death of me. In fact, you very nearly were."

No. No. She would not feel guilty. It wasn't her fault that he had been beast-ridden. And he didn't even seem to appreciate the fact that she had given up everything for him—her freedom, her precious freedom. She had given up her life as she knew it—for him.

"This won't work, Alex," she said, finally, defeated.

"It will."

"How can you say that?" They really were going to end up killing one another. He would try to break her, and she would rebel. They could never make this work.

"If you don't believe in it, yes, you're right, we won't be able to make this work ... Dennison." Danny bit her lower lip, nervously, and Alex continued. "Together, together we can do this. It is as I've always wanted it..."

"What is?"

"A union with you, a mating. Together, Dennison, I've always wanted us to be together."

"You say it, but I don't believe you mean it, Alex."

"And now you call me a liar."

Impossible, he was absolutely impossible. "No, I think you think you mean it, but I don't believe you understand what together really means." Try saying that three times fast.

"What it means to you." His eyes glittered dangerously. "Isn't that what you're really saying?"

Danny shook her head in resignation. "Does it really matter? Neither of us agree. Our outlooks are totally warped, and if we can't agree ... how can we do anything together?"

Alex beckoned to her. "May we take this inside, *Kyra*?" Danny gave him a pointed

look, and he smiled slightly. “*Dennison*, may we take this inside?”

“All right, Alex.” And as they walked toward the house, the sinking feeling in her stomach grew into a hard, tight knot.

“Where’s the Grand Dame?” Danny asked.

“She is touring Pack.”

The image almost brought a smile to her face—almost. The thought of the Grand Dame Roberta Wick as a tourist was amusing, but it was the undignified image of her holding a little flag, wearing a fanny pack and staring at the sights that really made Danny want to laugh. “Who did you send with her?”

“Titus.”

Danny began to grind her teeth.

“Do you have an issue with Titus, *Dennison*?”

“I don’t know,” she answered shortly, honestly. “I think he’s very capable.”

“Capable? Is that all?”

“Strong and powerful. He’s a good Sentinel, Alex.”

“But...”

“He wants more.”

A slow smile crawled up Alex’s face. “*Does* he?”

“You know he does. Will you formally acknowledge him as your Beta, Alex?”

“What makes you believe that he doesn’t already fill that position?”

Danny shrugged. “He may, but I know you haven’t formally acknowledged him as such. Now that the Grand Dame is here, will you do so?”

“I could.”

Is this what she had to look forward to, an endless cat and mouse game, questions with no answers, and riddles that went on forever? Was this Alex’s idea of punishing her? “Why the hell can’t you just give me a straight answer?”

Alex cocked his head. “You seem to be getting slightly irate, *Dennison*.”

Irate? Mildly put. “You just get under my skin.” That was the truth. “I’m asking you simple questions and you’re choosing not to answer them.”

“Not quite true.”

God. It was like trying to talk to a brick wall. Hell. The brick wall would probably be easier to talk to at this point.

“Then what are you saying, Alex.” ?” *If you’re saying anything.*

“I’ve always had a Beta, *Dennison*, an established one. When I came here, the order was, well there was no order. It was chaotic at best. Titus has been volleying for the position for a while. He had already established his bid during the prior Alpha’s reign. Now that a certain order has been returned, and the Grand Dame is here, I believe that we will have the necessary time to make arrangements.”

They were going to indoctrinate Titus. Oh, Alex didn’t have to actually say the words. She knew exactly what was going on.

“You are worried.”

Danny thought for a moment before answering. “I don’t know. He...” How much did she reveal to him? “...worries me.”

“Why?”

Why did Titus worry her? The same capability she saw in Alex’s eyes, she viewed in Titus’ eyes, but there was something else there. There was strength, and need. In fact, the

need was potent and overwhelming. But what was it that he needed, wanted? Did he have the best interest of Pack at heart? He had kept her secret, Alex's secret. He could have taken Alex when he was weak and assumed the position of Alpha, or tried to, but he hadn't. He had watched over Alex, watched over them all ... and yet, she still didn't trust him—not entirely—and the reason why ... it was there in those mysterious eyes of his.

"He wants too much, Alex." Danny held up his hand to stop him from speaking, and continued. "The naked need is in his eyes, you have to have seen it. Are you not concerned about it, about him? How long before he makes a move against you?"

"Do you care, Dennison?"

Danny jerked back. "Of course I care."

"Truly? You came here to flay me, *Kyra*. Do not try to deny it. You would burn me with that new power of yours if you could. Do you really care if Titus would try to usurp my position?"

"I completed the *Lunes* with you." How could he ask such a question of her in light of that fact?

"Completed, perhaps, but having your body without your heart..." His look deepened.

"My heart?" Danny took a step back. *Her heart?* "Alex..."

"You're frightened of me." It was a statement, not a question.

Terrified, petrified, scared shitless to the bottom of her soul. "You've always known how I feel, Alex. You've always known how little I can give to you."

Alex walked toward her. "I'll take whatever you can give me."

Danny snorted. "Blatant lie. Give me some credit, and don't lie to me. You, Alex, will never accept whatever little I can give. You will always demand more, and there's the kick of it ... more. You need more than I can give to you." Danny watched as Alex's handsome face shut down completely. A cold mask covered his face. It was a familiar mask, one that she herself often used.

"As it now stands, you have little say in the matter. We are mated, *Kyra*. You are mine and I am yours."

"You're cruel."

"No crueler than you." Alex raised his eyebrow. "Can you deny the fact that we are one?"

Could she, yeah, she could. Would it make the situation any different? Unfortunately, it wouldn't.

"We completed the *Lunes*, and the Pack acknowledges me as your *Kyra*, but my feelings for you haven't changed one bit, Alex." Danny shook her head. There was this strange light that had entered Alex's eyes and she was afraid she knew what he was thinking. "No, you can't force me to feel differently."

"Time changes all things, Dennison."

"Doesn't change them that much," she spat out.

"It brought you to me," Alex said simply.

And that stopped Danny short. Everything she had been prepared to say died upon her tongue. He was right. She had fought long and hard, and in the end it hadn't mattered ... time had made the decision. Time had brought them together. It mattered little if she was happy. She was bound, plain and simple. "Unfortunately," she murmured, "it did."

Alex walked toward her. He must have taken her stillness as acceptance, because he

smiled, and encircled her within his large arms.

“Dennison Lee, *magi* wolf, extraordinary woman.” When Danny jerked her head up to stare at him wide-eyed, his smile grew broader. “You are, you know. You are an amazing woman. Your wolf only adds to your magnificence. Do not think me a fool, I know how lucky I am to have both the wolf and the woman. I would not think to take one without the other, Dennison. I believe you have given me little credit all these years. You have imagined me to love the wolf, but to ignore the woman. It is not so. You are both, and both I *will* have.”

If only she could completely believe his words. They were obviously spoken from the heart, and the light in his eyes could not be mistaken or ignored. His feelings ran deep. But ... yes, there was always a but. They had too much history, spoiled, painful, history. Their history was the stuff of Shakespearean tragedies. You know, in the end, everyone died. She was trying to avoid the dying part. He said he wanted both the wolf and the woman, but she remembered the woman, staring at him with pleading eyes, and she remembered the coldness, the heartlessness that had been returned to her. While she lay broken on the ground she had made herself a promise, and until now she had been able to keep that promise. Yet, as Alex said, time changes everything, and time had certainly changed, if not obliterated, her promise. She had responsibilities now, deep, soulful responsibilities. People, many people, relied upon her, and if she failed—no, failure was not an option. She couldn’t fail. She wouldn’t fail.

*And what of your happiness? Does your happiness not matter?*

She heard the voice in her head. It did not belong to any of her men. It was her own voice, her own voice of reason, and she couldn’t push it away. Did her happiness matter? The Grand Dame had often told her, growing up, “*The good of one must always be sacrificed for the good of many.*” Danny would roll her eyes and go about her business. She had heard it before, and to a young pup it didn’t register. Now, however, she heard the Grand Dame’s voice, her words, ringing in her head, and the words did nothing but register. The good of many ... yes, she was responsible for the good of many, and in that equation her happiness seemed a small thing.

“The Grand Dame would formally recognize us tonight, at a Pack gathering.”

Of course, it made sense. The whole of Pack could feel the change, know her to be their *Kyra*, but a formal recognition would solidify her position. Since the Grand Dame was here, she would want to tighten the bonds as much as possible.

“All right,” Danny finally murmured. “Why the hell not.”

Alex shook her gently by the shoulders. “This is not a bad thing, *Kyra*, you shall see the wisdom of this, the beauty of it. We have always been friends, you and I. We are still friends, but now ... now we share the ultimate bond.”

Ultimate bond. Yes, they shared a bond. The ties pulled her close, even now. She could feel her beast cry for him. It wasn’t like the bond she shared with Savior, nor the tugging of her soul she felt for Asmodai, this was her beast, and her beast, up until now, she had shared with no one. The *Lunes* had pressed their animals together, melded them and molded them. It was what the ritual did, and what Danny had been trying to avoid for so many years—bonding of her animal. She had so little that belonged to her, only her. So few avenues still open. Those avenues were closing one-by-one, and though she tried desperately to hold on, she was slipping, falling.

“You are so beautiful.” Alex pulled her close. “Your scent is intoxicating. You fill



me, even now.”

His scent filled her as well. She could try to fight it, but it was impossible. In fact, the more she fought, the worse she felt.

“Alexander!” The Grand Dame swept into the room.

Danny rolled her eyes. Oh yes, the Grand Dame had no concept of privacy. Why should she? She was the Grand Dame, and wolf kind was her domain. There were some days that she wondered why the Grand Dame stopped at wolf kind ... she definitely struck her as the world domination type.

“Grand Dame.” Alex bowed his head.

“Ouch,” Danny griped when Alex pinched her. She snorted. Fine, fine, and she bowed her head in turn.

“Alexander, I just finished my turn around the compound. When did you take on so many younglings?”

“Grand Dame?”

“I came across at least ten.” The Grand Dame’s face was puckered. Oh, yes, Danny knew that look well. She was not pleased. “Are they yours? I know that Draco had taken in some younglings, but you, Alex, I had not expected it from you.”

“May I speak, Grand Dame?” The Grand Dame waved her hand nonchalantly and Alex continued. “Some of the younglings were here on Draco’s wishes. I believe the former Alpha enjoyed his power over the young, the weak. I have taken some in since I assumed leadership, they had a need.”

The Grand Dame raised her eyebrow. “So soft, Alexander. When did your heart melt?” She looked over at Danny and smiled slightly. “I take it this is your influence?”

Danny drew back. “Don’t look at me. I had nothing to do with this. This is Alex’s Pack.”

“Not quite so, Dennison, it is your Pack as well ... now.”

“Yes, Grand Dame,” Danny replied, “I guess it is.”

The Grand Dame’s eyes cut back to Alex. “So, you will tell me now why you took in so many younglings. The real reason.”

“It is exactly as I said, they had need. Most of them were sorely abused before they came to me. They had nowhere to go and no one else. I gave them a Pack, on a limited contract.”

“Have they proven strong enough to be worth the trouble?”

“Some,” Alex answered. “Others need a bit more time. We are working in the ring, and they are showing signs of improvement.”

The Grand Dame narrowed her eyes. “The scrawny wolf, the blind one, to whom did he belong to before he came here?”

Benjamin. The Grand Dame had to be speaking of Benjamin. Benjamin Ushton was indeed small and scrawny. He had only one working eye. His former Alpha had torn out the other. It had been a wound he could not heal. He was shy and quiet, and Danny had very real fears that he would not last much longer, not if he didn’t learn to defend himself better.

“Benjamin was of the White River Pack before he came to us.”

“Ah, he was one of Uriel’s.” The Grand Dame nodded curtly. “That explains much. What did you give him for this defective pup? Don’t try to tell me you gave nothing. Even a worthless youngling would mean something to Uriel, especially if he knew you

wanted him.”

“Two Sentinels.”

Danny gasped. It was the first time she had heard the price Alex had paid for Benjamin’s release from his Pack. Two Sentinels? It was an exorbitant price in any situation, but especially when one was receiving a broken wolf.

“Uriel won this trade.” The Grand Dame snorted. “Mother take me, Alexander, what were you thinking?”

“I was thinking he would not last a new moon in that place. He would certainly not last on his own.”

“You were never so tender, Alexander.”

“Life has taught me some things, namely, compassion, Grand Dame.” Alexander sighed. “They will mature, Grand Dame. They will mature, and they will fight for me, for us, for our Pack. These pups will be a force to be reckoned with. They have never been given a chance. I give it to them now, and they will give me their loyalty for as long as breath resides within their body.”

Danny smiled. Here was the Alex she had been hoping to see, the Alex she had known was there. This was the reason she had not been able to turn her back on him. This was the reason she had completed the *Lunes*. How could she deny wolf kind an Alpha like this?

“Bah,” the Grande Dame harrumphed. “And will you now take in every stray you find? You will become a laughingstock, and your Pack will be viewed as weak.”

“On the contrary, Grand Dame. I believe that compassion will only strengthen my Pack. When did compassion become a liability?”

“When you assumed leadership, Alexander. Your father, how compassionate was he?”

Danny’s ears perked up. She knew little of Alex’s family. After all these years she still knew little. All she knew was what every other wolf knew of Alex’s impressive lineage. And it was indeed impressive. Yes, he had been born into a family with the blood of Alphas running through their veins. There had never been any doubt he would assume leadership. You did not deny your wolf heritage—not and survive.

“My father has nothing to do with this.”

“You are wrong, your father has everything to do with this. Your father would never have—”

“My father was an arrogant, domineering tyrant who ruled Pack with a fist so strong it was suffocating. He lived by his claws and died by them. That is my father’s legacy, Grand Dame. I am sorry I do not wish to repeat that sordid history.”

Oh, my God! Had Alex just talked back to the Grand Dame and cut her off? Danny was shocked, stunned, and rendered absolutely speechless. She had never seen Alex lose control like that, not in front of the Grand Dame.

“Your father was an excellent Alpha.”

“Perhaps, but he was a terrible father and an even worse husband.” Alex looked over at Danny, the expression on his face softened. “I am not my father. I will not be my father.”

“Famous last words,” the Grand Dame said.

Danny swallowed. Famous last words indeed.

## Chapter Six

“What do you know of former Alpha, Crane Holt?” The Grand Dame directed her question to Danny. They were walking by the creek, having just left Alex. The Grand Dame had requested her presence.

“Very little, save that he was one of the strongest Alphas on the East Coast, and raised Alex to assume the mantle of leadership.”

“Do you know how Alexander came to assume the position of Alpha of the Striker Clan?”

Danny thought for a moment. Did she? No, she didn’t. When she had arrived at the Striker Clan, Alex was already in control of the Pack. She had asked no questions. Why should she? She had just been foisted off on Alex. She had been angry and resentful. “I guess I just assumed that Crane Holt passed on the mantle.”

The Grand Dame snorted. “Never assume, child. Have you ever wondered why I chose the Striker Clan, why I chose Alexander?”

Lately she had been wondering constantly. “Yes, Grand Dame, I have wondered. Alex and I were close when I was a pup, but our friendship has never been an easy one, and both of us have,” Danny cleared her throat, “combustible natures. It has never been easy with us.”

“No, and it never will be easy. Alexander was the only Alpha I considered to take you. I thought long and hard before rendering my decision, Dennison. I don’t regret my choice.”

“Why would you?” Danny muttered. Danny waited to see if the Grand Dame would lay into her. She didn’t.

“Alexander has his father’s strength. He has his father’s will.” The Grand Dame sighed. “But I am beginning to see that he is right, he is not his father.”

“And is that such a bad thing, Grand Dame? I saw a brilliant Alpha in that room, an Alpha I’m proud to serve.”

“You are not fearful of the strength of your Pack with Alex at the helm? He was beast-ridden. His famous control was lost.”

“It was regained.”

“With your help, and mine, child. He would not have been able to do it alone.”

“No, and he was lucky that he did not have to.” Danny stopped and turned to stare at the Grand Dame. “Is that not what Pack is about, helping one another? Do we not rely upon one another? A wolf without Pack ... is a wolf without soul.” Danny smiled slightly. “*You* told me that, Grand Dame.”

“I also told you that a wolf without claws will not live long.”

“I have those claws. Alex has those claws. Between the two of us, we shall be fine. Pack will be fine.”

“Does he? Does he have those claws, child?”

Was she testing her? Danny wondered if the Grand Dame’s motivation for these questions was to test her. She had never known the Grand Dame to show such hesitation about Alex’s leadership or Alpha abilities. “Yes, Grand Dame, he does.”

“There is history between the two of you. Are you certain it isn’t clouding your

judgment?”

“Pardon my impertinence,” she just had to say it, “but what the hell is this about? These questions... I feel as if you’re setting me up.”

“Setting you up?” The Grand Dame drew back in surprise. “Why on earth would I do that?”

Why did she do anything? Did anyone *really* know the Grand Dame? “I can’t remember the last time you asked so many open-ended questions. And I’ve never seen you show so little faith in Alex’s abilities.”

“I have reason to be hesitant, child. Between being beast-ridden, and now this taking in strays situation, I can’t help but question his logic, and even his strength. I am curious to see how you view him, and how you view his leadership abilities. He has had a lot to deal with, handling two Packs.”

“Honestly, Grand Dame, we need Alex.” *I need Alex.* No. No. She would not go there—not yet. She could not begin to entertain the thought of needing Alex. She already had too much to deal with.

“These latest developments—”

“Mean nothing in the larger scheme of things, Grand Dame. He is a strong, able, intelligent wolf, and an excellent Alpha. I completed the *Lunes* with him because of who he is. I would never have even considered such action with another wolf. The Pack needs Alex. What would it say about wolf kind if we lost or ignored an Alpha such as Alex?”

“To keep him you will need to give him more of yourself, child.”

Whoa. And when had this discussion turned to her? “I’m sorry, Grand Dame, but my relationship is none of your business.”

The Grand Dame chuckled. “You are very mistaken, child. Your relationship is absolutely my business. And when did it become a *relationship*? I was unaware that you and Alex were in a relationship?”

Fuck. Well, she had her there. “We aren’t, we’re just ... just...” Hell, now she just felt ridiculous. “We completed the *Lunes*, and we have to, uh, go from there.”

“Ah, go from there. You are sounding very human, Dennison. The way you speak of this relationship of yours is in a very human manner.”

“I am a woman, Grand Dame. I feel as a woman does. Part of me is human.” If she were to believe Sabine, the best part of her was human.

“You are also a wolf, and the wolf demands things of you, things the woman does not demand. Your relationship is actually quite simple, child. You choose to make it complicated. But it needn’t be so. You are the *Kyra* to the Alpha. You have completed the *Lunes* and all will be acknowledged tonight in the Lunar Circle. If you would let all your hesitation and fears rest, you would see instinct take over. Your wolf knows her place. She will not lead you astray.”

“My place...” Danny gritted her teeth. “Pardon me if I find that more than a little offensive. My place...”

“Offensive?”

“Yes, Grand Dame. You disregard my woman entirely. I understand wolf instinct, but I also know that my wolf will tear me apart if I let her. She demands a lot. I have to balance both the wolf and the woman. Up until, well, recently, I have felt pretty comfortable in my ability to balance the wolf and the woman. My job, Thad, my life ... it was my own, and now, suddenly it isn’t.”

“Dennison, child, your life has never been your own. You are *magi inherent*. You serve a greater good. You serve wolf kind.”

She was suddenly feeling as if she had stepped into a bad episode of *Star Trek*, or perhaps walked onto the set of *Star Wars*. The entire *save the universe*, bit was beginning to freak her out. She was Dennison Lee, *magi* wolf, and already the responsibilities she felt being who and what she was, weighed on her. When had she gone from serving Pack to serving wolf kind? No way, no thank you, leave that job for some other poor schmuck. She didn’t want it.

“I can read everything on your face, child.” The Grand Dame placed a hand on Danny’s arm and squeezed gently. “It pains me, to see how you suffer, how you war with your wolf. In essence, I raised you from a pup, you are, in many ways, like my own daughter. I always knew, however, you would not have an easy time of it. Your mother, Celia, she did not help matters.”

“She was about as maternal as a toaster,” Danny quipped.

The Grand Dame cleared her throat. “Indeed. It was unfortunate...” Her voice trailed off.

“What was unfortunate, Grand Dame?”

“Your mother’s lack of motherly abilities.”

Danny saw a film cross over the Grand Dame’s eyes. It was as if she were reliving a memory, a disturbing memory.

“Grand Dame?” Danny reached out and shook the Grand Dame gently. “Grand Dame?”

“Child?”

“Uh-yeah, are you all right?”

“I’m fine, child, and it’s yes.”

“What?”

“It’s yes, not *yeah*.”

Classic. It was nice to see that things didn’t change—much. The Grand Dame was still as much as a word freak as ever.

“Was this all planned?” The question was out before she could stop it. She couldn’t help it. She needed to know. “Did you have me tied to Alex from the beginning?” There was very real fear that she already knew the answers to her questions.

“Tied to him? No, child, it has never been like that.”

“But?” Danny rolled her eyes. “I know there is a *but* coming.”

The Grand Dame chuckled. “You have always been quite intuitive.”

“Intuitive my backside. I can just hear the ‘but’ in your voice. So spill.”

“Mother take me, child, you know how much I hate human slang.”

“Human slang? As opposed to, oh, wolf slang?” Danny said with a smile.

“Sometimes I despair of you, Grand Dame.”

The Grand Dame lifted her chin. “The ability to speak, language, Dennison, it is one of the most important, if not the most important ability that we have as wolves. It is what separates us from the mere animals. We should never take it for granted, and so often we do. You have great blood running through your veins, why would you debase yourself with such common speech.”

“Whoa.” Danny laughed. “Is this your new platform, Grand Dame? I know you’ve always felt strongly about, well, proper speech, but this fervor ... well, it seems

magnified.”

The Grand Dame waved her off. “I find the disintegration of the English language one of the most shameful things to have occurred in recent memory. It is a shame that so many rely upon this language for communication. The old tongue,” the Grand Dame smiled, “we never had such deplorable use of the old tongue. Sometimes I wish we could all communicate telepathically to rid ourselves of this bastardization. Hearing it makes me wince.”

“It’s unrealistic to expect new wolves to have any understanding of the old tongue, Grand Dame.”

“I understand. You, however, know better.”

“So do you,” Danny snapped. “You know better. You know that I talk the way I talk. Time wouldn’t have changed that.”

“I had hopes that your time at Belle Ville, or even at Striker, would have cured you of your rather ... vulgar tongue.”

It was true. Alex was nothing if not proper. Hell, he even used her full name. But it was ridiculous for the Grand Dame to believe that Alex would have been able to “cure” her of her use of vulgar language. If anything, how she spoke had gotten “worse” since being with Alex. She enjoyed pissing him off. And much like the Grand Dame, Alex did not like slang. “Does it really matter? Does my speech offend you that much?”

“I will survive.” The Grand Dame sighed. “Dennison, you must know that everything I’ve done ... it has been for the greater good, and for you. I’ve done much for you, child.”

“All I know, Grand Dame, is that I’m now bound to Alex, something I’ve tried to avoid for most of my life. I’m sealed to Pack, and my former life is gone.”

“That much is true. Your former life is gone. You cannot have it back. Child, it has been written for you, you were never to have the life you thought.”

A chill swept over her spine. “So, you’ve all been lying to me all these years?”

“I’ve never lied to you.”

“You let me think I had a measure of control. You let me believe in my ability to gain some freedom, to make my own choices.”

“All of which you’ve had, child. You had control, more control than any wolf I’ve known in my many years. You’ve gained freedom. You’ve run farther than any wolf I’ve known. And you’ve made your own choices, many choices ... many careless choices. Why do you complain so? Why do you refuse to see what is there right in front of your face?”

“Because I refuse to believe in a power that would take my choices away from me. I refuse to believe that I cannot write my own future.”

“Then you are lost,” the Grand Dame said bluntly, coldly. “You are *magi inherent*...”

“Why do you keep saying that, Grand Dame? You are the *magi inherent*. I am merely *magi*.”

“There is nothing *mere* about you, child.”

“You know what I mean. You are the *magi inherent*.”

“I am.” The Grand Dame sighed, and suddenly her face took on a contemplative and wistful expression. She appeared older, and tired. “I shall not be here forever.”

“Really?” Danny hated the fear that hit her at the mention of the Grand Dame

growing old. As much as the Grand Dame had tormented her as a child, as much as she continued to torment her ... she was like family. In fact, she was probably closer to her than her own family. The Grand Dame had raised her, and for all of her cruel ways, she had helped shaped the woman she had become. Part of her, she owed to the Grand Dame. "Don't be silly. You're going to live forever."

The Grand Dame chuckled. "Mother will take us all in the end." Danny opened her mouth to argue that fact, and then snapped it shut. The Grand Dame tilted her head to one side. "What were you going to say, child? Were you going to mention the vampire?"

Danny gasped. God. Sometimes she thought the Grand Dame was a seer, on top of everything else. Then again... "I admit to having some questions about the vampire."

"Oh?" The Grand Dame narrowed her eyes. "You have questions, even though you are sleeping with one of them?"

It figured that the Grand Dame would know about Savior. The thought of her spying, however, did not sit well her. "How long have you been keeping tabs on me? How long have you known about him?"

"It. The creature is an *it*."

"He has a name, Grand Dame." Oh boy, this was so not the time to be breeching this subject with her. What the hell, everyone knew she had no sense of decorum.

"The creature has a name, how nice."

"You can't be that prejudiced, Grand Dame. Merciful Mother, you are the *magi inherent*, you, of all people have to understand that there are forces at work here ... forces beyond merely wolf kind. There is magic in this world, great and powerful magic. Why do you hold such animosity toward the vampire? The vampire is but one of many mystical beings."

"There is nothing mystical about the vampire, child. I am frankly shocked and rather disappointed in you. I cannot believe you have lowered yourself to consort with one."

What was she thinking? She wasn't about to change the Grand Dame's mind. Nothing she said would make the Grand Dame soften toward Savior. "I'm not consorting with a vampire, Grand Dame."

"Oh? I had been told that you had taken up with the master vampire of this region."

"Been spying, have you?"

"I do not spy. It is within my rights to make certain things are working in natural order. And to make certain you are ... safe."

"Safe?" Danny snorted. "Don't you mean, *in line*. You watch to make sure I'm staying in line."

"You will never be that easy, child. No, I watch for your own safety. Now, tell me about this thing you've begun to consort with."

"First off," Danny glared at her, "I'm not saying anything if you keep referring to him in such a disrespectful way. He has a name." She was showing some grit. Hopefully, the Grand Dame didn't kill her for it.

"Fine," the Grand Dame finally said, coolly, "tell me the creature's name."

"Savior. His name is Savior Knight, and yes, he is the master vampire of this region."

"So you have been consorting with him."

"No, Grand Dame, it's nothing as simple as that." She took a deep breath and blurted out, "I may love the dead bastard."

“Pardon me?” The Grand Dame had gone chalky.

“I said that I think I love him.” Hearing the words for herself sounded strange. Love. What the heck did she know of love? She was a fucked up *magi* wolf. Well, what little she knew was all tied up with Savior and the weird emotions he elicited from her. And then there was Asmodai... Gods, what did she feel for Asmodai? How did she handle these emotions and the fact that she had them for two men?

“You cannot love it, child.”

“Again, he has a name.”

“You cannot love the master vampire. You cannot love that unnatural creature. It goes against everything that we are. You are a *magi inherent*. You have magic and life and the blood of this earth running through your veins. The master vampire has nothing but dark and death.”

“He’s not dead, Grand Dame.”

“You bandy with me? He’s reanimated. What is he, if not dead flesh walking by the grace of some dark force.”

The Grand Dame had a point. Savior’s living origins were murky, at best. Throw into the mix the questions she had about his dead ones and you had a recipe for complete confusion. When had he been turned? Who had turned him? Why had he chosen such a life? All questions she had for her vampire lover, questions she did not often let herself think about. She was so wrapped up in her own sordid and insane happenings, she often overlooked the happenings of those around her.

“Does that fact that he loves me and does his best to understand me, count for nothing in your eyes?” God knows she wasn’t an easy person to love or to understand.

“The master vampire cannot know how to love.”

“I don’t think you’re in a position to speak about master vampires, Grand Dame, have you ever been in a relationship with one?”

“You know I have not.”

No, she didn’t. The Grand Dame kept to herself what the Grand Dame wanted to keep to herself. She let very few people in, and those she did, they were still kept at arm’s length.

“Then how do you presume to tell me anything about my relationship with Savior? I really don’t care that he’s dead, sort of dead, getting deader every day, it doesn’t matter to me.” And it really didn’t matter. She realized, suddenly, how little she ever thought about Savior’s corporal state. She was usually more concerned with the questions she had about his past. “He has shown me more kindness and understanding in the short time I’ve known him than any wolf has shown me during my entire life.” Danny watched as the Grand Dame drew back. Obviously she had taken affront to that statement.

“Hard words,” the Grand Dame spoke coolly.

“Hard world we live in, Grand Dame.”

“And what about Alexander?”

“What about him.”

“How will you deal with your ... your master vampire and with your Alpha?”

“Savior has kindly offered to meet with Alex and myself, so that we can all work things out.”

“That is out of the question.”

Danny rolled her eyes. The Grand Dame’s reaction did not surprise her at all. “I



think we need to set some ground rules down.”

“You will not bring that thing here.”

“You are starting to try my patience and my good will, Grand Dame.” There was only so much she could take. The insults were beginning to go too far. Danny gasped as an invisible hand suddenly gripped her throat, squeezing painfully. The hand was invisible, the source of the power, however, was plainly visible. The Grand Dame’s expression never changed. She was cool, collected, and presently staring Danny down.

“I put up with much from you, child, mainly because I love you. You are the daughter I always wished the Mother would have graced me with. When Celia’s stupidity brought you to me, I knew the Mother was rectifying age-old oversights. I raised you to harness the natural power you have, and watched as you squandered your gifts. I’ve sat back and allowed your defiance and impetuous nature to come forth and take over.” The Grand Dame leaned forward, spearing Danny with her cold eyes. “No longer. I will no longer sit back and allow this foolishness to continue. You are unique, Dennison Lee. In the whole of the world, and beyond, there is not another like you. Your gifts were bestowed upon you by the Great Mother who sees all. With those gifts comes great responsibility. No, you no longer have the luxury to go out and to *find yourself*,” she sneered, “you have arrived. There will be no more of this ridiculous soul searching. Your soul is what it is, it is wolf, and *magi* and you will begin to act as a wolf and *magi* must act. I’ve begun to right the wrongs. You and Alex are mated, and tonight the *Lunes* will be acknowledged by Pack. The ties have been established and strengthened and already the natural order of things is being restored. Do not think that my older body is any indication of what I’m capable or not capable of, child. When it comes to you, I am ageless, timeless, and I will always be here to watch over you ... to watch and to fix what needs to be fixed.”

The invisible hand relaxed its hold and Danny fell to the ground. She took in a couple of deep, gulping breaths. After a minute, she rushed to her feet and lunged forward. She stopped a hair’s breath away from the Grand Dame. What in God’s name was she thinking? Was she really going to attack the Grand Dame? She steadied herself, calmed herself, and took a good two steps back. She needed a little bit of distance, separation. After listening to the Grand Dame she didn’t feel better, if. If anything, she felt worse, a lot worse. The Grand Dame made her sound like her pet project. And she certainly didn’t like the image of the Grand Dame watching over her ... forever. Was she saying that when she passed to the beyond she was going to come back to haunt her? Disgusting. What an awful thought.

The twisting in her gut continued. She had so many conflicting emotions about the Grand Dame. On one hand she admired and loved the woman for raising her and giving her a place when her mother had all but tossed her away. On the other hand she despised her, and would like to see her six feet under for making her life an absolute misery and for binding her to Alex.

“You can deny it all you want and tell me that I’m crazy, but nothing will change the fact that I’m bound to the master vampire. I accept, to a degree, that my relationship with Alex has changed, and we are now in this together, so to speak. But I will not give up, couldn’t if I wanted to, which I don’t, my relationship with Savior. If you want me, if I’m as important as you say, you will have to accept Savior as well.” Danny waited. She didn’t think she had gone too far. In fact, she felt as if she had presented that in a very

reasonable and logical manner. And it was true. If the Grand Dame wanted one, she would have to take the other. They were a pair, Savior and herself—a very dysfunctional, and at times, crazy pair, but a pair nonetheless. As for Asmodai ... well, Asmodai was just going to have to wait. After laying Savior on the Grand Dame, she didn't think she could take Asmodai as well.

“You are telling me that you won't sever ties with the master vampire.”

“Yes, Grand Dame, that is exactly what I'm saying.”

There was a very pregnant pause before the Grand Dame spoke. “I see. Perhaps all too clearly.” She sighed. “I believe I must ... think on this for a bit.”

Well, she hadn't choked her again, that was rather promising. “We're convening tonight?”

“Yes. I need to formally bless the Alpha and his new *Kyra*. Pack needs to acknowledge the two of you.”

“Will we—”

“Hunt?” The Grand Dame smiled. “Yes, child, Pack will hunt.”

A thrum of anticipation and desire began to beat within her. They were going to hunt!

## Chapter Seven

Danny walked into her room and stopped dead in her tracks. No way! No fucking way. She stomped out of her room and stormed into Alex's room, hands on hips, eyes blazing.

"What the hell do you think you're doing!" she screamed at Alex.

Alex turned slowly to face her. A small smile graced his handsome face. "Hello to you too, *Kyra*."

"Stop calling me that. What do you think you're up to?"

"I am afraid you have me at a loss. What upsets you so?"

Danny swept her arm out, motioning to the piles that littered Alex's room. "This, this upsets me. What gave you the goddamn right to take my things and bring them over here?"

"You did," he said reasonably. "You completed the *Lunes* with me. We're bound. You are my mate. It is only natural that you now stay with me."

"I'm not staying with you. Do you understand? I have my own life—a life, which doesn't include playing housewife. I'm outta here, and you'd better move my things back into my damn room, you domineering cave wolf!" She spun around, only to find herself trapped in his rather hard embrace. Wow. He moved as fast as Savior. "Let me go." She was thoroughly disgusted when she saw that he only smiled wider. It didn't seem that she was getting through to him at all.

"*Kyra*, do be reasonable. A husband and wife sleep together." He leaned close to her ear and whispered seductively, "Have we not proved how much fun we have when we *sleep together*?"

"We don't have a husband and wife relationship. I'm surprised at you. I thought that idea was much too human for you. Husband and wife," she snorted, "ridiculous."

"We are bound lovers, mates, my love. You cannot disregard our bind."

"No," she snarled, "I can't. But I can disregard all the rest of the slop that goes along with it. Sleeping with you hasn't changed how I feel about you, how I feel about being caged."

"I will not cage you, *Kyra*."

"You're impossible. You keep calling me *Kyra*. It's the first bar on my cage, Alex. You aren't even thinking about me as me anymore. You're seeing me as this fixture, this thing. I'm not even Danny in your eyes."

"What is this nonsense you spout?"

Danny sighed heavily. "Not nonsense, truth. You tell me that you don't want to cage me. You say that nothing will change, and then you go around calling me *Kyra* and disassociating me. It would be laughable, if it weren't so sad."

"Can you not ever make things simple, Dennison?" Alex finally asked.

Danny laughed. "Apparently not. But this isn't a simple matter. I told you that I'd make your life a fucking misery, didn't I?"

"You did."

She threw up her hands. "Well, there you go. I warned you. It's not like I didn't tell you so."

“I had hopes that you’d...”

“I’d what? Change? Come around? See things your way, perhaps?” Danny rolled her eyes. “I can see by your expression, that is exactly what you thought. Alex, I can’t be manipulated. Emotions cannot be manipulated. They have to come freely ... willingly, or they mean nothing. Do you not want freely given emotions?”

“Do you harbor no tender feelings for me, Dennison?”

Danny bit her lip. She found that it was hard to meet his gaze. “I...” How did she put what she felt for Alex into words? It was very difficult because her feelings were so mixed and tumultuous. Mixed and tumultuous, wow, it was the story of her life—the story of her ever-developing relationship with Alex. “I do have feelings for you, Alex.”

“Feelings other than intense dislike.”

Danny looked up and saw the laughter in his eyes, and couldn’t help but smile in response. “Yes, feelings other than dislike. What those feelings are, however, I haven’t exactly figured that part out. You don’t help matters any, either.”

“What are you blaming me for now?”

Danny pulled away and planted her hands firmly on her hips. “I’m not *blaming* you.” Well maybe she was blaming him a little. “I’m telling you, you don’t help me make up my mind. You’re very complex, Alex. One minute I think I’ve got you figured out... I’ve decided I’d rather be strapped to a chair getting a root canal than be tied to you forever, and the next ... well ... the next I’m not quite sure.”

“A root canal?” Alex raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah, a root canal. How would you like to have your teeth chipped away at, and tiny holes drilled through for drainage?” She watched his shiver and laughed. “Exactly. So, you see my dilemma. I know that we’re bound. I accept, grudgingly perhaps, the fact I’ve completed the *Lunes* with you. I just have difficulties resigning myself to being your pet and living in a prison.” Danny held up her hand. “I know, I know, you’ve told me that it wouldn’t be like that. How do you know?” Danny sighed. “How can you make that promise to me? You know you can’t. You have no idea what you’re capable of. You didn’t believe you’d fall into a beast state, did you? But it happened.”

“My beast state had nothing to do with—”

“With me? Even the Grand Dame would dispute that. I’ve done nothing but bring out the worst in you.”

Alex reached out for her. “Come here, Dennison.” Danny hesitated for a minute before sidling up to him. “Dennison ... you know things have not been easy for us.” He ignored her snort. “But I truly believe, I’ve always believed, that we were meant for one another, our beasts were meant to be together. I am not an easy wolf to be with...” he ran a hand down her cheek gently, “neither are you. Perhaps it is one of the reasons we were meant to be.”

“You’re trying to tell me we were meant to be with one another because we’re both thoroughly disagreeable wolves? Basically the impossible belong together?” Danny shook her head. “I don’t buy that. The world would be a horrible place if likeminded, disagreeable people got together.”

“Is it not?”

“Not what?”

“A pretty horrible place.”

Danny blinked. “God, when did you become so negative?”

“When did you become so positive?”

“I’m not.” Lord knows she wasn’t. “I guess I’m surprised, though. I didn’t realize you were so down on the world.”

“On the human world,” he said simply.

“On the human world,” Danny parroted. “Where does that leave me, Alex? Part of me is human, very human. Part of us all, in fact.”

“I’m not human, Dennison, neither are you. If you think otherwise you’re deluding yourself.”

“I’m a woman.”

“But not human,” he countered. “You are a wolf and a *magi*. I, along with our kind, we are shifters ... we are not human. One form may shift to human, that does not make us such.”

“God, what’s wrong with you?”

“I need you to see, Dennison. I need you to really see the situation for what it is. I need you to understand, and I don’t believe you do.” Alex sighed deeply. “You have always been under the mistaken impression we are human, and in that way you’ve done yourself a disservice. We are *otherworlders*, if you need a term for what we are. But in our soul of souls, we are wolves—wolves born of two forms, wolves at the heart of us. This will not change,” he cupped her face, “it will never change. You cannot change yourself, no matter how hard you try, or how far you run. You are who and what you are.”

“You really *don’t* see us as human?” She knew her voice was stained with shock and confusion.

“No, I don’t. It is, in part, the reason we have difficulties. I think of us as wolves. The part of us, which isn’t wolf, is *other*, not human. You think of yourself as human first and then wolf.”

“Not exactly. I try to balance my human side and my wolf nature, Alex.”

“Exactly. Wolf nature, again, as if your wolf is secondary or a lesser part of you. It is the opposite, your wolf comes first and then your *magi*. You will not find peace with yourself until you find peace with your wolf.”

“I feel like I’m in a bad episode of *Kung Fu*, and you’re about to go all *master-like* on me. Find peace with my wolf. Ah yes, because she’s just so fucking peaceful.”

“I did not say it would be easy, just that you must do it.” He frowned. “You’ve witnessed firsthand what happens to those who do not find peace with their wolf.”

“There is a lot going on here, Alex, a lot that I have to deal with.”

“I know. I am willing to wait it out with you.”

“How magnanimous of you,” she said sarcastically.

“Your sarcasm is not lost on me. Think on these words, we all do what we must to navigate this world. We all make choices, hard ones, at times. And we all sometimes lose sight of the true nature of things. But we are Pack, Dennison, and in the end ... family. Your Pack will never desert you, or fail you. Your Pack is the only truth you need to look for. We are the star which will guide you.”

“You are also ruthless, merciless and deadly.” Yes, Pack was family, but they were a violent family.

“That too. We are in part, animal, *Kyra*. Animals will do as they will.”

Danny wanted to rip off her ears, maybe then she wouldn’t have to listen to all this

Dr. Phil talk. She was exhausted and just basically fed up with it all. It wasn't as if she had asked to be born a *magi* wolf. Yeah, yeah, so she was complaining, she was just so damn annoyed and fed up.

"We will be all right, you and I."

"I'm just not so sure about that fact, Alex," Danny said tiredly. "But I'm just too tired to fight any more."

"I wasn't aware that we were fighting, *Kyra*."

No. He wouldn't be. Damn reasonable wolf that he was. "Just tell me when our shindig begins."

"Do not try to tell me you are not the least bit excited for the hunt, my dear."

She could try, but she'd be lying. "I am excited. It's been a while since I've last had a hunt." Her beast was more than ready for one. "I want my stuff put back into my room, do you hear me?" Alex remained silent. "Really, Alex. I want my stuff put back into my room. I'm not moving in here. I am not sharing a room with you."

"How would that look?" he finally said. "We are mated, and yet we do not share the same chamber."

"I don't fucking care how it looks. I like my space. I'm not staying in here."

"Dennison—"

"I'm tired, but that doesn't mean I won't stand here and argue this point all night if I have to. I will, Alex."

Alex sighed. "I don't have time for this nonsense."

"Neither do I!" she quickly shot back. "So?"

"All right, Dennison. I'll have your things moved back into your room. However, do not get the mistaken impression that this is finished, it isn't. We have only just begun."

"Yada, yada, yada, blah, blah, blah, I've heard it all before." She turned to leave.

"What time do I need to be in the Lunar Circle?"

"Ten o'clock."

"Ten o'clock it is."

"Dennison," Alex called out.

"Yeah?"

"Prepare yourself, it is the first time our beasts will run together."

Danny nodded curtly and left. When she was once again in the relative safety of her own room she breathed a deep sigh of relief. Alex was right, she did need to prepare herself. They were bonded, and she felt that bond even when they were fighting and snapping at one another, she felt it. It was a strange and alien feeling for her, this need and want for him. Oh, as a pup she had harbored a crush, but this bond went so much deeper than a mere crush. In the room, when he was standing toe-to-toe with her she had just about molested him, she'd wanted him that much. Her beast craved him, desired him like a force unknown till now. It was decidedly unnerving. Okay, she just hated it. If she could not temper down the need she felt for him their hunt would be impossible, she was likely to jump his bones on the trail.

Damn him, and damn the bond.

\* \* \* \*

Sweat poured off her brow and her muscles strained under the weight and pressure. Danny groaned. She hated weights. Unfortunately, since rejoining Pack and

becoming *Roit*, weight training was imperative. She was going up against wolves that were much larger and in some cases, physically stronger than she. Any advantage she could get, she would take.

“Need someone to spot?”

Danny sat up and wiped her brow with the back of her hand. “Hey, Benjamin. No, I’m okay. I’m done. Maybe next time.”

“Sure thing.”

Danny smiled at the youngling. He really was young, just seventeen in looks, with that flush of youth that was so charming. His face was truly beautiful. Soft, almost delicate, he was lovely. And then he brushed his long, blond hair from the side of his face, and the perfection was finished. His left eye was gone, dug out and discarded like so much trash by his Alpha. There were scars, five ragged lines that marred his porcelain skin, from his left eye down to his perfect mouth. A ruined angel, Danny gritted her teeth, she wanted to rip into the throat of Benjamin’s Alpha. She wanted to bring forth blood.

“Hey, you, uh, okay?” Benjamin asked. “You looked sort of far away.”

Danny pulled herself together. “I’m good.” Benjamin walked over and straddled the workbench. Danny could scent his hesitation. There was something heavy weighing on his mind. “Tell me, Benjamin. What’s wrong?”

Benjamin jerked his head up. “How do you know anything is wrong?”

She gave him her best “are you kidding” look. “I can scent it,” she said simply. “So, tell me,” she shrugged, “or not, it’s up to you.”

“We’re meeting tonight,” Benjamin said, finally. “And, well, we’ll hunt, right?”

“Yes.”

“I can do this, Danny.” Benjamin’s voice was full of fire. His good eye burned with intensity.

“Of course you can. Who has been telling you otherwise?” Benjamin shrugged and lowered his eyes. The submissive wolf was now showing. “Have wolves been filling your ears with drivel?”

Benjamin looked up then, there was a faint trace of humor back in his lovely eye. “Drivel? Is that an old person word?”

Danny snorted. “Careful there, pup, or I’ll show you how *old* I am.”

“I’m shaking in my shoes.”

She couldn’t help but laugh, their banter made her smile. She could easily kick his ass and he knew it, but he wasn’t afraid of baiting her. It told her something ... he wasn’t afraid of her, he didn’t cower in front of her, and she liked that. There were enough wolves in Pack he would have to cower to, but she was not one of them. She liked the pup, really liked him. Of course, she still feared for him. He was still far too submissive and weak. But that would change—it would have to. His survival depended on it.

“There are those who don’t want me on the hunt,” Benjamin said tonelessly.

“Yeah, so there are those who don’t want me breathing, so what?” Danny shot back.

“It’s different with you, you’re different.”

“Well, thanks,” she drawled.

“No, I mean, you know what I mean. You’re Dennison Lee. It doesn’t matter if people like you or not, you, well...” a faint flush rose up his cheeks, “kick ass. You don’t need people to like you.”

From the mouth of babes. Danny sighed, and wasn’t that the truth of things. She

didn't need people to like her.

"But me," Benjamin continued, "I don't have your power or your strength or your status in Pack. I *need* people to like me. If they don't like me," his eyes dimmed, "I die. It's pretty simple."

He was young, but definitely not unaware of how things worked. He knew his position in the Pack was precarious at best—that at this moment he lived by the grace of his new Alpha.

"You will go on this hunt, Benjamin. The Pack hunts tonight. You are part of the Pack, and so you will hunt. It's that simple."

"They will hold me back."

"And you will prevail, and you will fight for your stance and your right to hunt. If you do not, if you back down now, you will have signed your death warrant." It was harsh and brutal but she had to make him see the truth. If he didn't take a stand now, there wasn't a chance he would make it. The Pack would eat him alive. "You can do this, Benjamin. I know you can." Danny grinned. "I'm *Roit* and I tell you that you can do this."

Benjamin sighed. "I'm not used to this. With Uriel I never—" He broke off suddenly.

"Yes, Benjamin." She didn't want to make him talk about it if he didn't want to. But if he needed to let it out, then she would listen.

Benjamin straightened his shoulders. "In my last Pack I knew exactly where I stood. There was no doubt as to my ... position."

"Your position," Danny murmured.

"Yeah. It sucked. But no one tried to kill me," he shrugged, "I was Uriel's," he swallowed, "pet, and no one would dare to harm me and face his possible wrath. Of course he could hurt me whenever he wanted to."

*And he did*, Danny thought, looking at his sad and tired face. "He kept you weak, didn't he?" It was blatantly obvious that Alpha Uriel had hindered Benjamin, kept him purposely weak. He didn't want his pet wolf to grow any claws.

"He didn't let me spar, kept me with him when we hunted and didn't allow me any ... freedom. I've only ever wanted my freedom, Dennison."

And didn't she know what that was like—the desperate want for freedom. "You can call me Danny, Benjamin."

"Okay, Danny."

"Well, it's different here. You aren't your Alpha's pet anymore."

"I know, and I'm more grateful than I can convey to our Alpha for freeing me. But now here I am, out of place, useless..." he grimaced, "a freak."

Danny bounded to her feet. "Don't you ever say that, you are not a freak!"

"I see how people look at me," he whispered. "I see how they stare at my ... my..."

"Your unbelievably awesome good looks," Danny quipped. "Yeah, you're gorgeous, can you blame them?" Benjamin's mouth dropped open and he gaped at her. "Come on, Benjamin, all that blond hair, smooth skin and that perfect killer smile ... you're a hottie." Benjamin was still speechless. Danny rushed on. "So, now that we've established you're gorgeous, and that people can't help looking at you, can we get off it? I'm beginning to feel very inferior and decidedly ignored."

"You are something else," Benjamin finally said.



“Thanks.”

“No, uh, thank you, Danny. I really like talking to you. You make me smile.”

She made him smile? That was something she didn’t hear often. “Well, that’s good. I think you should smile a lot, you have a great one.”

Benjamin blushed again. He stood. “I guess I should go, sorry if I disturbed your workout.”

“Didn’t disturb anything. And you can come and talk to me anytime you’d like.”

Benjamin tossed her a shy smile before he left the room.

Once he was gone Danny pondered the strangeness of her feelings for this pup. She felt sympathy for him, that was for sure, but it was more than that. He reminded her of ... Daniel. No, Daniel and Benjamin didn’t look anything alike, but Benjamin’s shy smile, his mannerisms, they reminded her of Daniel when he was younger, and when he didn’t hate her as much as he did now. She hadn’t been able to do for Daniel what she wished—she hadn’t been the sister to him that she wanted to be. But she had a chance now to help Benjamin, to help this pup find his place and to survive the brutal world of the wolf. And there was a strength that she saw in his eyes, a strength she would force him to see and use. He would survive. She would see to it.

\* \* \* \*

She hated formal ceremonies, but she loved the hunt. Danny surveyed her surroundings, taking in the meeting circle and studying the faces of the many wolves that made up Pack. The Grand Dame was overseeing, and everything had to be just so. The Grand Dame was resplendent in a long, white robe accented with green and gold thread. Her power was a heady thing and washed over the circle like a demanding hand. Danny could feel it pressing against her, beckoning her, and she strengthened her wards. She was not going to fall prey to the Grand Dame’s power—not tonight, not with so much on the line. They were here because of what she had done, what she had done with Alex. She had to remain composed and she could not allow her temper to rule her. The Pack had to find comfort in their Alpha’s union, and if they noticed or felt any strife between Alex and herself ... there would be hell to pay.

“You look beautiful,” Alex leaned over and whispered in her ear.

“Thank you.” It was weird, standing here next to Alex in the circle with the entire Pack watching them and the Grand Dame smiling down at them like a proud parent.

“My children,” the Grand Dame’s voice rang out clear and strong. “We convene here tonight, under the knowing moon and watchful eye of the Mother, to witness and give our love and blessings to our Prime pair, Alexander Holt and Dennison Lee. These two have come together. They have joined their bodies and life. Their good is your good, and their happiness is your happiness. I have blessed and witnessed their initial joining and the great Mother is pleased. Let us now give thanks to the miracle and wonder that is the coupling of a Prime pair.”

Danny forced herself to remain still as the Pack descended ... and they really did descend. Suddenly she was surrounded, touched, caressed, kissed. Each member of Pack touched her and whispered the words, “To your health, and guiding hands.” The words were significant, as they were entrusting their lives to her and to Alex.

Danny felt a great big lump form in her throat, and an equally large lump take over her stomach. The responsibilities kept mounting. God, she was now *Kyra*. What did she

know about being a *Kyra*? She was going to fuck this up. Oh, God in heaven, what if she fucked it up?

“Easy, Dennison, easy ... all will be well,” Alex said softly, squeezing her hand.

Her jaw worked back and forth. Of course he knew, of course he could sense her unease. They were bonded, mated, shackled together. Alex ... impossible, domineering, overbearing Alex, had she ever imagined this for them? No, not even in her girlish dreams had she seen herself in the great circle being acknowledged by Pack and blessed by the Grand Dame. It was completely surreal.

*There is a great change in the wind, ashleya.*

Danny sighed deeply. *Was I that vulnerable, Savior?*

*Your defenses are crumbling, you seem uneasy. I can feel the shifting winds of change and I know that something has happened of great importance.*

*Shifting winds of change ... you speak so much nicer than I do,* she grumbled.

Savior laughed. *Thank you for the compliment, ashleya. Now, will you not tell me what has happened? Why you are so upset?*

*Not upset, exactly, just sort of uneasy and, and...*

*Lost?*

Was she lost? *Not lost, well, maybe just a little.* God, admitting it was hard.

*What happened, tell me.*

She would have to. It would affect him too. *The Pack is currently giving their blessing and swearing their allegiance.*

*Oh?*

*Yeah, oh, is right. Alex and I are standing here as naked as the day we were born getting felt up.*

Savior chuckled. *I'd like to see you naked, my love.*

*You get to see me naked a lot, Savior.*

*Not of late.* His tone of voice changed.

*Oh, Savior, Danny sighed, I've had a lot on my plate. I haven't really felt, uh, intimate and ready to engage in any sexual shenanigans. I'm sorry if you've felt neglected.*

*You're apologizing for ignoring me?* He was incredulous.

*I'm apologizing if I inadvertently made you feel unimportant, or not relevant to my life, because you are, you are very relevant.*

*Oh, my love. Come and see me soon. I need your warmth.*

*I will, Savior. I just need to deal with a couple of more things before I stir the pot anymore.*

*I understand. Goodnight, my love.* He disconnected.

“We will need to talk about this.” Alex’s grip on her hand had tightened. “You are connected to the creature.”

“If by *the creature*, you mean Savior, yeah, I am,” she hissed. “You’re going to have to get over it because it seems that we’re all three connected,” *technically four*, but this was probably not the best time to address that issue.

“I will not have that thing interfering in our lives, *Kyra*.”

“*He* has a name, and it really doesn’t matter whether or not you want him interfering, he’s here, he’s present, and he’s not going anywhere.”

“Children, children.” The Grand Dame clucked her tongue. She leaned into them.

“This is not the time or the place for this discussion. The Pack grows restless, Alexander, lead them to hunt.”

Alex nodded. “You are right, Grand Dame,” he turned to glare at Danny, “we have time to discuss these matters, time when we do not have so many eyes and ears upon us.” Alex turned to the Pack and opened his arms wide in a welcoming gesture. “My Pack, my family, we thank you for the great gift of acceptance and the trust that you’ve placed in us. My *Kyra* and I will give our last breath to uphold all that Pack is, and be worthy of the great honor of your love. To celebrate this momentous occasion ... we will hunt.”

Danny felt the ripple of excitement that washed through the crowd as they heard the word, *hunt*. A hunt was greatly anticipated, and this hunt especially so because of the importance of the occasion that it was honoring. She watched the flickering expressions that crossed over the many faces of the wolves within Pack, and knew that humanity was fading by the second. They were moments away from losing themselves. Only Alex, and his power as Alpha, kept them in check.

“The hunt,” she whispered under her breath.

“Yes,” Alex caressed her cheek, “can your creature give this to you, *Kyra*? Only Pack, only I, can bring you to the hunt.”

Danny chose to ignore his words and subtle, not-so-subtly snide, remark. It wasn’t worth the argument, and for that, she considered herself quite reserved. She had actually just displayed a “grown-up” tendency—reserve. Of course, she could just be tired, or maybe she was coming down with something?

“They wait.” The Grand Dame motioned to Pack.

Alex nodded, and with that, he let go the reins, and the change swept over them. All around, the sights and smells of the shift bombarded. Danny shivered as immense power and the magic of the change flew through Pack. She could feel each nuance, each harmonious string as it was plucked, and it was incredible. This was what it felt like to be alive. This was what Alex spoke of when he said that only Pack could provide such relief, such glory. This was the way of the wolf.

“Are you ready, *Kyra*?”

Danny nodded, closed her eyes and allowed her own shift to overtake her. Within moments, after the passing fluidity of stretching skin and melting humanity, she stood, in wolf form, at the ready.

“Mother take me,” Alex murmured. “You are so incredibly beautiful.” He admired her for a moment, before he, too, shifted, joining her in wolf solidarity. Taking a second to nuzzle her, he let out a howl and rushed for the woods.

The hunt was on!

## Chapter Eight

Life was most peaceful here—the woods, the moon, the pull of the earth, everything worked to ease the mind, soul and body. There was no power struggle. The Great Mother didn't demand her soul. There was no volleying back and forth to own her, to cage her. She could understand this, she was alive and powerful and full of joy. The beast was happy. The woman was content and all seemed to settle into a pool of bliss. Even Alex's presence didn't bother her. In fact, she rather enjoyed having his company. Something worked, felt right, having him here, at her side. To know that his solid and powerful body was hers, and that his fighting arm and Alpha strength now worked in favor of her happiness ... it was incredibly comforting. Although she was far from okay with admitting these revelations to him, no, she couldn't tell him how she felt. Getting too close was dangerous. It had always been dangerous. When you got too close, you were hurt. Her life didn't mix well with company. Life had taught her that harsh lesson. It was much easier to keep people at arm's length.

Danny jumped when she felt Alex nuzzle her side. She had been so engrossed in her thoughts that she had missed the two deer that lay before them. Fine wolf she was, she couldn't even keep her mind on the prey. She made a disgusted sound deep in her throat and nodded to acknowledge she had seen them. Before she could form another thought, or a plan of action or attack, Alex was off. Alex in motion was beyond beautiful. Watching him sprint across the glade and rush toward the deer was an extraordinary moment. His form, the perfect length of his legs, was so beautiful it took her breath away. Yes, she had always thought him a beautiful wolf, but in motion, in the throes of the hunt, he was breathtaking.

Well, she wasn't going to allow him to have all the fun! Danny took off after the second deer. She cornered the frightened animal by the brook and soaked up its fear. She could feel its terror and her beast ate it up. This was what her wolf demanded. This was what her wolf craved. The fear, the terror and the final thrill of the kill, something her woman could never and would never understand. Both parts were as integral to her make-up as breathing. She needed both souls to fill her. She could not survive split. She had tried, and sometimes she even succeeded, but never for long, and the consequences were always dire.

Danny lunged forward, and just like that it was over. It was a quick and merciful kill. She only allowed herself to linger for a moment. She moved back when she felt Alex's presence. Danny turned her head. Alex was staring at her intently. His eyes were glowing and she could feel his desire and need pulsing through him. He wanted her. And she needed him.

Alex rushed off and Danny was hot on his heels. They broke the clearing together. He was bathed in moonlight, and so utterly beautiful he took her breath away. She watched as the change took him. The change was as beautiful as he was. The magic, the power, began to pulse and shimmer around him, and she watched as his wolf melted away to leave the man in its wake.

He said nothing. He did not have to. Danny walked toward him, her wolf disappearing with each step she took. When she was standing a mere foot away from

him, she stopped. Her eyes soaked him in. Bathed in moonlight he was electrifying, and she could not have denied him if she had wanted to.

Alex was upon her in a second. His hand clamped around the back of her head, pulling her toward him. He drank her in. His tongue thrust in and out of her mouth, tasting, consuming. Danny met each stroke of his tongue. She wanted to breathe him in. It was as if she could not get close enough. He pressed her down to the soft and pungent ground. She could smell the scents of the forest and reveled in them. Alex's hands began to knead the full flesh of her breasts. His eyes were hot.

"I will take you slowly this time, *Kyra*."

Danny pulled him down for a kiss. She pulled away after a moment and whispered, "Don't call me that."

Alex continued his exploration. He nipped her neck and licked the soft shell of her ear. Danny shivered. Her body was begging for more ... it was not patient.

"You are ... you are my *Kyra*." He followed the trail his fingers made with his tongue. He gently laved her nipples, and then bit them gently, smiling when she cried out. "You are delicious, and your scent is so very sweet."

"You make me sound like cotton candy." Danny gasped when she felt his fingers begin to explore the wet and aching flesh of her pussy.

"Oh no, you are so much sweeter than cotton candy."

"Oh," Danny moaned when his fingers pressed deeper, "uh, well, that's good to know." Her brain was beginning to lose its functioning ability. The pleasure was growing increasingly intense, and her body felt as if it were on fire. She needed more.

"You will have more, my *Kyra*."

She hadn't been aware she had spoken out loud.

"You didn't," Alex whispered, spreading her legs wide, and moving down her body. Danny tried to jerk up from her prone position when she heard him. Alex kept a firm grasp on her body, keeping her in place. "Do not become self-righteous on me, Dennison, my love. We are mated. I will be entwined with you, as you are with me. Our bodies and our minds are united."

No! No! Not another one. She was getting a serious case of multiple personalities.

"It will never be as it is with them, *Kyra*," Alex murmured. He entered her slowly.

Danny moaned. He was hard and hot, and just when she felt him stretching her ... he was gone. She gasped and pulled at his shoulders, urging him closer. "Stop fucking teasing me."

"Oh, but I like to tease you, my *Kyra*." Alex bit her neck, and with one sure thrust imbedded himself within her. "So eager ... so needy." He withdrew.

"NO!" Danny screamed. She wrapped her legs around his waist, desperate to keep him near.

"Tell me then, tell me how much you need me, *Kyra*."

No, she wouldn't beg. She wouldn't beg him. "Alex..." Her voice came out strained.

Alex's eyes glittered in the moonlight. They burned into her. "What do I do to you ... for you? Tell me ... tell me how much you want this."

She was going to burst if he didn't fill her now. But she would be damned if she told him that. Danny gritted her teeth and closed her eyes tightly, fighting to keep the demands of her body and her beast from overriding her control.

*Let me go. Let me out. I need this. I need him.*

She heard her beast chanting. She tried to shut her out, but couldn't. The voice became louder and louder until she felt her mouth open. Just as she was about to let go and beg Alex, plead with him to fuck her hard and fast, she felt his cock bury itself into her aching pussy.

"You will be the death of me, Dennison. You are the most stubborn and hard-headed of wolves," Alex murmured. His hips began to piston back and forth, his rhythm steady and sure.

It was good, so good, but she wanted, needed, so much more than sure and steady. She raked her nails across his back and hissed. "Fuck me, Alex. Fuck me until it hurts." She watched as molten lava filled his eyes and felt his grip on her arms tighten.

"As my *Kyra* wishes." He ground into her. Pressing her even harder against the sweet-smelling earth. His movements were furious and frantic, and the sound of their bodies coming together filled the silence of the night.

"Yes, sweet Mother, yes," Danny moaned. He was hard as stone within her, delving deeper and deeper with every thrust.

"Oh, *Kyra*, my own, my heart." Alex wrapped his hands within the soft strands of her hair and buried his face within them. "Ahhhh ... merciful Mother..."

He was close. She knew he was. She could feel his beast rising, rising to meet her own. She was on the edge. She could taste her own heartbeat as it rushed and pumped at an incredible rate.

"Alex, I'm ... I'm coming..." And with a scream to wake the dead she was tossed over the edge and into the tumultuous storm of her orgasmclimax. Alex's own roar followed, and she watched, wide-eyed, as the shimmer of their beasts rose and collided.

\* \* \* \*

The cool air brushed her skin and kissed her softly. Danny smiled and took a moment to bask in the aftermath of sensational sex. It was true. There was a bond as a mated pair that could not be denied. She could feel Alex's heart, hear it, almost taste its frantic pulse upon her tongue. She could smell his lust and desire, and she matched it with her own. Underneath the moon, and blanketed by the stars and thick night sky, she felt her wolf soul rejoice. A true peace filled her, a peace that she had never felt before—or her beast had never felt before.

"We will make it work." Alex's voice broke the stillness of the night.

Danny turned her head to face him. She smiled slightly. "We ... what a strange thought."

"There is a we, now, Dennison."

She swallowed deeply, working past the knot in her stomach. "Yeah, I know."

"Do you?" He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close. "Are you going to run, *Kyra*?"

"What?"

A sad smile crossed his face. "I asked if you are going to run. No, don't try to deny it. Whenever things have become too difficult you have taken off in a mad sprint. You have run as far as you can away from Pack, away from me. I want to know now if what has occurred between us is going to make you run?"

Okay, the thought *had* crossed her mind. There was something unbeaten within her that screamed, *Don't let him have you. Don't let them cage you. Run, run, run as fast as*

*you can, and don't look back.* Fucking awful inner voice. Where the hell would she run to? Now that was the million-dollar question. How far would she actually get? And where could she actually go where they wouldn't find her, where they wouldn't drag her back. And, oh, the consequences would be dire.

"You are terrified," Alex whispered.

She couldn't deny it. "Yeah, I am."

"What scares you so?"

"Besides being locked in a gilded cage?"

"There is no cage here, Dennison. The only cage I see is the one you have constructed yourself."

"Shut up, Sigmund Freud!" She scowled at him. "Listen, I've come to like my life the way it is. I was a rather upbeat mercenary until you all came and fucked it up."

"How? How did I ruin your false existence?"

"You see?" She pulled away. "You're doing it again."

"Doing what?"

"Being condescending and mocking me."

"I wasn't aware that I was being condescending, or that I was mocking you, *Kyra*."

"No, you're never aware of it. It just comes naturally to you," she muttered. She took a couple of deep breaths to calm herself. "I want to try, I do."

"Try?"

"Yeah, Alex. I want to try to make this work. I just don't know if it will."

"It will." His voice was so certain, so resolute.

"You seem very sure of yourself."

Alex's face broke into a broad smile. "About this, about us, yes, I'm sure. I have always known, *Kyra*. I have always known that we were meant to be together. There has never been a doubt."

"Even when you tortured me?" Okay, that was a low blow. But she didn't like hearing that he had decided their future ages ago.

"I never tortured you." Alex's voice had gone tight and cold.

"Hmmm... I'd say bleeding and dragging myself half-dead from Pack was torture."

"That was not my decision. You were the one that decided to sever your ties."

"Did I also decide to nearly kill myself?" Alex opened his mouth to speak and Danny held up a hand and beat him to the punch. "Okay, okay, enough. This isn't getting us anywhere." She could tell by the look on his face he wanted to say, *Well, you started it*. But to his credit he held back. "We both have made our choices ... hard choices. And I know that they weren't always the ones that we wanted, but they were the ones that we decided on at the time. And we have to live with them now."

"Yes, we have to live with them, *Kyra*."

"Alex."

"Yes?"

"Could you please not call me *Kyra*?"

"You are."

"I don't care what I am, Alex. It really bugs me when you call me *Kyra*."

"It's a sign of great respect, a title fit for a queen."

Great. That was all she needed, to be another queen. "I have a name. It really bothers

me that you've disassociated me with my name, my personality, and have replaced me with this ... title. It's like I'm just your *Kyra* now, not Danny." She took a deep breath. "And I'm still Danny, Alex. I am still Danny. I need you to see that, to recognize how much it means to me, to still be myself."

"I wish only to honor you, *Kyra* ... Dennison. I wish to show you the respect that you deserve as my mate, as the *Kyra* to the dual Packs."

"Well, that's all well and good. But I don't want to lose my identity. I may be the *Kyra* to the dual Packs, but I haven't shriveled away. The sooner you realize that, and accept it, the better off we'll be as a couple."

Alex's smile returned. "I do like the sound of that ... couple."

"Do you? Even though it's a very *human* concept?"

"Human, non-human. I like it. A couple, two as one ... together."

Danny nodded. She still had major misgivings, and her stomach still rolled with the thought of being tied to Alex, but she was beginning to understand she had made her bed, and now she had to lie in it. She got to her feet and took several deep breaths. God, the air smelled sweet, the scents of the earth were so very welcoming.

"You are all to me, Dennison." Alex spoke quietly, fervently.

*He may have your body, but you have my heart, ashleya. And now that you have it, will you keep it safe?*

*Oh, Savior. Wow, as if matters weren't complicated enough already. I don't even know what to do with my own heart, Savior ... let alone yours.*

Savior chuckled. *Just keep it, ashleya. Keep it and we will learn together.*

*I'm in a very big...*

*Mess?*

*I'm not sure if it's a mess, but it's definitely really, really complicated. How am I supposed to juggle you guys?*

*I am not quite certain if I enjoy being thought of as something that needs to be juggled, however, I can see where you would be confused ... a lot has occurred over not that long of a time.*

*You can say that again.*

*I would still like to meet with your Alpha, ashleya.*

*And I still think it's a very, very bad idea. Not to mention, I don't think Alex wants to meet with you.*

*There are things that must be discussed between the three of us.*

*Savior, I'm not saying you're not right, I'm just saying it's complicated. Alex has certain ... feelings about the undead community that will not be easily destroyed or put aside.*

*He's a prejudiced wolf.*

*Perhaps, prejudiced, yes—but not without reason. The vampire and wolf communities have never associated much. We aren't known for our chummy get togethers. Alex is in a high-pressure position and is dealing with a lot of demands. He isn't exactly amiable to adding, 'vampire meeting' to his list of things to deal with right now.*

*Perhaps not, but it doesn't change the necessity of the situation. Ashleya, surely you can see how important it is we all sit down and discuss the ramifications of our actions? You have tied yourself to a vampire and a wolf...*



*And a demon prince.*

*Ah yes, the demon prince—a matter best left for another time. Am I safe in assuming he cannot cross to this realm in corporal form?*

*He's pretty much tied to Hell, yeah.*

*Then, as I was saying, we shall deal with him later. However, your Alpha is very real, and very present. He is soon to experience, as are we all, the consequences of our actions.*

*You make it sound like life or death.*

*Savior chuckled, dryly. Very well put—life or death. We are dealing with life and death, ashleya. What happens when the living, the dead and the other combine and unite? We must talk. I do not think any of us would enjoy being in the dark, so to speak, about the situation and the possible consequences.*

“Kyra!” Alex’s shout and subsequent shaking of her shoulders pulled her out of her conversation with Savior. “Kyra!”

“Okay, okay, stop shaking me like a fucking rag doll, Alex.”

“Stop conversing with that thing.”

“He’s not a thing, he’s a vampire, and he and I have some matters to clear between the two of us. Do you mind?”

“Actually, I do. I do not like you associating with that creature.”

“Tough shit. I’m doing a lot more than conversing with him. And no, our relationship isn’t going to change that fact. You want me, Alex, well then, you’ve got him too.”

“He is not my Kyra.”

“No, but he loves your Kyra, and I love him.” Wow, that was getting easier to say. Danny watched as the blood drained from Alex’s face and his body stiffened. “I love him, Alex. I know it’s not what you want to hear.” God ... *that* was that probably the understatement of the year. “But it’s the truth, and you deserve the truth. If we truly are a mated pair, then you deserve to know your mate’s entire situation. I am bound to Savior, Alex. Yes, really bound. We share a connection, not like the one you and I share, but a very real connection nonetheless. I cannot undo the bind, and...” She stopped. She had actually been about to say it ... *even if she could undo it, she wouldn’t.*

“You would not unbind yourself from the creature if you could,” Alex said bitterly.

Well, it looks like she didn’t have to say it after all. “No, I don’t think I would.”

Alex’s mouth was a taut, strained line. He nodded curtly. “Well, it appears that we do have matters to discuss then.”

“Uh-huh.”

Alex held out his hand. “Shall we join our Pack, Kyra?”

This was obviously the best she was going to get. She nodded. “All right, Alex. Lead the way.”

## Chapter Nine

The knowing look on the Grand Dame's face really annoyed her. It was obvious that the great lady knew exactly what had happened in the woods and was pleased with the turn of events.

Pack was scattered. Most were mingling, eating, drinking and engaging in "extra-curricular" activities. With each step she took, Danny could scent sex and lust. It was heavy in the air. Not surprising, of course, it was a hunting night and the beasts were out in full.

"A fine hunt, Alexander." The Grand Dame walked imperiously over to them.

Alex inclined his head. "Thank you, Grand Dame. That is a great compliment coming from you. Your hunts have always been magnificent events."

The Grand Dame waved his compliment away. "Oh, nonsense, it has always been just show, Alexander, you know that. We must always keep up a certain appearance." She turned her gaze sharply to Danny. "Now, child, there is much on your mind."

"Things left for Alex and me to discuss, Grand Dame."

The Grand Dame's eyebrows lifted. "Are you *dismissing* me?"

Danny cleared her throat. "No, of course not, Grand Dame. I am merely pointing out that this discussion ... one, if I may add, that is a long time in the coming, is better left for Alex and myself. If you would like to join us," she lifted her chin, "then I cede to your wisdom on these matters. However, I believe this is one discussion that the two of us must have ... alone." How would she take that?

The Grand Dame blinked and then broke out into tinkling peals of laughter. She nodded. "Well, that was nicely and diplomatically put, Danny. I am surprised and impressed. Very well then, I shall leave you and Alexander to your meeting." Her eyes sharpened. "I expect to be kept informed and updated, of course."

Both Danny and Alex nodded and spoke simultaneously. "Of course," they parroted.

The Grand Dame gave them one more amused look before turning with a swishing of long skirts to walk away.

"Come, Kyra. We can speak in our ... my room."

Danny followed Alex into the house and up the stairs. Once they had reached his room, she immediately felt calmer. They were away from prying eyes and alone. She walked to the door and began to run her hands across the rough wood.

"What are you doing?"

She continued to work, drawing patterns into the worn wood. "Warding us. I would like privacy ... real privacy for this conversation. And save locking ourselves in some experimental biosphere, this is the best way I know to get it." She smiled. "And really a much easier option." A couple of moments later she was finished. She stepped back and eyed her work critically. "Not great ... a little messy, but it'll do." She turned to face Alex. "Are we really going to talk, Alex? You're not going to go all cave-wolf on me, are you?"

A small smile danced upon Alex's lips. "I will attempt to restrain myself from pulling you by your hair into my cave."

"Oh, well then," Danny chuckled, "good."

The smile on his face died. "I cannot promise that I will not feel my beast, *Kyra*. The mere thought of that creature stirs..." He broke off.

"I understand, Alex. In fact, I felt very much the same thing when I first met him."

"Oh?"

Danny recalled her first meeting with Savior and laughed. "I was all, well, I was my usual charming self, and he was a blood-sucking fiend from hell ... in my opinion. You can imagine just how well that meeting went."

Alex looked perplexed. "And what changed things? How, why, do you feel this way toward him now?"

"It's really complicated." Danny sat cross-legged on the bed and patted the spot next to her. She waited until Alex took a seat next to her before she continued. "I had the same misgivings, notions ... prejudices that most of our kind have. I was bound and determined to see the worst in him, and I did, for quite some time. And he was so ... patient, understanding," her voice broke and she strove for composure, "kind. He was so damned kind, Alex."

"Kind?" Alex shook his head.

"Yeah, kind. Oh, don't get me wrong, he's arrogant, domineering, egotistical, and pretty much the master of all he surveys, and in many ways, he's very much like you," she finished with a laugh.

"That creature and I have nothing in—"

"Yes, yes, I've heard it all before." Danny cut him off. "He's the first person in a very long time that who has shown me any real consideration. Not in my power, not what I can do for him, or bring to him, but me, just me, Alex. It's one of the reasons that I love him. When I'm with him, and he's looking at me, I feel as if he really sees *me*."

Alex grabbed her hands. "I see you, *Kyra*."

Danny pulled away. "You see your *Kyra*. You don't really see me ... not yet anyway. Perhaps we'll get there. I'm willing, not that I have much choice now, to give it a try."

"You care more for that creature than you do for me, your Alpha, or for your Pack."

"This *isn't* a competition." She pushed some hair out of her face and sighed. "I know it's a difficult concept to grasp because our beasts want to fight, want to dominate, and want to win, we always want to win. But we aren't all our beasts, Alex. We need to find a balance. I'm just beginning to find mine. It's not easy, in fact, it's pretty fucking difficult, but I'm realizing that perhaps, as Savior has said, there is enough of me to give to everyone."

"Your creature said that?"

"Savior, he has a name, Alex. And yes, he did. He's pretty insightful."

"I don't know if I can share you." The words came out a mere whisper.

"You don't have much of a choice. I'm willing to work with you. I'm going to try, Alex, try to accept these changes in my life..." she smiled, "and not go running as fast as I can in the other direction. But *you* need to try as well. You need to work on being more accepting, more understanding. I'm spread pretty thin these days, and I'm going to need your help. You can't always be on my back. I can't have your disapproving eyes following me everywhere. And..." *Oh, here came the hardest part*, "I'd appreciate it if you weren't always ordering me to do things, or just ordering me about in general. Whatever happened to good old asking?"

“You’d refuse.”

Danny shrugged. “Uh-huh, it’s a possibility. But when you order me to do something instead of asking me, I’m already on the defensive and it puts me in a pissy mood.”

“*Kyra*, when are you *not* in a pissy mood?”

Danny blinked. She saw the twinkle in his eye and a smile lingering on his lips, and burst out laughing. “Hmmm ... you’re right. I think I came out of the womb pissy. But your cave-wolf antics don’t help matters any.”

Alex nodded slightly. “I could see that. You must understand that as Alpha it is difficult for me to suppress certain innate natures. Certain things are as natural to me as breathing, as necessary to me as my wolf nature. I will never be a docile or meek man. In fact, I will never be a true man, Dennison. I am a wolf that can walk in a man’s form. But my inner soul is beast.”

“I know, Alex. I know. But you have to see that your soul may be wolf, but mine, mine is torn. I wear the mantle of wolf and woman. Your beast must accept *both* parts of me, or this will not work.”

“I shall try.”

Danny smiled slightly. “That’s all of ask of you at this moment, Alex. I just want you to try.” Danny took his hands almost shyly then. “We can both just try.”

\* \* \* \*

What a strange turn of events. She was actually working *with* her assorted bevy of men to have a normal (or as normal as she could ever get) relationship—relationships. God, she was in multiple relationships. How had she survived to this point?

“*Kyra*.”

Danny stopped at the bottom of the staircase and turned toward the voice. “Titus.” She acknowledged him coolly. She still wasn’t sure of him, nor of his intentions.

Titus bowed his head. “I wished to welcome you again, *Kyra*. I am honored to call you *Kyra* of the dual clans.”

Danny smiled tightly. “And it seems that I owe you a congratulations as well, Titus. I take it that you have been named Beta, and honored so by the Grand Dame.”

Titus’ mouth curved up into a smile. “Indeed, I am pleased. I’ve long waited for...” He drifted off.

“For?”

Titus’ smile widened. “It is of no importance. Again, I just wished to welcome you, to tell you that I am very pleased that you are our *Kyra*, there. There is no one I would rather have in the position.”

“Somehow I find that very difficult to believe,” Danny muttered.

“You doubt me?” His voice had once again gone cold.

“I doubt you.” Danny’s answer was truthful and curt.

“What have I done to make you doubt me, to make you doubt my intentions?”

“It is what you have not done that makes me wearywary, Titus.” Danny could see by his expression that he was confused by her answer. She didn’t feel she owed him an explanation and yet she felt compelled to give him one. “The wolf is barely contained, Titus. You are barely contained.” Danny moved toward the study, she could feel Titus following after her. When they were both safely inside the warm, book-lined room, she closed the door, locking it behind her. “What you would not say before ... I see it written

in your eyes.”

“I don’t understand, *Kyra*.”

“I think you do. You have secrets, deep soul-ridden secrets. Those secrets threaten those I love, and they threaten the very foundation of what we’re building.” Danny was surprised to find that the words she spoke were true. She spoke like the *Kyra* that she was. Her tone was authoritative and her words conveyed the strength of the Pack she was now forced to lead.

“We all have secrets, *Kyra*.”

“Yes, but some have dangerous secrets.”

“Are you not one of them?” Titus asked.

Danny cocked her head to one side. “My life is quite open to scrutiny.” Hell, she didn’t even know what the word privacy meant anymore.

“But you still have secrets. Secrets you would not dare reveal to me.”

“To you?” She snorted. “You’re right, I wouldn’t reveal them to you. I wouldn’t reveal much to you.”

“You are honest, at least.”

“Painfully so.”

Titus laughed. It was a short burst of true laughter. “Indeed. You are an honest *Kyra*, an honest wolf.”

“Why did the former Alpha never take a *Kyra*?” She found the question popped out before she could stop it. Sure, Draco had been an ass and a total cave-wolf, but he had been Alpha of a very prominent Pack. It would have stood to reason that he would have taken a *Kyra*. It was curious to her that he had never done so.

Titus frowned. “The Alpha kept his reasons to himself. But if I were to hazard a guess...”

“Yes?”

“He was waiting for power. He was waiting for you.”

Ugh. “He had no reason to believe he’d ever meet me.”

“No, but our former Alpha drank in power. He was attracted to it as a moth is to a flame. He always knew that there was a wolf capable of holding the power he wanted. He just had to be patient. Eventually you came...”

“Yes, and killed him.” The words were biting.

“That you did. But you had no choice in the matter. It was kill or be killed. It is the way of the wolf.”

“No, it’s the way of any being, any race who wishes to survive.” Looking back, would she have done anything different? No, if the situation were presented to her in the same manner ... the outcome would have been the same. Had Draco’s death put a serious crimp in her life and fucked up her world? Hell, yeah! But what was done was done. And she had to begin to live her life looking forward, not back.

“And you, *Kyra*. This has come as a surprise to you.”

“What?”

“Being in this position.”

She shrugged. There was no point in denying it. “Yeah, I had envisioned things turning out a bit differently. But the lady works as she will.”

“Yes. The Mother will have her way.”

And that was something else. Danny had not only been running from herself, she had

been running from the great Mother. It was one thing to try to deny the wolf ... it was something entirely different to deny the Mother of all. That being said, she still did not believe she was above making her own decisions. Yes, the Mother was showing her a loftier plan ... but Danny believed the lady still gave them free will and the ability to utilize that free will to shape their future. Otherwise, what was the purpose of living at all? If you knew that you had no choice ... why risk anything ... why live?

Danny opened her mouth to speak, but a great wave of power slammed into her and knocked the breath out of her body.

"What in the name of..." Titus was already at the door to the study, throwing it open, trying to locate the source of the power which had rocked them.

"Alex..." Danny breathed. She rushed from the house and stopped short on the porch. Alex was standing in front of a severely battered Benjamin. Benjamin, for his part, was leaning heavily against a post. His handsome face was nearly unrecognizable, and blood was pouring out from several horrific looking wounds. Two Pack wolves were eyeing Alex and Benjamin with evil intent written clearly upon their faces. Their gazes shifted back and forth between the two.

"We have the right!" the smaller of the two wolves shouted. His name was Jessen, and Danny had never taken to him. He was a bully and just an all-round asshole. "Alpha, we have the right!"

"To challenge," Alex said, and his voice was deceptively calm, "not to strike from the back like a coward."

"Do you call me a coward?" Jessen's voice rose.

Alex lifted his head. "I have no need to call you anything, Jessen. Your actions account for themselves."

The second snarling wolf Danny recognized as well, his name was Ray and he was Jessen's shadow. Danny had long wondered if there was *more* to their friendship than just camaraderie.

"He cannot take standing within Pack if he cannot stand for himself," Jessen continued.

Danny stiffened. As much as she hated it, Jessen spoke the truth. If Benjamin couldn't defend himself he would never survive. He could never have a place in the Pack. There were, of course, lower wolves, wolves of very little worth who would never rise amongst their peers, but even they were able to contribute in some small way. Thus, they were tolerated and accepted as the lower wolves they were. Some of the females found stronger mates and were able to rise in standing. But the only way a male could rise was to defeat a stronger opponent, or be born *inherent*—that is, born into his position of power, like Alex. Benjamin was not considered an asset to Pack. He was small, but what was worse, he appeared frail in the eyes of the other wolves. His scarred face and missing eye only enlarged the target that seemed to be imprinted on his forehead.

"You are correct, Jessen." Alex spoke smoothly, calmly. His words were calm, but his aura was not. It was a pulsating orange, and Danny could see it radiating from his fiercely coiled body. "But again I remind you of your right to challenge an opponent, not to ambush him. I received no formal challenge summons from you. I have not seen anything stating your intent to challenge Benjamin." Alex took a few steps forward, his power growing with each step. "No, this was not a challenge ... this was an attack."

"It is the way of the wolf," Ray muttered under his breath.

“To strike cowardly?” Danny spat out. She had come to stand by Benjamin. She didn’t touch him. She didn’t want to add to his weakness. Any comfort on her part would be taken as signs of coddling. It wouldn’t help his position any.

Ray’s snarls turned to growls as he stared malevolently at Danny. When he spoke his voice was filled with contempt. “You are *Roit*, you have assassinated and been the target of such assassination attempts before.”

She would not validate such a statement. She was *Roit*. She did not answer to this impudent, ignorant wolf.

“Now you insult my *Kyra*. Are you certain that this is the course you wish to take?” Alex asked.

Jessen and Ray’s demeanor changed dramatically. They were not unaware of the dangerous path they now walked. Their Alpha stood before them, his *Kyra* and *Roit* by his side, and both were protecting their quarry. It was clear they needed to rethink their position or tackle it from another angle. This would get them nowhere.

“I issue a formal challenge then.” Jessen’s eyes glittered. “I assert my right as a member of the Stone Claw Clan.”

Alex nodded slowly. “You wish to challenge Benjamin.”

“Yes.”

A formal challenge from a standing member of Pack could not be denied. Alex turned to Benjamin. “As the challenged you set forth the terms. What shall it be?”

“Claws,” Benjamin said simply. It was clearly the only choice. Yes, Jessen was slight, but what he lacked in stature he more than made up for in width. His human form was obviously stronger than Benjamin’s. Yes, wolf was the only choice.

“So it will be.” Alex swept his gaze out amongst the gathered crowd and let his voice carry. “Due to the nature of this first attack against Pack member Benjamin, he will be given a day to recover from his wounds. At this time tomorrow, we will meet in the circle to carry out the formal challenge made by Pack member Jessen.”

“I would challenge him now!” Jessen sputtered furiously. He had obviously not thought his Alpha would give his prey a day to recover.

Alex’s expression turned mocking. “Do you think yourself so weak that you cannot fight a healed wolf? Must you take on a wounded wolf?”

Jessen regained his composure and spat out, “It matters not when I meet him in the ring ... I shall rip his throat out all the same. Tomorrow then,” his gaze came to rest upon Benjamin, “enjoy your last night amongst the living, mongrel.” He turned on his heel and stalked away, Ray obediently at his heels.

The curious crowd dispersed quickly after their departure and Danny immediately turned her attention to Benjamin.

“I’m fine,” he murmured, pushing away her questing hands.

“Fine?” Danny snorted. “You look like a piece of pulverized meat.”

“Nice to know I look as good as I feel,” Benjamin quipped.

“All right, if you’re cracking jokes you’re not on death’s door,” Danny said with a small smile. “April?”

“I’m right here, *Kyra*.”

Of course she was. She was always nearby. Bless her heart. “Would you please take a look—”

“Of course.” April was at Benjamin’s side in an instant. “Come, let us take this

inside.” April turned to Alex. “May we use the antechamber, Alpha?”

“Of course. Patch him up, little April,” Alex said with a sad smile, “he has quite a trial ahead.”

April nodded. “Yes, Alpha.” She and Benjamin disappeared into the house.

“He can do this,” Danny murmured, more to herself than anyone else.

“I believe he can.” Alex placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. “He was taken by surprise before. Jessen won’t have that luxury tomorrow. Benjamin will be ready for him. No cowardly attack this time. He’s stronger than he appears, *Kyra*.”

“Again, I have a name, Alex.”

Alex smiled. “Dennison. He is stronger than he appears. He is worth much more than his injuries would account for. I believe Jessen, along with Pack, will be surprised by just how much he is worth.”

Danny didn’t want to see this side of Alex, this benevolent and *kind* side of him. It made it so much more difficult to keep her distance emotionally, so much more difficult for her to keep walls up between them.

“I agree,” she finally said.

“*Kyra*...” Alex cleared his throat. “Dennison, I would like...”

“Yeah?”

“I...”

Danny smiled and waited expectantly. “You would like?”

“Would you take dinner with me?”

“Uh, are you asking me out?” She couldn’t help the bubble of laughter that began to build up inside of her.

“No, I am asking you, what I mean is, yes, I would like to have dinner with you.”

“Okay, you’d like to have dinner with me, as in let’s have dinner sometime, or do you have an actual time in mind?” All right she was probably being a little difficult now, but seeing the unsure and bewildered expression on Alex’s face was priceless, and she couldn’t help teasing him a little. He was cute this way—much more *human*, less domineering Alpha.

“We could have dinner now,” he blurted out.

“Yeah, we could.”

“Are you hungry? Is it perhaps too late?” Alex looked completely *un-Alex*. It was actually adorable—*adorable*? Had she been struck in the head?

“I could stand for a meal,” Danny said, deciding to give him a break. She grinned broadly at the look of relief that crossed his face. He was so hesitant. Had she ever seen him hesitant before? And what in the world had brought this about?

“I do not think that Aria is still working,” Alex murmured.

Danny waved his words away. “Even if she were, we don’t need anyone to cook for us, Alex.” She laughed when his eyebrows rose. “I take it you don’t have a lot of experience in the kitchen.”

“It is not my domain,” he said simply.

“You’ve got to be joking.” Danny grabbed Alex’s hand and began to drag him into the house. She was laughing the entire way to the kitchen. “Okay,” she said, laughing harder at the pure panic she saw on his face, “it’s a kitchen, Alex, not a torture chamber. My goodness, look at you.”

“What?” He was stiff, a deep frown marring his handsome face.



“You are Alpha of the dual clans and you’re afraid of a little ol’ kitchen.”

“I am not afraid of a kitchen,” he ground out.

“Uh-huh. Then why do you look like someone just approached you with silver?”

“As I said before, *Kyra*, the kitchen is not my domain. I am not afraid of it, I am just not a ... a ... kitchen person.”

“Not a kitchen person?” Danny rolled her eyes. She walked over to the huge stainless steel fridge and opened it. Sticking her head in, she smiled as a memory of Thad assailed her. How often had she found him in this exact position in her old kitchen? Her smile soon turned to a frown as those memories quickly changed, replaced by the knowledge of what Thad now was, and what he could never have again—his humanity. Thad would never know the taste nor the pleasure of fried chicken again, and she would never see his laughing eyes twinkling at her as he emerged from her fridge. And she was to blame. God, she had so much to repent for, so much staining her soul.

“*Kyra*? Dennison...”

Alex’s voice shook her out of her reverie. “I’m fine. Oh, look, deli meat. Don’t look so scared Alex, it’s just deli meat.”

“We are not having deli meat for supper, *Kyra*.”

“No, we’re having omelets.” Danny fished out the eggs, butter, meat and assorted items, and balanced them expertly on her arm. She laid everything out on the massive countertop and fished around for the appropriate pans.

“Omelets?”

“Yep, omelets. Eggs stuffed with assorted goodies. All yummy stuff.”

“We’re wolves.”

“I’m quite aware of that, EinsteinSteinmetz.” Danny grinned.

“Then you are aware of the fact that wolves do not eat ... omelets.”

“Why the hell not?” Danny began to crack eggs. When she had cracked twelve eggs she began to season liberally. Pushing the eggs to the side, she began to place strips of bacon into a large skillet. “Listen, I don’t make much, but what I do make is killer.”

“You make killer eggs?” There was a smile edging Alex’s voice now.

“I do indeed.” The bacon had begun to fry up and Danny worked on chopping up some ham for the omelets. “You’re going to love this, Alex. It’s something I do very well. It’s a Danny special.” She jumped when she felt his hands come to rest on her shoulders.

“I already know how well you *do* things. I like Danny’s special.” He licked the shell of her ear and began to fondle her breasts.

“Hey!” She slapped his hands away. “I’m busy here.”

“So am I. I’m showing my *Kyra* just how *special* she is ... and how I enjoy her *special* attributes.”

Danny swallowed and teasingly shook the knife she was wielding at Alex. “If you want to eat you’ll leave me alone. We’re almost ready to go.” She wasn’t sure if she was relieved or disappointed when Alex’s hands left her body and he moved back.

“All right.” Alex sighed. “We’ll do things your way for now. I am quite looking forward to having a Danny’s special.”

She flipped the omelets over, and satisfied with the results, she began to plate the food up. She checked on the bacon. It was perfect. Still very pink with barely crisped edges ... just how she liked it.

It was a strangely odd feeling ... cooking for Alex. It felt very *domestic*, and more than a little bit weird.

"All right, this should do it." She pulled up a stool next to Alex at the kitchen island and waited. "If I were going to poison you, I'd use something decidedly more ... sinister than omelets and bacon," she said with a sigh. "Well, eat the hell up, your food is getting cold."

Alex grinned. "Well, when you *demand* so nicely, how can I refuse?" Alex cut into his omelet and took a large bite. "Well, how..."

"Yes?" Danny waited expectantly.

"Different."

*Different? Different?* What the heck was that supposed to mean? Danny scrunched up her nose. "I don't know whether to take that as a compliment or—"

"A compliment, please—different as in good, Dennison. Different only because I am unused to eating omelets. But this must be the best omelet I've ever had."

"Now you're buttering me up. How many omelets have you ever eaten, Alex?"

Alex laughed. "I can't say I've ever had an omelet. You're right, I have little to compare this omelet with, however, I do know what I like, what my palate likes, and I certainly like this. There are so many contrasting flavors, and it's delightful."

Delightful. Now there was a word she liked when describing her culinary skills, and a word not often associated with her. Danny began to dig into her omelet, and yes, it was good, very delightful.

"I like you this way," Alex said quietly.

"What way?"

"Relaxed, at ease."

Taking another bite of omelet she turned to him then, eyes thoughtful. "You think I'm relaxed?"

"Aren't you?"

"I guess I am." Relaxed, wow, when was the last time she had been relaxed?

"Rather nice, isn't it? It is pleasant not having to worry. When was the last time you didn't worry about something, anything, Dennison?"

Could everyone read her? That thought brought on a sudden black mood. It was upon her like a storm, before she could even stop it, or reason past it. She had always thought she had a great poker face. Now here she was with Alex, Alex of all people, and he was reading her as if she were an open book. It was disconcerting and disquieting, and suddenly her omelet was bland and tasteless.

"You are going to ruin the moment, aren't you, Dennison?"

Danny turned her head away. She didn't want to look at him. She didn't want to look into his all too knowing eyes.

"Dennison? Suddenly I feel a weight, and it is a weight that wasn't there moments before. Something I said brought about this heaviness, and I would know what it was that I said. What did I do wrong?"

"Nothing," she snapped. God, her head hurt and her heart. Her heart hurt. What was wrong with her? Why couldn't she just be *nice*? Why couldn't she just be accepting and take things for what they were? Why was she always questioning everything and everyone? Every intention, every look, every gesture was up to the Danny inquisition. She couldn't even have an omelet in peace. And it was her, it was all her doing. She

could try to blame it on Alex, heck, she had just tried to, but in the end this blackness, this darkness that descended upon her, was her own doing. Alex was being Alex. And she was just being herself, a self she didn't often understand. "Why are you with me Alex? Why do you want me?" She found the question slipped out easily, naturally.

"You are the most beautiful..."

Danny cut him off with a slash of her hand and cold eyes which bore into his. "Save it. Don't give me pretty words. Don't ply me with half-truths. Give it to me straight, Alex. For once in your life, tell me, really *tell me something real!*" She waited, watching the shifting emotions as they filtered across his usually stoic face, and she held her breath. What would he do? What would he say now?

"You have always been meant to be mine, Dennison." Alex's face was now expressionless. His cool mask was firmly affixed. "There was never a moment this truth was not known, by me, by the Grand Dame, by my father."

"Your father?" What did Alex's father have to do with this?

"Yes. You think we have nothing in common, but we do. You see us as opposite ends, parts that cannot meet. But we are so much more alike than you could ever imagine. We were both *born*, Dennison. We were both thrust into this world with power and responsibility that we never asked for. We have used our power differently, that is for certain, but we both have the burden of knowing what we are, what we wield, and having to make those difficult choices every day. My father knew the moment I was born that I would be his end. He fought a good fight, and he did what he could to change his fate, but in the end, the Mother that knows all won out, she always does. His determination to change his destiny nearly brought about the destruction of our Pack. He became the Alpha that so many feared. He allowed his demons to consume him. Have you any idea what it is like to know you will be your father's end—to know and to see your father unravel every day and become a creature of madness and hatred?" Alex closed his eyes and took a deep breath. His hands were clenched into tight fists, and when he opened his eyes again they were filled with the beast. "You were born, and I knew the moment you came into this world. I felt you as surely as I feel myself. I breathed with you ... I lived with you. And in that moment my father was lost forever."

What the hell had just happened here? What in the world was he talking about? "I don't know. I don't ... understand." Words weren't coming to her. She was stuttering like an idiot. She tried, but could find nothing, nothing to take her out of her current stupidity. Something, she had to say something. What the fuck could she say?

"*Atheothy fatorium.*" Alex stood and walked away from her. When he reached the door, he turned and said, "Ask the Grand Dame. It is time that you knew—way past time."

## Chapter Ten

She was kneeling by the water. Her hair, silver in the light, seemed to reflect like shards of broken glass. Her hands, long and slender, were trailing through the water, making patterns, twisting in a dance of ageless beauty.

“Grand Dame?” Danny approached. She knew that the Grand Dame felt her, she realized the woman had felt her the moment she had broken the clearing. She probably knew she was coming. Hell, she knew everything.

“My child.”

Danny stopped behind her kneeling form. “I must speak with you. Will you grant me an audience?”

“Here, my child?”

“Is this not the most natural of places to meet?”

The Grand Dame laughed, her laughter was magical. “Well said, my child. You are right, where else would we converse but in the forest, surrounded by all the elements which give us life and sustain us. Sit then, come and sit by me.”

Danny took a seat next to the Grand Dame. “I had dinner with Alex tonight.”

“That is nice.”

“I ruined it.”

“You? Ruin anything? How is that possible?”

“Are you being sarcastic?” Danny was stunned. The Grand Dame wasn’t exactly known for her witticism and sarcasm.

“Yes, child. Now, go on. You ruined your dinner with Alexander, why?”

“I don’t know.” She let out a beleaguered sigh. “I don’t. One minute we’re having eggs, and the next I’m in this foul mood and lashing out. Oh, and it was so nice. It began so normally. We were like two people, two people just eating and talking and ... and...”

“Being normal.”

“Yes, exactly, being normal. Then he said something, and I got pissed because he could read me so easily and my mood turned absolutely horrific, just like that!”

“I see.”

“Do you, do you really? Because if you see, could you enlighten me?” Danny slumped. “I’m exhausted. I’m really fed up with this fight that I’m fighting within myself all the time. I feel like I’m at war.”

The Grand Dame turned to face her. There was a small, strange smile on her face. “You are, you are at war, Dennison.”

“But I don’t want to be. I don’t want to be at war. God, I just want to be normal. I just want to be human.”

“Child, that is something you can never be.”

“I am, though. I am, in part, human.”

“The part which is not wolf, is not human, child. You can never be human. You can live a thousand lifetimes and run to the ends of this earth and you will never be human.”

“I’m a woman, Grand Dame. Thus part of me must be human.”

“That part which is woman, is *magi*. The *magi* is flesh, blood and organs infused with earthly elemental magic, but it is not human. It is just as I said it is, *magi*.”

Danny slammed her hand down and screamed. "Then what the hell am I? What the hell am I, if I'm not entirely wolf and I'm not entirely *magi*, and I'm not entirely a woman? What the hell am I? Tell me."

"You are Dennison Tamara Lee, *Omni Espir*."

"The one great spirit?"

"Yes, The One."

"You know, you sound like some bad oracle from a comic book now."

"Always getting trite and sarcastic when you're cornered."

"Yeah, that's me, trite and sarcastic. Okay, The One. What am I supposed to do with that? Is it supposed to mean something to me?"

"You are the only one of your kind, the only one there will ever be, until..."

"Until what?"

"Until you have a child, a girl."

"But my mother wasn't The One, and she had me, right?"

"Yes. But you were foretold, Dennison, as is your daughter."

"Whoa, I'm going to have a baby?"

The Grand Dame's smile widened. "Not right now, of course, but yes, one day you will have a child, a girl child, and she will inherit all, all there is to you."

Her head was pounding, so was her heart. She was so over her head right now. "Okay, okay, I was always under the impression that my mother just didn't want to be saddled with me so she dumped me with you."

"That is pretty accurate. Celia was an unfit mother but it was not all her fault. Like you, she fought against the hand that fate dealt her. She wanted a choice, but she never had a choice. She was born to bear you, that is all. Celia had great power, not as great as you, but power nonetheless. She wanted to use her power and choose how she would wield it, and did not want to share, or give it away. But she was a vessel, a vessel to house the *Omni Espir*, and the moment she brought you into this world her powers diminished. They were passed on, as they were supposed to be, as they were fated to be."

"You're telling me that when I push out my kid she's going to get all of my power?"

"No, you will retain that which is yours to retain, but you will share the vast majority of your power with your child. Celia could never find peace with the Great Mother's decision. She could never accept that you were to be born and you were to take a place she thought she deserved."

"What does unified fate mean? What does *Atheothy fatorium* mean?" Danny watched the Grand Dame stiffen. "Alex spoke those words to me before he left, and told me to ask you what it meant ... he said it was past time that I knew. Knew what, Grand Dame? What have you been keeping from me all of these years?"

"He had no right."

"Obviously he thought differently."

"You are not ready—"

"I'm not ready for what? How the heck do I know if I'm ready or not if I don't even know what I'm supposed to be ready for?" Wow that was a tongue twister.

"*Atheothy fatorium* is as you said, unified fate. It is a knowing, a prophecy, if you will, that speaks of the unification of two souls bound as one. Two souls meant to change the face of existence as we know it. Since man walked as animals and animals walked as men, we have known this prophecy. All leaders have known. All leaders have waited and

hoped to be The One, to be the other half of the split soul.”

Danny drew back. “Oh, no, oh, no way. You are not telling me that—”

“You and Alexander are those two souls.”

“Bullshit.”

“Dennison!”

“Bull, fucking shit!” she screamed. “There is no way I’m some strange super being destined to change the world, hell, existence.”

“You were born, you were brought to Alexander, and you will fulfill your destiny.”

“I don’t buy it.”

“It is not a matter of whether you ‘buy’ it or not. It is a matter of simple fact.”

“There is nothing *fact*-based about this. You’re talking about some weird-ass prophecy. That is not fact. And I don’t believe in destiny.”

“You don’t mean that, child.”

“I do. I don’t believe in preordained. I believe we make our own destiny.”

“The Great Mother—”

“The Great Mother exists, yes. I believe she brought about what is, and what will be. But I also believe she gave us free will. She made us, flaws and all, and she gave us minds to think with, to reason with. We are what she has made us ... beings that stumble and fall and rise again. We have an existence because of her, and she wishes us to live freely, not bound by prophecy and the fear of cages. Because that is what your prophecy is, Grand Dame, it’s a cage. If I were to believe that I am preordained to be with Alexander, to bring about this change, then what is the point to *me*? Why struggle at all? Why challenge, why fight, why love or lose, why do anything? Why not just lie down and say, hell, the Great Mother wants it, so let’s get on with it. No, I don’t believe it is that simple. I don’t believe anything is that simple. Heck, my life thus far attests to the very fact that it isn’t that simple. Did you see me getting sucked into Hell? Did you see me falling in love with a vampire?”

“Small problems, easily rectified,” the Grand Dame said coolly.

“Problems? Hah! You didn’t see any of it. You couldn’t. You’re the *Highest Seere* and you could not foresee any of it. Why is that?” Danny knew by the tightening on the Grand Dame’s face that she was correct. The Grand Dame couldn’t see everything, or perhaps it was *her* that she couldn’t see. There were still answers that she needed to very interesting questions. “So you see ... prophecy is one thing, life is another. Perhaps some things fall into place, giving you the satisfaction and the comfort of knowing that your prophecy may be coming to fruition, but that does not mean that *life*, *life* does not happen and that things won’t occur to throw everything that you’ve ever thought about into major whack! And that is what I am.” Danny laughed. “I’m the whack in your prophecy. There is nothing about me which is certain, or stable, or even ... even ... prophetic. I’m just me, Dennison Lee, and I’ll always just be me. If being with Alexander makes you all giddy because you think we’re on the road toward changing existence, you’d better get a grip. We’re barely even dating. Most of the time we hate one another. And during the times that we don’t hate one another, I’m trying to figure out a way to unattach myself from him. Which doesn’t say much for a long-standing, long-term relationship. The best thing you can do for us is stay out of our way. Let us screw up on our own. We have no problems screwing up. In fact, I’d like to know, it would do my mind a world of good to know, that our screw-ups are our own and that you didn’t orchestrate anything.”

“Your rant doesn’t change anything, child.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake!” Danny stood up angrily. “Fine, go on and cling to your prophecy. While you’re doing that, I’ll be living my life and fucking it up on my own.”

“You are *Atheothy fatorium*.”

“Yeah, yeah, Grand Dame.” Danny laughed, suddenly she felt remarkable better. She felt lighter and happier and much less burdened. Knowing the *secret* gave her a new measure of control. Now she felt as if she understood the Grand Dame better, heck, she even understood Alex better. The not knowing and the conspiring was what had driven her crazy before, but knowing, knowing put her back in the driver’s seat.

“You cannot run from this, Dennison.”

Danny grinned. “I’m not running, Grand Dame. I’m just proving you wrong.”

\* \* \* \*

“So you know,” Alex said.

“Yes, I know, and you know what else I know, Alex? I know that it’s all bullshit. It’s total bull, absolutely bogus, a fairy tale cloaked in prophecy and held onto by fanatical, traditional old women who like to control the world.” Danny walked up to Alex and put her hand on his back, feeling it stiffen under her touch. “Don’t you see? It’s all about control. It’s always been about control. They can control us with these stories. They can make us dance about like puppets. We are not puppets, Alex. We can write our own stories. We can be *free*.”

Alex turned to face her. “I felt you, *Kyra*. I felt you the moment you were born. I knew you had come into this word. How do you explain that? How else would I know,” he put his hand to his heart, “here, that you were meant for me, that we were meant to be together, if not for the fact that we are *Atheothy fatorium*.”

Danny sighed. “I don’t pretend to understand everything, although I sure as heck would like to. And I won’t deny that magic calls to me and prophecy still holds a place in all that I believe and hold dear. As an elemental creature I am bound by those stories that I would dismiss when angry. But I don’t believe those stories define us, Alex. I don’t believe that we are bound to live those stories. We live as we will. We are who we are. I came to you because I did not want to lose you to the beast, not because some prophecy told me to. I’m here, talking to you, trying to make this work because I believe in who you are, not because I buy into some age-old story.” And it was true. She realized it was true. For so long she had labored under the belief that she was running from the Great Mother. When she had slept with Alex she felt the chains pull tighter, and she wept with the knowledge that her life was not her own. But no, no, she had a life to live, a life that the Great Mother had given her. She could have both. She could believe in both the Great Mother and in the free will the Great Mother bestowed upon her. She would live her life as she wished to, and she would not let anyone, let alone a prophecy, dictate her actions.

“My father believed in the prophecy. He ruled believing, knowing that I would usurp him, that I would complete the split-soul and we would rule together. He grew colder, older, until the madness overtook him completely. I had no choice in the end.” Alex dropped his head. “I had no choice. It was kill or be killed.”

“I know, Alex.”

“Did you know that is how I began my reign? With the blood of my father staining my hands? Did you know how I killed him in order to rule?”

"I know the way of the wolf. You were born into your position, but you could not take your place on the throne until..." Her words died off.

"Until my father was dead."

"Yes."

"You are not your father, Alex. You prove that every day. You are you."

"I am my father's son."

"And your own person. Your own wolf."

Alex looked up, speared her with his magnetic eyes. "I have pushed so hard because everything in me screams to have you connected with me forever. My beast, my man, all that is within me screams to close the gap which resides within me. You are the only thing that can close that gap. You are the only one."

"It's too much. It's just too much, Alex. I need to be me first. I need to understand and come to grips with myself, with my power first. I can't be your everything. That is too much pressure, too much for anyone to deal with. And you know me," she cracked a small smile, "I have no patience and, well, I'm a bitch."

"Yes," Alex murmured, "you are."

Danny laughed. "I'm not telling you no, not entirely. And I'm not telling you we won't be together in some capacity in the future. I'm just telling you that I can't be responsible for your happiness and for your life. You need to live your life, and to not live through some prophecy, and when you begin to do that you may see this, see us, differently."

"I don't believe so, Dennison."

Danny shrugged. "Maybe not. Maybe your feelings won't change. But you owe it to yourself to find out. And I'm telling you now, I will not be your enabler."

"Enabler?"

Mmm, too human a concept for him? "Yeah, your enabler. An enabler is someone that, uh, feeds, or helps to feed, an addict."

"You are calling me an addict?"

"I'm saying that if I go against my feelings, my instincts, and buy into this cock and bull story that I will, in essence, be an enabler. It would be a lie, Alex. And I won't do that to you, or to myself. I won't live any more lies." That brought her to another point. "You should have told me about *Atheothy fatorium* a long time ago."

"The Grand Dame said—"

"The Grand Dame says a lot of things. This is *my* life we're talking about. You should have told me."

"It was never the right time. You were always so, ... so, angry, and so touchy. I could not approach you without scaring you off."

He was probably right about the scaring her off part. But she still had a right to know. "I was with Pack since childhood, Alex. You're telling me that in the entire time I was with you, you couldn't tell me about this prophecy and what was riding you to the point of madness?"

"I'm saying that I have lacked the words in the past, and unfortunately my actions, my baser instincts, have often ruled me. For my part, there have been a thousand times I have wished for different outcomes, calm resolutions, peaceful ones even. For your part, you must admit that you are the touchiest of beings. You run, you always have."

"You've never left me with any choice other than to run. Your Neanderthal behavior



ramps up and you go completely berserk. You said it yourself, you don't talk, you just act, and often your acting includes commands. You would have had me shackled at sixteen, don't try to deny it, I see it in your eyes." Danny sighed. "Earlier even, right?"

"We're wolves, our heat—"

"Yes, I don't *need* a lesson in how we come into heat, thank you very much. But you never took a minute to consider my *magi* half, Alex. That part was not ready to accept all that you wanted or demanded of me."

"Yet here you are, grown, matured, and you are still not ready."

"No! If being in a relationship with you means accepting you as lord and master, no, I'm not ready. Fuck, I'll *never* be ready. I told you all of this earlier in the evening, and I thought you actually heard me, really heard me."

"Peace, *Kyra*. I did not say what I said to anger you, or to give you the impression that I was not trying to meet you in the middle, so to speak. I merely made a statement, perhaps it is a question, really. You are still not ready."

Oh. She was still so used to questioning everything that he said, did, that she had trouble taking his words at face value. "I'm still pissed at you for not telling me about the prophecy, but I meant what I said, I will work on having a relationship with you, Alex." A grim relationship, perhaps, but a relationship nonetheless. "But things have to change. And I also meant it when I said that I think before we can have anything meaningful you have to redefine what I mean to you, how you see me."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"You have seen me as an acquisition—no, don't interrupt me. An acquisition because your prophecy told me I was to be yours. You never questioned it. You just acted. You've lived your life keeping me in this exalted position, never even wondering if I was worthy of it, or if it was even real. We can't have a future if you are unwilling to consider the possibility that we are just us—just Alex and Danny, not the product of the mechanizations machinations of conniving elders and even older stories."

The look on Alex's face was one of confusion. "I don't know how. I reveal the truth to you now, Dennison. I am not sure how to accomplish what you ask of me. I have felt this way, accepted all of these 'stories,' as you call them, my entire life." His eyes deepened and his mouth tightened. "I have lived for *Atheothy fatorium*, and I have killed for it as well."

"I didn't say it would be easy, Alex. I just said that I think you owe it to yourself to find out if any of it is real. Do you really wish to live the rest of your very long existence being controlled by others? Or do you want to live free?"

Alex smiled, but it was a sad smile. "Free, Dennison? How enlightened you are. I have freedom, as much freedom as I can claim considering who and what I am. I also have responsibility, great responsibility. I am responsible for the freedom of my Pack and the continuance of our ways. So you see, *Kyra*, your view of freedom and mine, they are slightly different."

Therein lay the problem. "Slightly different? No, Alex, we always have differing opinions and they aren't slightly different, more like ridiculously different. So where does this leave us?"

"What do you mean, *Kyra*?"

"I mean, where do we go from here, or where do you think we can go from here? I've told you how I feel and what I am willing to consider as we go forth pursuing this

rather, uh, strange relationship. What are you willing to consider? What are you willing to compromise? Are you willing to compromise?"

"So many questions."

"Important ones."

"I want you. No," he corrected, "I need you. And I am willing to do anything, consider anything to have you in my life."

An honest answer if there ever was one. And probably as good as she was going to get from Alex at this time. Of course she couldn't help but wish he seemed more open to her words. "All right then, Alex. All right." She gave him a smile. "We both have some work to do if we're going to deal with each other without killing each other."

"You put it so nicely." But there was a smile in his voice. And his words were spoken lightheartedly.

"I have to go. The night is speeding by."

Alex's eye twitched and his mouth tightened considerably. "What is your hurry, *Kyra*?"

"It's like I just said, the night is speeding by." She didn't owe him any further explanation, and yet, in lieu of what she had just told him about trying to work with him, perhaps she should try to give him a bit more. "I have to meet someone, and it won't wait."

"Unnatural creature." Alex growled.

"That unnatural creature and you have something in common ... me. You can't have me in your life without accepting my relationship with Savior."

"I've accepted it." It was as if he was choking on the words.

"Now who's the liar?" she said with a smile.

"Perhaps I haven't accepted it entirely. I am Alpha, and I am a wolf. Your relationship with that creature goes against everything I've known. We were not meant to," he searched for the words, "mix with vampires."

"And yet we do, Alex. They are on this plane with us."

"But we keep to our own. We have our own ways. It is the way it has always been done, and it has not failed us."

"Things are changing." The very presence of the Fae on their plane attested to that fact. Danny watched Alex process her words. It had always been difficult to read him. He was Alpha, so it was expected on some level, however, he was also *Alex*, *her Alex*, and when she had been a pup he had been the stars that ruled her night. Now, here she was, having to balance the Alpha Alex and the Alex she had loved and lost as a child.

"Change is hard to accept." Alex whispered the words. He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. "Go then, *Kyra*."

"Alex—" She held out a hand to him.

"No. Say no more. And please," he shuddered, "do not reach for me. My control is waning. Just go."

And because she could do nothing else, she left.

\* \* \* \*

She pulled into the parking lot and shut off the engine to her rather beat-up car. Alex had tried to get her to accept a new car, a shiny, silver BMW to be precise, and she had stared at him perplexedly. It had never occurred to her to get a new car. Hers still ran.

Sure she salivated over the butter-soft leather of Alex's vehicle, but she had never let herself dream so far as to spending so very much on something that wasn't practical, at least not in her world. Her motto had always been: Why spend when you don't have to? If it runs, and works, it's golden. Of course, that had been before she had the unlimited resources of the Pack behind her, and Alex's relentless nature battling her for control. Danny remembered the shiny, glittering silver of the BMW, and the delicious smell of new car leather. Maybe she'd *let* him convince her to accept a new car—if he really twisted her arm.

Danny had barely exited her car when a new presence filled the parking lot. By the scent, it was clearly vampire—strong vampire. Mist solidified, and within seconds a breathtakingly beautiful woman, correction, vampire, stood in front of Danny. She had hair so blonde it appeared almost white. Her eyes were a crystalline blue, and though she was small, she was curved in all the right places, namely her rather generous bosom.

"You are pretty in an exotic way," the vampire said. And when she spoke, it was in that beautiful vampire voice that Danny thought was so unfair.

Staring at the gorgeous vampire in front of her, her words seemed silly. The vampire was clearly better looking than she was. "Thanks," Danny said dryly.

"I am Octavia." The vampire looked at her as if she was supposed to recognize her name.

"Okay, nice to meet you, Octavia."

Octavia smiled, but it was a bitter and almost cruel smile that twisted her lips. "I see," she said, "he hasn't spoken of me."

"Excuse me?" Again, here was someone, something, with the upper hand. The vampire obviously knew her, but of course she had no frigging clue who the vampire was, save gorgeous (but weren't they all?).

The beautiful vampire swept a long lock of shimmering blonde hair behind her ear and cocked her head to one side. "You are not what I expected. I did not realize his tastes had broadened so far." Suddenly her eyes narrowed and she snapped, "You are much too thin."

Danny laughed. "Is *that* the best you can do? I'm too thin? That's a pretty piss poor insult."

"It wasn't an insult," the vampire pouted, "it was simply a fact. You are almost bony."

Bony? Yeah, she was still putting on weight, but she hardly considered herself bony. "Yeah, and you're so much heavier than I am," Danny retorted sharply.

"Not heavy, but curved where I need to be," the vampire countered.

"All right, this conversation is getting ridiculous. It's late, and I have places to go and people to see."

"By people, you mean him."

"Who?"

Octavia narrowed her eyes. "Don't play dumb with me."

"Then don't assume I have any idea what the hell, or who the hell you're talking about. You're the one accosting me in a dark parking lot. Considering the situation, I think I'm being more than patient and reasonable." Fuck, yeah. She was being reasonable. She could have just fried this pissy vampire's ass upon seeing her.

"Savverilor, you've come to see him."

It took her a minute to remember how Tavius had called Savior, Savverilor.  
“Savior?”

“Savior.” Octavia seemed to scoff at the name. “His name is Savverilor,” she ground out. “A new world, a new time does not change his name, or who he is.”

“Time changes everything, hummingbird.”

Danny smiled. “Thanks for joining us, Savior.” Savior seemed to step out from the shadows. Who knows knew how long he had been standing there. He had cloaked himself so well.

“*Savverilor.*” Octavia rushed to him. The expression on her beautiful face had changed so dramatically it was incredible to witness the transformation. Her eyes were glowing, her lips turned upward in a brilliant smile. Her gorgeous face grew even more so with the adoration that was so clearly evident upon it.

“Hey.” Danny turned to Savior, frowning a little as something just came to her. “Did you just call her hummingbird?”

Savior ignored her completely. His eyes were firmly affixed on Octavia. “It has been a long time.”

“Yes,” Octavia whispered, “too long, Savverilor.”

“What are you doing here, hummingbird?”

Danny found that she was clenching her hands into tight fists. Hummingbird? He had a nickname for the gorgeous vampire? It bothered her. She wished it didn’t bother her, but it did.

“Why, Savverilor?” Octavia asked, her voice choked with emotion.

“You know why.”

“No! I don’t know. You—” Her voice broke then, and she tried again. “You left, and then not a word.”

“Uh, would you like some privacy? I can leave,” Danny said. She knew her words came out sharp, she could hear the near rancor in her voice.

Savior held up his hand regally. “No. My heart swells to see you, *ashleya*. Do not go, please.”

Octavia’s face seemed to crumble then. Her aura pushed forth, and it was blistering, painful even. “*Ashleya?* She is a mongrel dog, Savverilor.”

Ouch. “There you go,” Danny clapped, “that is a much better insult.”

*Ashleya, do not taunt her.*

Danny growled. He was defending her. The bitch vampire insulted her and he was defending her.

“You must go, Octavia.”

“Would you turn me away, after I have come so far to see you? Will you not offer me respite?”

Savior clenched his jaw and nodded curtly. “Forgive my rudeness.” He swept his hand toward the club. “Come and take your rest.”

Octavia smiled and inclined her head. “My thanks, I shall.” She began to walk toward the club, and she was so light she seemed to glide across the ground.

“I’m going to leave.” Danny turned back to her car and found her arm held in an iron grasp. “Savior, let go.”

“Do not go, *ashleya*. I am so glad to see you.”

“Are you as glad to see me as you are glad to see your hummingbird?” Whoa, she

sounded jealous. Shit. Danny swallowed as emotions overwhelmed her. She was definitely jealous.

Savior grinned. "There is no need for your jealousy, my love. Although I must say I am glad to see it."

"Who is she?"

"An old friend, *ashleya*."

"Friend?" Danny snorted. She looked toward the club. "Well, your *friend*," she sneered, "is waiting for you at the entrance."

"Then she shall wait. Come, my love. I have such need of you. I have missed you dearly."

And she had missed him. She had missed him so much her heart had felt the tug, the loss of him, on many occasions. But this situation, this beautiful vampire confused her, and, she would admit, angered her. It wasn't that she was beautiful, although she was. It was the softness in Savior's face when he looked at her, the tenderness in his voice when he spoke to her. They had something between them, something deep. It didn't matter what he said. It mattered what he *didn't* say. He was keeping things from her. Keeping a lot from her. What was it about this vampire that he didn't want her to know? It was clear that they had had a relationship. Did he wish they had one now? And where had she come from? Where had she been all of these years?

"You will not let me in." Savior spoke softly. "Your shields are painfully tight, my love."

"There is nothing that you can say that can't be said out loud." Danny shrugged. "And frankly, I don't want you in my damn head right now."

Savior's jaw worked back and forth. "Come, we will speak of this inside."

"Will we? I don't know, Savior. You're being very tight lipped."

Savior held out his hand. "Please." And that please held so much hope and pleading it swayed her.

"All right." She hadn't come this far in the middle of the night to turn right back around and go back to Pack and Alex. Yes, she didn't really want to deal with Alex and his beast again this eve. He was on the edge. It was best that she give him a little space. And, in the bargain, give herself some space as well. Savior's face broke into a brilliant smile and he leaned over and placed a gentle but meaningful kiss on her forehead. And, just like that, she felt as if she had made the right decision.

\* \* \* \*

Danny paced back and forth. The beautiful Octavia was sipping daintily from a golden cup. She was, in a word, flawless. Her face was truly near perfection, in fact, she was so lovely if not for the obvious—oh, like being dead—she could have passed for one of the Fae folk. Her hair was cloud of gold, and her perfect figure was encased in a flowing white gown that molded itself to her body in all the right places, showcasing all the right things.

Danny hated her with a passion.

"This room," Octavia's lips twitched, "is not what I expected from you, Savverilor."

Savior smiled broadly. "Why? Because there are no animal heads affixed to the wall and dried blood caking the floor? Or perhaps it is the lack of drunken fools falling all over you that has you stupefied."

Octavia's answering laugh was merry and bright. "Oh, but you were a sight that night, my dear. Hardly the composed Savverilor that I see standing before me now."

"If I remember correctly," Savior grinned, "it was you, dearest Octavia, that wished to see the 'common folk.' Did you not beg me for a chance to experience the bohemian, as you called it?"

"But you were the one who went all out in your play. Wherever did you come up with those ridiculous clothes?"

Savior shrugged. "I borrowed them from a clothesline."

"Oh," Octavia shuddered, "you had me wear peasant clothes?"

"Who else did you think they belonged to, my dear? They were hardly the garments worn by royalty? Or perhaps you were fooled by the stains and the smell of livestock?"

Octavia burst into peals of laughter. She put the cup down on the table and stood. "Oh, how I have missed you."

"All right, now I really feel like the fucking third wheel. I'm outta here." Danny turned on her heel to leave and Savior was right there blocking her path within a second. "Okay, so you can materialize, and I can't. Big deal. I'm still leaving you and Miss Perfect Hair to reminisce, since it's obvious that I'm not included in this trip down memory lane."

"*Ashleya...*"

"Don't you *ashleya* me, you big goon. I let those pretty eyes of yours and that sweet voice get me into this room, stupid me, and now I'm going to follow my first instinct and leave before I puke all over you. This sentimental shit is nauseating."

Savior smiled, and it was a boyish smile. "You are still jealous, *ashleya*. It is adorable."

"Babies are adorable, Savior. Chipmunks are adorable. I am certainly not adorable."

"You think chipmunks are adorable? They are rodents, *ashleya*."

"Never mind what I think is adorable, you ass, I'm leaving. Call me when you're done with the sharing of old stories."

Savior wrapped his arms around her. He tucked her head into his chest and ignored her growls and feeble attempts at struggle. "I am done now." There was a knock at the door. "Do come in."

Thad entered the room. "You called, master?"

"Yes, my young one. I would like to introduce you to an old friend. Octavia, this is one of my young, Thaddeus. Thaddeus shall show you to your room and provide to your comforts. Do not hesitate to ask him for whatever you need to make your stay comfortable and enjoyable."

"You are dismissing me?" She sounded shocked.

"Nay, I am merely acting as a good host. My *ashleya* needs attending to, and I have sorely neglected her. We can reminisce some other eve."

"Your *ashleya* can speak for herself." Danny jerked her head to the side and gave Thad a smile. "Hey, Thad, you look good for a dead guy." Thad said nothing, but a small smile curved his lips.

"Savverilor, do not do this, do not send me away," Octavia pleaded.

Savior sighed deeply. "I am not sending you away. But you must go and take your rest now. And Octavia, my name is Savior."

Octavia lifted her chin and her eyes sparked angrily. She moved toward Thad and the

door. "Again, neither time nor circumstance will change who you are, or what your name is. You are Savverilor, wear it proudly." And, just like that, she was gone.

Thad cleared his throat. "Should I, uh—"

Savior nodded. "Yes. Go after her. You will find her in the hall, young one. Take her to her room and provide to her needs."

"Yes, master." Thad winked at Danny and exited the room.

Danny wrinkled her nose in distaste. "Yes master, no master, would you like anything else master. My, what a nice little slave you've got there."

"Ashleya," Savior said warningly.

Danny groaned and pushed away from him. "What? I can't help it. It drives me nuts to hear him call you master. The subservience of it, it's disgusting."

"What is disgusting about it? It is the natural order of things. All creatures have a hierarchy, a ranking if you will. I treat him very well, my love, and he, in turn, wants for nothing, leans on me for comfort, and trusts me to protect him if the need arises. It is a very beneficial and natural relationship."

"There is nothing natural about it," she snapped. "Servitude is not natural. Freedom is natural."

Savior laughed. "Freedom," he choked, "natural?" Savior He gave her a look, much like the look a father would bestow upon an errant child. "Yes, you are adorable, my love. There is nothing natural about freedom. The notion, the very concept of freedom was created, given even, to creatures. Even then we were being manipulated, infused with ideas and notions that were not ours. So you see, we are all in some ways connected, and manipulated by greater forces. No, you see, we all serve some purpose, and some have a purpose to serve others. The strong survive."

"To dominate the weak," Danny murmured.

Savior shrugged. "If that is the case, yes. But not all of us use our powers and our position to control the weak."

"It just works out that way," Danny said sarcastically.

"You, better than most, know the workings of our world, my love, and yet you still refuse to accept them. Do you not dominate? How many do you control?"

"Not by choice!" she shouted angrily.

"Does it matter? Your very existence demands dominance. When you appear, others who are weaker than you are, cower. And do they question their reaction? Do they question your dominance? No, they do not. Why—because *that* is the natural order of things. Order, not freedom, is natural. Balance, not freedom, is natural."

Danny spun away from him. She didn't want him to see the rage on her face. Or perhaps she was afraid she would burn his hair. No. What infuriated her the most—he was right. Her bloodsucking boyfriend was right. She did control others. And it didn't matter whether she wanted to or not, or that she resisted such a thing, it was there, and it was true; she was *roit*, and others obeyed, and cowered in her presence. Her wolf nature knew it best, the strong did survive, and the strong led the weak, in some cases, controlled the weak. Was it pleasant, was it fair? Hell, no. But what was it that she said all the time, yeah, life isn't fair. In fact, life's a fucking torture chamber of unfair, and if you were lucky you were able to escape the clamps and chains for a brief millisecond.

"I know you're right," she said after several long moments. "I just don't like it. And yeah, I have trouble accepting it. I want, no, I believe in freedom, even in part." She

turned to face him. "Maybe my, 'freedom is natural,' speech was a bit much. But freedom itself... I believe in it, Savior. If we're being manipulated by some greater force, well, so be it. But that force gave us a sense of freedom," she nodded firmly, remembering what she said to Alex, "and I believe with all of my heart that freedom is worth fighting for. Sure all the other assorted nasty comes with it. Will there always be war? Will we always wrestle for control? And will there always be one who dominates and one who submits? Yeah, because of what you said before, balance. You spoke of balance and order. Balance seems to demand that order accompany chaos, and freedom accompany," she swallowed, "servitude. I'm still working on that part."

"What part would that be, my love?"

"The servitude part. My head knows the truth. My heart doesn't want to hear it."

"I will never enslave you, *ashleya*." Savior pulled her once again into his embrace. "If anything, you have enslaved me."

"I don't want to enslave you, Savior. I just want to be with you."

Savior smiled brilliantly. "And that you are, my love, that you are."

Danny slapped him on the shoulder. "Most of the time you annoy the ever living shit out of me."

"Ah, but you have such a way with words." Savior moved his lips to her ear and blew gently.

Danny shivered, and not from cold. She swallowed as a familiar heat began to work its way through her body. "It's, uh, late, or should I say it's getting early ... really early."

Savior sighed dramatically. "You are so right, my love." He swept her up into his arms and laughed when she began to sputter and shout at him. "We must make the most of our time together."

"Put me down, you big ape."

"No, I don't believe I will." He carried them out of the room, crossed the hall and entered a new room, a room that looked completely unfamiliar to her. "This may not be my sleeping chamber," he wriggled his eyebrows at her, "but as we have so little time, it will have to suffice for now."

Danny choked back laughter. "Okay, okay, you've had your fun. Now let me down." She found herself deposited none too gently on a very large, long and overstuffed couch. She made a move to get up and found herself trapped beneath Savior's large body. He had flung himself on top of her. "You've got to be joking."

Savior grinned. "I had to think of something to keep you here."

"So, trapping me under your ridiculously heavy body was the answer?"

"You could escape, or try to escape," he began to rub against her, "if you really wanted to. Do you want to?"

He was absolutely correct. She was no nancy girl, and if she wanted to, she could make her "imprisonment," pretty difficult, if not impossible. Savior was playing with the hem of her shirt and caressing the skin beneath it. Her stomach was beginning to flutter with anticipation and she longed for what was bound to come.

"Well, I guess you're not really *that* heavy," she demurred.

Savior's grin widened considerably. "How gracious you are, my love." He pulled her top up and cupped her full breasts.

Danny couldn't suppress her moan of pleasure. His hands felt incredible. She wanted more. She wanted skin on skin. Nothing beat the feel of slick, hot skin touching. She



began to tug at his pants, growling when she couldn't manage to get her fingers around the damn buttons.

"Having trouble?"

"Listen," she snapped playfully, "the night is waning. If you want to get to the actual fucking, you'd better give me a hand and stop laughing at me."

"How can I resist such a lovely offer?" Within seconds, and faster than her eyes could see, he was naked. His body was so damn beautiful, it wasn't fair. He was perfect, absolutely perfect. "I think it is your turn," he purred.

Danny drank him in, every bit of his beauty filled her and her body grew warmer still. She yanked her top over her head and quickly chucked her pants. Savior swallowed and Danny frowned. Why was he looking at her so strangely? She looked down and groaned. She had totally forgotten about her stupid undergarments. "Not my choice," she bit out.

"You look—"

"Absolutely ridiculous, I know." Damn April and her stupid ideas.

"No," Savior slid across her body, shaking his head, "I have never seen anything, anyone, so beautiful in my entire life." He trailed his finger across the lace of her panties.

"It wasn't my idea," Danny muttered. "Apparently some object to my rather practical underwear." April had insisted that Danny buy some girly, frivolous undergarments. The suggestion and ultimate purchasing of said garments had obviously been made for their Alpha's benefit. Danny didn't know how April would feel knowing that Savior was the first to see the lacy shit she wearing. Damn it all, she had totally forgotten she was wearing it too. After she had left Alex, she had made a quick run to change. She didn't want to go to Savior with Alex's scent all over her. It was bad enough that she was more or less branded, and that he was with her in that way, all the time ... she didn't need him clinging to her clothing to boot. She had been in such a rush to get out of the house she totally missed the fact that she had put the stuff on.

*Liar!* Her mind screamed. Somewhere deep down you wanted him to see it and watch the desire flood his face and fill his eyes.

Danny was about to contradict her annoying subconscious when she felt Savior's fingers slide beneath the silk of her panties and touch her wet, slick lips. She moaned and inched closer.

"I adore it," Savior murmured against her flushed skin. "You look like a cake, a beautiful, beguiling, decorated cake. One which I cannot wait," his eyes glowed, "to eat."

Danny's head dropped back and she moaned when she felt two of his thick fingers penetrate her pussy. They began to move back and forth in a languid fashion, and she was desperate for more. "Savior," she hissed. Savior moved down her body. He grabbed the ruffles of her panties with his teeth and began to pull them down her legs. "Savior, please!"

He brought the panties to her ankles and, with a toss of his fingers, flung them away. "Yes?"

"I was about to say if you didn't hurry I was going to kill you."

Savior laughed. He spread her legs and moved between them. "You smell delicious," he bent down and with one long lap licked her from the top to the bottom of her slit, "and you taste even better than I imagined."

Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God, it felt incredible. Her body trembled and she grabbed his

shoulders. "Do it," she demanded.

"Do what?" His mouth was hot against her needy flesh.

"Eat me, please, oh, please, Savior..."

"I cannot resist you, my *ashleya*." Savior said the words right before he drove his tongue deep into her welcoming body.

Danny screamed her pleasure. His tongue was greedy, insatiable, as it licked and probed and demanded all that she had to give and more. She grabbed his head and pressed him even more firmly against her, desperate for the release she knew was not long in coming. She wrapped her legs around his head and arched against him. The wave was almost upon her, and she felt the pressure in her body building and building. One more stroke ... just one more stroke.

It was there, her pussy clenched, her muscles began to spasm and she allowed the flood to overtake her.

Savior looked up at her, her juices glittering upon his skin. He licked his lips slowly, lovingly, and smiled brilliantly at her. "Delicious indeed."

Danny growled and lunged up. She pushed him back on the couch, and ignoring the surprise on his face, wrapped her lips around his cock. He was hard and hot in her mouth. His skin was so soft, but his cock was beautifully hard. She cupped his balls gently and began to suck and lick. Curling her lips under her teeth, she began to move up and down his shaft, licking him like a lollipop.

"Ah," Savior moaned, "my love, your mouth is sweet torture." He grabbed the back of her head and pulled her more forcefully toward him.

Danny continued. Now adding suction to the milieu. She knew what she was doing to him, to his self-control, and she loved it. She loved giving head, and she was damned good at it too. Relaxing the muscles of her throat, she took him deeper still, letting him feel the slick, heat of her tongue as it bathed the underside of his cock. He twitched within her mouth and she knew how close he was. Yes. Yes. She wanted to taste him as badly as he had wanted to taste her. She wanted him to spill in her mouth. "My love, I am..." Danny heard the words a split second before he jerked, tensed and filled her waiting mouth. She swallowed him down, every last drop.

She felt his hands stroking her hair, and she allowed herself to bask in the feeling of contentment and happiness.

"I must leave you now," Savior murmured, still softly petting her.

Danny frowned. "Why?"

"I would stay here, but you may find the consequences of such actions slightly distasteful."

It hit her then. Of course, she had been so stupid. "The dawn."

"Yes, my love, the dawn."

"You, uh, would stay here, in this room with me? Isn't that dangerous?" Vampire's all had "sleeping cells," rooms where they congregated to sleep. The older, more important, or more powerful vampires had private chambers, and the bigwigs, like Savior, would have sleeping chambers designed for them alone. Danny had seen many of Savior's rooms. Hell, they had fucked in several of his bedrooms. But she was fairly certain she had never been in his chamber.

"No, you haven't. But it is not lack of trust that has kept me from sharing my room with you. That is not why I have kept you from my chamber."

“Then why?” she asked simply.

“Would you truly wish to see my resting place?” Savior drew her into his arms and cradled her against his chest. “You have been so squeamish about my ... state. It is only recently that I feel you’re beginning to accept the fact I’m not a corpse, as you once called me, merely that I exist in a different state of animation. I have often thought if you were to see my chamber, to see me in my,” he paused before he spoke again, “rest, your opinion of me would change. You would revert back to your old ways, your old thoughts. You would think me a dead being once again.” He sighed. “Such thoughts pain me.”

“I...” Danny caressed the cool flesh of his chest. “I love you, Savior. I love you. Not what you are, but *who* you are.”

“But *what* I am and *who* I am are one in the same, *ashleya*.”

Danny sighed. “That came out wrong. What I meant to say is that I accept you. I accept that you are a vampire. I accept that you being a vampire is what you are, and that what you are is a good person.”

“Person?” There was laughter in his voice.

“I couldn’t find a better word at the moment,” she grumbled.

Savior pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “I love you too, *ashleya*. I love you with an intensity, a burning that will know no end.”

Danny twisted her head to look up at him. “Then show me. Show me where you sleep, Savior.”

Savior closed his eyes and nodded. “If that is your wish. So be it. Let me show you how and where the dead dream.”

\* \* \* \*

Shivers broke out upon her skin and she took deep breaths to even out her erratic heartbeat. She knew that Savior could sense any change in the beat of her heart, and she didn’t want cause him any discomfort—and let’s face it, she didn’t want him to go all “crazy” on her either. It was just that this place was really, well, creepy. She felt as if she had left his place of residence completely and entered a totally different place. In a way, she guessed she had. They had walked down several corridors, which hadn’t bothered her any since the halls all looked the same, felt the same. But when they had reached the last corridor, everything had changed drastically. They had hit what appeared to be a dead end. Savior had run his hands across the stone of the wall in front of them, and just as if by magic, the wall opened. When they went through the opening, that was when Danny got the heebie jeebies. It wasn’t the oppressive dark, or even the dank, musty smell that clung to the walls which creeped her out, it was something more, something stronger. There was magic here, dark and powerful magic, a magic that she couldn’t quite place. And she wasn’t sure if she wanted to place it.

“You wished to see it. You wished to know,” Savior whispered as they continued to walk.

“Uh-huh.” Danny’s eyes had adjusted quickly to the dark, but really, there wasn’t much she wanted to see in this place. It was, quite frankly, a really old spooky tunnel. Why in the hell would Savior rest in a place like this? He had always struck her as a “comfort” sort of vampire. She assumed he would want to enjoy the pleasures of satin and silk, even if he was “dead to the world” when he slept.

“Can you feel it, my love? I know you can.”

It was obvious to what he spoke of. “Yeah. There is some very strong magic at work here, Savior.” Danny blinked owlishly as they reached the end of the corridor and came to stand in front of two large and impressive looking doors. “Warded,” she breathed as the magic recognized her power and breathed over her. “Very, very, strong wards.” In fact, she wasn’t sure if she could have done better, they were that good. “Who did this for you? Where did you get this ward?”

“That I cannot tell you,” Savior whispered.

“Why not?” Danny was hurt. “I would never tell a soul.”

“I believe that, *ashleya*. But I made a promise long ago, to the maker of the ward. The secret of the power would lay lie safe with me. I would tell no one.”

Danny nodded slowly. The strength and power of such a spell had to remain in sacred trust. That trust was between Savior and the creator of his ward. Danny watched as Savior ran his hands over the doors and whispered the incantation that would unlock the ward. The doors opened and Danny and Savior entered, the doors slamming shut the moment they did.

Danny let her eyes soak in the room. It was stark and cold, completely uninviting. In fact, there was nothing in the room save what appeared to be a large, metal box in its center, and several heavy tapestries of bland, dark colors on the walls. It was a room devoid of any comfort. But she felt it then, the same dark and powerful magic resonating from the box in the center of the room. It, too, was warded, and it, too, had been crafted by the same hand that had crafted the doors. This was no room. This was a cell—a cell to keep all out and all in. No one would enter this room uninvited and no one would leave unless permitted.

“You can’t hide your surprise from me. I see your confusion.”

“I’m a little confused. This place is...” she searched for something less offensive then, “fucking, creepy, cell.” She was coming up short. “It just doesn’t seem like you, Savior.”

“And what is ‘me,’ my love?”

“Comfort, style, I don’t know, not this. I understand protection, but can you not have both comfort and protection?”

“What you see upstairs is my wish. What I would have, how I would be if things were different. This,” his face shuttered, “is the reality. I am Master Vampire Savior Knight and I must be protected and safe so that I may provide safety and protection to my people, *ashleya*. This is the reality. I need no comfort here. I need only what you see.”

“I understand.” Danny sighed. “It bothers you, though.”

“Somewhat. It has come to my attention, ‘bothered me,’ as you put it, a lot more since you have entered my life.”

“Me? What do I have to do with anything?”

“Are you still so blind, *ashleya*? You are everything. Since you have entered my life, it has been transformed. I am changed, you may say, awakened even.”

“Savior...”

“No, my love, it’s true. Things I would never have thought before, or considered, now plague me. I have you. And you are the soul I thought I had lost.”

She didn’t want to be his soul. “Savior, I—”

“I know,” he smiled sadly, “it frightens you.”

“Not frightens, not exactly. It is a bit overwhelming. And the pressure, the pressure

is a bit too much. I am juggling a lot of things right now, and my balance is precarious at best.”

“I think you are extraordinary.” Savior breathed in deeply and a small shudder worked through his body.

“You have to sleep,” she said simply.

“Yes, my love.”

“Uh, how do I get out of this tomb?” She instantly regretted her choice of words when she saw the look that passed over his face. “That was callous of me, Savior.”

“Perhaps, but it is true. This is a tomb, at best.” Savior reached around his neck and undid the clasp to a necklace she hadn’t even known he was wearing. “This key unlocks the vault,” he pointed to the other side of the room, “push back the tapestry and you will reveal a door, another door. The key unlocks the door. It is warded, but the key will unseal it.” Savior took her hands in his. “I have entrusted you with my heart. You already have my soul, now you must guard both.”

Danny swallowed. It was mind-boggling. With the key she now held she could destroy him. He was vulnerable when he slept, and no matter how old he was, and how much longer he could sustain in the daylight hours, he still had to sleep. She could easily, with this key and its power, be free of him, be free of the marks. She could be free.

But it would be a freedom without Savior, a freedom without the vampire she had come to love ... no freedom at all.

“Thank you,” she finally whispered. “Thank you for trusting me.”

“Implicitly, my love. With all that I am, and all that I ever shall be.”

Danny smiled. “You really do talk pretty.”

Savior returned her smile. “I try.” He looked toward the metal box and grimaced. “This has never bothered me until now.”

“Would you like me to go?”

“No. I draw comfort from knowing you are here with me.” He looked suddenly unsure and slightly hesitant. “Would you...” His voice drifted off.

“What? Would I what, Savior?”

“Would you perhaps hold me, my love?”

Danny looked toward the box. “Uh, I don’t think the box was built for two, Savior. And I must say that I don’t know if you’d like me squashed on top of you.”

“I always enjoy you on top, *ashleya*,” Savior remarked with a wriggle of his eyebrows.

“You know what I mean. We’d be a bit cramped.”

“Indeed. I shall look into having a new resting place made, one with space for two. Until then I simply wanted to know if you’d perhaps hold my hand.”

Danny didn’t say what was currently running through her mind; that the thought of sleeping with Savior in his box was somewhat gross. Instead she nodded and answered, “Yes.” Savior walked over to his resting place and situated himself inside. Danny walked over, smiled, knelt by his box and took his hand in hers.

“It has been a very long time since I have felt any warmth before I sleep.” Savior’s smile was brilliant. “What a wondrous feeling.” And with those words he was gone—just like that.

Danny cleared her throat, trying to remain calm in the face of growing panic. She hadn’t thought much of it, holding his hand while he slept, but this wasn’t sleep, this was

death. She held the hand of a dead person right now. He was cold, absolutely cold, and his body was stiff and pale. Danny reached out with her mind. She knew that she would receive nothing back, but somewhere, some part of her had hoped otherwise.

Nothing. It was silent and cold.

“Yep, this ups the creepy factor,” Danny murmured. She wasn’t sure how long she knelt by his box holding his hand, but eventually the cold began to seep into her bones, and she could not stare any longer at his pale, dead face. She extricated her hand and stood. He was still so beautiful—a still statue, a sleeping beauty.

Danny laughed a little. A sleeping beauty? The image was unexpected and amusing. But there was truth to it. He was so beautiful, so beautiful in his death, and perhaps that was what made this all the freakier. It was time to leave. She could not stand here any longer. She had too much to do. And Savior, and the many questions she had for him regarding his relationship with the lovely Octavia would have to wait.

## Chapter Eleven

Danny found Benjamin in the weight room. He wasn't lifting weights, however. He was simply sitting in front of the mirror, staring unblinkingly at his reflection.

"Hey." Danny stopped beside him.

"Hi."

"Uh, need help," she grinned, "need a spotter?"

Benjamin's mouth lifted up in a smile. "Nah, I'm good, thanks."

Danny sat down. "You know you'll probably only be maimed."

Benjamin snorted. "You're really bad at the consoling thing, if that is what this is supposed to be."

"It's not."

"Oh."

"I was just stating simple fact. You'll be hurt, not killed. I don't think."

"Jessen is considerably larger than me."

"Not really." She rolled her eyes. "So he has seventy, eighty, pounds on you, so what? He's an idiot, Benjamin, a bully. And he'll let his baser emotions take over and that will be that. You'll have him then."

"Will I?" He smiled. "You sound very confident."

"I am."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why are you confident? How in the world do I instill confidence in you? I'm a puny, ruined wolf. That is all they see."

"Well, first off, you're not ruined. And what's more, I take offense with you lumping me in with all those other stupid wolves..." Danny's smile widened, "especially when we both know that I am clearly in a league of my own."

"Ain't that the truth." Benjamin ran a hand haphazardly through his hair and grimaced. "I don't know why I thought things would be different."

"They are." She laid a hand on his arm. "You have Alex, and me."

"My Alpha, and my Roit."

"Your friends." Wow, more friends, she needed to tread carefully here, she was walking on very thin ice.

"You sure you want to bother with me?" Benjamin asked playfully. "I'm probably just going to die on you."

"No," her grip on his arm tightened, "you're not. And if I ever hear you say that again, I'll kill you myself. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Want to spar?" she asked suddenly.

"With you?"

Danny laughed. "No, with the other person who just asked you. Yes, of course with me."

Benjamin seemed unsure, but finally nodded. "Yes, okay, no one else will spar with me. They seem afraid to break me, or disgusted by my deformity."

“Again,” Danny stood, “you’re not deformed.” She moved to the center of the room where the mats were and began to strip. She was pleased to see that Benjamin took no notice of her or of her body. At least there was one wolf that didn’t seem determined to fuck her. When she was standing in nothing but her bra and panties, she motioned to him. “We’ll start off slow,” she said, right before he roundhouse kicked her.

“Don’t bother,” he said with a grin.

“Well, well,” Danny drawled, eyes sparkling with admiration for his cunning, “you’ve been holding back on us.”

“No,” his eyes clouded over, “I haven’t. Everyone has just assumed ... no one has bothered to ask.”

Danny lunged, catching his arm expertly and flipping him over. “Well, I’m not asking either. But I am going to find out.” She placed her foot on his throat. “I need to assess your capabilities.”

Benjamin stared at her, his throat trying to find a way to work, what with her cutting off his air supply.

“They,” he swallowed, “won’t find me such an easy mark.” He dug his hands into the soft tendon in the back of her ankle, and smiled when she yelped and moved back. That had surely hurt.

“Clever,” Danny quipped, and began to circle him. He was covering his side well, and his one ruined eye did not seem to impede or impair him. He watched her closely with his one working eye, and kept his hands at the ready. Danny saw a small opening when Benjamin shifted his weight, and went in for the attack. They collided in a tangle of limbs, both grappling for the upper hand and a firm grasp. He was surprisingly strong. She liked that. It was good to know there was mettle beneath that seemingly soft, smooth, flesh. Danny groaned when she felt his elbow connect with her lower back. Good move. She countered with a jab of her own elbow to his groin. He jumped back when he saw her intent, but not quite quickly enough. She got in one, solid punch and it was sufficient in rendering him momentarily short of breath.

Danny laughed. Sometimes it was really good to be a girl.

“Low blow,” Benjamin huffed.

“Yeah, but don’t think they won’t try worse. And you know they won’t hold back. If they see any hint of weakness they’ll go in for the kill.”

“I know.”

“Just be prepared.”

“Can’t do anything but in the current situation,” Benjamin said sadly. “What do you think, Dennison?”

“About?”

“Do I have a place here? Do I have a place anywhere, for that matter?”

“Going philosophical on me?”

Benjamin shook his head. “No, just being serious. I assumed for the longest time that I had to accept what my Alpha did, what my Pack did to me. I took the abuse, accepted it, just like I would wear a robe, a mantle of hot irons, so, too, did I wear the robe of abuse. It was, as everyone explained to me, the way of things. The way of the wolf. The strong prey on the weak. The powerful consume those who have no power. It was a shock to me.” Benjamin’s face took on a baffled expression. “It was a complete shock when your Alpha, our Alpha, negotiated for my release and subsequent change of Pack. What was I



to do? That was my first thought, my first question. How would I survive another decade, another two decades being the punching bag, the spit bucket for another round of sadistic wolves?" His voice now came out tortured. "And you know the sickest thing of all? I was afraid, afraid to leave my Alpha. This, this victim-hood was all I had known, perhaps all I was good for."

"We can all play the victim, Benjamin," Danny said softly, "but we don't have to live the life of one."

"But..."

"But what?" She narrowed her eyes. "Do you honestly believe that that is all you're good for? Can you honestly tell me you have survived this long by just playing the victim, by accepting abuse? Or could your survival run deeper, stronger? You have the will, Ben. You have the will to survive in your eyes. And do you know how I know that? Because it's the same will I know is present in my eyes." She squared her shoulders. "So, you either live as a victim," her lips curved up into a small smile, "or you possibly die, but as the master of your own body and mind, master of yourself. Make the choice, Ben, make it now, otherwise tonight they'll take the matter out of your hands and make the choice for you."

Benjamin answered her smile with one of his own. "Master," he said.

"Excellent." She crooked her finger at him. "Then let's go again."

\* \* \* \*

"Dennison, my child."

Danny stopped, but didn't turn around. "Yes, Grand Dame?"

"There are a great many things you do not know, my child."

"Yes, because you have kept them from me."

"Things are revealed to us in a certain order."

"How convenient for you," Danny snapped.

"Your anger is misplaced."

"It's warranted, though. You have been pushing, manipulating me all along, and under the pretense of guidance. You haven't guided me. You've used me, like everyone else." Danny jumped and stiffened when she felt the Grand Dame's hand upon her shoulder.

"Unfair, child. Most unfair. I took you in—"

"Because you knew what, or who, I was supposed to be to you. It wasn't out of the goodness of your heart."

"Do not," the Grand Dame's voice grew icy, "interrupt me again." She continued. "I took you in, and of course there were several motivations for my actions. There are always motivations behind a person's actions. I knew who you were, but I also knew it was I who could best guide and teach you. And when it was time, I set you free."

Danny frowned and turned then to face the Grand Dame, the woman who had raised her. "Don't you see? You didn't set me free. You sent me to Alex, yet another one of your schemes. You sent me to him."

"It was foreseen."

"It was manipulative and calculating."

"You are where you are supposed to be, my child. All I have seen has come to fruition. And there is so much more yet to come."

“What you have seen has come to fruition? And what of those events you have not been able to see, what of those?”

“I admit a certain amount of frustration regarding your continued association with the dead. But such dealings do not affect the outcome of what is to come. The Great Mother has shown me the path. And small deviations do not alter the destined outcome.”

“I am blood-tied to that dead, as you call him.”

The Grand Dame growled. “Again, not a situation I like, nor approve of, but a situation that will not alter the Great Mother’s plans.”

“Alex has felt his call.”

“What?”

“When you performed the *Lunes*, you bound me most intimately with Alex. As I bound our bodies, you bound our souls. But I shared a connection with Savior already, and thus all three of us are now connected.”

“Alexander has spoken to you of this?”

“He doesn’t have to. The truth burns in his eyes. He is now a part of us, and shares in a bonding of three.”

“Such a thing...” the Grand Dame murmured, “is unheard of. A pairing of three, made up of a wolf, a magi and of the dead.”

“Unheard of, perhaps, but happening nonetheless. So you see, Grand Dame, I am forced to re-evaluate everything, every day. Nothing and no one remains the same around me. I seem to act like a broken compass, directing all those foolish enough to become involved in my warped little world in the wrong direction. But if I can’t dissuade them from acting in my screwed comedic farce, which is my life, I can only hope to be flexible enough to navigate the waters. Your prophecy leaves no room for flexibility, or for compromise. And I cannot, and will not, live without either one, not now, not ever again.”

“That was quite a speech.” The Grand Dame clapped her hands, ignoring Danny’s immediate scowl. “You are picking up some skills from Alexander, I see. Now, you will listen, Dennison, and listen well. You will do as you will, you always have. But your actions are far reaching, and the consequences deep, now more than ever. Your actions do not stop the inevitable, and know that when the time comes I shall not accept flowery words and poignant speeches, neither will the Great Mother. Until then you shall live as you have, and have what you believe is your freedom. But my eyes, and *her* eyes will always be upon you. And you will find you have need of me soon. And let us pray I accept your apology then and give you the help you need.” With those words the Grand Dame turned and strode away.

“Damn it,” Danny murmured. “How does she fucking do that?”

“Do what, *Kyra*?” Alex asked, having just walked up.

“That!” Danny snapped in frustration. “No matter how cool I sound, or how ultimately kick-ass my speech is, she always manages to come out sounding more bad-assed than I do.”

Alex laughed. “She is the Grand Dame.”

“I know. But I hate it!”

Alex’s laugh deepened considerably. “I love it.”

“Love what?”

“This moment. All of a sudden I see you as a pup. Standing in front of me, receiving

a chastisement. Your eyes had the same spark of fire within them, your voice was the same, petulant and irritated. And it was all followed up by a stomp of your oh-so-dainty foot.”

“My foot, dainty?” Danny rolled her eyes. “Hardly dainty. Do you remember what I was being chastised for?”

“You froze Ken Bradley.”

Danny’s eyes widened as she recognized the name. “Oh, yeah.” She waved her hand carelessly. “That wasn’t bad at all.”

“You froze him while he was being attacked by bees, *Kyra*.”

“Uh-huh, he deserved it.”

“He was allergic.”

“I didn’t know that. And anyway, it wasn’t a bad allergy, hardly affected him at all. He cleared up in no time.”

“And then he tried to kill you.”

Danny shrugged. “A bit extreme under the circumstances, in my opinion.”

“You were ridiculously strong, even then.”

“But still learning control.”

“Glad you can recognize that, *Kyra*. You were very temperamental.”

“Were?” Danny asked, brow raised.

Alex snorted. “I stand corrected. Are. You are temperamental. Did you and the Grand Dame reconcile anything?”

“Are you joking? Come on, Alex, when have you ever known the Grand Dame to reconcile with anyone. The Grand Dame speaks ... you listen. The Grand Dame commands and you jump. And you know me, I’m not the jumping sort of person.”

“She is to depart today.”

“Really?”

Alex nodded. “She leaves this afternoon. She must return. Apparently there are matters that must be addressed back at Belle Ville.”

“Did she tell you anything about coming events?”

“Coming events? Are you asking if she has divulged plans for us, *Kyra*?”

“No.” Danny searched for the correct words to convey some of the unease she was experiencing. “This isn’t about us, or maybe it is, somewhat. I just have this feeling.”

“What sort of feeling? I’ve learned not to disregard your ‘feelings,’ *Kyra*. Even if they sometimes border on paranoia.”

Danny ignored the jibe and continued. “Something is at work, something ... magical, I think. And the Grand Dame said something about needing her in the future. I thought perhaps she may have spoken to you about it.”

Alex shook his head. “No, the Grand Dame seems to confide in me less and less these days.”

“Afraid you’ll talk to me,” Danny muttered—secretive old bat that she was.

“Yes.”

“Well, she still tells you more than she tells me.”

“Maybe. But she truly keeps her own council.”

“Always.” To that Danny could agree. “You seem ... better,” she said, changing the subject.

“Oh?”

“Well, better than when I left you.”

“I have had some time to think on things. Time can help in some situations.”

“Many situations.”

“Yes.” I still cannot truly process your involvement with the creature. But as much as I would like to, I cannot deny that there is one—an involvement.”

“I’ve heard you say these words before.”

“And you will no doubt hear me say them again, *Kyra*. But hear me out, each time I say them, they become a little bit clearer to me, and I take them in a bit more. I have hopes to come to terms with them eventually.”

“Eventually?” God, how long would “eventually,” be? Alex had a great many years ahead of him, he could spend the majority of them “coming to terms” with her relationship with Savior.

“Yes, eventually. And under the circumstances, I believe that is very fair.”

“Do you now?”

“I do.”

He never ceased to amaze her. “You may not have all the time you would like. Have you thought about that? You’ve felt the ties binding us closer still. What do you propose to do about them?”

“Have you deal with them, of course.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said, have you deal with them. They are, after all, your ties, ties of your making to that creature.” Alex smiled, but it was a tight and brittle smile. “I may have to accept, or try to accept your dealings with it. But I do not have to deal with my own. We are in no ways obligated to one another.”

“Oh, for the love of—” Danny groaned. “Stubborn! I seem to have no shortage of stubborn men in my life! Have you not been listening to a word I’ve said? It doesn’t work that way. In fact, I know you have felt the pull, can you honestly tell me otherwise?”

“We are not having this discussion right now. I have things of greater importance to deal with.”

Of greater importance than being metaphysically tied to a vampire and magi? Really? Uh, okay, it was his funeral.

“You’re impossible,” she hissed.

“Then we make a pretty good pair.”

“A crazy pair.”

Alex’s eyes sparkled then. “I can live with that.”

Danny swallowed. And that was what frightened her the most at this point. He could live with it ... could she?

\* \* \* \*

The day seemed to fly by in a flurry of activity. The Grand Dame and her entourage were packing up for most of the morning, and the entire Pack was literally at their beck and call. Danny tried to stay out of the way, and if she would admit it to herself, out of the way of the Grand Dame. It wasn’t as if she believed she had anything left to say to her, not that she’d hear, anyways. And the Grand Dame, for her part, obviously had said as much as she was going to say for the time being. They were, in all respects, at an impasse. It would be interesting to see who “blinked” first. Danny was reminded of the

old spaghetti westerns, where the hero and villain stared each other down on Main Street, guns cocked, hands at the ready. Everyone assumed that in a showdown the Grand Dame would come out victorious, hell, even Danny had always believed that. Who could possibly hope to win against the Grand Dame Roberta Wick?

And therein lay a lot of the Grand Dame's power. Danny had come to realize a lot in a short period of time. For one, a lot of the Grand Dame's power came from her ability to intimidate and to control through fear and reputation. Oh, of course she was strong. There was no doubt about that. But when was the last time the Grand Dame was actually challenged? Danny couldn't remember. No, everyone was afraid to come against the Grand Dame, and so they kept their distance and revered her from afar. It was quite brilliant, and very fortunate for the Grand Dame. No way did that mean she wanted to engage in battle with the Grand Dame, but if it came to that, she was beginning to think her chances were better than she once thought of coming out victorious.

"You are the daughter of her heart, you know." Brenton spoke softly, gruffly, as he came to stand beside her.

Danny tried to keep the surprise off her face. Brenton rarely spoke, and when he did, it was not to her. No, usually he was too busy kicking the shit out of her to bother with small talk.

"Then we have a really fucked up familial relationship."

Brenton's mouth curved up into a smile. "Indeed."

Danny frowned. "Is there a reason for this little tete-a-tete?"

"Still impudent, short-tempered and impatient, I see."

"Still big, brutish and ugly as ever," Danny snapped back. She sighed. "Sorry, it's habit, you know."

"Mouthing off?"

Danny snorted. "Yeah, mouthing off. If you come at me with something, I'll shoot right back at you. My mouth has a way of overriding my brain and short-circuiting my switchboard."

"Your switchboard?"

"Uh-huh, the place where all my common sense and reason is stored."

"Then your switchboard must always be in a state of dilapidation and disrepair."

Danny's eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. Wow, Brenton had just shown a bit of acerbic wit. And here she thought he was just a cold, heartless foot soldier.

As if he knew what she was thinking, he said, "I am not the monster you have thought me to be, nor am I so humorless or stupid I cannot see what you have done and what you have become in order to survive."

Her jaw clenched. "Many lessons I learned at your hands, Brenton."

"Yes, *shaera*, many lessons. Have you not learned the most important one?" At her puzzled look, he smiled sadly. "Forgiveness, *shaera*. Without the lesson of forgiveness the bitterness and anger shall eat away at you for the remainder of your life." He sighed. "Your heart is hard, and your head stubborn. You have never been one to forgive."

Danny stiffened and tried to push away the feelings that were beginning to invade her body. Remember, it was easier to live, easier to survive when you didn't feel so much. She already had too much to deal with, too much to atone for... "I have come a long way. We have both come a long way. I'm here, aren't I? We're talking, aren't we?" *I haven't fried your ass to a crisp.*

“We’re talking, but we’re not.”

“Well, what the hell do you want to say, then? You barely spoke to me during my childhood, except to chastise me, or threaten me. And now you want to have a heart-to-heart? Forgive me if I’m a little skeptical.”

“*Shaera*,” he said reproachfully.

And she was right back to feeling like she was six years old. “Yes, *Rasha*?”

“When you left us, her heart broke. She would never tell you such, or share so much with you, but it is true. She felt your loss keenly.” Danny remained quiet, and Brenton continued. “She is a powerful woman, a difficult woman to understand. Her motives are complex, and yes, often disturbing, however, with you, it has always been different. I had my doubts and my hesitations about letting you stay with us, *shaera*. You were young, untrained, unruly and very defiant. Your habits were appalling, you had trouble with authority, and you certainly did not understand what it meant to be part of a family. I was afraid for her, afraid that you would hurt her, that you would drain her. And I was afraid for Belle Ville, that you would dismantle all that we had helped to build.”

“Me?” Danny said softly. “I was just a pup.”

Brenton moved to stand before her, then. His eyes were fervent when he spoke. “And already you showed a potential unlike any other we had ever seen. You were extraordinarily strong and powerful. Your knowledge ran deep and your instincts even deeper. The Grand Dame felt the shift, the shock of magic when you were born. Do you understand what that means, *shaera*? You entered the world and the earth resonated your birth.”

“I, I can’t—” Danny swallowed, finding words were suddenly hard to come by.

Brenton nodded. “Yes, and that is how it has always been. You have not been able to respond, or accept the fact that this ... you, are simply who you are, and who you were meant to be. I did not tell you the things that I did when you were a child, or do the things I did to you, for any other reason than they had to be done. And you, you would be able to withstand it all. You are, simply, magical, in every way you are magical.”

“I’ve only ever wanted to be my own person, Brenton.”

“Yes, I know. But you have always been your own person. No manner of training, discipline, running or plotting could, or would, change that. You are you. But you must accept that all I have said you are, it is a part of you. It is you, as well. You are all I have said and more.”

“This prophecy, about Alex and myself...” She let the words hang.

Brenton sighed. “Much I cannot say. It is the Grand Dame’s realm, not mine, to speak on such things. I will say this, however. Do not judge her too harshly, *shaera*. She, too, has had to accept certain truths, hard truths, and for a woman such as the Grand Dame is, it has not been easy. She is not, although many may think otherwise, infallible.”

Yes, it was easy to see how many would believe the Grand Dame to be so. She seemed infallible. It was certainly a persona she cultivated easily. “If you say so,” Danny said with a small smile.

Brenton returned the smile with a small smile of his own. “One day she shall not be—” Brenton’s voice broke and he had to begin again. “One day she shall not be with us.”

Danny could hardly imagine a world without the Grand Dame. It didn’t seem possible.

“Come on,” she said lightly, “the woman is going to live forever.”

“If only that were true,” he murmured softly. “No, she is not immortal. Can you see now why you have been so important in her life, why you continue to consume her?”

“Honestly? No, Brenton. I do, I do understand. I don’t like, but I do understand why she thinks she must work so hard on me, and control me the way she does. But I don’t see why she must let my life consume her, or why she must make me the center of everything. Such knowledge and pressure was too much then, and it is too much now. Both parts of me, the wolf and the *magi* rebel and will continue to rebel against such a stranglehold. If what you have said is true, and you are not lying to placate me, then you understand why I rebel. You understand that, this is just me. You cannot tame what was never meant to be tamed.”

Brenton looked at her quizzically. “When did you become so wise, *shaera*?”

Wise? Her? God, that was a new one. She didn’t feel wise. She felt old. She felt old and very tired.

“Not wise, Brenton, just accepting. Just accepting that there are things that I have to deal with and take into account to keep me from going stark raving mad. Not that I don’t seem to go mad on a daily basis, but at least I can keep the psychotic episodes to a minimum.” She said this last with a small chuckle. “Or at least I try.”

Brenton’s expression turned somber then. “There is magic in the wind, *shaera*.”

Danny gasped. “You’ve felt it too, then?”

Brenton nodded. “Only a full human could possibly miss the strength of this magic. Something stirs, something ancient and powerful.”

“What? What is it? And why won’t the Grand Dame tell me?”

“The Grand Dame’s reasons are her own. As for what it is ... I truly do not know. I can only say I have felt the stirring, the shifting, and it is unsettling.”

“Is Belle Ville all right? Is whatever this is affecting Belle Ville? Will it affect any other Clans?”

Brenton shook his head. “I can say no more for my part. But, *shaera* ... be careful. There is an undercurrent here, and it is not a pleasant one. You have brought unease, a true change, and as you know, change affects wolves in different ways.”

Didn’t she know it. She watched as Brenton began to walk away, and then she called out to him. “Brenton!”

He turned. “Yes, *shaera*?”

“Can you honestly tell me that you didn’t enjoy kicking the crap out of me for years on end?” Her words were hard, but the glimmer she knew was present in her eyes lightened her words.

Brenton laughed, a truly rich and deep laugh. “Oh, *shaera*, it was the highlight of my youth.” He was still laughing as he strode away from her.

## Chapter Twelve

A new night, a new set of problems to deal with. It really was a never-ending stream of shit. And somehow she had become the “pooper scooper,” the person who disposed of the shit. It was, just as it sounded, a really disgusting and dirty job.

Danny finished braiding her long hair, and after giving herself a quick once-over, she left her room.

*Are you coming to me tonight?* Savior’s voice was honeyed sweetness in her head.

*No, Savior, I can’t. I have some major stuff to deal with at Pack tonight.*

*Will you get to kill anyone?* he asked lightly.

Danny chuckled. *Nope, at least I don’t think so. No, no burning, decapitating or disembowelment on the menu for tonight.*

*Then I do not see what is so important that you cannot come and keep me company, ashleya.*

*For goodness sakes, Savior, I have a life apart from you. Anyway, you can take another walk down memory lane with the beautiful Octavia.* Danny frowned. *Wait, is that bitch still there? Savior? Tell me you told her to drink, sleep and be on her fucking way.*

*She has traveled a great distance, ashleya. It would be unkind not to offer her rest.*

*She had her fucking rest last night. How much damn rest does she need?* Silence reigned and Danny felt choking anger swell through her. *Savior! You wanted to talk, so talk. Answer my damn question, how much rest does the cloying vampire need? She’d better be out of there before I get there or I’ll—*

*Your jealousy and anger is misplaced, ashleya.*

*Well, I see you’re still there. Listen, Casanova, you have a lot of questions to answer. Do I?*

*Yeah. Unfortunately they’ll have to wait for a better night. But don’t think you’re not going to have to answer them.*

*She’s a friend, nothing more.*

*Yeah, yeah, that and a token will get you a ride on the frigging subway. I’ve got to go. But we’ll be having this out soon.*

Savior chuckled. *I look forward to it, ashleya. I look forward to it.*

Danny felt his departure and scowled deeply. “You won’t be when I plant my foot up your ass,” she muttered. “Stupid, bitchy, blood-sucking beauty queen. If you so much as make a pass for him I’ll—” Danny stopped abruptly. What the hell? She sounded like some love-crazed, obsessive, crazy teenager with her first major crush. “Okay, Danny, okay, get a fucking hold of yourself. You have more important matters to deal with right now. Put the bitch out of your mind for the evening, and concentrate.”

“You may not be comfortable with Pack money, Kyra, but it is high time you utilized some of it to purchase a more ... extensive wardrobe,” Alex said as he looked her over.

“There is nothing wrong with my clothing, Alex. In fact, there was a time when this garb was pretty standard for us.” Danny wrinkled her nose at him. He was wearing a very expensive-looking silk shirt and equally expensive-looking slacks. His shoes were the only “casual” thing on him; black leather sandals. “What happened to your U2 shirt?”



"It's in a box, in my closet."

"I liked that shirt." The shirt she was referring to was a beat-up, worn and slightly torn U2 concert T-shirt. It was soft as silk from being worn too many times to count and faded in places, but it was classic "old" Alex.

"It's threadbare, Dennison."

Danny shrugged. "Yeah, but I still liked it. You didn't use to be so uptight about clothing. I liked seeing you in jeans and a T-shirt."

"It's not appropriate attire in my current situation."

"Maybe, maybe not." She sighed. "Regardless of how you dress, I'm not going to let you dictate how I dress."

"I was not insulting your attire."

"Oh? It sure sounded like you were."

"No." His eyes now took a more leisurely trip over her body. "I love your leather," his voice deepened, "I *really* love your leather. I just think you could stand to own a few more garments, suitable and for show."

It was hard to argue there. She didn't do the whole shopping thing, at least not for clothes. When she shopped it was for supplies and books. She could spend a week in a supply store and a month in a bookstore and still she'd need to be dragged out kicking and screaming. But she avoided clothing stores like they had the plague. Most of her "show" clothes, the clothes she wore for work and to display a show of strength—her corsets, bodysuits and other assorted kick-ass clothing—was specially ordered and tailored for her. Anastasia, her rockin' designer in New Jersey, came up with the most fabulous stuff, and was super creative. That chick could find a place to hide a set of knives like nobody's business. "April has offered to take me shopping."

"Good, good. You will actually purchase some things, won't you?"

She didn't mention the undergarments she had already bought. "Yeah, I'll try. Don't expect me in frilly sorority shit, though."

Alex laughed. "I wouldn't dream of it." He held out his hand. "Come now, it's time."

Danny exhaled. She had told Savior she wouldn't be doing any killing this eve, but that didn't mean there wouldn't be bloodshed and that death would not occur. Great Mother, she just hoped that Benjamin would be spared. It couldn't be his time yet. It wasn't his time yet.

"Come, Dennison. It will all be all right."

Danny nodded and took his hand. Yes. The new, improved, more optimistic Dennison Lee had to believe that it would all be all right. "Okay," she said briskly. "Let's do this thing."

\* \* \* \*

Bloodlust was in the air. Danny felt the tension, anticipation and eagerness that permeated from Pack. Those who were not participating in the actual fight still felt the thrill of it. They were Pack. They were one. Danny knew that there were many wolves that craved this, that there were many wolves who lived for the fight and the thrill of the kill. She was not one of those wolves. Danny dealt death where and when death was needed. She killed for necessity, not for sport, and she tempered down the more violent urges of her beast by soothing her half soul with her *magi* powers. But even if she didn't have her magic to help her, she wouldn't relish in the kill, not this sort anyway. Hunting,

that was an entirely different matter. Wolves needed to hunt. They were the predator, and they needed prey. To deny the hunter was to deny the wolf. And those wolves who could not accept their predatory nature often went mad. Of course, it worked the opposite way as well. Those wolves that relished in the kill, saturated themselves in bloodlust and hunted prey of a different variety ... well, they too went mad, and then, they went rogue. Rogues were hunted down (often by sentinels in Pack) and dispatched of. They were dangerous to both man and wolf, and they could not be tolerated to live.

Danny's gaze swept over the gathered crowd again. She was completely on guard, in full *Roit* mode. Jessen and Ray were present, but she hadn't spotted or scented Benjamin yet. She could see the glimmer in Jessen's beady eyes even from where she stood, and she knew he already considered himself the victor of this fight. Cocky sonofabitch!

"His arrogance will be his undoing," Alex said, voice low.

Danny nodded. "Most certainly." She scented him then—Benjamin. Her eyes sought him out. He broke from the wood, striding forward confidently. He was naked, wearing his skin proudly, hiding nothing. Danny could feel the shock and flutter in the air as Pack got its first good look at a completely bare Benjamin. He was stripped completely, inside and out, and it was clear to her that this was what he wanted everyone to see. He did not wish to hide any longer. His body was marked repeatedly, and the scars were visible and shocking. It took a lot to mar a wolf, and for Benjamin's body to be so visibly scarred, the wounds would have had to have been brutal and probably near fatal. His scars spoke volumes, though, and Danny saw the dawning understanding, and in some cases, respect in the eyes of Pack. He had survived his hideous wounds and his disfigurement. He had lived, and here he stood, wearing each scar like a medal, a badge of intense immense honor.

"And now they begin to understand," Alex said, drawing her nearer.

It was true. In this light one could see what had drawn Alex to the scarred wolf, and why he had traded sentinels for him. Danny watched Jessen and Ray intensely, taking in their expressions and stance. It was clear they were taken aback, and yet, it was obvious they still did not consider him a threat.

"Alpha." Benjamin's voice rang out full and clear. "The Great Mother keep you and your *Kyra*. I have come to answer the challenge, and I stand ready to accept the Great Mother's will."

"Benjamin, Jessen, step forward, please." Alex's voice was commanding. "You meet in this circle, and the Great Mother sees and judges all. One shall leave victorious, may that one be determined here this night."

Danny watched the shift take place. Almost simultaneously Benjamin and Jessen took their wolf form. Jessen was clearly the larger wolf, but Benjamin wasn't scrawny or small as many had thought. He was a beautiful wolf.

Mere seconds later the two were upon one another. In a rush of fur and claws the two wolves met in the middle, their dance was primal, raw and riveting. Danny's beast drank in the fluidity and positive beauty of the fight, even as her woman rebelled at the sheer base violence of the act. The battle raged on. It was clear Jessen had underestimated Benjamin. His wolf was surprised and shockingly weary. Both wolves fought intensely, each trying to find an opening, a way in, a way to take their opponent down. Jessen was relying heavily on sheer strength. Benjamin, however, was quick and his speed was clearly taking Jessen aback. The other wolf could not seem to get a foothold, he was

barely able to strike before Benjamin's wolf darted away in a blur almost too fast for the eye to see.

"He's tiring," Danny murmured. Jessen was growing sluggish. Benjamin was wearing him down. Jessen's brute strength was not going to win this fight. In fact, it was clear who had the upper hand in the battle.

"Yes," Alex said, clearly approving.

It was just then that Danny caught movement out of the corner of her eye, and was off in an instant. "Foolish, foolish, wolf." Danny growled, her knives at Ray's throat. "You have just sealed your fate, and his."

Ray was snarling, but there was fear in his eyes. "Unnatural witch!"

Danny snorted. "I've been called much worse." She looked up, Benjamin had pinned Jessen. His claws were in the killing position. "Not a very original plan. Wait until we were preoccupied and strike from behind? Of course, it was probably the best you could do with a pea-sized brain and no balls to speak of." Ray began to struggle and Danny dug her knives in a little deeper. "Careful now, you wouldn't want me to slip, would you?"

"For this, his life is yours." Alex spoke coolly from her side. "And you, Jessen..." he turned his head toward Jessen and Benjamin, "you are defeated. Benjamin, you may finish it."

Danny felt Ray stiffen, and Pack went absolutely still. He wouldn't do it. Danny knew that was what the Pack was thinking. This *boy* wolf, this *ruined* wolf would not, could not, kill. Just as those thoughts filtered through her brain, Benjamin dealt the killing blow. Ray roared his denial and began to struggle against her hold. Danny dropped her hands and Ray rushed to Jessen's side. He gathered the fallen wolf into his arms and buried his head into his fur.

"It had to be done," Benjamin whispered, having shifted back into his human form. "They had to know I was capable of it. And he would never have stopped. It had to be done."

Ray dropped Jessen's body and lunged toward Benjamin. He never touched him. Danny was upon him in a second. "*More* stupidity, Ray?" she whispered into his ear. "Do you wish to die, because if you do, we can accommodate grant that wish right now." She felt the tremble as it ran through his body. "I did not think so. You may be stupid, and now you shall grieve, but your will to live is strong." She sighed. "It is clear you wish to live." She looked at Alex. "I will not kill him this eve. He is suffering, and it is sufficient for now." As it was, she had no desire to see any more blood spilled. Benjamin's words were true. It had to be done. And the coldness in his voice, and the strength of his actions would send a warning to anyone else who thought to attack him or doubt his ability. But she saw the shadow that now lived within his eyes. It was the shadow that came with death, with knowing you had taken a life. And there was regret. She could feel it from him.

Alex nodded. "So be it. Ray, your *Roit* has shown mercy this eve. You are cut from Pack. You have until the dawn to be gone from my territory."

Danny released Ray. He spun on her, eyes wild and fury-filled. And she knew in that instant that she would have to kill him one day. He would not forget, and he would not forgive. His anger, hatred, and now grieving, extended too deeply. Yes. He would have to die. Ray sprinted off and the Pack began to disperse.

"And just like that it's over," she whispered.

Alex nodded. "Yes, *Kyra*."

Danny watched as cleanup commenced. Pack was efficient and in this regard, unemotional, detached even. The circle was wiped clean, the body removed, and all restored in less time than it took had taken for her to get ready to attend the evening's challenge. But that was the way of things, the way of Pack. There was a winner and a loser. And the loser, once gone, well, he was the loser, you didn't give much in the way of sympathy to the loser. Not to mention that Jessen had not been one of Pack's favorites. He had been a bully and had enjoyed his petty torments. No, he would not be missed.

"Do you see me differently, Danny?" Benjamin had come to stand quietly by her side.

"What?"

"Do you," he stiffened, "do you now find me repulsive? I killed him."

"You were challenged and you won, fair and square."

"He is no less dead."

Danny sighed. "Yeah, dead is dead." *Except in the case of her walking dead lover.* "But like I said, you were challenged. And you won."

"I know. But I'm asking you if *you* are disgusted by what I did."

Her eyes widened. "Uhm, I'm *Roit*. Do you *know* what I have to do in the name of my position?"

"Yes. But it's your position, an honored one. You can kill in the name of your position. I don't have that luxury."

Ice filled her veins. *Kill in the name of her position*. God, she hated the sound of that. She killed, yes, she vanquished, yes, but she had never done so indiscriminately. She had never asked to be *Roit*. The position had been thrust upon her. And now that the mantle was upon her shoulders, she found she could not shake it off.

"You have solidified your standing in Pack." Danny shrugged, masking her turbulent emotions behind solid shields. "Anyone in your place would have done the same thing. And yes, you did what had to be done."

"My *Kyra* is right," Alex walked up to them, "you won, it is that simple. And now you are no longer a lowly wolf. You have risen in standing, and the others will see and acknowledge that."

"Some will," Benjamin said, "and some will not."

Danny snorted. "It's like that now, with me, with Alex, with any wolf in any Pack. There will always be those who challenge, some do so for power, others because they enjoy preying on those they think are weaker than them. Whatever the reason, you fight, you win, you go on. You have stopped some of the ambushes with your actions here tonight, and you have certainly sent a message to all the members of Pack. You will train, get stronger, tougher, better," she smiled, "because you are a survivor, you have proven that." Danny watched as Benjamin straightened his shoulders and seemed to fortify and strengthen himself right before her eyes. Tough kid. He would definitely survive. In fact, there was a latent, potent power in his eyes that bespoke of future grandeur. He could be great. One day, his wolf would be great.

*That is why, Kyra ... that is why I took him.*

Alex had known, he had seen the potential in Benjamin and he had saved him. *Yes, I can see it. You saved him, Alex. You saved him and now he is going to thrive.*

*I did nothing. It was his own innate strength that saved him. If he hadn't had the will*

*to live, the power that his does, he would not have survived the torture, and there would have been nothing left for me to 'save.' No, Kyra, he did this himself.*

*He'll be Alpha one day.*

*The potential is there.*

Benjamin looked between Danny and Alex and narrowed his eyes. "Why do I feel like the two of you are in on something that I'm not?"

Danny smiled broadly. "Because we are. Don't sweat it, though, it's just a little *talk* between the Alpha and his *Roit*. Everything is just fine and dandy." Danny had no sooner uttered those words when a tremendous burst of power hit her and nearly brought her to her knees. "What the hell?" She screamed when another shock wave attacked her, this time managing to penetrate her carefully constructed shields. She did fall this time, dropping to her knees in pain. She barely registered Alex gathering her within his arms, asking her urgently what was wrong. The pain was intense, sharp, but now she realized it wasn't actually attacking her, it was clinging to a like source. It was almost as if it were an S.O.S. Who in the world had enough power, enough magic, to send out such a distress signal?

Sabine. Her mind screamed the name. She had to go to her now.

\* \* \* \*

It was dark, but her eyes easily adjusted to the lack of light. What she saw sent shivers down her spine. The place was ruined, ramshackled, and the scent of blood lay heavy in the air.

"No," Danny whispered through a choked throat.

"What has happened here?" Alex placed a hand on Danny's shoulder. "There is a scent here, a strange scenscent, I can't place it."

"Benjamin."

"Yes?"

"Check upstairs, please, and be careful. Don't, under any circumstances, touch anything."

"Of course," he said, and was off.

Danny knew, however, that Sabine was gone. They would not find her here. Whatever had done this, whatever had taken Sabine, was gone, and so was her friend.

"It feels—"

"Evil," Danny finished quietly. There was a lingering presence, something black and dark and horribly wrong clinging to the surface of the walls, staining the floors they walked upon, tainting everything. She didn't know what it was yet, but she definitely knew what it wasn't; it wasn't anything light, or good, or anything she could reason with. This power, this evil did not speak to her—thank the Mother for small favors. But because it did not speak to her, did not acknowledge her on a natural nor magical level, she could not place it. She did not know what it was—yet. She would figure it out. She had to. Sabine was not dead. She knew! She knew it in her soul. Her friend was not dead.

"Kyra, there is a lot of blood, and it is hers, that much I know," Alex said the hard words softly, gently, as if to try to take some of the pain, and harshness away from them.

"She isn't dead, Alex."

"Kyra—"

Danny spun around, her body was tightly coiled and she could feel the rage, the heat

building up within her, when she faced Alex. “My name is Danny, and Sabine is not dead!” Danny walked away from him, rage still flooding through her. She made her way into Sabine’s sitting room, the room that had once been so beautiful, such a peaceful and safe getaway, now reeked of the same evil that had assailed her when she had first entered Sabine’s home. Danny could feel the splintered remains of Sabine’s wards all around her. They were broken and tattered, but still tried to protect. They were a true testimony to the *Airok*’s power, and they also revealed a chilling truth to Danny; whatever had done this, whatever had taken her friend, was powerful, really, really powerful. No mundane magic, no small power could have penetrated Sabine’s wards or battered them so completely.

*Oh, Sabine, what happened to you?*

“Danny!”

Danny was running the moment she heard Benjamin shout her name. She stopped dead in her tracks at the top of the stairs, nearly running into Benjamin. “What—” she began, only to be cut off by Benjamin.

“The fuck happened here? Great Mother, what happened here?” Benjamin was backing up, and only Danny’s hand steadied him. He was looking down at the floor. Even in the darkness the blood was visible. Some of the blood was Sabine’s and some, well, some was blood from another source. Confirming her suspicions, the pool of blood suddenly separated and began to stretch forward like a great and evil hand reaching for its next victim.

Benjamin skirted away. Danny found herself paralyzed, unable to move. The blood surrounded her feet and then began to crawl up her legs—only then did she begin to struggle.

“No!” she screamed, thrusting her power outward, rejecting the evil that was beginning to reach for her. She broke free and stepped out of the blood. She shivered, even as she fortified her shields and warded the space around Benjamin and herself. “Whatever it was, she wounded it.”

“The witch wounded her attacker?”

“*Airok*, not witch,” Danny corrected sharply. “And yes, she wounded it. This, this, tainted blood is not hers. It belongs to whatever that thing is that took her.”

“You will not bring that filth into our Pack. Yes, I’m quite aware of what you’re thinking, and what you want to do.” Alex spoke from directly behind them.

“It’s already staining my shoes, Alex. And I need to study it. I need to place its origin.”

“It’s blood,” Alex said dryly. “I think its origin is pretty obvious.”

“It’s powerful blood from a powerful source, a magical source. I need to determine that source, Alex. It’s the only way I’ll find out what took Sabine. And no, don’t you even say what you’re thinking. We’re proceeding forward, knowing, do you understand, knowing, that she is alive!”

“You would expend energy and valuable Pack resources to find the local *Airok*.” It was a question, but said as a statement.

“Absolutely. This is non-negotiable. I am going to find Sabine. And I’m going to figure out what took her, and when I do,” she knew the fire was flashing in her eyes, “I’m going to make it suffer before I destroy it. I’m going to take it apart piece by piece, dragging each part out so that it can feel itself being torn to shreds, feel the agony. And

only then, when the pain has surpassed anything it has ever known, will I send it back to its maker.”

“Remind me never to get on your bad side,” Benjamin said quietly.

“She is *Roit*. Suffering is what she does best,” Alex said. His words were blunt and flat.

She didn’t correct him, although she could have. Justice is what she liked to call what she did, what she inflicted upon the guilty. She dealt in justice. However, at this moment, with the fire riding her body and rage pouring through her, she did feel like unleashing agony and suffering. Someone, something, had taken her friend, and not just taken her, *hurt* her. The evidence of Sabine’s pain was clearly written upon the walls and floors of her house. She had suffered, and she suffered still.

*I’m coming, Sabine. Hold on. I’m coming. I promise I’ll find you.*

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Kyra,” Alex said, clearly hearing her mind’s cry.

When Danny spoke her words were chilly utterly cold and deadly serious. “I never do. I never do.”

\* \* \* \*

Danny looked at her weapons. They were laid out meticulously in front of her. She took quick mental stock of everything she had and what she still needed. Next she picked up the vial of blood, turning the glass around and around in her hand. Ignoring Alex’s orders, and threatening to gut him if he tried to stop her, she had bottled up the tainted blood she had found in Sabine’s home and taken it back to Pack with her. With or without Alex’s help she was going to recover her friend.

*Ashleya.*

*Savior? Now is not a good time.*

*I felt your mental cry and anguish. But you shut me out so completely I could not get in.*

*That should tell you something. I don’t want you ‘in,’ I need some time. I’m dealing with—*

*That brings me to why I’m contacting you now.* Savior interrupted her. *I need you to come to me immediately.*

*No.*

*Ashleya, do not defy me.*

*The hell with that. I’m not at your beck and call, so fuck off.* She was already beginning to shut him out. She had to concentrate. She had to strategize. Sabine. Sabine was all that mattered.

*Vianne has been taken.*

*What?* Danny’s shields began to waver.

*One of mine has been taken. And you know what it takes to abduct a vampire. She did not go meekly and she suffered.*

*How ... how do you know?*

*There was much blood at the scene, much of her blood.*

*How do you know she’s not gone, really gone?*

*You know better than to ask a question like that, ashleya. Vianne is one of mine, and I know when one of mine has departed from this earth. She is still here, but her link to me*

*is growing weaker.*

*You said there was a lot of blood at the scene?*

*Yes.*

*Did you encounter anything strange about the blood?*

*Come, my ashleya, see for yourself.* Savior paused before he added, *I have need of your help. Vianne has need of your help.*

Danny nodded curtly. *I'll see you soon.* And she shut off their connection.

\* \* \* \*

It was eerily similar. The home reeked of the same evil that she had encountered in Sabine's house. Danny stepped over broken furniture and shattered glass, her eyes taking in everything. She stopped, picking up a picture off the floor. The photo showed a young girl with a brilliant smile, hair the color of midnight and flashing emerald-colored eyes. The girl's head was resting on the shoulder of a handsome young man with russet-colored hair. He, too, was smiling broadly for the camera.

"That is Vianne," Savior said.

It was clear that this was the vampire's home. The question was, *why*? Why in the world did she live here? *How*, in fact, did she live here? Vampires, like wolves, stuck together. They had almost a cult-like mentality and they did not take on their own residences—at least not usually.

"Vianne chose to live apart from us. She wished to live with Connor."

"The guy in the photo," Danny said.

"Yes."

"And you let her?"

Savior smiled slightly. "She worked at the club, was absolutely loyal to me and mine, and since I had no interest in her, she was free to pursue other interests."

"You mean other men? I'd think you'd be territorial, what with her living with another vampire away from you. Even if you weren't, uh, dating."

"Connor is not a vampire."

"Excuse me?"

"He is," Savior sighed, "mortal."

"WHAT?" Danny couldn't have been more shocked if he had told her the Pope was a demon. "One of your vampires was dating a mortal, a human?"

"Indeed."

"And you were okay with it?"

"As long as she fulfilled her duties to me and to her brethren, then yes, I was okay with it. And Connor is decent enough for one of the human throng."

"Decent enough?" Danny asked dryly.

"He is a doctor in the human world, and treats her very ... well." It was clearly difficult for Savior to spit out that last word. Decent enough or not, Connor was still a human, and vampires did not view humans as equals.

Danny narrowed her eyes. "For someone that you don't have any interest in, and claim you never dated, you seem to care quite a lot for her. And no, I'm not jealous, just curious." The care in his voice when he spoke of Vianne was not like the care in his voice when he spoke of Octavia. No, this was different.

"I care for all of my flock."



“Yeah, but there is something more, something more when you talk about her.”

Savior nodded curtly. “Vianne is precious to us, she is precious to all of us. She is prescient.”

“Whoa.” Well, that explained it, special indeed. “Is that how you’ve come upon such good fortune?”

Savior stiffened. “I have no need of Vianne’s abilities to keep my nest prosperous.”

She had insulted him. She really hadn’t meant to. “I’m sorry.”

Savior raised his eyebrows. “An apology from Dennison Lee, rare indeed.”

Danny rolled her eyes. “Yeah, well, I know when I’m in the wrong.” *Usually, okay, sometimes.* “But, come on, you had to have known I’d be surprised to hear that one of your nest was prescient. It’s a rare gift in anyone, but in a vampire? Is she the only one?”

“The only one in the Americas.”

The Americas, how quaint. “It is incredible that she has managed not to, uh,” Danny cleared her throat, “go bonkers.” Most of the prescient set lost their minds. Foresight was rare for a reason. Most could not navigate or balance their “visions” with reality. They often lost themselves in their minds and were gone forever. And those were the lucky ones. The unlucky ones went slowly mad, either committing unspeakable crimes upon others, or in many cases, upon themselves. No, it was an incredible gift, and a monstrous one.

“Having this ... life,” Savior said coolly, “it kept her sane. She needed this.” He swept his hand around the house. “She needed this; she needed that human man to keep her grounded, to keep her from losing her mind.”

“You cared,” Danny said gently.

Savior shook his head. “Only in as much as it kept her healthy and working at full capacity for the nest.”

She was pretty certain that he cared, despite his calculated words or the coldness of his voice. And that was one of the reasons that she loved him. He claimed that it was she who had brought back his *humanity*, his lost soul, but she knew better. He had never lost his soul, or that part of him which was good and caring, it had just been buried, hidden behind a wall of cool reserve and carefully constructed shields. And she understood, she really did. Had she not constructed those very shields for herself for those very reasons?

“Sabine has been taken, Savior,” Danny said finally.

“The local *Airok*?”

“Yes. When you tried to get through earlier, and I was shielding, I was at her home.”

Savior narrowed his eyes. “Taken in a similar manner?”

“Very.”

He nodded. “I see. So we’re looking for the same individual in both cases.”

“Individual?” Danny shook her head. “I think you know that we’re looking for something beyond the natural. Whatever took Sabine and Vianne, well, it’s powerful and it is not of the human set.”

“An *Otherworlder*.”

“I’m going to find out. I need to take some of this blood with me, and do I have permission to take some of Vianne’s blood?” She needed his permission. Blood was precious among vampires (for obvious reasons) and since Vianne was a member of a nest, protocol demanded that she procure the Master Vampire’s permission before she took any of her blood.

“Of course, *ashleya*.”

“Thank you.”

Savior suddenly pulled her close, wrapping his arms tightly around her. “Do not worry, my love. I know you shall find them.”

Danny sank into his embrace, allowing him to comfort her, to love her. Yes. She would find them. And as the fire began to build within her body she made a silent vow.

*Wolf and woman will hunt you down. And when I find you I will make you suffer so greatly you will beg me to end your miserable existence.*

“And of that I have no doubt,” Savior said quietly, firmly.

A slow, evil smile curved her lips. And for the first time since she had been bestowed *the kiss*, she absolutely welcomed the flames.

The fire would serve her well.

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

Ever since I could pick up a pen, I have been writing. I became fascinated with fantasy at the age of eight, when my mother bought me a copy of ‘The Hobbit’. Not too long after that I became addicted to anything and everything about vampires. The duality of nature fascinated me.

But it was an event four years later that would shape my future career as an author of erotic romance. At the age of twelve I discovered my grandmother’s stash of romance novels, hidden of course, in her closet. I devoured them. My grandmother kicked me out of the closet. But alas, the damage had been done...I was a hopeless junkie—a romance junkie.

To this day I keep my love of fantasy, vampires and romance. What’s more, I have learned (through much practice) to meld the genres to create, for myself, the perfect environment to pen my erotic romance novels. I live, quite simply, for love, lust and the complex nature of the human heart. And I write to share my love, lusts and complex nature with others.

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