



Born of Fire

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Chapter One

“That is awesome beyond words!” Max crowed. “How do you do that, Cilia?”

Cilia flexed her fingers and watched as the bright red flame leapt from her palm and hovered just over her skin. Max’s eyes widened as she brought her hand to her lips and blew a gentle breath across the glowing orb. The fireball floated from her fingertips and hovered in the air between them. Max took a step back and the ball tracked him, rolling closer. He flicked Cilia a nervous glance right before she clenched her fist and the fire extinguished in a puff of smoke. “I’m a Phoenix, Maxie. It’s what I do.”

The door to the apartment opened. Stella bustled into the kitchen and sniffed the air. “Do you smell something burning?”

Cilia winked at Max. “No, Stella. Maybe it’s from the match I used to light the furnace.”

Stella rolled her eyes. “That pilot light is such a pain to keep going.” She walked over and dropped a kiss on Max’s head. “Thanks for watching Max for me. I know he’s a handful, but he loves to spend time with you.”

“No problem, Stella. You know I’d do anything for you guys.” And it was true. Cilia was a Phoenix; her biological clock was set to burst into flames every five hundred years or so, but she could deal. It was old hat now. She stood on the cusp of rejuvenation, with only a few decades left in this incarnation. She was used to outliving everyone around her and being reborn into the ceaseless cycle of life. What she had never become used to was the isolation. She craved companionship, and every time she watched a friend like Stella or Max pass away, it cut a little deeper. The worst thing about humans was their abbreviated life span. They were here and gone within the blink of an eye.

Cilia pushed back from the small kitchen table and brushed away the fine black powder coating her palms. “Just call if you need anything.”

Max rushed her, almost knocking her down. He wrapped his gangly arms around her waist and hugged her tight. “Bye, Cilia.”

The sweet warmth of his embrace drew her Phoenix to the surface. She felt its bristle of awareness at his touch, and beneath that, a subtle rising interest in a potential food source. Thermal energy was ambrosia, the fuel she needed to survive. Cilia drew her sustenance from the sun, but all living creatures emitted a low hum of energy the Phoenix found appealing.

Among their own kind, Phoenix could transfer heat and share energy with one another. It was a mark of affection and a sign of bonding, although most social heat exchanges stopped after a pair mated. A lone Phoenix could only siphon energy away, draining and eventually killing its donor. Devoured by flame and reduced to ashes, it was a death she wouldn’t wish on anyone, and certainly not on Max.

She pushed him back gently. “Bye, Maxie.” Then she stepped out into the hall. She braced on Stella’s door and waited to regain control. Cilia loved living close to so much life. The steady warmth each family exuded, the less complex lives they led, was comforting. Over time, the constant presence of humans had inured her to their appeal as nourishment. Their companionship was actually quite pleasant, and their lifespan far too short to end prematurely with carelessness.

Air stirred in the empty hallway; the scent of leather and clove surrounded her, heat washed over her as her sex went liquid. The heady aroma of fire filled her nose. She glanced down and saw her hands engulfed in flames. She looked around and patted her hands on her pants to put out the fire. She sniffed the air, but found only the usual traces of burnt food and humanity that always lingered in old buildings.

Suddenly, staying inside seemed like a bad idea. Her restraint had already been tested once tonight, and she didn't dare risk her Phoenix rising a second time. It was dark outside, and with no sun to absorb energy from, she was a danger to anyone around her. She decided a nice walk in the November night would help soothe her ragged nerves and cool the heat building between her legs. She walked down the hall and took the short set of stairs that led to the lobby. Her skin prickled, and the sensation of being watched intensified. She brushed it aside and stepped out.

The first lick of chilled air on her face calmed her nerves. She smiled and trotted down the steps of the small brownstone that housed her apartment. The small park across the street was empty and dark. Cilia headed for the track, planning to jog off her excess energy.

The first loop iced the flames licking along her insides. She'd started her second round when something inside of her shifted, and the scent of char and spice filled her nose. She spun around, but didn't see anyone. Unnerved, she claimed a bench and waited to see if the strange tingle left her. When she was certain she was in control, she headed across the street and slipped into her apartment.

* * * *

Fiach rolled his neck and reached back to scratch between his shoulder blades. He looked down at the long creamy expanse of thigh and close-cropped thatch of pussy that lay uncovered beside him. His cock jerked, longing to bury itself back into those warm folds. The woman's back was exposed. Long, jagged wounds marred her perfect, pale flesh. Fresh blood welled in the cuts and aroused his hunger. He ran his tongue along the sharpened edges of his teeth; he had taken enough, he had to be content with that. Nothing fully sated him, why would this human be any different? She was a pleasant amusement, but nothing special. He imagined she would be disappointed to wake up alone, but then, she had no idea how grateful she should be to wake up at all.

He slipped black leather pants over his narrow hips, pulled a t-shirt over his head and cast one more longing look at the thin blonde in bed. Then he searched for his shoes, but quickly lost patience and materialized a pair onto his feet. He flexed his toes. Perfect.

Fiach ran an impatient hand through his hair and stepped out into the hall. He noticed a softly curved woman pressed against a door, while staring across the hall into a second one. He assumed she had forgotten her keys. Humans were forever forgetting things. They locked themselves out of cars, and houses, and all manner of cages they built for themselves.

His body shimmered and disappeared. He'd had his fun and didn't want to play knight-errant to the lady in distress. He strode past her. She stiffened as the displaced air stirred around her. She smelled nice; like cinnamon and burnt matches.

He made it to the lobby of the small apartment building before the implications hit him. He cursed. There was something familiar about the woman's scent, something that spoke to the hellfire and brimstone of his origins. She wasn't as he was; he would have

known instantly. Still...he mulled it over. She was worth investigating... that echo of a memory told him with certainty that she was more than a mere mortal.

He turned to head back down the hall and almost ran right into her, which would have been inconvenient since he was invisible, not incorporeal. He sidestepped to let her pass and the air filled with her unique perfume. Entranced, he watched as she stepped from the brownstone into the cold air and made her way toward the park.

Darkness recessed as she entered the night. Fiach's skin tingled at her nearness. How very interesting. He watched her jog a lap around the track, but the winds shifted and her head jerked up as she spun around, searching the night. She glanced left to right, but found nothing. She crossed the track and settled down on one of the benches.

She seemed familiar, but they were unacquainted. He would have remembered seeing her even without her distinctive scent. Her short black hair fluttered on the breeze. He envisioned the ebony tresses longer, her eyes darker, and skin passion flushed. The picture was so real it felt remembered rather than imagined. She was beautiful, and her spiced fragrance made him hunger for something he couldn't put a name to.

Fiach laughed to himself. His blood thrummed with arousal so sharp it was painful. He wanted to close the distance that separated him from this most interesting discovery and take her across the bench where she rested. He would part her silky thighs and drink his fill from her core as she cried out from the pleasure he alone could give.

Like a startled doe, the woman lifted her head and strained to see into the darkness. She felt the weight of his stare, and was unnerved by it, preparing to fight or flee. He thrilled to see her tense and prepare to face the unseen danger, but what he planned was a much more subtle attack. One he would pay dearly for, but one he guaranteed she would never see coming.

He had seen enough and knew what he had to do. He left the park and made his way back onto the sidewalk. He whipped out a cell phone, one of the more intelligent human inventions, and punched in a number. His call was answered on the first ring.

"This better be good, Fi." A woman's throaty purr rasped against the receiver.

"Baby, I'm always good."

The voice giggled. The sound was pitched high, like a helium overdose, and then deepened into the husky chuckle of something obviously male. "I'll have to take your word on that. What do you want?"

Fiach feigned hurt. "Why do you always think I want something?"

A harsh snort filled the line. "You only call Arvel when you want something." A smug note entered the voice. "Something no one else can give you."

Fiach weighed what he wanted against what he would have to pay. "I want an apartment. It's on Chase, the small brownstone across from the park. I need space there for a month."

Silence lingered on the line. "And the price?"

Fiach swallowed. "Name it."

"The usual. Same place, same time." The voice was coarser now, excited.

"Are you sure I can't find you something different?"

"No. It's you I want." The voice paused. "Is it a deal?"

The hard-on Fiach had been nursing while watching the woman in the park turned flaccid as he spoke the words to seal the deal. "My word is given."

"Excellent. The apartment will be ready by tomorrow night. You can claim the keys

... after.”

“I can’t wait,” Fiach lied smoothly and threw the cell phone against the bricks of the building hard enough for it to erupt in a spray of black plastic and circuit boards.

Chapter Two

The warm rays of the sun poured through Cilia's window. Her skin prickled as their heat woke her from sleep. She loved to wake with the sun. Its radiant warmth fueled her and was as addictive to her as a morning cup of coffee was to humans. She basked in the glow, turning a slow circle in the rectangular patch of light that slanted across her floor. She did a little dance and stirred the dust motes as she twirled around.

She skidded to a halt when she heard a rhythmic tapping on her door. She peeked through the Judas hole, but the fish-eye lens distorted the person standing on the other side. It was a man. Tall and broad shouldered. His face was turned away and half hidden.

She twisted the elliptical dead bolt lock and opened the door, keeping the chain firmly in place. The man turned towards her and inhaled, his breath catching as he pushed the air from his lungs. His shoulder-length hair was the same ebony shade as hers, and his golden skin bespoke of someone who enjoyed the sun as much as she. Oh, but his face. It was carved with thick brows, high cheeks, and full red lips. She tore her eyes away from his tempting mouth to ask, "Can I help you?"

"I'm new to the building. I was just making the rounds, trying to meet my neighbors." He flashed a heart-stopping grin and asked, "Mind if I come inside?"

He stepped closer, and his eyes moved over the long t-shirt she had slept in. She wore a pair of knit shorts as well, but judging by the look on his face, he hadn't realized that. His large body filled the crack in her door; the tiny chain glittered meaningfully at the level of his eyes. It was a subtle reminder he had not been asked in, and she hoped he would take the hint.

He extended a hand to her through the small opening. "I'm Fiach, and you are?" She ignored his offering, and he withdrew his hand with a curious expression on his face.

"I'm Cilia Andrews and I'm running late for work," she lied. "Maybe some other time."

He rocked back on his heels. "I'll hold you to that." Then he did the most surprising thing of all. He turned around and fished in his pockets for a key. He looked over his shoulder and caught her staring as he pushed through the door and into the apartment opposite hers. Stella's apartment.

That was odd. Max's father had been out of the picture for as long as Cilia had known them. Between the two jobs Stella held down to keep a roof over her and Max's head and food in their bellies, she rarely dated and never had casual flings. The idea of a man slipping into Stella's apartment, with his own key, was immediately suspicious.

Cilia was ashamed to admit it, but more than anything, she felt jealous. This new neighbor, if that's what he truly was, called to her Phoenix in a way no one had before. Her body tingled, aware that he was right across the hall. She was crushed by a wave of sadness that he must be someone very important to Stella to have such ready access to her apartment.

Cilia banged her head once against her closed door, then pulled away and went to dress for the day. She hadn't exactly lied about being late for work, she just hadn't told the whole truth. She didn't have set hours, but her new neighbor didn't need to know that. The fact of the matter was that she worked hard, and often; her hours flexed depending

on her mood and workload.

Her loneliness had driven her to work among humans, but she had to be selective about which jobs she chose. She couldn't risk close proximity to people or a profession where touching was commonplace. So she had been forced to be discreet about her contributions to human society.

With those requirements in mind, she had taken a job as a paralegal for a pro bono law firm on the low rent side of town. The Dalme and Smith office was small and shabby, but full of heart and the dedication to do better by their fellow man. As a paralegal, Cilia could sit in her cubicle and do case research or filing, safely out of range of the people represented by the stack of paperwork. The bustling of humans around the tiny office made her feel like one of them; just a person, trying to make life a little better for someone else, instead of the solitary creature she was forced to be.

Cilia's head throbbed. Her eyes burned and watered as her reality tilted. The ground beneath her seemed to shift and she crumpled to the floor. She was still in her apartment, but the edges had blurred and faded into breathtaking alien scenery. A barren landscape, all earthen hues of browns and reds, cracked ground beneath her feet. Large warm arms around her and the echo of laughter floated on the soft sultry air. The image shattered as quickly as it had come, and left a hollow ache in her chest. She assumed it was a buried memory, a partial recollection that had been lost to this incarnation, but it was impossible to know for certain.

She brushed her teeth and pulled on a black knee-length skirt then buttoned a white blouse over the top before adding her heavy black overcoat and matching heels. Twisting her short hair into a bun with the ease and practice of someone used to having much longer hair, she snapped a clip to hold it in place, then grabbed a thin black briefcase by the door and stepped outside. For a moment, she was too busy keying the locks into place to notice, and then the scent hit her.

She wheeled around and found herself flush against her new neighbor's chest. He steadied her by placing his large, warm hands on her shoulders, which should be safe enough through the heavy wool of her jacket. "Sorry about that, Mr. Fiach," she mumbled.

"It's just Fiach; no mister required." He flashed another killer grin, and Cilia wondered if it was personality or practice that had perfected the action.

"Well then, Fiach, I apologize but I really have to be going." She stepped back and away from the weight of his hands to continue down the hall.

"Could I offer you a lift?"

"No thanks. I prefer to take my own car." She gave a wave over her shoulder and picked up her pace until she was out on the street and the aching familiar scent of home and man was behind her.

*

Fiach cursed softly as Cilia trotted down the steps and out onto the busy sidewalk. He was pushing her, but his arrangement with Arvel gave him only a month. After that, the occupants of the apartment would be returned and his time would be up, unless he wanted to bargain for more. His skin crawled. No, he would succeed within his thirty days. No amusement was worth facing Arvel twice in this decade, or longer, if he could help it.

Cilia had occupied his thoughts constantly for the past two nights. Her scent

tantalized and made him salivate for a taste of her. The desire to possess her was so strong he marveled at how he had let her dismiss him so easily. No one had ever tempted him so far, ever cost him so much just to be near them.

He glanced down the hall. Since he was staying here for a while, and it didn't look like Cilia planned to succumb to his charms any time soon, Fiach walked down the hall toward the apartment where his last conquest resided. It would be hard to explain his sudden residency, but he doubted she was the kind to ask questions. He knocked softly on the door, confident he would be admitted.

After a moment, the door swung wide and the woman inside gave him an appraising look. As though she were surprised to see him, but not so surprised as to waste the opportunity. She wore a short silk robe that parted just enough to hint at the cleavage he had already tasted and measured. She reached out a long pale hand to trace his cheek with her finger, but the touch did nothing to warm his skin. He was tempted to say he had come back for his shoes instead of another sexual interlude, but the decision was taken from him.

A startled gasp sounded behind him. Fiach glanced down the hall and saw Cilia fumbling with the lock on her apartment. Her briefcase slid from its perch beneath her arm and clattered to the floor. Their eyes met and he saw her disappointment clearly before she returned her attention to the keys in her hand.

It was strange that one look from her could make him question his actions. He regarded the tall blonde stroking the buttons of his shirt, picking them free one by one. His interest in revisiting her vanished and left a cold, uncomfortable feeling in his chest. The woman smiled welcomingly. When he looked again, Cilia had made it inside her apartment; the grating slide of chain and the clicking of tumblers let him know she had locked herself in and away from him.

He pivoted on his heel and started for his own apartment. A soft hand closed over his arm. "Aren't you coming in?"

He almost felt embarrassed to have dismissed the woman so quickly and absolutely. All earlier thoughts of simple pleasures of the flesh and self-indulgence had evaporated the second he saw the dismay in Cilia's eyes. If Fiach was going to enjoy his month of living here, he needed to keep his activities better concealed. He stared at Cilia's door. It was still closed and silent. He turned back to the blonde. It looked like her offer was the only one he would be extended today.

"Of course," he said. He ignored the sick feeling knotting his stomach and escorted the woman into her apartment. Once inside, he let his nature take over. He was half Fae, and he called upon that part of himself now. His mother was the Lady of the Sidhe court, and that meant he had learned the games of sexual intrigue at the knee of a master. He allowed the woman to lead him to her bedroom. She slipped the short robe from her shoulders and paused to allow him to admire her nude body. The move was practiced, and he wondered how often she had gifted herself to others like him. He pushed her gently to the bed, making her kneel on the mattress and face away from him. He undressed with a thought, and shifted between her legs. His cock pushed through her damp folds and she sighed before rocking back against him. He set a steady pace of thrust and retreat, a mindless, pleasurable rhythm.

His demon half meant that he had learned at an early age to separate from his emotions. His father had branded that lesson into his flesh. The result of his mixed

heritage was his ability to view sex as a bodily function easily controlled with minimal thought. He called on his Fae half to ensure his body's readiness and focused on his demon half, his darker self, to have the strength to force his body to complete an act his every cell rebelled against.

He abstained from feeding. He knew the exact vintage running in her veins was nothing he thirsted for. Instead he lost himself in the pleasures of the flesh and tried not to remember why this felt wrong.

As his cock pounded into the tight sheath of the nameless woman below him, his mind wandered. Sex and blood were linked, but he never found the exact combination he was searching for. The woman's soft cry brought him back into the moment. Her muscles rippled along his shaft as her orgasm peaked, pulling him groaning into climax after her.

"That was amazing," she said, looking dazed and content.

"I suppose," he answered. He was already pulling away and getting dressed.

That caught the woman's attention. "You're leaving?" she shrilled.

"Yes." He stepped outside her apartment in time to hear something hard crash against the door and shatter. It hadn't been his intention to use her and leave her so quickly. He had meant to let her down softly, use a little suggestion to soften the rejection. Instead, he had been so disgusted with himself for allowing Cilia to see him proposition another woman, something even in his limited experience with human females he knew to be a bad thing; he hadn't thought of anything except that he could have ruined the very chance he had paid so highly to receive.

As fate would have it, just as he left the infuriated woman's apartment, Cilia stepped back into the hallway. Her quick assessment at his disheveled state seemed to prove the conclusions she had already drawn about him. She clenched her jaw and departed, disapproval surrounding her like a cloud. Fiach was left to watch her rush from the building as if the hounds of hell were nipping at her heels.

* * * *

Cilia stopped outside the brownstone and leaned against the cool bricks for support. She had forgotten a file that was up for review today, so she'd gone back to her apartment to retrieve it. The fact Fiach was introducing himself around shouldn't have bothered her. She decided she was really offended on Stella's behalf. After all, if he was anything to Stella, he shouldn't be slipping into bed with strangers in the middle of the day.

Cilia's lack of sexual experience didn't mean that she was oblivious to the signs. When she spotted Fiach in the hall speaking with Regina, he was neat as a pin, and dressed as if heading to work himself in light khakis and a white dress shirt. Once Cilia had her file in hand, and had gotten up the nerve to brave the hall again, Fiach had stepped out with wrinkled pants and a shirt with misaligned buttons. His feet had been deeply tanned and bare, as if he had forgotten his shoes inside, or worse, planned to recover them later.

She took a deep breath and pushed away from the building and headed for her car. The air was frigid, but at least it allowed her pulse to slow and cool. That man and his trysts were none of her business, but when she got home from work she planned to make sure Stella knew just what kind of man she had allowed into her home.

Chapter Three

The day had been a long, tedious lesson in human cruelty. Cilia had shuffled and researched rape and assault cases solidly for the last ten hours. They always left her feeling drained and pessimistic. On an overcast day, there was no sun to pull her from her melancholy state. As she pushed open the front door of the brownstone, she decided it was time to confront Stella about her new roommate. It had been two days since Max dropped by for a visit, which had to be a record.

She squared her shoulders and stiffened her spine as she prepared to knock on Stella's door. Just before her knuckles made contact, the object of her intervention swung the door open and leaned against the frame. His pose was casual and natural, as if he spent his days lounging in doorways. For all she knew, maybe he did.

"Is Stella home?"

His face went blank and he shoved off the frame with his shoulder. Now he stood almost toe-to-toe with her, his expression unfathomable. "She's not home right now." His voice rang with challenge.

"Where did she go?"

An easy shrug of his shoulders did nothing to calm her nerves or answer her question.

"Max is halfway into the school year. Stella would never take him away this close to semester finals."

He arched a dark brow. "It was sudden. She asked me to housesit for her while she was away."

"And you are?"

A smile lifted one corner of his mouth. "I'm her brother."

Cilia turned that over in her mind. Stella had never mentioned having a brother, but she hadn't exactly said she didn't have one either. Stella knew Cilia was uncomfortable talking about family when she had none of her own, so it was a topic they avoided.

"Okay. Do you have a number I can reach her at? I'd like to check in and make sure she and Maxie made it wherever they were going all right."

"I'll have to ask my sister if she wants that number released. If she calls again, I'll find out for you," he all but purred.

"Thanks." Cilia turned on her heel and flipped through her key ring. It slipped through her fingers and dropped to the floor. She bent over to pick them up and felt something brush her hip. Fiach had stooped down too, and steadied himself with a hand just below her waist. Flames tickled her insides as heat built to a flashpoint where his palm rested. The scent of charred clothing filled the air. Cilia grabbed her keys and rushed into her apartment, terror and elation surging through her as she did. She ran to the shower and turned on the cold water a second before her body became engulfed in bright blue flame. The icy water sizzled and hissed as it met the halo of heat.

Water wouldn't extinguish Phoenix fire, but it could keep it from spreading away from her body. She was tempted to laugh. She hadn't lost control of herself like this since ... something drifted across her mind...a memory of sorts, but nothing she could put her finger on. Part of reincarnation was having a thin barrier erected to separate each new

beginning from previous lives. She carried all the essential information she needed for survival into each rebirth but to cut down on confusion; some parts were glossed over and locked away just out of reach. She was grateful the memory hadn't fully surfaced this time. Forced recollection always made her head ache and her stomach pitch as she was assailed by the reminiscence of actions and emotions she no longer recalled.

Something about Fiach made Cilia smolder and her Phoenix stir, which made him dangerous in a way no one ever had been. And now he was living across the hall, a temptation within easy reach.

*

Fiach sniffed the air. Something was burning. He looked at his palm. The flesh was pinked and a little warmer than usual. He closed his eyes and inhaled again. Cilia's cinnamon spice filled his head. His cock jerked as the scent whispered over his skin and filled him with longing. He leaned his forehead against her door, just breathing in the subtle fragrance.

When he looked down, he saw her briefcase stood by the door. In her rush to escape him, she had left it there. He was tempted to knock on her door and return it, but curiosity won out and he carried the case back into his borrowed apartment.

He dropped it onto the coffee table and circled around it. From the outside, it looked like any plain black leather case. Cilia's scent overrode the faint trace of leather, but stronger than either was the smell of humans. Wherever she worked must employ a great many of them. Then again, the scent might be more concentrated if a human was allowed access to her property. He puzzled over that and her obvious affection for the neighbor whose home he had temporarily invaded. He decided that for whatever reason, Cilia genuinely cared about the lesser race and had even developed affection for them.

He pushed in the gold clasps on the front of the case. The lock released and the lid popped open. He lifted it further and looked inside. Yellow legal pads, pencils, and file folders filled the interior. He grabbed a stack of papers and flipped through them. Her neatly printed notes filled the margins of what looked like case dockets. This type of drudgework was below a lawyer, so she must be a paralegal or secretary. A slow perusal of her notes proved she was wasting her time as an underling when she clearly had the knowledge to be much more.

He patted the heavy pockets sewn into the lining of the case. He reached inside and pulled out a business card. Dalme and Smith, Attorneys at Law. Cilia's name and address were printed below that heading, along with the expected title of paralegal, and a contact number complete with after-hours help line. He memorized the address. It was on the low rent side of town. He felt a flicker of fear over her returning there. Crime was higher in poor communities and that would put her at risk, something he found he didn't like to think about.

He snapped the lid closed and decided to return her property before she noticed it was missing. He crossed the hall and knocked softly on the door.

*

Cilia really didn't want to invite Fiach into her apartment, but it wasn't as if she couldn't protect herself, and her earlier behavior was pretty embarrassing. She closed the door in his startled face and unchained it before swinging it open. His smile slid back into place.

She stepped back to let him enter. He brushed past her and the scent of him

surrounded her. It was intoxicating, rich and earthy, hot and ashen, and strangely familiar. She closed the door only to find herself caught between her new neighbor and hard wood behind her. He advanced on her slowly, his eyes curious and hungry. He lowered his head, intent on claiming her lips. She almost allowed them to touch before she pulled herself together. "I'm not that kind of girl, Fiach."

"I didn't mean to imply you were." He extended the hand holding the briefcase.

Cilia stepped around him and took the case by the sides, instead of risking a touch by grabbing the handle, and sat on the couch. She leaned back and crossed her ankles, waiting to see if he would join her. "Can I get you anything? A drink perhaps?"

His tongue smoothed along his teeth. "Perhaps later." He stepped to the couch and plopped down on the cushion beside her, his size dwarfing the dainty furniture. He looked around the room with marked interest and reached out a finger to smooth over the head of a black ceramic kitten she kept on the side table. It had been a gift from Stella the Christmas before.

As she watched his large forefinger stroke over the sleek black glaze she felt a damp rush between her thighs and crossed her legs tighter. Fiach grinned, as if he knew the effect he had on her and enjoyed it. She rose from the couch. "I need something to drink."

His brow lifted, but he said nothing as she entered the kitchen and started a pot of the coffee she kept on hand for Stella's benefit. She took the time to take a few breaths and prepared to face her guest again. She stepped into the living room and right into his chest. The force pushed her backwards, but he grabbed onto her bare upper arms and steadied them both. Heat suffused her skin, spiking her temperature through the roof.

She ground her teeth and forced her Phoenix to subside. She jumped free of his embrace, but not before his eyes lit with knowledge. He held his hands out, palms up, and flexed them. Cilia stepped closer and was amazed that his flesh was flushed pink, but not scorched. His energy sampled, but not consumed.

*

"Interesting." Fiach gauged Cilia's amazement over his relatively unscathed palms. Clearly she expected much worse than pink skin and slight tingles. He wondered what would happen if they dared prolong that contact. What it would feel like to make her as hot and needy as she made him with no more than a touch.

Fiach pinned her against the kitchen wall. His hips pressed into her, his cock aching to know her secrets. Cilia fought, kicking and squirming in his hold. He caught her face between his hands and lowered his lips, tasting her for the first time. She froze, one hand on his chest, the other braced on his hip. His lips began to heat and when he opened his eyes, he saw that hers were full black with only a thin red line circling the rims; she didn't seem to notice the change.

Interesting. No wonder he wanted her. His earlier assumption had been correct. She wasn't human. She was something else. But what, he wondered? Not a demon. Nothing in his world was as like this; so hot, so alive.

"Fiach?"

"Hmmm?" he asked, his mind racing ahead to which part of her he wanted to taste next.

"Back off now before one of us gets hurt." Her tone was serious, if not breathless. She meant what she said, but he hoped to make her forget that.

He reached between their bodies and slipped a hand inside the loose shorts hidden

beneath her oversized sweatshirt. Her skin was fevered as his fingers trailed to where he expected a tangle of curls. Instead, his hand brushed over smooth flesh and he growled before slipping his fingers inside. She was hot, wet, and everything he wanted.

Cilia's breath caught on a startled moan. Her fingers danced across his stomach, searching. He eased away so she could reach between them and palm his erection. He pushed against the pressure of her hand and thought he would die if she didn't touch his bare skin soon. In response, he impatiently unfastened his pants and freed his erection.

Her hand wrapped around his length and she stroked him, almost driving him to his knees. She released his cock to search lower until her hands cupped his balls and massaged them gently between her fingers. She applied pressure. At first it was good; really good, then it occurred to him that it hurt. He tried to pull back, but she had him caught and they both knew it.

"Ouch," he said with uncertainty.

She laughed in his face. His fingers were still buried deep in her core, and he knew she wanted him, and that she held him captive despite her wants.

"I asked you to stop, Fiach."

"I planned to."

Her derisive snort filled the air between them. "When?"

He grinned sheepishly. "Eventually."

She rubbed his sac. This time softly enough that he groaned and pushed into her palm.

"If I let you go, will you promise to behave?" She still rubbed him tenderly.

"Don't stop." He panted. It was shameful to let her humiliate him like this, but he was so desperate to come with her he didn't care how it was achieved.

Cilia used her free hand to remove his from her shorts, from her core, then grasped his shaft, working him while she continued to cup and knead his balls.

"If I let you have me, I would be no better off than Regina." Her strokes quickened. "You'd probably pick up your next plaything out in the hall, the same way you found me."

"No, Cilia..." he grunted. "You're different."

She increased the pressure fingers on his sac while she ran her palm up and down his shaft. The skin darkened and flushed with the added heat and the friction. He threw his arms out to brace against the wall on either side of her head. She pinched his balls and Fiach cried out his release. Warm, sticky cum pulsed from the head of his cock, lubricating her hand as it slid up and down his moistened flesh.

"I am different." She ducked out from under his arms. "I'm not going to be anyone's forgotten amusement." She walked into the sink and began washing her hands.

Fiach dropped his arms and tucked his spent erection into his pants. He should be energized; Cilia had brought him to orgasm, but instead it felt hollow. He wanted nothing more than to go across the hall and take a long hot shower. His powers were such that he could be cleaned and dressed with mere thought. This humiliation called for something more; he needed the bone-deep absolution only hot pounding water could give.

He saw Cilia's hands covered in bubbles, as if she couldn't wait to wash away the evidence of his desire for her.

"Cilia..."

"Just go, Fiach." Her voice was coarse and tired. "Anything you have to say has been

practiced on too many women to be original.”

He ran a hand through his hair. His fingers were still coated in her juices, the subtle fragrance making his mouth water. “You’re right.” He knew the truth of the words even as they left his lips. “I’m not worthy of you. I never was.” He wasn’t sure why he added the last part. His own confusion was mirrored in Cilia’s face.

He turned and left her alone with her hands in the sink. He needed to think about what his next move should be, or if there would even be one. When he entered the borrowed living room, he plopped down on the couch and regarded his damp crotch. The need to shower was still with him, as strong as it had been a few moments ago.

As a sexual being, he couldn’t explain the dirty feeling Cilia’s hand job had left him with. He should be thrumming with power, delighting in the charge of relief. Instead, he felt debased. Perhaps much as Regina had felt. Turnabout wasn’t fair play. It was a bitch.

“I trust I find you well, my Lord?” A high voice chimed, startling him from his reverie.

Fiach covered himself with a pillow and looked around to locate the familiar sound. “Hello, Arabella.”

A twinkling sphere of luminescence hovered just behind his shoulder. It moved closer until it dissolved and a tiny fairy balanced on the pillow over his lap. Her dragonfly wings flittered with nervous energy. “Your mother has sent me with a message.”

Fiach shifted and watched as Arabella hovered easily in the air until he had settled. “Well? What news have you brought?”

The tiny fae wrinkled her face in concentration. Fiach almost laughed, but knew it would only upset her. Bella had the temperament of a five-year-old human, as most of the smallest fae did. “I have it!” she trilled. “The Lady wishes you to come home for a visit. Since you reached the age of majority you have refused to visit her. She wishes to know why you prefer the company of humans to that of your own mother.”

Fiach rolled his eyes; he’d been expecting this form of attack for some time now. “Would you please tell the Lady I only want some time for myself? I would like to enjoy freedom for a while before she and Father find some new way to chain me.”

The little fae glowed brilliantly. “How dare you mention Him and the Lady on the same breath? He is demon spawn; Lord or not, he was never the equal to our Lady!”

“I’m his son too, Bella. What does that make me?”

Bella flew to his shoulder and embraced the side of his face. “I am most sorry, my Lord. You cannot help your parentage. That vile monster should never have been allowed to touch a hair on your glorious head.”

Fiach snorted, but covered it with a cough so as not to hurt her feelings. “You are very kind, Bella.”

“I know. I have worked most hard at it.” She grinned devilishly. She patted her tiny pockets until she found a small vial with silver and sapphire liquids swirling through the center. She offered it to Fiach, who accepted it hesitantly. It was rarely a good idea to take anything the fae offered, but it was equally dangerous to refuse their gifts. Even though his mother was the Lady of the Sidhe Court, these smaller fae were less easily ruled than their larger cousins, and his half-demon blood was a temptation few of them could resist.

Bella noticed the slight hesitation. “My Lord, I would never trick you into thanks or

favours.” She grinned a pointy-toothed smile. “Besides, your mother forbade me to. She said to deliver the vial and ask you to visit as soon as possible.”

“What does it do?” Tiny fissions of light mingled in the strange swirling mixture. The vial swelled until it stretched across his palm, almost the size and length of one of the pencils from Cilia’s briefcase.

“It is a beacon, of course. The Lady says if you are to live among humans, she needs a way to keep you safe. If you crush the tube, the magics will mix and allow the Lady to locate you anywhere. It is in case of extreme danger only.”

“Of course.” He slipped the vial into his shirt pocket. “Thank you, Bella.”

Her eyes gleamed with eagerness to collect on what she considered his debt of thanks. Instead, she ground her sharp little teeth and pirouetted into the air. “I will give your mother the message. She will be most pleased to find you safe.”

Fiach lifted a hand to wave her away. Once her aura dissipated, he escaped to the bathroom and peeled the clothes from his weary body. He felt profoundly inadequate because nothing in his life had prepared him for the tender emotions Cilia evoked in him. Her disappointment in his behavior, and disbelief of his motivations, stung far worse than any lash he’d received by his father’s hand.

He twisted the hot water handle and waited until steam poured from the shower before he stepped in. The water should have scalded his skin, but it was a pleasant way to wash off the memories of a very unpleasant exchange. He shampooed his hair and washed his body with the bottles he found in the shower. Thankfully, because of her son, Stella had a few masculine options that saved him from smelling like peaches and cream.

He turned off the water and stepped out onto a faded bath rug that covered the tiled floor. He opted to use magic to dry and clothe himself. He had no desire to touch his skin right now. Despite the bath, he still felt unclean.

He trudged into the kitchen and started looking through the cabinets and refrigerator. His options were limited. He looked around and noticed for the first time that the apartment was clean, but filled with second-hand furniture.

The mother was single with a growing son, he knew that much from Cilia. That must use the bulk of her resources. Fiach decided when he left he would gift the pair with a luck enchantment. It would draw wealth and prosperity to them as long as they did not abuse it. If Cilia’s devotion to the pair was anything to go by, they deserved a period of good fortune. Once his time was up, Arvel would safely return the humans from Faerie, and they could begin a more propitious life.

The fact Cilia put so much stock in the pair gave him pause, just as the casework he’d seen in her briefcase had. She was a puzzle...an otherworldly being who’d nested in the mortal world. Her actions tonight had put him in his place, without question. And in doing so, she’d become an enigma. Someone who resisted his power seemingly effortlessly, the very essence that made him Fae, Demon.

Did he want to pursue her, when other women fell at his feet? Oh yes, he thought, as the memory of her scent aroused him all over again. But he needed to think, needed to plan. Needed to eat; he laughed aloud as his stomach growled.

He had just located a frozen dinner when someone knocked on the door. Fiach looked at it with resignation. There was only one person it could be. He felt in his bones that Cilia waited on the other side. He’d wanted more time to consider how to go about winning her. He slid the box back into the freezer and went to open the door. At the last

minute, he left the chain on, as a petty reminder of her earlier treatment of him.

She stood in the hall barefoot wearing cut-off jeans and a long baggy sweater that hung down to the frayed cuffs. She held a six-pack of soft drinks in one hand and two pizza boxes balanced in the other. He looked at her and tried to determine her motives, but couldn't think of any. A puzzle indeed.

"Truce?" she offered.

The pizza did smell better than the block of ice in the freezer. He shut the door enough to slip the chain free and bade her entry. She scooted past him and dropped the boxes on the coffee table, then went into the kitchen and started rattling around. She reappeared a few minutes later with plates, cups of ice, and a roll of paper towels. She settled on the sofa and started dishing up the food and drinks. It was clear she spent a lot of time here and was as much at home on this side of the hall as her own.

She looked up and patted the cushion next to her while holding out a plate of pizza with the other. Fiach took the proffered plate, but settled into a chair instead. He took a bite. It was good pizza.

Cilia seemed to take that as an opening. "I'm really sorry for what I did. There's no excuse for treating another person that way."

"Even if that other person is me?"

"Even you. Especially you. I have no right to judge what you do or don't do." Cilia stood with her plate in one hand and an unopened can in the other. "I'll leave you to enjoy your dinner." When she reached the door she paused. "I mean it, Fiach. I am sorry."

"Don't worry about it. It's time someone put me in my place. I just didn't expect that person would do it quite so effectively." He looked at her. "Thanks for dinner, Cilia."

"You're welcome. Sleep well."

Then she was gone and he was alone. He needed some time to think. He bit into another slice of pizza. There had to be a way to earn her approval. And he found he wanted that approval almost more than he wanted his next breath. Yes, part of it was because she was more than human, and presented a challenge. But it was more, as if her treatment of him earlier today had opened a window in his mind, shown him a brief sliver of what he'd become, how he was living up to the worst pieces of each of his parents. For some reason, he didn't want to be that person around Cilia.

A plan formed and he almost dropped his pizza in excitement. The address of where she worked flashed across his mind's-eye. He threw his head back and laughed victoriously.

If he couldn't make her come to him, then he would simply go to her.

Chapter Four

Cilia could tell from the slant of sunlight across her floor that she had overslept. After a restless night spent obsessing over what she'd done to Fiach, and how much more she wanted to do to him, Cilia was sleep starved and sexually frustrated. She rolled over in bed and glimpsed the manila folder on her nightstand. She stared at it for a long moment before an alarm began jangling in the back of her mind, the pieces slowly clicking into place.

She leapt out of bed and tugged on clothes, then grabbed the file and her car keys, pulling on her shoes as she burst from her apartment. She took the stairs at a jog and headed for her car. She threw her briefcase across the front seat, slipped behind the wheel, and sped towards the Dalme and Smith office.

She pulled into the parking lot just shy of her usual ten-minute commute, keeping the time-sensitive file cradled under her arm as she jogged briskly to the building. The paperwork had to be in Ms. Dalme's hands before she headed to court this morning. Of all the days to sleep in, Cilia had to do it the one time she had a case with an expiration date.

Pushing through the front door of the office, she froze as a familiar scent filled her nose, leather and clove. She looked around. The office hummed with early morning activity, but nothing out of the ordinary. Guilt from yesterday still clung to her like a second skin. That was probably why she imagined his smell here.

She breezed into Ms. Dalme's office without knocking and dropped the file on her desk. "Here's the Childers file. Sorry I'm running a little behind, I had a rough night."

Ms. Dalme's face was impassive. Her eyes cut to the chair across from her desk. Cilia flushed, not realizing she had interrupted a meeting.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, Ms. Dalme. I'll come back later." Cilia turned to leave when a familiar voice rose from the corner.

"Don't leave on my account."

It wasn't possible. There was no way Fiach could know to find her here. She turned slowly and there he was. His gray suit and white dress shirt were immaculate. His hair was slicked back, leaving no distraction to the beauty of the face it usually framed. Ms. Dalme picked up on the tension between them immediately.

"Do you two know each other?"

Cilia couldn't speak. She wasn't certain what to say. Fiach answered for them.

"Yes and no. As we discussed, I'm housesitting for my sister while she's away. I thought the best use of my time would be to offer my legal services to a worthy cause during my month-long stay." He glanced at Cilia. "Ms. Andrews is my temporary next door neighbor."

Ms. Dalme grinned openly now. "Oh, so we have our Cilia to thank for you lending your expertise."

Cilia started to refute the claim, but Fiach spoke over her. "Yes. I was so impressed with what I learned of your firm through Ms. Andrews, I felt my time would best be spent here." He flashed a dazzling smile. "That is, of course, if you are in need of my assistance."

Ms. Dalme smirked. She hadn't survived becoming an inner city lawyer by being naïve or gullible. She knew Fiach was playing at something, but she seemed equally certain that it wouldn't come back to bite her. She extended her arm towards his. "Mr. Fiach, it's been a pleasure. Since you are on more friendly terms with Ms. Andrews, I'll let her take you on a short tour of the office and she'll set you up with a cubicle and some case files to get started on."

Fiach stood and smoothed his suit before offering a hand to Ms. Dalme. "Thank you for the opportunity to serve."

"The pleasure is all mine." She released his hand but shook a warning finger in his face. "Just keep your hands to yourself and your games restricted to your own time."

Fiach laughed, a deep sound that warmed Cilia to her core. He seemed genuinely amused by the warning and Ms. Dalme's curt assessment of him. He waited until he and Cilia rounded the side of the first cubicle before taking her hand in his. He hummed a little, as if he enjoyed the warmth, or maybe he was just happy to hold her hand.

She led him to a cubbyhole that held barely more than a battered desk topped with a mountain of files and a tattered chair that had seen better days at least a decade ago. She swept the space with her arm. "Here you go. You can start with the files in the short stack and work your way over. I'm four cubicles down and one across if you need anything." She leaned over and wrote her extension on a sticky note. "Or you can pick up the phone and dial me in if you have a question."

"Thank you, Cilia. You won't be disappointed in me." His face was earnest.

She was startled. "Why does it matter what I think of you?"

"I don't know," he answered. "It's never mattered before."

Not wanting to get into his feelings while hers were so scattered, she started back to her cubicle where she didn't have to think about things like hot sex with an even hotter man. The worst thing was that she understood perfectly what he meant. Something about Fiach called to her, made her ache and want. The image of him leaving Regina hovered in her mind. The rumpled clothes, tousled hair, and the knowledge another woman had touched him, had taken him inside of her. It just hurt too badly to dwell on.

Cilia took two steps away from him before a shooting pain in her skull dropped her to her knees. Ice-cold shards stabbed behind her eyes until she was blinded from it as a fragmented memory assaulted her. Anguish swelled in her heart and whispered through her mind. She had the fleeting impression of Fiach clasping her hand in his as silver chains were draped across them. It was a ceremony of some kind. Cilia lowered her head to the floor and breathed in the dirt and grime ground into the threadbare carpet. Then warm arms were circling her, lifting her away from the stale odor, and carrying her outside into the fresh air.

Fiach settled on the sidewalk with Cilia draped across his lap. They were in full sun and the rays of energy danced along her skin and helped her lock away the agony triggered by her latest remembrance. The pain receded and her head cleared. He stroked his long fingers down her back and held her close.

"Are you all right?" he asked finally.

Cilia pushed away and sat upright. For once her Phoenix was silent. "I think so. I don't know exactly what happened back there."

"The sun makes it better though?"

She answered thoughtlessly. "Yes, the sun helps." The color bled from her face as

she realized what she had admitted. Fiach seemed lost to his own sunbathing, his face upturned and eyes closed as he basked in the bright light. So she kept the explanations and remarks to herself. If he didn't see the significance of her words, she would be a fool to highlight them for him.

He seemed to notice the polite amount of time for holding her had passed, because he stood and set her carefully on her feet then hooked an arm around her shoulders and walked her back inside to her cubicle. He sat her down then returned with a thin paper cup full of water and ice chips. Cilia took the cup gratefully and sipped as he watched her. Being the sole focus of his attention was unnerving. She wondered if sex with him would be the same way. She snuck another look in his dark eyes and knew it would be.

He leaned against the flimsy wall of her cubicle. It groaned against his weight and inched backwards. The lady next door popped out of her chair and looked around to see what had happened. He gave her a little wave. "Sorry. I'm still getting the hang of these things." She smiled shyly and ducked back into her cubbyhole.

Fiach dropped to his knees in front of Cilia's chair. She had a second to wish he would spread her thighs and bury his face there, satisfying the dull throb in her pussy that silently demanded his attention, but the solemn look in his eyes warned her he had a different agenda in mind.

"Cilia?" His voice was hesitant.

"Yes?"

"Do you think...? I shouldn't presume to ask ... but..."

Cilia's stomach quivered. She could see this going a dozen different ways and all of them good. "What is it, Fiach?"

"Could I give you a lift home after work?" The question was phrased with all the shyness of a boy asking a girl on their first date.

Cilia giggled, she couldn't help herself. This was nothing she had envisioned him asking for. Fiach lowered his eyes to the floor and pushed up to his feet. His hands shoved into his pockets as he turned to leave. His petulant expression melted to hurt. She could have said no to the egotistical man who had been driving her to distraction the last few days, but she couldn't say no to this vulnerable side of him. "I didn't say no."

He stopped, but refused to turn. His voice was a frustrated sigh, "But you didn't say yes either." He stood there, more beautiful than any man had a right to be, baring more of himself than she was sure he was comfortable with.

"I work late," she warned.

He spun around then, his boyish enthusiasm restored. "I'll wait." Then he disappeared to his cubby with a smile.

Once alone, Cilia tried to get focus on work. Instead, she was ashamed to admit, she began to fantasize about Fiach. She rested her chin in one hand and tapped her pencil absently with the other. She imagined him with great black wings filled with silky ebony feathers. She saw him ringed in red fire with black glittering eyes. Her eyes. She shook her head. As far as daydreams went, it was a good one, but Fiach hadn't given her any reason to believe he was anything other than what he appeared to be.

A few hollow raps on the wall of her cubicle had Cilia twisting around in her chair. Fiach's jacket was missing, his sleeves rolled up over his muscular forearms. She noticed swirls of delicate black ink marking his deeply tanned skin. The collar of his shirt was open and she could just make out a hint of pattern there as well. She wondered where else

the swirls traveled, but snapped back to attention when she noticed him watching her.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked.

"No, I..." the sentence hung unfinished as she realized they were the only two people left in the office. She jerked her head toward the window and saw the deep red and orange sunset looming on the horizon. She had whiled the day away fantasizing about him. Fiach watched her quietly. She stood and smoothed the creases in her skirt. "I guess I'm ready to leave. I didn't realize it had gotten so late."

He shrugged. "I enjoyed watching you work." She couldn't tell if he was teasing her or not. He reached out to pluck a pencil from behind her ear then tossed it on the desk. He offered her a hand and she took it. Fiach used their linked fingers to pull her to her feet. She rose, aware of the scant inches between their bodies. "Are you hungry?" he asked.

Cilia thought about it. She had worked through lunch and she had the feeling Fiach had skipped as well. "Is that an invitation?"

He chuckled softly. "Just as question between friends. We are friends aren't we?"

"Yes?" It came out as a question, but he accepted it happily.

"Friends can eat dinner together, right?"

"Yes?"

"Then, as my friend, you won't take any undo offense to my asking you to join me for dinner." His brow ached, as if daring her to disagree.

She cursed. "You really are a lawyer, aren't you? No one else could come up with that kind of convoluted reasoning."

He rolled his shoulders in dismissal. "I am many things."

"Aren't we all?" she couldn't help but add.

He grinned and she had the impression he understood much more than he was letting on. He used their intertwined fingers to guide her out of the office and onto the sidewalk.

* * * *

Fiach enjoyed dinner. It was such a rare occurrence he hated for it to end. As he paid the bill, he pretended not to notice when Cilia left the tip. Since they had each driven to work, they separated long enough to drive back to the brownstone. Fiach found himself waiting on the steps as Cilia parked and walked to where he perched on the wide stone stairs.

"I really enjoyed dinner," he ventured.

She nodded and brushed past him into the lobby of the building. They took the small flight of stairs in silence. As they walked down the hall, Fiach let Cilia lead until they came to their respective doors. He opened his mouth to say goodnight just as she spoke.

"Would you like to come inside for coffee?"

He was tempted to say yes, but had the feeling she was offering more than an after-dinner drink, and knew it would be wrong of him to take it. Not if he wanted more than what they'd experienced yesterday. And he did.

"I'd better not."

Relief and disappointment mingled on her face.

"We both have to be at work bright and early tomorrow." He grinned. "Care to carpool?"

"That would be nice."

An awkward silence hung between them. Fiach ended it by leaning down and

pressing a kiss to her forehead. "Sweet dreams, Cilia."

"Goodnight, Fiach."

Cilia slipped inside her apartment and left him alone in the hall. He unlocked his door and stepped inside. The keys were tossed on the counter as he walked into his borrowed bedroom and stretched out across the mattress.

"She has enchanted me," he said aloud.

*

Cilia curled up on the couch and drew an afghan around her shoulders. She picked up a book, but flipped through the pages unseeing, and let it drop from her hand. The remote dug into her side, so she flipped on the television to break the quiet. Her fingernails clicked on the plastic, debating.

The cordless phone rested on the side table. She picked it up and stared at it, willing it to ring, but nothing happened. Then inspiration hit. She had Stella's number, but she had never given Fiach her phone number. It wouldn't be forward of her to call and leave him a way to contact her. With his sister and nephew out of town he might need... She groaned and dialed the number before she could change her mind.

The line hummed. Her pulse raced through the first ring, then the second. Her palms started sweating and she wiped them on her pants. The third ring came and went and she began to feel foolish. On the fourth ring a deep voice purred into the receiver.

"Hello?"

She stifled the wave of pleasure just from hearing his voice. "Hi, Fiach, it's me. Cilia."

He chuckled darkly. "So I assumed. I'd know your voice anywhere." Then he paused. "Was there something you needed?"

She stuttered her response. "That's why I was calling. I wanted to give you my number in case you needed anything." She dutifully recited the digits and another awkward silence filled the line. She listened to his breath caressing his mouthpiece and her own quickened with arousal.

"So what's going on across the hall?"

"Nothing much. What are you up to?"

His low growl lifted the hairs on her neck. "That is a loaded question."

Cilia flushed red to her hairline. "I didn't mean..."

He changed tactics. "Why did you invite me in tonight?"

She exchanged questions with him. "Why did you turn me down?"

A weighty sigh brushed over the line. "If I had gone into your apartment I wouldn't have left until morning."

"I thought you might not be interested in me that way after," she cleared her throat, "what happened. Last night in my kitchen."

"I've thought about it. Much more than I should," he admitted.

"I'm sorry I did that to you."

His wry laugh loosened her guilt. "I'm only sorry I didn't get to return the favor, minus the awkward accusations and embarrassment."

"Fiach..."

"Cilia, I want you. So badly even the breathless sound of your voice over the phone makes my cock ache to be inside you."

She choked on her words as her sex drowned in arousal. She couldn't speak, her

needs were too close to the surface. Her desires lay bare across their tenuous connection.

“Have you ever touched yourself, Cilia? Have you ever thought of me when you did?”

She made an involuntary sound in the back of her throat she knew he could only take as assent.

“Touch yourself now, Cilia. Give me that much. Let me know you’re feeling the same hunger I am.”

She whimpered, caught somewhere between fantasy and the reality she would have to face in the morning. She ached for him, for release. She balanced the phone between her cheek and shoulder and unbuttoned her pants.

“Did you take your pants off for me?” Damn, the man’s hearing must be phenomenal.

He must have sensed her embarrassment and spoke for both of them, deep guttural commands that made her melt.

“Fuck your pussy for me.”

She did as he asked and moaned as she brushed against her clit.

“I want you to slip a finger inside, real slow. Are you with me, Cilia?”

“Yes,” she murmured.

“Can you add another? God, I can almost feel how tight you are.”

She added a second finger and stretched herself open further.

“Use your other hand and rub your clit.”

She did as he asked and instantly her breath sharpened, her teeth grinding to hold back her sounds of pleasure.

“Let me hear you, Cilia. Let me know you like what we’re doing.”

Her fingers quickened their strokes, rubbing across her most sensitive skin while plunging deeply into her core with the opposite hand. She let him hear her groans, the sharp intake of her breath as she reached for her peak. Fiach’s voice became strangled and she imagined his large hands stroking his cock as she had. The heavily veined shaft straining for release as his palm slid up and down its length.

He cried out and she heard his labored breathing ease. The sound of his orgasm made her come. Tight muscles contracted over her buried fingers, cream coating them as she envisioned Fiach’s cock filling her, bathing her in the hot pulse of his desire.

For a moment the connection was forgotten, as each struggled to recover. As her head cleared, she couldn’t believe what she’d done. What he’d done to her with just his voice.

“Cilia,” he said. His voice was gentle and soothing, letting her know he understood her reserve. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I’ve never done anything like that before,” she admitted. “I didn’t know it would be so... intense.”

She could hear the smile in his voice. “I think we’ve had enough excitement for one night. Unless you’d like me to cross the hall and tuck you in?”

Her face burned bright red. “No.” She amended, “I mean, that’s really not necessary. I think you’re right. We should both get some sleep.”

“Sweet dreams, Cilia.”

“Goodnight, Fiach.”

She pressed the end button and tossed the phone to the foot of the couch. She

couldn't hide the smile stretching her face any more than she could cover the groan of embarrassment rumbling from her chest.

She wasn't inexperienced, at least when it came to pleasuring herself, but she'd never done what she had tonight. She pulled the afghan up to her nose, as if hiding her happily sated smile, even from herself.

Chapter Five

“Good morning.”

Cilia took in Fiach’s business suit and easy smile. Her stomach clenched as he leaned over and pressed a chaste kiss on her forehead, much as he had last night, and offered her the cup of coffee in his hand.

“Good morning,” she murmured. “Thank you for the coffee.”

He jangled his keys. “Don’t want to be late for work on my second day.”

“You don’t have to do this, you know.”

He paused. “What do you mean?”

“This whole trying to earn my approval thing. I misjudged you. You’re a pretty good guy, morals notwithstanding.”

A single eyebrow rose. “Thanks. I think.”

“So are you still coming to work?” she asked.

“Are you?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“Then so am I. I don’t want to ruin my perfect attendance record.”

Cilia snorted and purposely avoided any conversation about the night before.

He reached down and casually took her hand. The action spoke of a comfortable habit more than calculated technique. The heat of his palm in hers felt wonderful, a decadent indulgence after so long without any contact at all. She had been careful to keep watch over him to make sure he wasn’t suffering any ill effects from their time together, but so far he seemed perfectly fine, and still her Phoenix was silent.

They stepped into the morning sun. She glanced up at Fiach and had the fleeting impression of the wings from her daydream nestled softly between his shoulder blades. The vision was so clear she reached up to touch them, but only felt the soft fabric of his jacket. He looked at her and grinned. She blushed, embarrassed to have been caught touching him. She pretended to brush lint from his shoulder instead. He smirked and she ignored the feeling that he knew exactly what she had been doing.

Fiach opened the car door and she took her seat quietly. He rounded the hood and slid in on the driver’s side. His scent filled the car and her desire kindled, her pussy drenched with longing. He closed his eyes and inhaled. Cilia clamped her legs together tightly as heat crept up her neck to her cheeks.

Fiach’s hands tightened on the steering wheel. His head tipped back, his eyes closed. “How do you do that? How do you make me want you with only your scent?”

Cilia cleared her throat. “I don’t know how to answer that.” She placed a hand over his white-knuckled grip. Her thumb smoothed over the tightened skin. He shivered beneath her touch.

“I don’t have the words to explain what you do to me.”

“What are you saying?”

“I want to be with you, only you,” his eyes opened and met hers. “I want to try to be what you need me to be.”

“Fiach, you can’t pretend to be something you’re not. It won’t work that way.”

His face softened. “I’m not the same person I was. For better or worse, you’ve

changed me. Branded me.” His voice held no hope. “I’m yours.”

“You can’t mean that.” Fear and excitement warred in her tone.

Fiach released his hold on the wheel and cupped his hands around her face. He lowered his lips to hers and she melted. This kiss was full of desperate longing, instead of empty pleasure as their first kiss had been.

“I want you, Cilia,” he whispered over her lips.

She surrendered the will to deny him. Her hand lowered to where his erection strained against the fabric of his pants. He growled as she rubbed her heated palm over his hardened flesh. “Then have me.”

The offer was impulsive, but the desire for his touch was anything but. She had survived too many lifetimes unloved, unable to seek physical comfort from those around her. This one man broke through her defenses with kind words and thoughtful gestures until she was left bare before him. The stroke of his fingers blazed across her skin, and coaxed her slumbering Phoenix awake.

Fiach bolted from the car and pulled her onto the sidewalk in the blink of an eye. She would have asked how it was possible if his mouth hadn’t lowered to hers, his tongue thrusting inside to taste her.

*

Fiach pulled Cilia into the lobby and nibbled down her throat. He paused to lick over her pulse, wondering what honeyed pleasures flowed through her veins. He scratched his teeth across the faint pulse point and allowed her a glimpse of what he had planned. Before she could react, he sank his fangs deep, and molten pleasure rushed over his tongue. Her taste was all fire and cinnamon. He pulled back and licked the sweet heat from his lips, then lapped the thin trail of blood trickling down her neck.

Cilia looked at the crimson smear on his mouth and took his lips, tasting her essence on his tongue. His lips warmed as she deepened the kiss. He broke away and licked across her collarbone, tasting the spice here as well. “What are you, Cilia?” he asked casually.

She stiffened and tried to withdraw, but she had realized her mistake too late. He held her tight and refused to let her go.

“I don’t know what you mean.” Her voice was strained, panicked.

“Oh yes, you do.” He licked the pinpricks where blood still beaded. “You let me feed. We’re kindred.” He tugged her ear with his teeth. “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.”

Her nervous laugh bubbled up and over her lips. “You first.”

He shook his head. “I know what I am. I want to see what you are.”

Cilia paused and looked around through dazed eyes. He had forgotten they were still in the lobby, where anyone could walk in on them. This was not the place he had in mind for when her mysteries were revealed. He tugged her beside him as they raced upstairs and into her apartment.

Fiach braced her against the closed door and brushed his lips across her jaw as he watched her greedy mouth search for air.

“How did you know?” she asked.

“I’ve always known. From that first night in the park I knew you were special, I just didn’t realize how very much more than that you are.”

She cuffed his shoulder. “I can’t believe that was you.” Her body stiffened in his

arms. "If you're not human, then you can't be Stella's brother. Where are she and Max really?"

"Safe," he murmured. He needed her too desperately to think straight. Right now her humans were the farthest things from his mind. The only thing that mattered was this woman and his claiming of her. He suckled the flesh of her neck until she pressed her throat against him, searching for relief from the abrasive nips and scratches of his teeth along her tender skin. "Cilia, I want to see you."

Reluctantly he let her step from the circle of his arms. After a short respite, her breathing leveled and she exploded outward as bright blue flames licked along her skin, burning away the thin fabric of her clothing until she was gloriously naked before him.

Fiach stared in disbelief. She was mythical. She was perfect. Of all the possible outcomes he had imagined, this was never one of them. Phoenixes were rare, on the brink of extinction if they weren't already there. His own father had hunted them for sport until their numbers dwindled and his remaining quarry went deep into hiding.

Fiach's own conception was the fruit of a bargain his mother had struck to protect similar creatures from his father's obsession. The price had been one night in the Sidhe Lady's bed in exchange for the safety of her court and the cause she championed. Looking at Cilia now, Fiach would never understand how anyone could seek to harm something so beautiful, so elemental.

Her short black hair had grown until it licked the high curves of her bottom, the satin length of her tresses threaded with crimson quills. Her skin paled to an almost translucent white and became luminescent. Her eyes were darker, almost black and small speckles of gold danced within their depths.

"Your turn," she said shyly. The look of flushed innocence she wore made him crazed to be inside of her.

"As you wish." He stepped back and let his glamour fall away.

*

Cilia watched Fiach's outline shimmer as full black wings burst from his back and stretched until their tips touched from wall to wall. He looked like a Fallen Angel. The laughter in his eyes told her she wasn't far off the mark, but she didn't care.

His shirt was gone and black-inked swirls covered his golden skin and dipped below the waistband of his pants. She wondered if he was tattooed there as well. The fabric of his slacks bulged where it cupped his erection. She couldn't stop staring as it seemed to expand before her eyes. She looked at Fiach. He was smiling.

"I didn't think it would be so big," she stammered.

Confusion crossed his chiseled features. "What do you mean? Have you never taken a demon spawn?"

Cilia's face flushed bright red. "I have never actually taken anyone before."

His expression lightened. "So you like to be taken, then?"

She cleared her throat and stared at a point over his shoulder. "I haven't been taken either."

Fiach's brows drew down in concentration. "You're a ... a..." he couldn't form the words.

"A virgin?" she supplied.

He rested his forehead against hers. "How is it possible?"

Cilia shrugged. "I set someone on fire, literally, while he was trying to make love to

me. My Phoenix rose and fed from his energy. I never chanced it again.”

Fiach’s voice was filled with reverence. “To initiate a Phoenix would be a great honor. Are you certain it’s one you wish to waste on me?”

Cilia smoothed her palm over his abdomen and came to rest with a finger tucked behind the waistband of his pants. His breath caught. She fumbled the button and lowered his zipper, then pushed the slacks from his hips. His cock sprang free and she caught it in her hand. He was wide and his length was more intimidating than the last time she’d held him. Then again, the last time she hadn’t been prepared to lose her virginity to him; now she was.

She stroked her palm up and down, testing his response. Fiach stiffened as his cock kicked in her hands. “I want to take you slowly. If you keep that up I’ll do something we’ll both regret.”

*

Fiach pried her fingers away and led her to the bedroom, his wings folded behind his back, the tops brushing along the threshold of the door as he passed through it. He reached for Cilia. Her flushed skin sizzled under his hands, her nipples hardening as the cool air danced over the sensitive nubs.

Fiach lowered her to the bed, then followed with his lips and pulled a taut bud into his mouth. He kissed from breast to breast, then traced a line down to her navel and stopped to plunge his tongue into the shallow hole.

He licked and nipped until he reached her bare mound. Her scent filled his head. The cinnamon spice was stronger here and his mouth begged for a taste of her. She was wet; her fragrance made his cock hum with need. He clamped down on the urge to fuck and tried, for once, to be gentle.

He leaned down and licked her slit, quivering at the taste. His tongue burned, her juices stoking the flames building in his groin. His balls tightened. His hips thrust against the mattress as he lowered his lips and opened her tender folds, then laved her center. The small pink pearl of her core was swollen and shimmered with her readiness.

Fiach circled her bud with his tongue, drawing it into his mouth and rasping his teeth against it. Cilia pushed her hips to his mouth and started grinding her pussy against his lips. He smiled as he pushed her to climax with teeth and tongue and groaned when her sweet liquids poured into his mouth. She lay limp and breathless as the small tremors receded. He wanted to wait. He planned for her to learn the difference between the hollow release she could give herself and the fulfillment his body could provide.

Cilia raised her head and met his eyes with dazed, half-closed lids. His dick throbbed, refusing to wait any longer. Fiach crawled up her body and bit a nipple before claiming her lips and making her burn brighter. Her skin glowed now, a soft pink that sizzled under his tongue. He settled between her thighs and positioned himself at her entrance. When the head of his erection pressed into her skin, it burned as if his shaft had entered a forge and the fire within threatened to burn him alive. The sensation made him harden even more.

He continued to rock and listen to Cilia’s soft whimpers until her met her barrier. Proof she was whole and untouched. He leaned over to press his cheek against hers and laced their fingers together. He paused to let her prepare.

“It’s all right, Fiach. I know it will hurt.” She nuzzled against him and bit the skin of his throat.

The sensation of her teeth closing over his flesh overrode his concern. He pulled back until only his tip remained buried, then surged forward and pierced her virginity as he buried himself to the hilt inside of her. Cilia cried out in pain and squirmed against the pressure invading her.

Fiach held still and let her body adjust to his size and possession. When she relaxed against the pillow and started playing with a lock of his hair, he began sliding back and surging forward, pumping himself into her. She gasped and made little hissing noises. Her inner muscles clenched around him, as though testing themselves for the first time. He ground his teeth, trying to keep from coming before he showed her what being his lover really meant.

Cilia became restless. "I think... I need..."

"What do you need, Firebird?"

She shivered beneath him. "I want more."

Fiach ground his hips in a circular motion, making her breath stutter and her sheath ripple. She slid her hands from his back to his ass and clutched him to her. He took her encouragement and surged forward, his testicles slapping against her skin. She cried out and became hotter. The harder he pounded into her, the wilder she became and the brighter her skin burned.

He draped her legs over his shoulders to deepen the penetration without breaking his rhythm. At this new angle he could feel himself sliding completely inside her, kissing her cervix with every thrust.

Flames broke across her skin; bright blue and consuming the bed they lay on. His skin prickled, but nothing born of hell could be beaten so easily. It drove him on, needing to see her finish this, to know he had caused her fires to ignite.

She clutched his back, her fingernails digging into the flesh as she cried out. Flames roared around them. Fiach felt her muscles clamp down, the sweet flow of her warmth flooding him as she came. His cock burned from the sweet pleasure of her release.

He leaned forward and kept her legs hooked over his shoulder then braced his hands on either side of the bed. He began fucking her harder, faster. His balls slapped in time to his thrusts against her upturned ass. He drove himself deep and groaned as he came. His shaft erupted in her depths, spilling his seed as her smaller tremors caressed his tender length. He collapsed over her as her fires quenched, leaving them both covered in a fine black powder.

It was only when he softened within her that he took notice of the shrill siren resounding through the building. Heavy footsteps ran through the halls and the nervous cries of scared humans accompanied the screaming fire alarm. Fiach looked around and saw the bed they rested on was a mangled mass of black ash and melted springs. The carpet in the room was ablaze as well as the curtains and most of the other furniture.

He grinned wickedly and pulled Cilia to her feet. "We can't be caught like this."

She blinked and looked around the room, as if she just noticed that her home was engulfed in flames. "Oh," she said stepping into him.

Fiach pulled her to a nearby window and broke the glass with his elbow then stepped through, careful to avoid the slivers with his feet. He held his arms out, and Cilia crawled through the opening and into his embrace. "Wrap your arms around me tightly. We have to get out of here."

She nodded mutely and bit down on her lip as he leapt onto the railing of her terrace,

cradled her against him, and jumped into the open air of the inky night. His great black wings unfurled, feathers rippling and straining to stroke the sky. One strong downward thrust stopped their decent. A second forceful snap of his wings brought them higher.

Fiach held Cilia against him as he guided their flight. Sharp nails bit into the flesh of his bare back and her legs wrapped around his waist. The effect was instantaneous. He hardened and lengthened until his flesh was rigid and begging for her warmth. She pulled away from his shoulder long enough to look into his face, then positioned herself over him. Her thighs tightened an instant before her pussy covered him. His wings stuttered in their flight as she used her weight and the hold on his shoulders to impale herself onto his hard staff.

He had always loved the thrill of flying, but never had he known it was possible to be fucked while he did it. Cilia rocked in his arms, her temperature rising as she came closer to orgasm. Fiach couldn't risk thrusting into her or they would careen off balance. A crash landing from this high would be painful. Instead he was content to let her steer their pleasure. Her strokes were steady now, as she slid her juice-slick pussy over his cock. His body tightened, straining for release, but needing more. He grit his teeth. "Faster. Fuck me faster so I can come."

Cilia's face flushed, but she did as he asked. She slung her body hard enough that Fiach almost lost his grip on her, until she was no longer holding on. Instead she was gripping his shoulders and pushing from them to swing her body onto his in a grinding cadence. Her heat was burning him but nothing had ever felt so good. He couldn't go over the edge. His thoughts were too divided between the pleasure and maintaining control of their flight.

He clutched Cilia to his chest tightly and whipped his wings downward in long powerful strokes, climbing higher into the air. When his lungs burned and his head became light from the altitude, he spread his wings, allowing them to act as a glider. Then he clutched Cilia's hips and slammed inside. He groaned and pushed faster, harder until his dick was numb from it and throbbing. She cried out and clawed him as she came, her slick cream stoking him higher. He thrust one more and felt his balls tighten as forceful spurts erupted from his cock and filled her.

It was over within minutes. He stayed buried inside her as his wings began to displace air and force them higher. Small ripples danced along his shaft as she snuggled closer and settled her legs around him. She had not burst into flames this time. Perhaps the first time was part of her sexual awakening or even a loss of control because of her heightened arousal. Either way, he vowed it would not be the last time they burned the house down with their love play.

He flew toward a small cabin he sometimes used when the need to fly became too strong to ignore. It was reckless and dangerous to risk soaring inside the city as he'd done tonight. His powers could shield him from human eyes, but not from other demons and he didn't want anyone learning of his prize.

"Hold on. We'll be a little off balance. I don't normally have to worry about anyone but me in the comedown."

The great span of his wings spread wide and held as they drifted down. His feet touched the ground and he shivered. There was snow here, thick and deep. He was amused to find himself still lodged in her pussy and growing hard again just realizing it. With regret, he pulled free of Cilia's snug sheath and lowered her to the ground beside

him. The snow melted under her too-warm feet, forming a tepid puddle around her toes.

He held her hand in his and pulled her quickly into the cabin. His breath hung in clouds before him and even Cilia, with her innate heat, trembled a little. He yanked an afghan from the back of the couch and wrapped it around her naked shoulders. Then he went to the wood shed to gather logs. He jogged back inside and tossed the armload of wood into the hearth and reached for a book of matches.

Cilia cleared her throat to capture his attention, then called a flame into her hand. She blew a gentle kiss of air and he watched as the ball spun down and settled amongst the logs before erupting in a blaze much hotter than the simple wood kindling could have provided. Fiach turned to her in time to see her dust the residue from her palm.

“Wait here,” he instructed.

*

Cilia watched Fiach turn and leave her standing by the fire as he ducked into a bedroom. While he busied himself, she sat on the couch her blanket had been liberated from and soaked up the heat in the room.

She looked down at her body. The blood spilled from her virgin barrier streaked her inner thigh and their mingled fluids coated her legs. She was in no position to judge, but she felt they’d shared great sex and he had seemed pleased.

His withdrawal gave her time to consider their new circumstances. She didn’t know him, not really. She had no idea what he would find funny or offensive, if he would laugh or become ill humored with her.

Now she was homeless. She had the funds to start over, but she dreaded the work that would entail. Buying new furnishings when her olds ones had been comfortable. Finding a new building to live in since her previous address was now a smoking shell of brick and mortar thanks to her sexual awakening. She prayed that no one had been injured.

She would need to send Stella and Max some start-over money. The rest of the families that had shared the brownstone had been fairly well off and undoubtedly insured, but as a single mother, Stella’s pennies were stretched to the limit.

Lost in thought, she missed when Fiach joined her in the room. Still nude, he stopped before her, grasped her hands in his and lifted her to her feet. The blanket slipped from her shoulders and they were left skin to skin. A shudder ran through her, and he leaned in to press a kiss to her neck. Liquid pooled between her thighs, preparing her for what was to come. Instead of what she had expected, he led her to the bedroom, past the bed, and into the small bathroom. The tub was full of steamy water and frothing with bubbles.

“I thought you might be sore ... or something.” Fiach cupped the back of his neck with a hand, as if unsure of what else to say.

“Thank you.” She rose up on tiptoe and dropped a kiss just under his jaw. “That was very kind of you. I am a little sore.” Then she gestured at the dried proof of their joining. “And dirty.”

Fiach glanced down to where she pointed. He tilted his head and stared, then dropped to his knees. He leaned his face into the skin of her stomach before moving lower to where her virgin’s blood marked her passage to womanhood.

He slid his hands between her legs silently asking her to open wider for him. She obliged and gasped as his tongue darted out and traced the line of blood and semen that ran from her knee up to her pussy. He licked her clean and pushed himself back onto his

feet. His hand covered his mouth. His eyes were large and dark. “It tingles,” he murmured. Then he seemed to realize he’d spoken aloud. “Sorry. I’ll leave you to your bath. Just call out if you need anything.”

Cilia nodded mutely and slipped into the bubbly water. Fiach watched as her breasts floated and bobbed, then licked his lips and closed the door with a solid thud.

Chapter Six

Fiach slumped against the bathroom door. Inside, he heard water splashing as Cilia bathed. He pushed off the frame and looked around the bedroom. In a dresser drawer he found a small stash of women's underwear. The bottoms look about right, but the bras were too large for Cilia's smaller, pert breasts. He also found a pair of black Capri length tights. He unfolded the pocket closet doors and found oversized plaid work shirts hung on bare metal hangers. They were worn soft and faded from too many launderings. He fingered one with red checking and pulled it free of its hanger.

He could manifest his own clothing, so he didn't need to worry with finding something to fit him. He was dirty in the way only great sex can make you. Even though he could clean himself with a thought, he had been among humans long enough to appreciate what scalding hot water could do for your spirits, much as he'd thought only a few days ago. He had to retract his wings to fit into the shower. When he wore his glamour, they were invisible as well as intangible. It was the only way he could enter most structures or interact with humans normally. Unless glamoured, his massive wingspan would have made life among mortals impossible.

While Fiach waited for his turn in the bathroom, a flicker of movement caught his eye, and he went to the window. Sunken eyes peered in at him from a gaunt, emaciated face. Silver hair hung down in greasy threads. A long hooked nose curved over thin chapped lips. A black serpent's tongue darted out to moisten them as Arvel raised a hand and wiggled the misshapen digits in a silent hello. Fiach didn't bother to wonder how Arvel had found him...his bargain with the demon to displace Stella and Max gave it the power to locate him effortlessly, at least for the next three weeks or so.

Fiach cursed and pointed toward the door. He wasn't about to invite Arvel inside. Demons had to be asked inside another's home. Fiach wasn't about to give that protection away, even if this wasn't technically his "home." Instead he padded through the house, pausing to listen for Cilia. She was still in the tub, humming an unfamiliar tune. Satisfied she would be occupied a while longer, he strode to the front door and stepped out into the cold.

Arvel was perched on the edge of a wooden rocker, looking at him with something akin to hunger.

"Why have you come?" Fiach asked.

Arvel's voice pierced his eardrums. "You have found favor with another." The apparently female demon pouted. "You will service Arvel no longer."

Fiach crossed his arms over his chest. He had to be careful how he played this. One misstep could place Cilia in immense danger. "Now, Arvel, I have taken lovers before. I have always come back to you." Of course it was only for the exchange of favors impossible for anyone but her to grant, but he didn't dare admit that.

"She is more. Your aura glows with golden red flame." Arvel grinned and bared needle-sharp teeth embedded in blackened gums. "You think I do not know. Arvel knows what this means."

Fear tightened Fiach's stomach. He had not sensed the change in his aura and had no idea what it meant, but he aimed to find out. If Arvel could sense it, then other demons

and more powerful nightwalkers could too. He couldn't risk leading danger to Cilia. He smiled his most sincere smile. "I don't have the knowledge that you do." He stared into the black bottomless eyes. "I don't understand what it means."

Arvel brightened immediately. Her smile tightened and her eyes glittered feverishly. "Arvel knows. I would tell you ... for a price."

The price went unspoken. It was always the same. Arvel was androgyne, both male and female. While some demons were monoecious and could self-fertilize, Arvel was hermaphroditic. She required sperm or egg donors, so her kind often bartered with fellow demons for sex. She was also amorphous. With Fiach, she would assume her most female form and he would shove down the revolt and disgust she inspired to fuck her into unconsciousness then make his escape. He shivered inwardly, thinking it had only been days since their last encounter. Usually he managed decades, sometimes longer, before he had to barter with Arvel.

"My word is given. Tell me what this change means."

Arvel clapped her hands excitedly, and then calmed to relay the information. "Your aura has changed because you are a half-breed no longer. You stand on the edge of a conversion. That creature will make you as she is; she has no choice." Her voice lowered to a menacing bass. "You have mated a Phoenix."

"Mated?" he knew the word was breathless, but there was no way to call it back.

Arvel's nails dug into the arms of the rocker, making the old wood creak and splinter. "This excites you!" her tinny voice shrilled.

Without warning Arvel launched herself at him, clawing at his clothing and reaching for his zipper while rubbing her palm against his groin. Fiach stiffened, but had given his word, and had no recourse now but to follow through with his promise.

Arvel had just freed the limp length of him when Cilia came to the door wrapped in a towel. She looked at Fiach and her sadness was a tangible thing. Then she looked at the demon desperately trying to arouse his flesh.

Arvel met her eyes levelly. "He bargained. He cannot take it back."

"I know," Cilia said simply and leaned against the doorframe.

"Cilia, you have to know I don't want this. I had to bargain for your protection." He gestured at his open fly. "This is all I have to offer."

"I know," she repeated calmly.

Arvel watched Cilia warily, but took his flaccid cock into her mouth and tried to stimulate him orally. He winced, then looked away and almost missed what happened next. When Arvel had taken him as far as she could, her head erupted in a bright burst of flames. Fiach gripped the thin bony shoulders and pushed the demon away. He looked down, but he was unmarred by the fire.

Cilia dusted her palms on her towel, leaving black powder handprints. He considered her timing and realized he'd been punished for what he was about to do. If she had any less control of her fires, he would have been seared badly, and in a most delicate place.

Arvel writhed on the deck, slapping her face and trying to put out the blaze. Fiach watched until the fire-eaten skin was reduced to a charred skull. It wasn't enough to kill Arvel, but it would be more than enough to piss her off.

Without any muscles left in her jaw, Arvel was reduced to bass growls and rasping threats. The one he heard clearest involved parts of his anatomy and things that would happen to him once Harailt found out about his mating.

Fiach watched as the demon crawled along the porch, then vanished into the night. He was uncertain if Arvel had truly gone, or if she had merely veiled herself. He tore his eyes away from the night to face Cilia.

She was looking down at her toes and wiggling them. It had the same effect as if someone were tapping fingers on a desktop. Finally he had to speak. "Cilia..."

Cilia looked up, her expression guarded. "I heard it all. I know why you offered as you did." Her brow wrinkled. "What the demon said about you becoming like me is true." She studied her toes a little more. "If you stay with me, you will change. You would never be able to take another lover. Once the conversion is complete, we will hold a piece of each other." She looked up then. "Phoenixes mate for life."

Fiach stood in stunned silence, uncertain how to react.

*

Cilia took Fiach's reticence as a bad omen. She reentered the cottage and headed to the bedroom, still sickened at the scene she had walked into. Fiach had bargained himself away for information he thought would help him protect her. He would have let that thing have him. Didn't that show a certain amount of fondness on his part? Would he have enjoyed the arrangement? Thinking back on his sickened expression, she knew that couldn't be it.

He was probably just overcome by the announcement he had mated a Phoenix by accident. She sniffled and felt a tear slip down her cheek and evaporate against her too-warm skin.

Strong arms circled around her. Fiach pulled her back into his chest and spoke against her neck. "Why so sad, Firebird?"

Her heart constricted at the endearment. "I'm not sad. I'm just tired," she lied.

"You cry when you're tired?" he asked.

She laughed a little. "Only when I'm very tired."

His fingers slipped free the knot of her towel and let it fall to the floor between them. One large hand spanned her stomach as the other nestled into the juncture of her thighs, parting her folds and forcing her to lean on his strength to stay upright. He slipped a finger inside as he stroked her swollen clit with his thumb. Hot liquid rushed from her body, coating his fingers as he pleased her.

He nipped her shoulder. "I think you're scared."

Cilia bit back a moan. She was too molten for words.

He nipped higher, on her throat. "I think you don't realize how much I want you."

This time she did moan, his words soothing the ache in her heart. His tongue licked the path of the vein he had taken earlier. He increased the pressure of his hands, the slow circles coming faster and faster.

She cried out his name as her body shivered and clenched around his finger. He gave her no time to react. He pushed her down to the bed, sprawled before him on hands and knees. The instant the bed shifted to indicate he had joined her, his cock slid home and she gasped and rested her forehead on the tops of her arms.

Fiach groaned in approval, the angle shifting and allowing his thrust to penetrate deeper into her core. He fisted his hand in her hair and pulled her head up as he bent over her back and brought his lips to her neck.

"I have to know that you want me. I must know you have some need of me. Even if it's only this." To make his point, he swiveled his hips and ground his cock into her with

an almost savage need.

She began to ripple around him, the thick slide of his flesh into her stole her breath. Just before she came, she whispered her need of him into the bend of the arm she braced on. The driving rhythm stopped and he slipped from her. Cilia looked up, prepared to complain, but met his lips instead. He rolled her onto her back and devoured her. His kisses ignited her lips. Their intensity burned as he consumed her. She felt the velvet tip of his erection prod her entrance as he reentered her.

His thrusts were gentle, softer strokes and just as she reached for her peak she felt him spill within her. The hot spurts of fluid scorched her insides and pushed her over the edge and into her own orgasm. The enormity of it made her eyes close and her head kick back into her pillow. Her skin tingled and she smelled the sweet scent of fire. She gazed at Fiach's upturned face. His eyes rolled open slowly as his pulsing warmth slowed inside her.

His body was ringed with fire. It burned red hot and leapt from his skin. She had underestimated the timeline of their intimacy. Fiach had changed more than she'd realized. The Phoenix within Cilia had accepted him, and gifted him with a piece of itself. His newly risen Phoenix pushed from its dormancy and caused hers to ignite. Her flesh radiated a light blue flame. Purple arcs of heat danced where they were joined.

This time they noticed the mattress smoking in time to jump free of the bed and douse the flames with water from the bathroom sink. They laughed a little and moved into the second bedroom. When Cilia lay down, she felt the warm assurance of Fiach spooned against her back. Neither spoke as the enormity of what had transpired settled around them. Instead, they chose sleep and left their uncertainties to the night.

Chapter Seven

Cilia snuggled into Fiach's chest. They had been awake for long minutes, but hadn't moved or spoken. He stayed quiet and still, unwilling to be the one to break the silence.

"Where are Stella and Max?" Cilia tilted her head back so she could look in his eyes.

"I bargained with Arvel for a month of time in your building. Once my terms were accepted, Stella and Max were taken to the outer edge of Faerie to be kept in stasis until the bargain could be completed."

Cilia pushed away from his chest and sat up. "You mean to tell me you bargained away the lives of two innocent humans? Just to get in my pants?"

Fiach rolled onto his back. "Yes."

"And you didn't once think that was wrong?"

"No," he admitted. There was no reason for him to feel so hurt. She viewed his actions as a betrayal of humanity. She didn't know what he was and couldn't understand that was a quality he didn't possess. "Cilia, I'm half demon. Bartering with other people's lives and possessions is an acceptable practice where I come from. My father is actually quite renowned for it."

"What about your mother's influence?" she asked, curious.

He answered as honestly as he could. "My mother is the Lady of the Sidhe court. Her teachings are the only reason I bargained for confinement instead of souls." His fingers traced a groove in the skin over his heart. "I try to find the balance, but it's hard sometimes. I was raised on both sides to believe I was entitled to everything the world has to offer. Only the methods for obtainment were different. My father believed in ruthless ambition, my mother in devious negotiation." He met her stare. "You're the first person who ever told me no. The only person to ever make me earn their good opinion instead of bowing down to my parentage."

"I didn't know who your parents were at the time."

"Would it have mattered?"

Cilia laughed. "No." She worried her thumbnail and asked, "The way you talk about your parents, are they together?"

"No. My mother, the Lady, offers refuge to magical creatures in her favor. My father, Harailt, is a rabid hunter of the same things she seeks to protect. I don't know all the details, but once she harbored something so dear to her heart she risked her life and the lives of her court to protect it. My father found out and stormed Faerie, seeking to claim them for himself. She refused and a bargain was struck. He gained one night in her bed, which was a great insult to her virtue, and in exchange her protection held until a secure place could be found and those she guarded delivered safely." He offered a wry grin. "I am the byproduct of that bargain. A half-breed son born to bitter enemies."

She stroked his cheek with her finger. "You are so much more than you give yourself credit for. You're a good man. It's all right that you're still finding your way. We all are."

Her face fell and he could guess the reason. His thoughts turned to what had happened tonight. Arvel would seek revenge and Stella and Max were easy targets for her wrath. He sat up and mirrored Cilia's posture. "You think Arvel is going to harm them?"

"Don't you?" She ran a shaky hand through her hair. "Fiach, we have to help them."

He shook his head. "They are bound. The only way to reach them is through Arvel, and we know now that I've lost the ability to bargain for what she wants. And its doubtful Arvel would be merciful. We can try to thwart her plans, but I'm uncertain of the best course of action."

Cilia frowned. "I'm sorry I've changed you." She looked down at her hands and worried a fingernail. "If we stop now, maybe the effects will wear off."

Fiach grabbed her shoulders and shook her until she looked up, shocked by his anger. "I don't want to stop."

"You'll be mated to me, Fiach." She swallowed. "You won't be able to have another woman, ever."

He pulled her tight against his chest and kissed her hair; the feathery quills tickled his nose as she burrowed tighter against him. "What makes you think I would ever want one?"

"You really want to be mine?" she asked.

"Always."

Pleased by his response, but aware of their more immediate concerns, Cilia pushed out of his arms and tapped a finger over her lips. "There has to be another way to get to Stella and Max."

"I know someone who could help us, if it suits her." He cringed at the thought of asking his mother for help. It would be much easier if he could contact Arabella and ask her for a favor. He tried not to dwell on what that would cost him.

"Really?" Hope resounded in her voice. It was enough that Fiach decided to risk calling the tiny fae and asking for a favor.

He closed his eyes and focused on the image of Bella and whispered a summons softly in his mother's language. He waited, but nothing happened. He tried once more before Cilia's squeak of alarm made him open his eyes quickly as he prepared to face down the overprotective little fairy.

Instead of the tiny fae, a large black panther crouched in the corner. Its pumping purr vibrated in the air. The cat's lips pulled back over its teeth in a perfect feline smile. "My Lord, such strange bedfellows we make."

"Kathel, what brings you here?"

"Your summons, of course. There is ... unrest in Faerie. It is rumored your father has gathered the Morag. The lesser fae have been banned from this realm. I heard your call and fancied I would answer it."

"Excuse me, but what is that?" Cilia asked pointing at Kathel.

The large cat bowed low. "My Lady, forgive my rudeness. I am Kathel, emissary to the Lady of the Sidhe court. I heard the boy's call and came to see how best I could help."

She sat perfectly still and watched Kathel as if he were tensed to pounce. Fiach smoothed a hand down her arm, but kept his eyes locked on the large cat. When standing, Kathel was equal to Fiach's waist and broad enough to carry someone on his back, although he would kill anyone for trying. The old cat grinned slyly at Cilia and enjoyed her whimper of alarm.

"I'll not hurt you, lass," Kathel purred. "I'm as tame as any old housecat."

Cilia relaxed a little until Kathel sat on his haunches and revealed nine tails of equal length that twitched and curled to his side. Each was tipped with a silver barb that caught

the low light and glittered.

“Fiach...” she yelped.

He pulled her into the crook of his arm. “It’s all right, Cilia. He’s no housecat, but I doubt he means us harm.”

A rusty chuckle issued from the cat’s broad chest. “He’s right. I accepted his summons. I can’t harm you and I don’t wish to.” Seeing that his tail made her nervous, Kathel dropped to the floor and stretched out, trying his best to look like the tame housecat he had named himself. “So what did you need with the wee folks anyway?”

Fiach sighed. “I made a deal with Arvel, and in exchange for my favor, she took two humans that Cilia cares a great deal for so I could inhabit their residence. Last night I attempted to bargain for information, but it didn’t go so well for the demon. I’m worthless to her now, so we fear she will harm the woman and her son out of spite.”

“Not of use? Demons of her ilk only ply in the trade of favors for procreation. If you’re of no use to her that must mean...” Kathel turned his large yellow eyes on Cilia. “Is the lass your *D’Ame*?”

The word caught Fiach off guard. He hadn’t considered what his fae heritage would mean in a situation like this. If he claimed Cilia as his soul mate, he would have to do so before the Faerie Court and obtain his mother’s blessing before they would be tested to see if they were worthy of the *Noce*, or soul-binding ceremony.

Kathel clucked his tongue, an odd sound coming from his feline jaws. “It’s a shame. One such as her is a rare prize.”

“I don’t want to think on courtly politics just yet, Kathel. For now it’s enough to know she is my mate. I am bound to her in the way of her people.”

The old cat’s tails thumped against the floorboards. “Wise you are, young one. Your heart has to be willing for the soul binding to work. You’d not like an eternity tied to someone who only brings you misery.”

Cilia interrupted. “As much as I enjoy being talked over and ignored, I thought the point of this meeting was to find a way to help Stella and Max.”

Kathel dropped his head back and roared with his laughter. “Such fire! Such spirit! If you don’t claim her, I swear I will.”

Fiach growled, then thought better of it. “If you know what she is, old one, then you realize none other can claim her.”

Kathel’s laughter subsided. “My Lord, I will pretend ignorance of her origins, and you would be wise to do so as well. If the Morag have truly united, then who do you think Harailt will come after?”

“Cilia.” Fear seized him. Harailt lived to acquire the rare and exotic. If his father’s plans were thwarted, the demon lord would be certain to destroy the current object of his obsession so others couldn’t enjoy it either.

Kathel nodded. “Now as to these humans...”

“We have to save them.” Cilia said.

“Och aye, we’ll save them.” Kathel looked to Fiach. “There’ll be a price for this.”

Fiach sobered. “There’s always a price. The question is, what will yours be?”

The old cat stretched and rolled over, exposing its stomach. “I expect a good scratch on the belly would balance the scale.”

“Kathel, I don’t think that’s wise.”

“What’s life without a little risk?”

Fiach held up his hands and turned to Cilia. She looked wary. "It's your decision, Cilia. The terms are yours to accept." Then he looked at the lounging feline, "But the debt owned is mine."

A guttural purr punctuated Kathel's laughter. "You always were a quick one." He rested his large head on the floor and looked at Cilia through upside down eyes.

She walked slowly until her toes were almost pressed into Kathel's side before dropping to her knees. She reached out a timid hand to the black fur of his stomach. Her eyes widened and she added a second hand. "Your fur feels like silk."

Kathel's pleased purr filled the room. "Oh lass, that feels so good."

Cilia stopped stroking the blackened pelt and Fiach watched as her eyes glazed over just before she collapsed, her head cracking against the planks before he could reach her. Kathel rolled to his feet to investigate.

He nudged her with his large head and licked across her cheek with his sandpaper tongue. Fiach slammed into the side of the large cat and knocked him away from Cilia and into the wall. Kathel jumped to his feet and roared in fury. "I'll forgive you once, for the lass's sake, but touch me again and I'll not be so kind."

Cilia groaned. Fiach gave his back to the cat and went to scoop her into his arms. He brushed the hair from her face and waited. When her eyes opened, she focused on Kathel. "You're the death cat. I guess being a cat of nine tails should have tipped me off."

"It was a dangerous gamble I took for both our sakes. No one save the Lady, and those of her line, can touch me without paying their life." He gave a curt nod to Fiach. "The price of our bargain has been satisfied."

Cilia twisted and punched Fiach hard in the shoulder.

"What was that for?" he asked.

"You let me touch the death cat! I could have died!"

Fiach didn't put up a fight, he just let her slap and hit until she grew tired. Kathel watched the exchange with interest.

"If it makes you feel better lass, the boy couldn't tell you. Once the price was set, his tongue was bound from swaying your decision. You had to be willing to accept the price, and you would have hesitated or refused had you known your life swung in the balance." His eyes slid to Fiach. "It had to be an equal exchange, the risk of your life by touching me for the risk of my life by helping you. Without that my oath would be meaningless. Besides, the lad took on your debt."

"So?" she asked.

"So if anyone had forfeited their life today it would have been him, not us."

Cilia blanched. "How could you let him risk that?"

Fiach interrupted. "Cilia, Kathel can only speak and act as he does now when he's been summoned by a member of my mother's court. Otherwise he's wild fae. Feral and without need of such refinements."

Cilia's shoulders bowed under the weight of their confessions.

"It's true, lass. I'm not called the death cat for altruistic reasons." He chuckled, but the laugh was forced. Fiach understood better than most how the untamed beast of Kathel's nature despised being forced to heel. He also knew the higher awareness of the old cat was grateful for any respite from the bloodlust that filled his days.

"I'm so sorry, Kathel. I didn't know."

The black fur of his shoulders shifted in a feline shrug. "It's all right. Sometimes I

wish *I* didn't know."

Chapter Eight

“Are you ready, lass?” Kathel’s resonant purr rumbled next to Cilia’s ear.

“I’m ready.” She held out a hand to Fiach. “Ready?”

“As we’ll ever be,” he replied cryptically.

Against her better judgment, Cilia burrowed her hands in Kathel’s soft fur as Fiach’s fingers tightened on hers for an instant. Her ears popped as a kaleidoscope of colors flashed into her line of sight. She blinked to clear away the tiny sparkles. She was disoriented and swayed on her feet a little before she realized her palm still rested on Kathel’s shoulder. “Sorry,” she whispered.

“You need never apologize for bringing this old cat the pleasure of such a kind touch.”

Fiach pulled on her hand as much, she thought, to separate her from Kathel as to point her attention toward their goal. She took a moment to look around. In the fading light, Faerie was breathtaking. Rolling green hills were filled with meadows and dappled with trees. Wildflowers stretched as far as the eye could see. On her right a majestic mountain range rose up from the lush fields and cast forbidding shadows across the landscape. To the left were a series of smaller, more rounded hills complete with a lazy waterfall that rushed into the basin of a small lake. The natural beauty was awe-inspiring and Cilia was tempted to reach out and see if the scene before her was real or imagined. Surely no place was so perfect. Of its own volition, her hand stretched down to caress the bright red blossom of a nearby flower. The petals were flawless, not a single bruise or blight. And the fragrance was intoxicating.

Fiach’s fingers curved around her wrist and folded her arm to her side. “Touch nothing,” he warned. “Nothing in Faerie is as it seems.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Don’t move. I’ll be right back.” Then he slipped into the lengthening shadows and disappeared.

Kathel stalked past her, his long fluid strides bringing him past the flower Cilia had just admired. When the cat neared, the flower hissed and ejected darts from its center that embedded in Kathel’s foreleg. His lips curled over his teeth as he pulled each spine from his paw. Cilia leaned down to help, but Kathel growled until she stepped away. He spit a mouth full of small plant needles onto the ground and spoke with an evident slur.

“They’re poison, lass.”

“Will you be all right?” she asked.

Kathel finished his chore and licked the wound clean. “I’ll live, which is more than I could say if it had continued to stalk you.”

Cilia paled. “It was hunting me?” she squeaked.

“Och aye. The little buggers play with your mind. Make you see enchanted meadows and such. Make you long to pick a piece of it to take home with you. When you’re near enough, and your only thought is to touch some small piece of nature, it expels poisonous darts. Most things die immediately.”

“But not you?” she asked as she looked him over, anxious for any signs of decline.

“You can’t kill what’s already dead.”

She swallowed. “What happens to the bodies of its victims?” She stared fixedly at

the docile-looking flower.

Kathel looked away. "The poison is a neurotoxin that immobilizes by shutting down the communication between your muscles and your brain. The myotoxin in the venom melts away your flesh until a nutrient-rich liquid is released into the ground."

"The plants in Faerie make their own fertilizer?"

Kathel grunted. "It's why you don't see any wildlife around these parts. Only the inner cities of Faerie are warded against this type of attack. If you wander to the outlands, you're on your own."

Fiach returned, moving silent as a wraith through the foliage and back to her side. He saw the blood on Kathel's leg and grimaced as his eyes found hers. She could guess what he was thinking. If it had been her, and without Kathel's intervention it would have been, she would be dead. Fiach wrapped her in a bone-crushing embrace.

"Firebird," he whispered against her hair. "Please be more careful. We've just found one another, don't take this time away from me."

Her throat constricted. "I'll be careful, Fiach. Kathel is the best guard cat I could ask for."

Kathel winced at the almost canine comparison, but a quick scratch behind his ears restored his spirits. Death magic rolled off his silky midnight coat. Small touches were safe enough, but prolonged contact made her body lock and drag down the black spiral of infinity. It was worth the risk to see such a silly grin on the face of something so fierce. Apparently no one with immunity to his curse took into consideration that Kathel, like his housecat cousins, liked a good scratch behind the ears and a long stroke down his satiny back.

Fiach covered his mouth and shook with silent laughter at Kathel's expense.

"Were you taking a stroll or did you find anything of use?" Kathel asked acerbically.

Fiach pointed to the grass a dozen yards away. "If you look closely, you'll see the grass isn't moving."

"Aye, I see it now."

Cilia squinted, her vision the weakest of the three. "What does it mean?"

"It means that someone has gone through a lot of trouble to make a complex glamour but forgotten or skipped the steps to give the illusion movement."

Kathel pondered that. "It would make sense. None born of the fae would forget something so rudimentary. A demon though, with no proper training and no small gift, could do this." He lifted his nose to scent the air. "I smell nothing but us three."

Cilia had wondered about that as well. The only smell she'd encountered thus far had been the illusionary effects of the poisonous flower. "That means the glamour is blocking out the scent. Whoever constructed it isn't skilled enough to differentiate, so they chose to block out all the scents instead of risking the wrong one being revealed."

Fiach squeezed her shoulder and dropped a kiss to her cheek. Kathel chortled. "You've a sharp mind, lass. Glad I am that you're on my side this day."

"So how do we do this?" she asked.

Fiach flicked a wrist in the direction of the illusion and whispered beautiful melodic words in time with the motion. The lush, primitive landscape fell away to reveal a large gray fortress constructed of coarsely hewn stones. Though several hundred yards away, Cilia could make out small black-skinned creatures guarding a deep indentation nestled in the side of the high walls.

“Darkies.” Kathel grunted. “I’ll take them. Fiach, you get your woman inside safely and I’ll join with you there.”

Before Cilia could offer words of luck or safekeeping, the massive cat was gone. She watched his graceful leonine lope as he neared the ominous stronghold. The Darkies offered no resistance when they saw the cat approach. Kathel batted one to the ground with his large paw then turned to rip the throat out of the second. As Kathel’s lungs labored under the strain of rising bloodlust, the first rose up and lunged forward. A loud crunch carried to where Cilia and Fiach lay hidden and she knew that the death cat had broken the other creature’s neck.

She couldn’t stop a tear from rolling down her cheek. Fiach wiped the moisture away with the pad of his thumb.

“There’s no cause to cry for them. They were under Arvel’s influence. They chose the monster they served and have paid the debt owed for it.”

Cilia caught his hand. “The tears are for Kathel. He deserves better than this.”

“He does,” Fiach agreed. “But for now, he’s risking himself to keep our route open. We have to move.”

He gathered Cilia to his side and they sprinted towards the stone encampment. Before they reached the safety of the walls, arrows began to rain down around them. Arvel must have posted reinforcements hidden under the canopy of trees just beyond the field. Fiach cursed and pressed Cilia tighter until she was almost running underneath him. Another step closer and he grunted, his steps faltering. He swung an arm behind his back and when he brought it around, he held an angry looking arrow coated in his blood.

Without a word, his large black wings unfurled. He cinched an arm snugly around Cilia’s waist as he flexed downward and soared into the sky. The arrows still volleyed around them, but in the air, Fiach’s speed gave them an advantage even with her added weight slowing him down.

Within seconds they were at the entrance. Fiach dipped down and stretched his great black wings across the darkening sky to catch the wind and slow their descent. The landing was still rough, much worse than their first one had been. He fell from the sky the last couple of feet and ran with her tucked tightly against his chest.

Kathel was still hunched over the bloodied bodies of the butchered Darkie guards. Cilia called out to him, but when his eyes lifted they were red rimmed and unseeing. It was like she had waved a steak at a starved lion. The fact Fiach was running triggered Kathel’s urge to hunt prey and bear it to the ground. He tensed, his muscles rippling, as he prepared to attack them.

“Fiach!” she screamed.

“Almost there,” he panted.

He leveraged his shoulder against the heavy door on impact and forced it open as he towed her inside and slammed a heavy metal bar into place. Cilia leaned against Fiach as his back rested on the heavy iron barrier. They heard Kathel’s crazed snarls and scratches as he flung himself against the door, lost to his rabid pursuit of prey.

Uncertain of what lay ahead, Fiach shoved away from the door and tucked Cilia behind him. When she stepped around to his back, she couldn’t stop the muffled cry that left her throat. His back was burned, badly, the feathers singed away, revealing exposed bone and ripped flesh.

“Fiach, your back!”

He dismissed it with an impatient wave of his hand. Cilia kept obediently behind him to placate his desire to protect her. Something sizzled and popped by her ear. She squinted against the darkness and saw that wherever Fiach's blood had touched the surface of the metal, it boiled over and evaporated. She wondered what horrible curse had been laid upon the old metal. "Iron."

Fiach nodded. She didn't realize she'd spoken out loud. So it was true then. Legend said that creatures of Faerie hated iron and that it could be used to harm them. For once, it looked like the legends were right.

Intent on checking Fiach's wounds, she diverted her attention to the mangled flesh and feathers plastered to his back with blood. Something whispered through her mind. Another memory fought to surface. Cilia's head throbbed as new knowledge trickled in and taught her exactly what to do. Her hands poised over the worst of Fiach's wounds. Instinct took over and cool white flames sprung from her fingertips. She pressed them to Fiach's back and he roared in pain.

She smoothed her fingers over every feather, every patch of exposed skin until she saw the white flames begin to recede. Fiach's own fire caught in a protective shield. His fire called hers and Cilia's skin erupted in flames. Gone was the pure white light of healing, and in its place her blue Phoenix fire blazed.

Fiach swung around and lifted her off the ground as his mouth settled over hers. His eyes were black, his beautiful wings full and well, and he was alit with red flames that rivaled the sun. It almost hurt her eyes to look at him.

He crushed her into the nearest wall and hiked her legs around his waist. In a moment of perfect clarity, she understood. The Phoenix within him had fully risen and it wanted its mate. She forced her legs to the floor and removed her shoes and pants. Fiach watched her, his black eyes glittering, and when she finished, his clothing disappeared. Gone as if by his will.

He pinned her back against the cool stones as he lifted her hips. His cock drove into her pussy just as her legs circled his waist. He grunted and was lost to the new carnal creature he had become. Inside, her Phoenix exalted in his possession, seeking to share instead of consume.

His thrusts found their rhythm and Cilia crawled up the wall as he ravaged her with the most forceful mating she could imagine. Nothing could be so hard and so perfect.

The sounds of their damp flesh slapping together filled her head. She no longer cared what danger lay ahead, as long as he kept driving into her desperate core. She couldn't stop the pleasure long enough to sort through the words of adoration he pressed against her neck. He nibbled along the skin, pleading softly in a melodic language she couldn't understand. His question was as obvious as his desire had been. He needed to feed. The earlier blood loss had made him weak, and he needed to taste her strength to be fully restored.

She pulled the long black and crimson hairs away from her throat and tossed them over her opposite shoulder in anticipation. Fiach murmured his appreciation even as he struck. The sharp points of his fangs buried in the tender flesh as he held her closer. She gasped as the smaller pain gave way to greater pleasure. The cadence of his thrusts took on a new edge of desperation. He was pushing deeper and deeper until she wondered that there was anywhere left to go.

The gentle suckling at her neck ended and she felt the slick slide of his tongue over

the punctures. He leaned back and looked at her with dazed and sated eyes. He touched his forehead to hers and lowered a hand to where they were joined. His thumb circled her clit and she exploded into orgasm. Fiach thrust inside until she wanted to scream out that she couldn't hold any more. Still he pumped into her until his cock jerked, releasing his hot seed in forceful spurts that scalded her insides.

She distantly realized that she had closed her eyes at some point, because when she had the strength to open them again, Fiach's face was still pressed to her own. His eyes opened and they were his again, no longer controlled by the alien beauty of his Phoenix.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked. His voice was labored from exertion.

Cilia went through a quick mental checklist. Her back was sore and cold from the stones, but everything else felt great. More than great, she was ready to have him again. His dark chuckle proved he understood her expression perfectly.

"Even if we didn't have a job to do, I need some time to recover." He set her on her feet.

Cilia rose to her toes and kissed his swollen lips and tasted the tang of her blood still coating them. Then she bent down to pull her clothing back into place.

*

Fiach watched Cilia step into her clothes and prepare for what lay ahead without comment. His skin itched and his body ached. Something moved just beneath his skin. It should have alarmed him, but instead he felt comforted, as if a missing puzzle piece had snapped into place. His Phoenix had risen and taken its mate. He knew Cilia understood this had not just been about sex. It had been a claiming.

A loud thump brought their attention back to the door behind them.

"Come out, come out." Kathel rasped.

His voice was almost impossible to recognize. The fact he still had one told Fiach the old cat was trying to get himself under control, but the coarsely spoken taunt meant he wasn't having much success. If they managed to escape from Arvel with the humans, Kathel would still stand between them and their escape. The heavy illusion wrapped around this small corner of land meant they would have to be free of the walls, and completely at Kathel's mercy, for Fiach to send them home. It was a worry he pushed down on the list while he tried to focus on finding the humans.

Cilia came to his side and opened her palm, allowing a small flame to appear. Its flickering illumination helped them to see each corner of the room they stood in. The door was behind them, stairs in front of them, and large empty rooms on either side. Fiach decided the rooms were their best bet. Arvel would need a lot of space to house her indentured captives. He knew from experience the demon did a brisk business.

Fiach led them into the room that branched off to the right of the entryway. Once inside, they found themselves reflected a thousand times over. The light from Cilia's palm enabled them to see each detail of the floor-to-ceiling mirrors that hung mere inches apart, and covered every wall in the cavernous room.

Each gilded frame was inscribed with a riddle. Fiach traced the complex patterns with his fingertips. The symbols and letters were familiar, but some of the passages were incomplete. The language was his father's, something he had been forced to learn as a child, since Harailt considered his mother's native tongue to be inappropriate for a young Lord of his house to speak. The dialect must be several generations older than the language commonly used now.

It gave Fiach disturbing insight into how old Arvel was to have such artifacts at her disposal. This room of mirrors predated any age he might have ascribed to the demon.

"Do you know what it says?" Cilia asked.

"I think so. Each frame is engraved with a riddle. I assume solving the riddle releases that mirror's occupants, but I don't know how to find out what's being held in there in the first place. Or how you let the mirror know you've found the answer."

"I think I have an answer to the first and a guess as to the second."

Fiach glanced over at Cilia. One corner of her lips kicked up.

"Watch this." She placed her palm flat against the surface of the nearest mirror. The silvery background wavered around her reflection, and then gave way to a small room where a huge and furred beast lay hidden in the corner. The creature lifted its horned head and glared at her before lying down on the stone floor and ignoring her presence altogether.

"Interesting." Fiach went to the next mirror and placed a palm against the cold glass and watched as another identical chamber was revealed. At first, the room appeared to be empty, but a small flicker of light caught his attention. A small fae, almost identical to Arabella, fluttered around the chamber humming to herself, oblivious to his intrusion.

He withdrew his palm and watched the mirror ripple then smooth until his reflection stared back at him levelly. Cilia had moved to the frame opposite his. They took turns searching the mirrored cells for what seemed like hours. There had been no sign of Arvel, but no sign of Stella and Max either. Soon they would have to begin searching the next room or concede that Arvel had already disposed of the humans.

"Fiach! I found them!" Cilia called.

She stood across the room with her hand pressed to a mirror. Inside he saw the outline of a mother cradling a child to her chest and rocking him. From the way her lips moved, Fiach assumed she was singing.

"Are they all right?" he asked.

"They seem to be." Then she turned to him. "So what does this mirror say?"

Fiach stepped closer to examine the carving. When Cilia dropped her hand, the cell behind it shimmered and the smooth silver exterior returned. She glanced at the opaque surface.

"It's best they not know we're out here just yet," Fiach said gently.

She nodded and started to worry her thumbnail with her teeth. After a few tries he was fairly certain he had translated it correctly.

"Well?" Cilia asked hopefully.

"It says, '*A cloud was my mother, the wind is my father, my son is the cool stream, and my daughter is the fruit of the land. A rainbow is my bed, the earth my final resting place, and I'm the torment of man*'."

"Crap."

He chuckled. "Have you so little faith?"

Her eyes brightened. "Are you telling me you know the answer?"

"Well, no" he admitted. "But anyone born of the fae cuts their teeth on turns of phrase and half truths."

Cilia's determination glittered in her eyes. "Okay, let's think about this. The answer has to be elemental."

He considered that. "I agree. All the elements are mentioned, except fire." He looked

at Cilia. "I wonder if that was done on purpose?"

"How could Arvel have known?"

"I'm not certain she did. Since this is Faerie, it would make sense for nature and the elements to play a key role."

Cilia rolled her eyes, unbelieving the choice of riddle was a coincidence. "The answer is something to do with water." She was certain. "Arvel would choose an answer that meant the opposite of fire. Something an uninformed demon might think I would find offensive."

"So how to we tell the mirror?" he asked.

"I think you have to read the inscription, in the language it's written in, and then give the answer."

He shrugged. "It won't hurt to try." He carefully enunciated each word of the riddle followed by their answer. Nothing happened.

"So maybe it's not water, but it's something along those lines." She tapped a finger to her lips, drawing Fiach's attention away from the task at hand and toward her full mouth. She caught him staring. "Focus, Fiach."

He let his gaze slip from her tempting lips. "The riddle mentions cloud, wind, stream, rainbow, and earth."

Their eyes met. "Rain." They said together.

Fiach murmured the words again and the silver film covering the chamber dissipated. He reached out a hand, and where he should have met cold glass, he met with open air. The room's occupants started and huddled in the farthest corner. He held his hands out, showing he meant no harm. He pulled Cilia forward and allowed them a glimpse of someone familiar. She whirled past him and called out to her humans.

"Stella! Maxie! Thank goodness you're both all right!"

The second they saw Cilia, the wariness in their expressions lightened to pure joy. The boy broke free of his mother and ran straight for Cilia.

*

"Don't touch me," Cilia warned. Tonight the rush of adrenaline from mating and the magnitude of danger they were in made her overtly aware that extra energy stores were nearby. She glanced at Fiach, uncertain how well he could contain the hunger of his newly raised Phoenix. Max skittered to a stop.

He turned a mutinous glare on Fiach. "Why can he touch you?"

Cilia sought a simple explanation, grateful that it was the truth. "He's a Phoenix like me, Maxie."

Max's eyes widened. "Boys can be Phoenix too?"

Cilia could practically hear the gears turning as Max readied his next question.

"So can you make me a Phoenix?"

She patted his back. "No, Maxie. It doesn't work that way."

Stella stepped from the mirror. Hesitantly she asked, "Cilia, what's going on here? Where are we?"

"You're in a very bad place, Stella. I won't lie to you. It's our fault you're here, but we've come to take you home."

Stella shook her head. "I don't want to know. I probably wouldn't understand it anyway." She hugged Max to her side. "Let's get out of here."

Fiach stood behind them, his eyes searching the darkness. "It's too quiet, Cilia."

Whatever Arvel has planned is going to happen as soon as we leave this place.”

Cilia placed a hand on his shoulder. “It’s all right, Fiach. We’re going to get through this.”

He nodded absently then swung his gaze to Stella and Max. “Are you able to run?”

Stella stood a little straighter under Fiach’s scrutiny. “Yes. We were fed well and I exercised with Max to burn off his energy. I’m probably in better shape now than I’ve been in years.”

Fiach grinned. “Good woman. Just keep between Cilia and myself. If I ask you to do something, don’t hesitate.” He winked at Max. “That goes double for you. Stay close and listen well.”

Cilia fell in line behind Stella and Max as Fiach led them from the room of mirrors and back to the heavy iron door. He paused and tilted his head. She could imagine what he listened for. Kathel. If the cat were to touch either of the humans they would die. She and Fiach had better chances, but if the bloodlust still had control over Kathel, then none of them would be safe.

“I don’t sense him.” Fiach addressed their group. “When I open this door, you’ll have no time to waste. Cilia and I will guide you. The only thing you need to remember is to run. If either of us falls behind, don’t look back. You must get away from this place.” His voice thickened. “If we both fall, then walk north until you find the city. Tell them Lord Fiach sent you and ask for the Lady. They’ll understand your message.”

Stella reached out to his arm, but pulled her hand back. “Thank you.”

“I’m not worthy of your thanks. It’s my fault you’re in this mess to begin with.”

Cilia watched his hands blister as he pulled the old iron door open. He didn’t flinch or show the pain except for a slight tightening around his eyes. Her heart hurt for him and wanted to soothe his pain, but she realized their lives depended on how the next few minutes played out.

The door swung freely on its hinge once loosened of its mooring. Fiach cracked it open and peered out into the night. Nothing moved. The bodies of the Darkies had been picked apart and consumed. Whatever creatures guarded the stone outpost from the tree line kept silent and still. With one last look over of his broad shoulder, he slipped into the night. Stella went next and Max fell in behind her with Cilia bringing up the rear. They had almost made it to edge of the magical cocoon when arrows arced against the dark sky and began to plunge into the ground all around them.

Fiach shook his wings free and pulled Stella and Max under their shelter. He cast Cilia a tortured expression that let her know he wished she was the one protected. She gave him a smile that she hoped let him know her friends’ lives were more important to her than her own.

As they ran, Cilia began to hear dull thumps behind her. Rhythmic beats that sounded in time to her own footsteps. Without turning she knew it was Kathel. The arrows had been a diversion to slow them down long enough for him to catch up. Whatever Arvel’s plan had been, they had handed the demon an even better alternative, one beyond reproach. After all, what were two humans and a Phoenix doing in the outlands of Faerie? Cilia doubted Fiach’s death could be explained away as easily.

She realized too late it would never be a problem. Kathel was herding her away from the others. Her heart soared with hope that Fiach could escape and take Stella and Max to safety. Her life in exchange for theirs; it was a trade she could easily live with. So she

ran, heedless to Fiach's strangled cries as he realized her intentions almost in the instant she veered away from them.

Cilia had a flash of insight that she should run to the tree line and towards Arvel's legion. After all, if she had to die, why not take a few of the enemy with her? She pushed herself faster and faster until her legs were weak and ready to collapse beneath her. She crashed through the brush nestled at the base of the trees.

She could clearly see the archers now. She was too close for their arrows to be of any use. She hurtled over logs and past their perimeter. The Darkies sat still and allowed Kathel to ravage anyone and anything in his path. She was the only thing in motion. She hadn't understood why the Darkie guards had stood their ground as Kathel snapped them in half. She did now. A moving target was much more tempting than a still one. If you stood silent and motionless, you had a chance, however slight, to survive the onslaught. If you ran, as she was running, it was like placing a large red bull's-eye on your back.

Kathel was a predator. The sight of easy prey within reach triggered his instincts to hunt. He was powerless to stop himself from attacking. One second she was running, the cool night air stinging her lungs. The next heavy weights were thrown against her back as Kathel pounced and forced her to the ground. She felt his hot breath on the back of her neck as her head bounced off the hardened earth.

She heard his voice croak, "I'm so sorry, lass."

Then the world went black.

*

Fiach saw the second Cilia turned away from him. He knew the humans were her priority, so he ran as quickly as their legs could carry them until they breached the edge of the illusion surrounding the fortress. The second he reached the stable air of the outlands he allowed his power to swell up and swallow them down.

One second they were in Faerie, the next they were in a hotel room downtown from where Cilia's brownstone had stood. Fiach shuttered his wings and gave a curt bow. Without goodbyes or any comment to the startled pair, he willed his body back to the spot where he'd last seen Cilia. A commotion under the trees caught his attention as he saw her run headlong into the Darkie archer's camp with Kathel close behind.

In one horrifying second he saw the great cat tense and stretch as his body reached for hers and his huge front paws caught the center of her back, pushing her to the ground. Her head bobbed when it struck the ground and she lay still as Kathel crawled over her back and opened his wide jaws to cover her neck.

"Cilia!" he cried out. He flashed from his position on the field to where Cilia lay hidden from sight under a mountain of black fur. Kathel didn't move. Fiach didn't understand what had happened until a blast of bright blue flames encircled and consumed the huge cat. Apparently even with its host body impaired, the Phoenix inside Cilia was sentient and ready to protect itself. Kathel sighed and stepped away, then lay down on the grass and frowned at Cilia. She was still and unconscious. Then he looked at Fiach.

"Tell the lass I said thanks for ending this hell I've been trapped in." The searing heat licked over his black fur, igniting the individual strands. "Do us a favor, boy. Finish it, for friendship's sake."

Fiach ducked his head, then spread out his palms and released his fire. Red flames melded to the blue and danced over Kathel's melting flesh until only bone remained. The unnatural fire raged until only a fine powder was left where the once-legendary death cat

had lain. There was no time for remorse. He stepped past the charred remains of his old friend to check on Cilia.

He gingerly rolled her over to assess her wounds. Other than a jagged cut down her cheek from where she'd fallen on a rock, she was whole. She would have serious bruises the next day, but she was alive and she would heal. That was all that mattered.

He shifted her into his arms.

"You will not leave here." Arvel screeched from behind a wall of Darkies, all with their arrows notched and ready to fly. "You broke our bargain."

"The price was paid before I ever took possession of the keys. The humans were collateral damage and I couldn't leave them here and risk what you would do to them."

Arvel hissed through her still largely fleshless face. "You are worthless to me now. The humans can still breed. What would you take for them?"

"I won't bargain with you again, Arvel. The price is satisfied; leave the humans out of it."

"Then I claim your mate as payment for damages to my property and the loss of the humans."

"You know you can't touch her. She's a Phoenix. And she was powerful enough to kill the Lady's familiar while unconscious. Do you really want to risk the same?" he asked.

"Stand down, demon." A melodic voice rose from over Fiach's shoulder as his mother stepped into view.

Arvel snarled through mottled gums, but ducked her head in greeting. "Lady, this is no concern of yours."

The Lady crossed her arms over her chest. "Forgive me, but my son's affairs are always a concern to me." She delivered the next line with a sharp glance at Fiach. "Whether or not he wishes it so."

Fiach spared his mother a smile and bowed deeply, feeling the weight of the unbroken vial Bella had given him in his pocket. In Faerie, the Lady had no need of such a beacon. "Mother, I am sorry you were disturbed by our disagreement."

The Lady peered down at Cilia's limp form and gasped before she could cover her reaction. Fiach stared at her intently, but she only waved away his concern. "This is the object of your disagreement?"

Arvel's forked tongue flickered across her misshapen mouth. "Yes, Lady. Your son has cheated me and I would have satisfaction."

"Fiach, what is your answer for these charges laid against you?"

"Lady, I entered into a bargain with Arvel to exchange places with a pair of humans for the period of one month."

The Lady arched a brow. "One wonders why you would enter into such an agreement."

Fiach ignored her interruption. "The terms of our bargain have been fulfilled, but I feared for the humans and came to collect them before they could be harmed. I could have given Arvel the remainder of the time we had agreed upon, but felt it was in the best interests of the humans to proceed with haste."

"Lady, I would have taken them back. Arvel always takes them back." The demon whined piteously.

"Yes, you do, but not always in the shape they came to you in. I accept my son's

reasoning, but acknowledge that both of you were at fault in some way. Fiach for attempting to force your early release of his humans, and you for attempting to keep them for spite.”

“But, Lady...” Arvel simpered. “He has cost me loyal guards this night. Does not their blood call for justice?”

The Lady pointed a finger at Kathel’s blackened remains. “You have cost me my emissary, and death’s own boon companion.” She flicked a wrist over the ashes. A warm breeze gathered and swirled around the scorched earth, lifting the particles into the air. They loosely assembled into the large outline of Kathel’s body. A second later, they solidified and the death cat stretched and rolled his shoulders gingerly.

“My Lady,” he bobbed his head curtly.

She cast him a pitying glance. “I’m sorry, Kathel, but your service is far too valuable to let you lie.”

“Yes, my Lady.” He looked to Cilia and frowned. “How is the lass?”

“She’s fine, Kathel. A little rest and she’ll be good as new.”

The tension drained out of the big cat’s shoulders. He prowled to the side of the Lady and sat on his haunches, awaiting orders.

“Gentlemen, we must return to the matter at hand.” She gestured to Arvel and the Darkies that shifted nervously under Kathel’s gaze.

“Yes, my Lady.” They said in unison.

“It is my judgment that no disrespect was meant from either side. I think we can all agree that accidents happen and forget this matter entirely.”

“It is not fair! Arvel demands compensation!” The demon fumed.

“As I said, demon.” The Lady’s eyes cooled and her tone hardened. “Accidents happen.”

No one could misconstrue the threat woven into the careful placation.

Arvel spluttered and raged. “I have witnesses.”

The Lady pointedly looked from Kathel to the Darkies and back to Arvel. “If you wish to pursue this matter further, then please feel free to bring it before the court next month when I hear cases from the outlanders.”

Kathel rose and twitched his tails, nine tips tinkling against one another in the dark. “What’s it to be demon? The Lady has other pressing business to attend to. She has already granted more of her time than required.”

Arvel pasted on what could have passed for a smile, had her lips been whole. “Lady, please forgive me. I meant no harm to you or yours.” She bent at the waist and backed away. “There is no need for court. Arvel will consider the matter closed.” Then the demon disappeared and left the Darkies to amble about and work their way back down to the fortress.

“That’s not the last we’ll hear from her.” Kathel predicted.

“No, but at least it buys us time to regroup. We’ll be prepared next time.”

The Lady turned on Fiach. “Who is she that you would risk so much?”

Fiach laced his fingers through Cilia’s limp ones. “I would take her as my *D’Ame* if she would have me.”

She chuckled. “You haven’t asked?”

“No, Lady, I wanted to give us time before making such a permanent commitment.”

Her eyes softened. “You offer time for her sake. You’ve already decided?”

“I have.”

“Impulsive youth,” she chided. “When the time comes, you will have my blessing if you but ask for it.”

Fiach nodded. “Thank you, Mother.”

She rested a palm on Kathel’s broad shoulder. “Come, friend. We are needed at court.”

A bright light swelled and engulfed them. In a flash they exploded into glittered particles and drifted on the breeze, until even those sparkles extinguished and left Fiach alone in the night.

This time he didn’t bother to lift Cilia; he simply cupped her shoulders and clasped her close as he pictured the bedroom of their cabin. He barely registered the burst of light that signified they had arrived. Instead he stretched Cilia out across the bed and pulled her clothes away gently. They were covered in blood and caked with mud.

Once she was bare, he went into the bathroom to find a washcloth and lathered it with soap. He returned to her side to wash her as she slept. With every trace of their ordeal removed, he covered her in a quilt and went to take a shower.

As the hot jets of water cascaded over his sore back and arms, he thought about tonight. He’d killed an old friend, made a new enemy, and almost lost the only woman he’d ever cared for. The only woman who could alternately make his heart race wildly or stutter in its cadence.

For now he would let her rest, but when Cilia woke, they had a lot to talk about. The image of her limp body pinned beneath Kathel as he roared and prepared to attack made Fiach’s knees go weak. He had to keep her. They would talk. And he would make her listen to reason.

Chapter Nine

Fiach rolled to his side. Cilia's half of the bed sat cold and empty. He jerked awake and peered around the room. He didn't see her, but heard quiet laughter and the low murmur of conversation. He willed a pair of jeans onto his body and shuffled out of the bedroom to find her.

She leaned a hip into the counter and spoke softly into the phone while beating eggs in a bowl. Bacon sizzled in a frying pan at her elbow.

"Maxie, I can't visit right now." She paused. "No, I can't stay at the hotel with you, there's not enough room for all three of us." She snorted into the line. "Put your mother on, please." Another short pause and regret suffused her voice. "Thanks for letting him call, Stella. I'm sorry things worked out the way they did." She sighed deeply. "I hope I can earn your friendship again in time. If you ever need anything, or if Max just wants to talk, you have my number." She pressed the end button.

She turned her attention to the crisping strips and caught sight of him. She flipped the bacon and wiped her hands on a dishtowel before stepping into his arms.

He smoothed his hands down her back to trace the curves still easily revealed through the thin fabric of the plaid shirt. His hands lowered to cup her bottom and found it deliciously bare. She slapped his hand and stepped away.

"I hope you're hungry."

"I'm always hungry."

She gave him a cutting glare, but continued to whip her eggs.

"How do you feel this morning?" He moved behind her and flipped the tail of her shirt up to reveal the sweet curves of her ass. He pressed his hips against her, letting her feel his desire. Instead of giving in, as he had hoped, she picked up a wooden spoon and popped him on the hand with it.

"I have a killer headache, but other than that I can't complain."

He retreated to the table to watch her cook and smiled happily because she had neglected to flick her shirt back down. "So, you and Stella made up?"

When she moved to pour her mixture into the frying pan, the shirttail fell and covered her. He propped his elbows on the table and sulked until Cilia stepped behind him and hugged him, trapping his chair between them. She gave a little squeeze then went back to her cooking. "Not exactly. I think she's testing the waters. I put her life and the life of her child in danger, even if it was indirectly. That's not something easily forgiven, and if she does at all, it won't be overnight."

"Cilia, we need to talk."

She ignored him.

"We have some important decisions to make."

This time she cut him off. "I know, I know. I just wanted us to have a nice meal together before we got into the dirty details."

"A last supper? Or breakfast, in this case?"

"I guess."

"Cilia, nothing bad is going to happen."

"That's what everybody says right before something really bad does happen."

Fiach killed the heat on the stove and ignored her protests as he lifted her into his arms and walked to the living room. He dropped to the couch and settled her across his lap.

Cilia huffed and crossed her arms over her chest. "Fine. Ruin breakfast," she pouted. "Breakfast will be there once we've talked."

A crease formed between her eyes and she made no attempt to look at him. They were back to the prickly suspicion she had shown him the first time they met. He had deserved it then, but he felt hurt she would think so little of him now.

"First of all, there is the fact I am now a Phoenix," he said.

"You knew what would happen when we..."

He cut her off. "Second is the fact I find myself mated to a Phoenix."

"I tried to warn you..."

He cut her off again. "And third, is the fact I don't think I could live without said Phoenix."

"It's not my fault, you ... what?" Her puzzled expression would be comical if Fiach weren't so desperate to know her feelings. "What are you saying?"

He faked a long-suffering sigh. "I am saying that I think I love you, know I can't live without you, and want you to stay with me always."

She zoomed in on the one weak spot in his argument. "You only think you love me?"

"Well... I was hoping you could convince me..."

Cilia stared him down. "I don't know. It sounds like a lot of work to me." She hopped out of his lap. "Maybe I should just let you figure it out on your own. I'm sure there's another hot Phoenix male running around out there looking for a mate to love."

She took exactly two steps away from him before his Phoenix rose to the surface and fury broke his calm resolve. His eyes flashed to black. "You are mine, Cilia. No other male will ever touch you."

She rolled her eyes. "I don't belong to anyone. I'm my own person."

Fiach wrested Cilia to the couch and ripped the front of the old work shirt down the center. Buttons clicked and scattered over the hardwood floor. With the shirt laid open, she was bare to his gaze and his senses went on overload. He couldn't decide which part of her he wanted to taste first.

He licked a nipple to peak, and then tugged it gently between his teeth. Cilia writhed beneath him, taunting him.

"What does this prove?" she challenged.

He rose over her until he was able to lick along her neck. He nibbled up to her ear and whispered. "You are mine." He slipped her panties from her legs and settled between them. He needed to reclaim her, force her to see him as her mate.

"I need more than this, Fiach."

He tested her readiness. She was soft and wet, her body primed for him. He willed his jeans away and pressed his bare flesh against her. She gasped as he drove into her. His cock jerked and pressed deeper. She clawed his arms and fought to hold still beneath his assault. "Maybe I need more too," he said.

Cilia froze and Fiach pounced on her indecision. "Don't like the tables getting turned?" He started a slow slide, stroking himself root-to-tip inside of her. "I don't hear you making any declarations."

Her eyes fluttered closed. "You're the man. It's your job to go first."

“Open your eyes, Cilia.” He chuckled. “I want to see your eyes when I say this.”

Her eyes opened and the crease on her forehead returned. Fiach decided to overlook the hostile glare she was giving him and rolled his hips into her instead. Her eyes widened and her breath hitched in her throat. He quickened the pace of slide and retreat. The second he felt himself go over, he looked down into her large black eyes and said the words he hoped she wanted to hear. “I love you, Cilia.”

She climaxed around him, milking his tremors until they blended together in peaceful release. She stared up at him and traced his full bottom lip with her fingertip. “I love you too, Fiach.”

He nipped the pad of her finger. “Good. Now that that’s settled...” He nuzzled her throat, then swirled his tongue over her pulse. “How about that breakfast?”

The End

About the Author:

Hailey Edwards is a paranormal romance author. She favors fangs, fur, and things that bump in the night. Check out her website at <http://www.haileyedwards.net>

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