



From the Ashes

Hailey Edwards

(c) 2009

ISBN 978-1-59578-524-4

From the Ashes

Hailey Edwards

Published 2009

ISBN 978-1-59578-524-4

Published by Liquid Silver Books, imprint of Atlantic Bridge Publishing, 10509 Sedgegrass Dr, Indianapolis, Indiana 46235. Copyright © 2009, Hailey Edwards. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Liquid Silver Books
<http://LSbooks.com>

Email:
raven@LSbooks.com

Editor
Leigh Hogan

Cover Artist
April Martinez

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

Chapter One

Max sprinted around his new backyard; his shaggy blonde hair fell into his eyes as he ran from Cilia. She paced herself and allowed the boy to take the lead. Happiness radiated from every line etched in her face. The setting sun glinted off her raven hair and tinted her skin a golden red.

Fiach and Cilia had spent all afternoon with the human child and his mother, Stella. They were celebrating the couple's move from the hotel, where they had been staying, to the new home that Fiach had purchased for them. The house had been a gift to replace the apartment Cilia had accidentally burned down a few months before.

Max's new puppy leapt and chased the pair as their race deteriorated into fits of laughter and finally exhaustion. Fiach carried them each a chilled bottle of water. Max wrinkled his nose at the offering, but Cilia uncapped the bottle and drank greedily.

His thirst stirred as the muscles worked in her throat. She was a Phoenix, and because of their mate bond, so was he. Their biological clocks set to burst into flames every five hundred years. Fiach had never experienced the rebirth in fire, but Cilia had convinced him it was something to anticipate.

A fine sheen of sweat glittered over her skin. His fangs distended. If they had been alone, he would have sampled the salty moisture and perhaps something more substantial. The vein in her neck pulsed; the flutter of life tempted him to taste the sweet rush of adrenaline-laced nourishment he would find there.

"Did you see that? I beat her fair and square," Max boasted, taking a grudging sip of water.

Cilia elbowed Fiach and brought his attention to the boy and away from the temptation of her blood. "I don't know Max; it looked pretty close from here," Fiach replied.

Cilia shoved Fiach's chest. He rocked back on his heels and captured her hand, pulling her in for a quick kiss before releasing his grip.

"Now, now. Let's keep in mind there is a child present." Cilia warned. Stella joined them on the porch and pointed at her son, who stared at them in fascination with his prepubescent interest piqued. "Sorry, Stella. We'll behave." Cilia winked at Fiach, who swatted her bottom as she sashayed past him to reach down and fondle the puppy's ears.

"I saw that." Stella chided.

"I'm sorry, Stella. I'll try to restrain myself." He flashed a wicked grin at Cilia then softened the smile for the human. When Cilia and Max wandered out of earshot, Fiach spoke softly. "Thank you for inviting us over. She misses you a lot, you know."

Stella crossed her arms and pursed her lips. "I miss her too. The separation is killing Max, but she's not who I thought she was. Not even what I thought she was. You both risked my son's life." She glared at Fiach. "You, in particular, bargained with a demon so you could put the moves on my next door neighbor."

"I never meant for either of you to be harmed. Please believe that."

One of Stella's eyebrows rose in a doubtful expression. She watched as Max started another round of tag with Cilia. "He's all I have in the world. If something ever happened to him..." Her voice broke. "I don't know what I would do."

“I understand Stella, but Cilia had nothing to do with it. The fault is all mine. If you have to be mad with someone, be mad at me.”

Stella frowned in the fading light. “I appreciate the offer, but it doesn’t work that way.” Her voice turned hard. “You have to learn that you can’t play with other people’s lives or their loved ones. Cilia explained what you both are, but that doesn’t excuse what you did.”

“Does it really bother you so much to know what we are?” he asked.

She gestured between Fiach and Cilia. “You two shouldn’t exist. I shouldn’t be able to have this conversation because you shouldn’t be real.”

He leaned against the house and crossed his arms, his stance mirroring hers. “I could say the same thing about humans. Maybe you shouldn’t exist. I was born half demon. Humans believe in those. I’m also half fae. Most human children believe in fairies.” He grinned in amusement. “You read about us in fairytales; you can’t say you were never warned.”

Stella pinched the bridge of her nose between two fingers. She appeared to struggle between her desire to be a good host and her instinct to put distance between her child and the danger that Cilia and Fiach represented.

Max flew past them; his puppy ran in circles around his legs. In a blur of motion, the two tangled, and the boy began to fall. He stumbled close to the heavy planters that dotted the edge of the patio. Fiach used his supernatural speed to place himself between the child and the cement containers; he scooped Max into a bear hug and brought him to his mother for inspection.

Stella reached out, but Max pushed her away and grinned sheepishly. “Thanks Fiach. Phoenix is just playing around. Mom says he’ll grow out of it eventually.”

“Phoenix, huh?” Fiach teased.

Max’s face flamed red, and his eyes shifted to some suddenly interesting point over his mother’s shoulder. Fiach had noticed that Stella and Max had been careful to only refer to the puppy without the use of a name. Now, he knew why. In Max’s idol worship, he had named the dog after his newest hero and heroine.

Fiach was amused and oddly proud that the human child thought so highly of his mate, and of him. He tousled the boy’s hair. “It’s alright Max. When I was a child, my mother gifted me a pony. I was ready to name it Aranax, after a great warlord. Imagine my surprise when I found out not only could the pony speak, but it was already named.”

Max moaned sympathetically, envisioning where the story was headed. Fiach nodded sagely and continued, “Her name was Buttercup.”

The boy’s jaw dropped. He doubled over and whooped until his laughter dissolved into hiccups. When he could manage a gulping breath, he asked, “What happened with your pony?”

“Well, it turned out the pony was actually a Kelpie. My mother kept her at a stable near the outlands of Faerie, close to where you were taken. She told me to never ride the pony near water, even if it begged for a drink.” Fiach frowned. “One day I went for a ride with some of the other fae children. It was the peak of summer, and we were all hot and thirsty. One of the other boys knew a place where we could rest our ponies and swim. I disregarded my mother’s wishes and heeded the urging of my friends instead. That was my first mistake.”

“What was the second?” Max asked, eyes wide.

“Not noticing how quiet my usually talkative pony had become. Buttercup knew she would lose my mother’s favor if she lured me to the water’s edge. If I went there on my own, and she just happened to be there when I did, she felt it was the only logical assumption that I was fair game.”

“Did she try to hurt you?” he asked.

Fiach caught Stella’s wary glance and decided to tone down the actual events of the story. Max was secure in the protective cocoon that his mother had created for him, and Fiach wanted the boy to remain there. There was no reason for Max to know that Kelpie attacks on humans were attributed to fresh water sharks since both shared the same serrated teeth. Just as there was no reason for Fiach to tell Max all he knew about Kelpie attacks from the experience.

Once a Kelpie smelt water, its skin turned adhesive and trapped the rider onto its back. It would wade into the deepest part of the stream and stay beneath the water until the victim drowned. Then the Kelpie devoured its prey. They were careful to stay near thriving streams and rivers so that fish and other wildlife helped cover their misdeeds.

Max hadn’t grown up in the same grim fairytale as he, so Fiach embellished the truth. “Actually, I remembered the warning about the time I started sticking to my pony. I called for my Mother, and she came and,” he looked away, “rectified the situation.”

“Oh.” Max said. “So it all turned out right in the end?”

Fiach recalled the memory of his water horse being dragged away in iron shackles, hobbling along to her execution. He still held Buttercup’s death as a grudge against his mother. The Kelpie had only acted as it was created to. Its only crime was its poor choice of victim.

Max poked him in the ribs with a lean elbow. “Well? Did it turn out okay or didn’t it?”

“Yes it turned out okay in the end. My mother saved me, and I learned to always look a gift horse in the mouth.”

Max shook his head. “Whatever,” he said and scampered off to catch up with Cilia.

Max had no idea how fortunate he was to grow up with a mother like Stella. The woman was all plump curves and good intentions. The kind of casual affection that the two shared was enviable, something Fiach had never known with either of his parents.

He had known all of his life that his blood was not pure. He exuded neither the icy demeanor of his mother nor the malicious tendencies of his father. He was different, and more than the full black-feathered wings on his back marked him as such.

In a desperate attempt to conform him, his mother had taught him to use glamour personally so that he could hide his wings and his nature around others of her kind as well as from those who kept his father’s company.

She was the Lady of the Sidhe court. His father was Harailt, a demon lord who took her body as punishment for offering asylum to two creatures that he wanted dead. The result of their union had been Fiach’s conception. A rare mix of genes since bedding demons was looked down upon in Sidhe society, no matter what the title. His mother’s pregnancy was something none of the fae ever talked about, which spoke volumes about how immense the blight on her reputation was, because all fae are social and thrive on gossip.

He caught sight of Cilia pirouetting away from the energetic pup. If his father knew what she was or what Fiach had become, he would gather the Morag, his personal demon

guard, and kill them both. Harailt had hunted Phoenix almost to extinction. Now the burden of Cilia's protection, as well as his own survival, rested on his shoulders.

"Is it my imagination or does she seem to touch Max more often than she did before?" Stella asked, intruding on his thoughts. "They were always close, but seeing her now, it seems different somehow."

Cilia had been forced to abstain from physical relationships with humans. Phoenixes bond by transferring heat and energy. A lone Phoenix would have sensed the relationship between Cilia and Stella, or Max, and reached out to cement its own ties to them. The results would have drained away the humans' life energy and left them as blackened husks consumed by Phoenix fire.

"I think they're both making up for lost time," he replied.

"Yes, I suppose that must be it."

The low hum of energy that all living things exuded would always interest their Phoenixes. Now that Cilia had mated Fiach, they could share with each other and curb their appetite for life energy. They could live a more human life, something he never expected to prize so highly.

Stella glanced at her wrist and twisted the watch face upright. Fiach looked to the sky, noting the location of the sun. Dark was coming, and it was time for Max to get ready for bed.

Cilia held up her finger to indicate one more race. She lined up beside Max; Phoenix pawed at their heels. Her muffled countdown drifted across the yard. Max shot off the mark and ran with speed impressive for such a physically limited species. His coordination had improved considerably over the last few months; his gangly limbs had learned to move in greater concert even as they continued to lengthen and stretch his frame with new growth.

The pair skidded to a stop in front of Stella and Fiach, panting and out of breath. They dropped to lie in the grass and let the puppy lick the sweat from their faces.

Cilia stared into the sky. "I didn't realize how late it had gotten. It's time for you to get ready for bed Maxie."

Stella chimed in. "She's right, hon. You need to take a bath and wash some of the dog off of you, then it's up to bed."

"Aw Mom," he groaned. "I haven't seen Cilia in ages. Can't she stay just a little longer?"

"No Max. If you behave yourself, we can invite them over again next weekend."

Max rolled to his feet and helped Cilia to hers. He dusted the grass and dirt from his hands and offered one to Fiach.

"I hope you can come back soon." The boy's eyes sparkled. "Or maybe Mom will let me go see your place in the mountains." He turned a pitiful expression on his mother. "I bet it's really pretty up there, and Phoenix would have lots of room to run."

Stella sighed. "Maybe. I still have some concerns about your safety that need to be laid to rest first."

Max grumbled, and Stella shot him a look that would have cowed a man twice his age. "Maxwell, I said we'd see." She softened her tone. "A night in the mountains might do your mutt some good." The boy balked at the use of his given name then gathered her in a quick hug.

"You're the best! Thanks Mom." He turned to Cilia, gave her a shy kiss on one

cheek, and then tossed a wave at Fiach before bounding into the house.

Max's absence marked the first time Cilia and Stella had been alone since the humans had been rescued from Faerie.

"Thanks for inviting us over Stella. I've really missed you guys a lot."

Stella nodded. "I know, but I have to be certain that Max is safe around you. He's my baby, and I can't let you risk his life again." Then she turned to Fiach. "And I have to be more certain about the company you keep."

Fiach stayed silent, knowing he deserved any harsh words or accusations she cared to level at him.

"You're right Stella. There will always be an element of danger if you continue your friendship with us, but I like to think the benefits will outweigh the risks." Cilia pulled her into a hug, and Stella startled, having never felt Cilia's embrace before. "Only you can decide what's best for your family. We will respect any decision you make."

Fiach saw the hesitant tightening of Stella's arms as she pulled closer to Cilia. Their friendship would survive this. He was certain of it. When they stepped apart, the human's cheeks glistened with tears, but he was certain they were of the happy variety. Cilia looked up at him, and her eyes twinkled with tears unshed for the friend that he had almost cost her.

*

Cilia willed the moisture from her eyes and gave Stella a watery smile. "Thanks again for having us. If you need anything, you have our number."

Fiach draped an arm across her shoulders and led her around the side of the house. She inhaled the scent of leather and clove that always clung to his skin. The scent was comforting and reminded her of home.

"I think tonight went rather well, all things considered," he commented.

"It will take some time, but I think she'll forgive me." She gave him a pointed glare. "As long as no one barter her or her son to a demon again."

Fiach chuckled, a deep bass reverberation that echoed against the cheek she rested on his shoulder. "Will I never live that down?"

"Not likely. It tends to stick in someone's memory when they're trapped in an alien world for weeks on end by a creature they thought didn't exist." She shivered. "I can only imagine what they thought of Arvel. Seeing her must have been a horror in itself." The emaciated face and black sunken eyes had been bad enough. After Cilia burned away most of the demon's skin while protecting Fiach, Arvel's largely fleshless skull was a truly horrific sight.

Fiach shrugged. "If I said that I would undo it if I could," he bent to brush his lips across hers, "it would be a lie. I would do it again, and much worse, if it meant the difference of having you in my life or not." He smiled against her closed lips. "It's a good thing you're here to reform me from my evil ways."

Cilia rolled her eyes. "I worry that it's the other way around. That you're dragging me down, instead of me shoring you up."

He paused. "Why do you say that?"

"Because, since I met you, all I seem to think about is getting you in bed."

He growled. "I can think of a few other places I'd like to get you." His thumb pressed into her wrist. Whether it was to count the heartbeats or enjoy the telltale quickening of her pulse, she wasn't certain.

Cilia cleared her throat and glanced around. They were in Stella's driveway and within range of a set of prying youthful eyes and straining ears. "Fiach, we shouldn't discuss this here." She jerked her chin over her shoulder, indicating the upstairs bedroom window where the soft sounds of a television floated down to them. She was willing to bet Max was on the other side of the curtains that framed the window and fluttered periodically even without a breeze to stir them.

"Then let's get out of here." He released her wrist and rounded the driver's side to slide into place behind the wheel.

Cilia took her seat and clicked the belt in place. "I thought gentlemen opened car doors for ladies."

"I'm no gentleman," he confessed. "But, I would gladly do it from now on if it pleases my lady."

"Charmer," she accused.

His wide smile flashed in the fading light. "Let's get home Firebird. I have something I want to show you."

Cilia snorted. "I think I've already seen it."

"Perhaps." He reached behind her seat and dropped a box in her lap. She attempted to lift the lid, and he slapped her hand away from the temptation. "Not yet; if you open it now, we won't make it out of the driveway."

With the lid firmly in place, she shook the box searching for clues. There was a dull thumping sound. The box itself was heavy, and whatever was inside only made a muffled thud when rattled against the thin paper walls.

"No peeking," he scolded.

"I'm not peeking. I'll have you know human children do this every year at Christmas and on birthdays. It's allowable to shake the package for clues even if you can't open it."

"I've heard you can use hairspray to see through wrapping paper if it's thin enough."

"Really?" she asked. It did make sense. You could spray the paper until it got damp enough to see through, catch a glimpse of the gift beneath, and once dried the package would look exactly as it had before.

"I've never tried it, so I wouldn't swear by it. I thought the ritual exchange of gifts was an interesting one, so I looked into it a little."

"You've never gotten a present before?"

"Oh I've gotten plenty of *gifts*. Didn't you hear me tell the humans about my first pony?" His dark laughter did nothing to assuage her. "But I have never received one freely given. Or, one that wouldn't attempt to kill or maim me if I ever let my guard down around it."

Cilia rested a hand on his taunt forearm. "I'm sorry Fiach. I shouldn't have brought it up."

"It's all right. If my mother hadn't prepared me, then my father would have killed me to spite her."

"So you think it's better that your own mother tried to kill you before your father got the chance to?" she asked with incredulity.

Fiach choked on a laugh. "I have never thought of it like that." He squeezed the hand resting on his arm before settling it back on the steering wheel. "You have an interesting perspective on my childhood. I was too busy trying to survive it to notice."

Cilia slipped a finger between the lid of the box and the sides, careful to pry the side

closest to the door and farthest away from Fiach's keen eyes.

"Cilia," he groaned, voice thick with hunger. "I warned you not to do that until we got home."

The dappled sprawl of houses near Stella and Max's new home had faded away, which left only dense foliage and towering trees on either side of the road. The city was invisible from here, too many miles away to mar the natural beauty. Only the strip of asphalt signaled civilization.

Fiach's accelerated flight back to the cabin slowed to the speed limit as his eyes searched the darkness.

"What do you think you're doing?" she asked.

"Teaching you a lesson," he replied absently.

Chills prickled her skin, her core flooded with desire and a rush of excitement. Fiach's head jerked to stare at the juncture of her thighs, as though he could see her arousal through the thick denim of her jeans. He inhaled deeply.

"You always smell so sweet when you're wet." His eyes darkened. "I'll never tire of your scent."

Her cheeks burned in the night although, with his eyesight, he could easily see her embarrassment. She cleared her throat and talked past the lump that was rapidly forming there. "It's easy to say that now. Just wait until we've been together a few hundred years. Then we'll see who is committed."

Fiach smiled, and she knew he was thinking of the *Noce*, the ceremony fae partners underwent to become soul bound. Fiach had only mentioned the rite once, and even then he hadn't brought up the subject. Kathel, an emissary to his mother, had. Kathel believed it was only a matter of time before Fiach claimed her as his *D'Ame*. She wished she felt the same calm assurance as the great black cat. After a few months of being together, she could no longer imagine her life without Fiach in it.

The car turned onto a small dirt feeder road. They drove a few hundred yards, and it ended abruptly in the middle of nothing. Tall trees formed walls on three sides of the car. The only way to leave was the way they had come. He turned the car off and they sat for a second in silence, enveloped by the night.

He twisted in his seat and thumped the box. "Open it."

Nervous hands fumbled the lid. Inside was something she was certain that she had never seen before: a thick leather strap with handles at both ends and padding in the middle. "Thank you?" She lifted it from the box and stretched it curiously. "What is it?"

"A new toy."

She twisted the strap and tried to imagine a use for it, but nothing came to mind. "I give up; what does it do?"

"Why don't I show you?" He stepped from the car and popped the truck.

Cilia climbed out and circled to the rear in time to see him pull a thick blanket from the trunk. Her stomach clinched when she realized he had planned for this outcome all along. He knew she would never make it home without sneaking a peek at her gift.

His mouth curved in a self-satisfied smile as he spread the blanket over the ground. In a flash, he willed away his clothing and stood nude before her. His shoulder length black hair was woven with ruby quills; his eyes blackened with hunger and shimmered with intensity. He dropped the glamour from his wings, knowing how she loved to see them. They stretched and flexed, fanning behind him before settling against his back once

more. Black tattooed swirls dipped over his chest and stomach, curling along his side and over his back. The flushed head of his erection strained upright, almost brushing his navel.

He held out a hand for her to join him. She discarded her clothes by the car and tossed them on the hood. She took a few tentative steps, until she was close enough to take Fiach's hand and allow him to reel her in, to press her against his chest. The hard-muscled skin beneath her cheek acted as an aphrodisiac, all on its own. His scent was intoxicating; the musky clove fragrance made her head swim.

"Are you ready to try out your present?"

She pouted. "I don't know what it is, so I'm not sure if I want to try it out or not."

Fiach tilted her chin up as his lips lowered to claim hers; his tongue smoothed over her full bottom lip, and his teeth nipped it as they parted. "I think you'll be pleasantly surprised." He dropped to his knees and patted the blanket.

She knelt beside him and waited for further instruction. He shifted her hips and pushed her in front of him; he angled her shoulders so they aligned with his. Then he pushed her down until she was on all fours and wondering what a black leather strap had to do with this particular position. It was too wide to be a whip and too soft to be anything else she could imagine. "You could have just told me how you wanted me, you know."

"And ruin the surprise? I think you like not knowing."

The flutters in her stomach agreed with him.

She felt the smooth slide of leather across her lower abdomen. The padded cushion rested across her pubic bone. Fiach wrapped his fingers in the handles of the strap and pulled them taut, lifting her backwards and into his straining erection. "Oh. I um... I see," she stuttered. The straps enabled him to impale her with much more force.

"Do you? Are you sure you don't need another hint?" he teased as he ground his swollen cock against the crevice of her bottom.

Cilia whimpered and pushed back onto him. The air thickened around them. Their Phoenixes were rising and wanting to mate, to join in their purest, most elemental form. Fiach's labored breathing made her own lungs burn.

"You'll have to guide me in." The admission was torn from between tightly clenched teeth. He slacked the strap and gave Cilia enough room to reach between her legs angle his crest to her entrance. The head of his erection parted her folds and plunged home.

She gasped; the feeling of fullness was always a welcomed shock. He tightened the strap and pulled until her bottom was flush with his skin; the invasion was so deep that she struggled against him even as he yanked her closer. The sweet burn of penetration eased, and her muscles clinched along his length, which drew a soft curse from behind her.

"You're so tight."

She couldn't speak, only feel. The strap loosened as her body pulled away from his. Her body savored the slow slide of his flesh inside of hers and the sudden snap of leather as he reeled her back. He slid in deep. He tugged and released; his balls slapped against her bottom, which made her fingers itch to stroke them.

She dropped to her elbows and balanced her weight on one arm as she reached between her legs. With her free hand, she reached through to cup the heavy weight in her hand. Fiach groaned and lost his rhythm as she tugged gently on the loose pouch of skin.

When he moved again, his thrusts were deeper. The sounds of flesh slapping flesh filled the otherwise silent night.

“Pull harder.” His voice was a thick, guttural caress.

She palmed his testicles—the warm flesh overflowing her fingers—and pulled harder as he propelled himself into her depths. His pace grew frantic; he buried his cock, over and over, until she was straining for more, trying to go over.

He dropped the handles and wrapped large warm hands on her hips. He rocked her onto him until the tension winding in her core released, and she tumbled over into orgasm. Fiach’s strokes forced through her tightened muscles until he shouted out and filled her with hot forceful spurts.

His fangs dropped, and he thrust once more as he bit into the vein throbbing in her neck. He could feel her uncertainty as he pricked her skin, but she rapidly replaced her hesitancy with the rush of providing for her lover as no one else could. Their bodies stilled; the final tremors relaxed away as he fed, as she arched up in offering. He suckled at her neck; the brush of his lips raised gooseflesh along her body. When he was sated, he licked the small wound and nuzzled her shoulder in silent thanks.

He withdrew from her and used the edge of the blanket to clean the fluids trickling down her legs. He dressed with a thought and helped her stand. Then he carried her to the car since her shoes were nowhere in sight. He dropped her lightly on her feet so she could dress behind the shield of his muscular body. They were in no danger of being discovered; the woods were deserted except for wildlife, and it was now full dark. No one would see, but human modesty forced her to pull on her jeans and shirt quickly and left her anxious to head home.

Inside the car, she rested her forehead on her window. The low murmur of the radio and the steady sway of the car lulled her to sleep. She didn’t wake when Fiach lifted her from the car and carried her inside. She stirred for a moment while he pulled down the bed sheets, but once she felt his familiar warmth curl around her, she fell back to sleep.

Chapter Two

Fiach woke to the sharp pop of ozone and the bitter sulfuric stench that signaled they had company: demons. He kept his eyes closed and focused with his other senses. Low voices rumbled just outside the bedroom door. He had only seconds to prepare. He shook Cilia awake; her eyes rounded when she met the cold determination of his stare.

“Demons are in the cabin. I can’t tell how many, but too many for me to risk your safety. When they come, do as they ask. Don’t fight.” He pressed a rough kiss to her thinning lips. “Be brave, Firebird. We don’t have much time.”

He lay back, closed his eyes, and assumed a sleeping position. He gestured that she should do the same. When the demons cracked open the door and circled the bed, neither moved. When one covered Cilia’s mouth with a filthy open palm, Fiach heard her struggle not to purge her stomach of its meager contents. The mattress dipped as the demon forced her to sit up and then sprang back as her weight left the bed. He tensed and waited for her to be secured.

He heard the clink of metal on metal. The chains tinkled together in bell-like tones. Then he heard the definite snap of a clasp. Cilia was quiet, but he felt her fury in the subtle rise of temperature around him. Her Phoenix was seeking his; it needed to know its mate was unharmed and wondered if it should take control.

Fiach pushed reassurance into his own Phoenix. Soothing it, convincing it to calm its mate and allow events to unfold. The stifling heat that had choked the air dissipated, and a cool resolve settled around the cabin.

Sharp pressure dug into his side. He feigned rolling over and let his arm strike out to find the empty mattress where Cilia had lain only minutes before. He prepared for his upcoming role: the surprised half-breed caught unaware of his woman’s capture. His eyes shot open, and he glared around their small bedroom.

Lesser demons filled the room; Arvel had made good on her threat. There was only one demon foolish enough to risk the wrath of Fiach’s mother and attempt a coup against his father. Jarlath.

Cilia stood shackled in gold chains, looking fierce and proud. Her eyes softened as they met his, a silent recognition of their bond. He counted four lesser demons, including the one cautiously holding the chain threaded through Cilia’s restraints. She was nude, a fact the demons around her enjoyed greatly. Her hip length ebony hair was sleep tousled. Her pale, luminescent skin glowed faintly in the darkness.

The demons caged his Firebird, a mistake they would live to regret for now. Fiach reached beneath his pillow and grasped a thin crystalline tube. It was a gift from his mother, a homing beacon that she could follow if ever he needed her help. Peering around the room, he realized that time was now.

He snapped the tube and covered it back with his pillow to keep the light hidden. The pressure in his side increased as he sat up. A lesser demon pressed a gold tipped spear into his ribs. He had never thought of gold as a menacing alloy before, but as the malleable tip pressed into his skin, acute pain radiated from the contact point.

“I imagine that’s uncomfortable. What with you being a Phoenix and all,” a deep voice boomed from the hallway.

Fiach jerked his head around in time to see a tall, dark-skinned demon sweep into the room. Jarlath was a demonic parasite. He increased his power by leeching away the essence of other supernatural beings. Red symbols of power wrapped around his face and neck, burned into his skin as remnants of the abilities he'd stolen. The other symbols on his body hid under black slacks and a black jacket.

Disgust pitched his stomach as Fiach realized what Jarlath's interest in them meant. Cilia was a Phoenix. If she were to die, she would be reborn from her ashes. Now that Fiach had mated her and became as she was, he, too, was a perpetually renewable energy resource.

Fiach tamped down his unease. "Hello, Jarlath."

White teeth winked in the black skinned face. "It has been a while, has it not?" He walked to Cilia and traced her cheek with a finger. "It's a shame that the myth of copulation has proven true." His skin sizzled but he shook it off, nonplussed. "I would have loved to sample her pyroardor." He appraised Fiach with the same sexually intense gaze. "I know from Arvel that you are off the menu as well. Not to worry, I have other uses for you, as you well know."

Arvel was androgynous, both male and female. While some demons were monoecious and could self fertilize, Arvel was merely hermaphroditic. She required sperm or egg donors, so she often bartered with fellow demons for sex. Fiach had bargained with her mostly-female form too many times to count, and he despised himself for each encounter, particularly the last, where he asked to exchange places with Stella and Max.

Jarlath licked the coating of burnt skin from his fingertips then tossed a set of golden shackles to the lesser demon beside Fiach. The demon presented the cuffs and waited for Fiach to place his wrists into the bracelets before clamping them flush to his skin. Jarlath left in a flash of light and sound. His demon lackeys pulled Fiach to stand and pushed him to Cilia's side, where they were led single file from the cabin and out into the yard.

In a burst of blinding light, they simply stopped being and came into existence somewhere else. Fiach looked around and recognized the opulent surroundings as Jarlath's private residence, a palatial spread carved out of bedrock far below the surface of the earth. The frigid temperature and yawning darkness were its main attraction to the demon lord. He was a nightwalker, only allowed to move above ground during the nighttime hours.

He caught a glimpse of his mate, and she rewarded him with a timid smile before the guard noticed and hit him across the face with enough force to make his jaw pop.

Celia struggled against her bonds, but Fiach shook his head. *We shouldn't fight, at least not until we know what we are up against*, he warned. He allowed himself to be led down a long tunnel and into a series of catacombs. Each boasted a dirty floor and rock walls with iron bars that crisscrossed the width of the opening. One cell glowed with the soft light of oil lamps mounted to either side of its entrance. A threadbare Persian rug rested over the dirt. A small bed sat in one corner, and a table and two chairs sat in the corner opposite.

He gazed around the space. So, this was to be their prison. He noted the thickly crusted black bars that thrummed with demon magic. A holding spell enchanted the bars; even if the enchantment could be reversed, he would pay dearly for touching the iron. Only one cell had been prepared, so he would be allowed to stay with Cilia. For the

moment, that was all that mattered.

The demon holding her chains pushed her into the cavernous room and forced her backwards so that he could shove Fiach in as well. He instructed them to thread their hands through the bars to have their restraints removed. Once the golden baubles opened, Fiach rubbed Cilia's wrists; the prolonged contact with the gold had given her a surface burn. The wounds healed as he smoothed over the chaffed skin with his thumbs. He added that mark to his tally of their captors' sins, but for now, he was content to pull her into his arms and stroke her bare back with his fingertips.

Pulled from the comfort of their shared bed, they stood naked. Fiach could cover himself but was uncertain if he could do the same for her. Their mingling of essence might have given Fiach enough commonality with Cilia's body to allow him to manifest her clothing.

He pulled her closer and closed his eyes, thinking of the layers and fabrics that he would choose to wrap her in. When he heard her startled intake of breath, he knew the experiment had been a success. He fashioned himself black leather pants and a simple t-shirt then stepped back to admire his handiwork.

*

Cilia startled as a swath of fabric slid over her skin. She looked down as the dress that Fiach had designed fell into place. The gauzy scrap of fabric managed to cover her most intimate parts and only hinted at the lush curves hidden beneath. She almost complained about the scantiness since the demons still stared at her with lusty intent. Instead, she saw the dark appreciative glimmer in his eyes and swallowed the snide remark hovering on the tip of her tongue. "Thank you," she said, appreciative of his kindness.

They moved to the bed and sat on the edge together. His arm rested across her shoulders, and the familiar weight brought her comfort. She snuggled closer. "So, any ideas?"

Fiach played with a quill, running his fingers down the vane. "A few ideas actually." He grinned.

"Any you want share?"

He looked thoughtful. "Not particularly."

Cilia slapped his hand from her hair. He dropped them into his lap and linked the fingers. She slipped her hand into the loose knot of his. "Fiach, we're supposed to be a team." She rubbed her other hand over his sculpted stomach, tracing the hard ridges she found there. He quivered under her touch. "Whatever happens, we'll get through this." He dropped her hand and drew her across his lap. She nestled against his shoulder and smiled when he hissed and shifted her weight away from his erection. "So how do we escape?" she asked.

Fiach's soft chuckle was enchanting. "Why are you so certain I know a way out of this?"

"You wouldn't have allowed us to be captured otherwise. Anyone who bargains with Arvel the way you have is made of stronger stuff. You didn't even put up a fight."

"Maybe I was worried that you would get hurt."

Cilia chewed her lip and pretended to consider. "No, I'm pretty sure that's not it."

"They did have gold chains on you," he noted; his dark eyes implied that he thought chains weren't a bad idea.

“True, but I could have melted them if it became necessary.”

Fiach asked in puzzlement, “How do you know that? Isn’t gold toxic to you? To us?”

“Not exactly. It’s more like an irritant. I don’t know that anything can actually kill a Phoenix.”

He considered that. “How is it that pertinent information bubbles out of you at the most inopportune moments?”

Cilia laughed. “It’s complicated. I have the knowledge of all my lifetimes, but to keep them straight, each rebirth erects a wall against my past consciousness. The information is there, it’s just a matter of locating it.”

Fiach became quiet. His focus centered on the hall before them.

“Did I say something wrong?” Cilia asked.

“I just wonder.” He took a deep breath. “What if we don’t remember each other in the next incarnation? I would be grateful for five hundred years at your side, but I would prefer a much longer indenture.”

Cilia’s chest tightened. She held Fiach’s face between her palms. “You’re my mate. No matter how many times we are reborn, now that we have found each other, we will always burn together and rise from the ashes.”

His dark eyes gleamed. “Cilia, you would have been better off with someone else. The things I’ve done ... the creatures I’ve done them with...”

Cilia smoothed a stray hair from his cheek. “The past is in the past. Our love was born of fire, and fire cleanses everything it touches.”

“You are better than I deserve.” He dropped a kiss into her palm.

“You don’t give yourself enough credit.” Cilia pulled his face down to hers for a quick kiss and sighed as his heat enfolded her. He laid her back onto the thin bedding, covered her, and ground his leather-encased cock against her barely covered mound.

Celia turned her head and froze. Jarlath propped his forehead on the bars as he looked in on them.

“Don’t stop on my account,” he whispered.

Fiach pulled back and resumed his seat on the edge of the mattress. She curled into his side and waited.

“Oh well. I suppose it was a bit much to expect to witness the mating fires so soon. After you’ve been here a while, you’ll learn to accept my presence during such private moments.” His lips curled back over his teeth. “Perhaps even enjoy it.”

“Don’t hold your breath.” Cilia said.

“Sweet one, time means nothing to my kind or yours. I have no doubt your lover will be unable to resist claiming you eventually.”

Jarlath stepped back and motioned for two of his demons to slip trays of food between the bars. The meal looked delicious, which made her immediately suspicious.

“Enjoy you dinner.” Jarlath rubbed his jaw; his fingers slipped over his lips. Then he turned and left the catacombs through the tunnel they had taken earlier.

Cilia walked over to the trays and peered down at them. “What do you think?”

Fiach lifted a tray to his nose and inhaled. He sneezed and rubbed his nose. “He’s coated it in Fairy Dust, a powdered aphrodisiac.” To prove his point, his eyes dropped to his crotch, and hers did as well. An enviable bulge in the leather was a testament to how potent the drug was. He had grown twice the size he was before they had been interrupted. He reached down to gently adjust himself but winced as he touched the

sensitized skin. Even through the fabric barrier, his touch was painful.

He draped his long body across the bed, propped his arms behind his head, and then crossed his feet at the ankles. He looked at ease, but she knew him well enough to recognize the suffering in his eyes. The worst part was the familiar knowledge that he had of the drug and his calm while facing its effects. Her stomach turned when she realized his familiarity with the potent drug, most likely used as the final resort to arouse him enough to complete his bargains with Arvel. She could think of no other reason for his calm acceptance of the situation.

“Fiach...” she started.

He held a hand up to silence her. “I’m fine, Cilia. I refuse to put on a show for our jailer’s amusement.”

“I just don’t want to see you hurting.”

He snorted. “Believe me, I’ve hurt a lot worse than this before. At least, this is a pleasant torment.” He turned his head and captured her eyes. “It wouldn’t be as potent if I didn’t want to be inside of you so badly, already.”

“I could...”

“No, I won’t share any part of you with him.”

“You wouldn’t have to.”

*

Fiach’s brow crinkled. He watched Cilia approach and was tempted to laugh at his uncertainty. She straddled his thighs and gently unbuttoned his pants and slid open the zipper. His mouth opened, and she covered it with her palm. “Let me ease you, Fiach.”

His hands folded over his stomach and interlaced. His knuckles whitened from the strain of keeping them still. He longed to twine his fingers in her hair and force her lips to his burning cock. Instead, he lay perfectly still and let her take her time.

She folded the leather aside, as though she were unwrapping a gift. She freed him gently, and the chilled air made his arousal more painful. Cilia leaned down until her lips hovered over the head of his erection. Her warm breath fanned his engorged flesh.

Then her lips closed over his cock and engulfed him. His hips twisted and tried to force more of his eager flesh into her mouth. Cilia groaned and lowered her lips almost to his base before she timidly suckled the heavily veined shaft and started a slow slide back to his tip.

Her tongue darted out to lick over the slit of his crown. When she pressed into the narrow opening, his hips bowed off the bed. He had to force himself to still, and even then, his hips began a slow pumping motion to show her how he wanted to be taken. She took the lead and quickened her lips while increasing the suction until he thought she would swallow him whole.

She reached down, held his sac in her palm, and rubbed the tender pouch. He was almost ready; his blood strummed in his veins. Then Cilia’s fingers tightened on his balls and squeezed with gentle pressure. Her mouth stopped just at the head of his cock as his orgasm swept through him. He swore he saw colors as the pleasure rippled through him in waves; the drug heightened his release to the point of pain. After a moment, he realized that Cilia still nursed his softening erection as the heated pulses erupted from the tip.

He reached down to tangle his hands in her hair and lift her face to him. He hoped his love and appreciation for her kindness showed in his expression, because he was without words for what she had done.

She freed her mouth with a soft pop and licked her reddened lips before crawling up the bed. She lay on her side and stroked his chest through his t-shirt. She snuggled close as sleep claimed her. Fiach held his mate and listened to the soft intake of air as it whispered over her parted lips.

The reprieve that Cilia had granted him wouldn't last long. It would take days for the drug to pass through his system, and until then, he would be struggling for control of his arousal. Jarlath was counting on him to succumb to the raging need building inside of his body. Thanks to his dealings with Arvel, Fiach had some control over his urges, but eventually the rising need would have to be sated.

Chapter Three

For the second time in two days, Fiach woke swearing. A sharp point dug into his side. His eyes opened, and he looked down to find Cilia curled into his chest. His heart softened, as other parts hardened, at the sight of her sleep-flushed face. His swollen cock was a crude reminder of the Fairy Dust that he had inhaled the night before. Reassured that his mate was secure, he twisted to address the pain in his side.

A sphere of incandescence hovered only inches above his side; the tiny ball of light flickered to and fro while pressing the tip of a crystal dagger into his flesh. He held his hands up in surrender and twisted onto his back.

The luminescent orb stabbed him hard in the side and drew the knife through the flow of blood. The radiance faded and revealed a tiny person who promptly brought the blade to her lips and licked the red liquid. Her wings fluttered appreciatively.

"It is you," Arabella chirped.

Fiach rolled his eyes. "You had to stab me to figure that out?"

The tiny fairy shoulders rose and dipped. "Your aura has changed. You no longer seem yourself." Then she flittered over him and landed on his stomach; her tiny feet tickled the skin. She held her dagger out and pointed it towards Cilia. "Can I poke it?" she asked, clearly glorying in the sharp blade, which he knew to be a recent gift from his mother.

"No, Bella, you most certainly cannot poke it. That is Cilia. She is my mate." The tiny fae still looked confused, so he clarified with a word he knew she would understand. "She is my *D'Ame*."

"Your *D'Ame*?" Bella squeaked.

Fiach nodded. "Yes."

Bella's eyes glittered. "Your mother does not know! You are not bound by the way of our people."

"Not yet. I wanted to give Cilia time to know me before attempting such old magic."

"I'm telling." Bella stomped off; her feet rose into the air as her tiny dragonfly wings fluttered excitedly. Tiny fae had very child-like temperaments. To Bella, having this secret to tell was akin to tattling on an older brother.

Fiach caught her in between his large palms, careful not to ruffle a hair on her tiny head. "Did Mother send you here for a reason, Bella?"

The tiny doll face scrunched in concentration. Then her glow expanded in a sharp crack. "Yes! Yes! The Lady said to bring you home. That you had called and asked for transport."

"Wonderful. We really would like to leave as soon as possible."

Bella's face turned petulant. "The Lady said nothing of bringing this other thing. She said to fetch her son and bring him home."

"She is my *D'Ame*. Mother would never expect me to return home without her."

Bella considered this for a moment. "The Lady has missed you so." She gave herself a shake and flittered from his hands. "Gather the other; I will do as you ask."

Fiach grinned and shook Cilia awake. Her large sleep-softened eyes found his and then rounded when she saw the glow coming from over his shoulder.

“Is that what I think it is?” she asked.

“It! I am not an It!”

Fiach pressed a kiss to Cilia’s plumped lips. “Yes, she is exactly what you think, but please, her name is Bella, and she is our way out, so play nice.”

“My name is Arabella, daughter of Marabella and granddaughter of the great Christabella, great granddaughter of the...”

Fiach pressed a finger to the tiny Fae lips. Bella snarled around his finger, which was large enough to cover her face. “We know your lineage, Bella, and are very impressed by it.”

He elbowed Cilia, and she took the hint. “Yes Arabella, I am awed to be in the presence of someone of your ancestry.”

Bella preened, spiraled through the air, and then landed on Cilia’s shoulder. “Maybe your *D’Ame* is not so bad after all.”

Cilia mouthed the word, “What?” but he pretended not to understand.

Bella launched herself from her perch and glided into the air above their heads. “Ready? I’m ready.” Then she lifted her sword high over head, and they flashed from the catacombs into a lavish throne room filled with lithe Sidhe, the larger cousin of the small fae.

A statuesque woman reclined on the throne in the center of the room. Dozens of subjects surrounded her. Their expressions varied from curious to feigned boredom. The woman opened her hand, and Arabella zoomed forward to dance into the outstretched palm. She executed a perfect curtsy and announced, “My Lady, I present your son and his *D’Ame*.”

For the span of a minute, no one moved or spoke. Then the Lady rose and glided forward without seeming to move, as though she floated on the very air. “So you have finally come to present her.” She craned her neck to stare at Cilia.

Fiach stepped between them and pulled Cilia into his back. “No, Mother. We were trapped in the catacombs beneath the demon Jarlath’s lair. Arabella was kind enough to bring us here at my request.”

“You are always welcome here Fiach. You need never ask to come home.”

“Thank you, Lady,” he replied.

The Lady turned her intense focus on Cilia. “Do you not wish to be bound in the way of our people?”

“I have not been asked, my Lady.”

The Lady lifted a hand to twirl the crystal pendant hanging from her neck. “Your mate does not know.” She addressed the vague comment to Fiach.

“Know what?” he asked warily.

His Mother’s eyes sparkled. “You will see.” She stepped around him and pried Cilia from his grasp. She enfolded Cilia and whispered words against her cheek. Cilia had a moment to look confused before her blue fire rose and licked along her skin. His mother stepped clear and smiled openly. “It’s true, then.”

She repeated the process with Fiach. She embraced him and whispered words in the liquid language of her people as red flames erupted over his skin. She stood back and stared. “I had forgotten how beautiful you both were.”

“Mother?” he asked.

“There will be time enough for answers later. Now we must plan your *Noce*.” She

paused for a moment. "Unless there is doubt?"

Fiach stepped to Cilia's side and pulled her in for a kiss. Their flames merged, and purple fires arched from their bodies to spill into the air around them. Murmurs and appreciative sighs echoed around them. He looked down to Cilia's half closed eyes. "I need to ask you something. Just trust that whatever decision you make is the right one." He dropped to one knee and cupped her hands between his. "Cilia Andrews, flame of my heart and mate to my soul, will you marry me?"

Whispers filled the hall. "Is she human?" someone asked. To buy time as he awaited her answer, Fiach addressed the crowd. "Cilia lives among humans. I thought it would be fitting to ask for her hand in their traditional way." His heart dropped when he realized she hadn't answered.

She freed a hand from his grip and tipped his chin up with a finger. "I will marry you, Fiach. My answer is yes."

In a blur too fast for her eyes to track, Fiach trapped her in his arms and spun them around the room. His lips dropped to hers. He pierced her mouth with his tongue, tasting the fire simmering below the surface. She burned; the heat consumed his thoughts until the aphrodisiac in his system roared to life. He struggled to stop from tearing the clothes from her body and claiming her in front of the entire Faerie court.

*

Cilia laughed exuberantly as Fiach twirled her around the gilded hall. She couldn't decide if she was still dreaming or if she was awake. The creatures around her seemed so alien, too beautiful and perfect to be real. Even their voices were as silk caressing her senses.

The loveliest, the most inhuman wore a long gown of spun silver with diamonds woven into the fabric. Her white hair hung in perfect ringlets down to her waist and a fine filigree crown in the same color nestled in her curls. Her face was flawless and smooth. Her large silver-blue eyes tilted up at an exotic angle, and her too-red lips were full and lush. Most disarming was the fact that Fiach called her, "Mother."

As if reading the question in her eyes, Fiach leaned in and whispered, "Later," into her ear. She nodded and let him tuck her tightly against him.

The Lady addressed her. "This must all seem so sudden to you, but I assure you we have waited long years for this time to come. The *Noce* is our most sacred of bindings. Do not enter into it lightly." She cast a worried glance at Fiach. "You will both be tested in preparation for your vows. They are dangerous interrogations with potentially lethal consequences."

He frowned. His mother's warning unsettled his warm assurance from only moments before. Cilia clutched his arm and reaffirmed her answer. "I wish to be bound to your son. I agree to any test you deem necessary."

"Mother." The single word was both a sharp warning and a desperate plea. "She doesn't understand the power of her words. I ask for lenience on her behalf."

The smooth lines of the Lady's face remained impassive; she kept her reaction to his words hidden. "I cannot grant you what you ask. From the moment she agreed to the *Noce*, she is bound to her words, however carelessly offered or naively spoken."

Cilia paled, too late realizing her mistake. She had agreed to endure any test the Lady required. Fiach was livid. After the stories of his childhood antics in Faerie, she should have realized the value of knowing when to keep her mouth shut.

The Lady addressed her court. "Keep the silence and stay to the light until the trial has passed. I will remain in my rooms until its completion." Then she turned to Fiach. "I would have a word with my son."

*

"Rois, please keep watch over Cilia until we return," the Lady instructed.

A beautiful Sidhe woman stepped from the sea of sameness. She smiled as a human did, a trick that few of the court had mastered. Her expression looked peculiar but honest, with her full red lips lifted and her light silver eyes warmed.

She grasped Cilia's hand and led her to the courtyard beyond the great hall. He knew where Rois was taking her and regretted he would miss the blossoming wonder on her face as she saw the Butterfly Tree for the first time.

The trunk was smooth and rounded; its substance was almost translucent. The tree's long limbs reached high into the over-bright Faerie sky. A faint pulse of shifting colors in its base created a kaleidoscope that flashed through the iridescent body. Its sweetly perfumed bark shined with thick syrupy nectar; butterflies blanketed its arms.

Cilia would look with her human sensibilities and see the wonder and magnificence that made the Lady lavish the tree with her attentions. She would see, instead of leaves, thousands of butterflies, in every color and pattern imaginable, cover the transparent limbs. Their tiny, straw-like tongues would dart out to suction the sticky nourishment from its silky skin. What she wouldn't see was the drunken abandon that spurred the fragile insects to glut. Overfilled with a substance they should never have tasted, a slow poison disintegrated their dainty bodies and allowed the tree to absorb their minuscule essence.

Although the tree looked grounded, it was animated. It moved to where it best felt the light, to where its delicate perfume could best lure more unsuspecting victims. It fed from its decorations; the ground was merely a convenient anchor to hold steady the burden of its pantry stretched across its limbs. This was Faerie, and nothing was as it seemed.

The Lady guided Fiach to a small alcove, a Whispering Corner. Anything spoken in whispers remained confined to the space, but a raised voice would release any secrets the speaker had imparted. They were a valuable resource, an oasis for allies to meet and foes to plot. Ventriloquism was a necessary skill set if you chose to activate a Corner. Just because your voice couldn't be heard didn't mean your lips couldn't be read.

They stepped into the small space, and each took a chair facing the other. The air around them thickened and pulsed, which made his ears pop. The spell was active; their privacy guaranteed. He sat back and waited to see what had necessitated this meeting. He was anxious to see Cilia again, to smooth his hands over her flawless skin and glimpse forever in her eyes. He needed to feel his part in her future.

"I know you think me harsh in my treatment of your mate. For that, I am most sorry."

He waved her apology away, uncertain if she meant it. "You didn't have to take her words. You could have allowed her that small concession."

She patted his cheek with affection that was alien to their relationship. "There are things I can do, things I must do, and things that will forever be altered if I interfere."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you honestly think that I don't know what Harailt did to you during your stays

with him?"

Fiach looked away. "I assumed you knew. You never mentioned it, and I saw no reason to either. It was nothing that either of us could change."

"Exactly. Your life would have been forfeit if I had tried to come between that demon and his spawn."

He sighed wearily. "I am of age. Harailt can no longer command my loyalties. I survived, and I found Cilia. Those are the only two things that matter."

"They matter more than you know."

"Why so cryptic, Lady?"

"I cannot speak freely with you until after the *Noce*. I should not speak with you at all, but I felt the need to ... clear the air ... between us before this trial begins."

His scalp prickled with unease. "Promise me you will not harm her."

"I can offer no such promise. It is not within my power."

"You are the Lady of the court," he hissed. "Nothing is beyond your power."

The precarious bubble of silence wavered, but a gentle flick of the Lady's hand enforced the nearly breached walls. She waited until the soft hum of magic resumed before she continued.

"That is where you are wrong. Destiny is not within my control. You have a great destiny before you, Fiach. One I have waited long years to see realized." She stood and waited for him to do the same. "Come. We must begin."

"Can I see Cilia before the trial begins?"

She nodded. "I will allow you to escort her to her chambers."

Fiach accepted the offer and followed her through the pierced dome of quiet and back into the center of the hall, where Rois was already leading an exuberant Cilia to meet them.

*

Fiach's mother motioned for them to follow and led them away from the great hall, which bristled with the curious stares of her people. Cilia closed her eyes and focused on the warmth of Fiach's body against hers. The curve of his arm wrapped around her hip so that he bumped into her as they walked. When her eyes opened, he was looking down at her with those dark brooding eyes set in his perfect face. He had apparently taken after his mother in one respect at any rate. He was beautiful but not effeminate. Only pain and desperation could have forged the ruggedness in him.

They halted outside a pair of floor-to-ceiling double doors. Fiach's mother pulled them open and stepped inside. As Fiach led Cilia, they entered an opulent bedchamber. The high ceiling had been enchanted to look like a summer sky. Clouds danced overhead, white flashes against the cerulean background.

It reminded her of the eerie majesty of the Butterfly Tree, an illusion of beauty and splendor that attempted to hide something sinister. Dark gray shadows slipped between the white cotton hazes over head. She would ask Fiach to explain them, and the tree, once they were alone.

"This is to be your *D'Ame's* chambers."

Cilia passed Fiach a worried glance. His expression was grim.

"Mother, she is a stranger to this place, to your people. I'm certain she would feel more comfortable sharing a room with me."

The Lady laughed. "Do not think I am ignorant as to how you became as she is. Only

intercourse is the catalyst for that change. Our ceremonies require you to be celibate during the cleansing and preparations for the *Noce*.” She stared pointedly at his tented pants. “I can read the taint in your body from your aura.” She smacked her lips as if tasting the air surrounding them. “Fairy Dust. You will not be allowed alone with her until the trial is completed.”

“Lady I am not wholly Sidhe, nor completely demon, and Cilia is neither. Surely we aren’t required to fulfill such an archaic rite.”

“You are not either now; you are a Phoenix, as she is. They are an honored part of our extended court.” She smiled tightly. “That means that you both are bound by our *archaic rites*.”

Cilia slumped against Fiach’s side, concerned with the prospect of finding sleep beneath the ominous wisps painting the ceiling.

“Now, now, I am not being cruel. You will thank me for this later.” She pointed to a second set of double doors. “I offer you a concession. I will give my son a room joined to yours, but only if you can abstain.”

Cilia grabbed the offer with both hands. “I think we can behave ourselves.”

The Lady cast her an amused look but said nothing.

“Isn’t it a little early to be putting us to bed?” Cilia asked hesitantly.

The Lady smiled warmly at her. “It seems but a moment since you awoke, but time moves differently in this place. You will sleep. The enchantment on your bed will ensure that.”

Cilia opened her mouth to speak.

The Lady cut off her unasked question. “There will be time enough for answers later.”

Fiach leaned in to kiss Cilia good night but stopped just before his lips touched hers.

“You must not,” the Lady warned.

Fiach aligned Cilia until their heat mingled and their Phoenixes pushed reassuring warmth and much needed energy into each partner. She reached her hand to thread through his ebony tresses to feel the small quills and the buds of feathers filling in across his scalp.

The Lady sighed, as though they tried her patience. Fiach stepped away but let his fingers trail down her cheek. “I love you. No matter what else comes, know that.”

His eyes were pained and full of worry. She wanted to comfort him, but his mother stepped between them and led him away. As the doors closed, Cilia thought she heard her say, “The trial has begun.” Their voices were softer now, too far away for Cilia to know if what she had heard was real or imagined.

Chapter Four

Without Fiach to share it, the room had lost its appeal. Cilia stepped to the bed and tested the mattress with her palm. It was soft and springy; the fabric smelled like fresh flowers and rain-kissed grass. She crawled up and settled on her favored side. As her head hit the pillow, her ears popped. Her eyes dropped shut, and her breathing almost stopped. She was still conscious and aware, but paralyzed and terrified. She wanted to cry out for Fiach, but her lips refused to move.

A voice whispered, "Do not fear, child. This is the first phase."

Suddenly, all the talk of trials and tests crashed down on her, and all of Fiach's assurances evaporated. In her mind, she was sitting in a black void, perched on a spindly chair carved from gnarled tree branches. Silver eyes gleamed in the darkness around her, and the soft cadence of a chant filled air. A cowed figure glided forward and spoke.

"We will ask you a series of questions. Answer them honestly. If you value the bond to your mate, you will be truthful. Do not attempt to escape; if you do, you forfeit your right to the *Noce*." He uncoiled the long black length of a leather whip. Its serpentine tail danced nimbly across the floor just before her feet.

She nodded mutely, and he asked the first question, "What right has Fiach to be loved?"

Cilia waited, but not further clarification was made. The figure awaited her answer as the braided leather length writhed on the floor below her in silent menace, daring her to run. She licked her lips. "He has the same right as every creature to love and earn love in return."

The hooded head bobbed and blended into the background, passing the whip's handle off to the next figure to approach. The black handle hung loosely from his fingers, as though he regretted its presence there. He poised his question with little inflection. "What right have you to be loved?"

Cilia's heart accelerated; her mind flew ahead to try and sense a trap but was unable to find one. If there was a hidden meaning to the questions, she was at a loss to discover it. "As I said, we all have the right to give and earn love as we can. It's not a matter of whether you deserve it, only if you can attain it."

The black-robed figures shuffled their ranks again. The whip was offered, but this time waved away. Its black tail slid from view, like a snake retreating to the shelter of tall grass. The cloaked form opened his hand and a dagger settled against his palm. "Would you bleed for someone you loved?"

"Yes."

He took her hand in his, and she noticed an intricate tattoo on the fleshy meat that joined his thumb and pointer. He pricked her finger with the blade.

Fire erupted around the dagger as her blood beaded on the tip. "I wonder, would you die for someone you loved?"

The question was harder, but the answer equally easy to give. "Yes."

Cold hands twined in her hair and arched her neck. She felt the iced edge of the blade as it drew a line of blood from her neck.

"Are you certain? Death here is quite permanent."

“Yes,” she said again. Then the horrible sensation of her neck being sliced open overtook her; she felt her airways bared, and her voice silenced as she screamed. The world went dark.

* * * *

Cilia jerked upright, disoriented and amazed to be alive at all. Fiach knelt at the foot of her bed with his hands folded in what looked like prayer. A white band of gauze circled his neck and wrists. Red seeped through in bright patches. Her hand rose to her throat impulsively and found the same padding. When she withdrew her fingers, they were tinted with blood.

“Fiach.” The sound was little more than a hoarse whisper. His head jerked up, and she saw mercurial tears slip down his cheeks. He pushed from the floor and moved to the foot of the bed. The doors to his bedchamber remained open; a thin Sidhe woman hovered in the doorway and watched them.

“Cilia,” her named was little more than a reverent murmur over his lips.

Her neck burned. “I’m alright. No harm done.” She swallowed a little to test her throat.

Fiach’s eyes burned with fury. “I can’t allow them to torment you like this.”

She pointed to his bandages. “And, you as well.”

He waved a hand in dismissal. “We can still marry as humans do. This binding isn’t necessary to prove our devotion to one another.”

Cilia wished deep down that she could throw herself into his arms and beg to be spirited away, but she recalled the flush of pure joy on his face when she had agreed to the *Noce*. Whatever else lay in store, the reward had to be great for Fiach to be in awe at the prospect.

“No. We started this, and we will finish it. Something is niggling at my mind.” She frowned as the thought passed her by. “I know this is the right thing to do.” She rubbed her temples. “I hate not being able to remember things, always feeling like something important is on the tip of my tongue only to have it slip away.”

He reached out a hand, and she took it. The tingle of their bond danced up her arms and down to her core. The dark look in her mate’s eyes was mirrored in her own, she was certain.

“I want you,” Fiach whispered. His voice rang coarse with hunger. Sweat beaded his brow. His skin felt fevered, and his hand shook in her grasp. The drug still raged in his system, but she was powerless to help him.

“I want you, too.” She squeezed his hand quickly. “And, I love you.”

He looked around and gestured his hand to encompass the room. “After I’ve put you through all this, can you believe I love you, too?”

“I know you do.” One side of her mouth hitched up in a half smile. “I don’t suppose you can tell me what comes next?”

He shook his head. “No, I can’t. The rules are changing.” His stare fixated on the bloody gauze at her neck. “I don’t remember anyone’s life being endangered before. I don’t know what it means.”

A throat cleared from his doorway. “The Lady said you could have ten minutes and not a minute more. I must ask you to come with me, my Lord.”

Fiach’s eyes pinched closed. “I’m coming.”

“It’s all right. Whatever comes next, we’ll be ready.”

He pushed from the bed and stalked back to his room. The woman guarding him peeked around the corner once he had passed.

“I’m worried, Mistress Cilia.” Her voice was almost inaudible. “The next phase begins. Be aware.”

Chapter Five

Fiach lowered himself into the first chair he found. Rois, his chaperone, stood with her back pressed to the door that divided his room from Cilia's. She was his mother's favored companion, meek and mild, and given to displays of emotion.

Whispers around the court asserted that Rois's emotional temperament was the product of raising a changeling, a human child swapped for her own at birth. Since Rois was esteemed so highly, few dared to comment on her unusually bright disposition or her open affection for her son, Cayden.

She risked a curt assurance. "You chose well, Fiach. She will survive this."

"Thank you Rois." Then they were quiet.

On the other side, Cilia's trial had begun. He heard her screams and loud crashes as things unknown hurled into the wall. He kept repeating to himself that it was an illusion, that no harm could come to her, but his neck ached, a stinging reminder that the rules had changed. No one's physical body had ever received a wound in *Liemmos*, the sleepless place. This torture was unheard of; the mental projection of a body might be harmed, but the physical body had always remained intact. Yet, he and Cilia both bore the marks inflicted on them. Fiach shuddered; if Cilia were to die there, her spirit would remain trapped while her body aged and died without the fire of her soul to animate it.

Rois announced with a shiver, "I must leave you now. Danu, be merciful."

Fiach tensed as frigid air blasted his face and neck. He sat motionless and waited for its source to be revealed. A long serpentine neck came into view followed by a bulbous body and tiny, clawed feet. A clubbed tail twitched and thumped solidly into the wall. The large, disproportioned head swung around; its eyes gleamed. It was a dragon; on an elemental level, Fiach recognized this creature as his enemy. A dragon cast in ice, the nemesis of his being that was forged in flame.

"Your mate was most ... exhilarating." It rasped between its too large teeth.

Terror balled in Fiach's stomach. Cilia's room was silent now. He looked again at the dragon and saw red stains on its lips and claws. It wasn't possible. He would know if something happened to her, wouldn't he?

"I'm not taking the bait, dragon."

"No bait, just truth." The forked tongue flicked out and licked across its reddened snout. "You have tasted her blood? It has a slow burn going down and is spiced, like cinnamon."

All rational thought left Fiach. His fists balled, and his body erupted into flame. He flew forward, propelled not by his wings, but by his fire. His clothing disintegrated, and his skin shed until he was a living flame.

The dragon snapped its jaws, but Fiach barreled into its side and listened to its roar of fury as his heat melted the icy scales of its skin. Its huge head bent around and bit into Fiach's side; its icicle teeth pierced deep and splattered his blood on its snow-colored skin. The monster shrieked as the Phoenix' fire consumed him. Fiach grabbed the dragon around the middle in a tight embrace and watched as the nightmarish creature streamed tepid water in lieu of blood.

With a shudder and hiss of steam, the dragon melted into a pool at his feet. Fiach

looked down and saw his own reflection in the red tinted water. His flesh rippled and flowed over him in the second before he dropped to the floor. He desperately pressed his hands flush to his side to stem the flow of blood.

The double doors of his suite swung wide and admitted Cilia. She dropped to her knees and tried to replace his hands over the wound. Fiach grabbed her shoulders and forced her back to inspect the damage. She was nude and covered in the fine powder that marked the transformation to flame. One eye was swollen, almost closed, and a jagged cut marred the skin of her side where the dragon's clubbed tail had landed a blow.

He yanked her into his lap and sank back on his haunches. "This ends now!" he bellowed at the ceiling.

Cilia tried to soothe him, but he yelled at the enchanted clouds over head. "Mother! I know the high court watches these proceedings. My mate will not be endangered like this!"

Cilia caressed his neck and jaw; she rained kisses over his battered face. His lips were too bruised for kisses, so he held her tightly and hoped the worst was over.

His mother's voice trickled down from above. "Next is the final test. It is for Cilia to judge."

The puddle that they knelt in vanished, and they were at once sitting in chairs across the room from one another. A long, black velvet curtain draped over one end of the rectangular space, obscuring what lay beyond. Fiach met Cilia's eyes and mouthed the ominous words, "Forgive me."

Chapter Six

Cilia was frightened. The trial's method of awarding merit seemed insane. Each stage ending only when one or both of them succumbed to a potentially mortal wound.

Fiach slumped in his chair. Sunken and drained, the blood loss weakened him to a dangerous point. As she watched him mouth the foreboding words, her eyes glued to the curtain to see what horror it concealed. Framed by the draping fabric was a pulsing blackness, thick and cancerous, a tangible malice that she easily felt from across the room. She tensed and prepared to defend her mate if necessary.

A parting of fabric revealed a tall unearthly woman. She stepped clear of the curtained doorway and stopped a few feet away from Cilia. "I am Zinath, and I was the first lover of Fiach." After her proclamation, she strode to where Fiach sat and dropped into his lap. His face distorted, but his body remained frozen.

The curtain rustled again and a black-skinned creature, almost more animal than woman approached her. Its rasping voice grating out the words, "I am Kidre. The second of Fiach's lovers." She turned and took her place by Fiach's chair.

Cilia was uncertain whether the women were illusion or reality since the lines blurred constantly in this place. If they were real, then the curtain concealed a portal that could bridge the gap between Faerie and other planes of existence. If they were illusion, then it hid something guaranteed to be equally sinister and unforgiving.

Cilia was shocked as woman after woman stepped through the portal and past the curtain to approach her. Each gave the same recitation, allowing her a glimpse into the life that Fiach had led. It forced Cilia to acknowledge that she was truly one of many.

It was then that Cilia understood. This was about humiliation, about degrading Fiach to the point that his sins were laid bare, and she must judge him fit to mate or not. That revelation brought peace. She watched the procession for what must have been hours. A staggering collection of women lined the walls and claimed the floor around Fiach until he was lost from her sight among them.

Cilia tensed as Arvel stepped forward. The demon's eyes were unfocused and distant; her words slurred in awkward cadence. Cilia acknowledged her, and the demon went to join the others. When the room was filled to capacity and the women were forced to stay by her side because there was no room left by his, the curtain opened wide.

In reverse order, the women began to form a line, this time, starting with the last. A human woman stepped forward that Cilia recognized as her neighbor from the time she had lived at the brownstone with Max and Stella, the one that Fiach had been with when she had encountered him. The woman looked at Cilia and asked, "Can you forgive your mate for the sins he has committed against you?"

"Yes," she huffed out tiredly.

"This room is filled with women who have known the pleasure of having his cock inside of them. Of being ridden to screaming orgasm by the one who now claims to love you."

This proceeding had quickly become ridiculous. Laughter bubbled up and spilled over her lips. She rubbed a hand down her face. "Can we cut to the chase, or do I have to answer the same thing to each of you?" She met the stares of the harem of women, all of

which startled at her outburst.

Cilia stood and pressed through the throng of past lovers, wading through the sea of flesh to find Fiach at its center. She grasped the arm of his first lover and pulled the woman free of his lap, then claimed her seat. Fiach was pale. His hands were too weak to wrap around her. She rested against his chest and spoke to him instead of the women.

"If I had been able to have sex without killing someone, I bet I would have collected more men here than your women."

He was still for a heartbeat and then began to chuckle. "I wouldn't be surprised. You have a very healthy appetite."

"I wouldn't have loved them. You called to my heart from that first time in the hall. I knew then that everything I had done to belong to the humans was foolish because my place is wherever you are."

"Cilia, I want to be with you. I want you to live inside of me and burn with me all the days of forever."

A smattering of claps interrupted their private moment. Cilia looked up; the room lay empty, and the curtain had vanished. In its place, the Lady and the cowled men from her dream stood. She decided to ignore whatever torture lay ahead and instead to bask in the warmth of her lover's body.

"You don't have to hold him so close, Cilia," the Lady said.

"Don't I? Who knows when the next trial will begin and if either of us will survive it?"

"Calm yourself. The trials are over. You may rest tonight and be joined in the morning. The preparations for your *Noce* are complete."

Cilia looked at the ethereal mother, the beautiful Lady, and saw for the first time the hint of cruelty that lay beneath the mask of serenity. "I don't care. We don't need your permission or your acceptance. We can leave this place and find our own happiness."

The Lady frowned. "Fiach will not be happy unless he is joined to you in the way of our people. Any happiness you find will not be lasting."

"You don't know your son. If this rite was something he wanted, he would have asked me on his own without being coerced."

His mother laughed, like a whisper of fury. "Coerced? If I had not mentioned it, what makes you think he would have ever offered? He is too much of a gentleman to leave you embarrassed in front of the court." Her lips curved into what some might consider a smile. "He asked you out of pity."

Cilia stood and pulled Fiach to stand beside her. "We're leaving now."

A dozen sinuously muscled guards flashed to the Lady's side. The nearest one held a gold tipped spear and pressed it into the shredded flesh of Fiach's side. He blanched and almost dropped to his knees.

Cold fury enveloped Cilia. Her Phoenix rose and demanded she protect its mate. Luminous blue flames blazed over her skin and encased her and Fiach's weakened body. She called forth her fire and prepared to battle their way free if necessary.

In the face of her murderous rage, the Lady lifted a hand; a dam exploded in her mind and knowledge filled Cilia. She remembered. The thin barrier of rebirth ruptured, and memories assailed her. Large pieces of a life forfeited and a love she had sworn to never forget swarmed into her mind. Power that had been dormant for too long cascaded over her skin as her Phoenix settled closer around her.

Cilia pressed a palm encased in flame to Fiach's chest. "Open for me." And, he opened his mind to the crush of his forgotten past. His eyes widened and his jaw slacked, as his memories were unlocked. When he looked at her, she saw the difference in his eyes immediately. They were still dark and lovely, but the gentle love that had been there before was amplified. Red flames licked in his gaze and consumed her. Here was love. Here was her soul.

"I thought I had lost you," he said.

A whoosh of air tickled over her as his skin ignited. The white glow of healing encased them as their wounds healed. The pure white light flashed a deep golden red. Her fiery mate's need called to her own. His skin was damp from his body's failed struggle to flush away the remnants of the aphrodisiac. He dropped his head to hers and took her lips with hard licks and teeth. He forced his tongue inside her mouth and laved each surface therein.

"I'm sorry I didn't find you sooner." She whimpered and now could remember a thousand times his kisses had burned her, left her charred and smoking as their desires consumed them.

The Lady's voice seemed distant, but urgent. "Remember our bargain."

The fires were stoked too high to discharge. They required flesh sliding against flesh, bodies slapping together in joining.

"Do you mind?" Fiach grated against her lips.

"I need you. I need to know this is really you. I don't care if the whole damn court watches."

Dozens of tiny explosions seemed to happen at once. Cilia pulled back enough to see that, in fact, the entire court had heard her grant permission for them to be present. She groaned and rested her forehead on Fiach's shoulder. He chuckled.

"It's too late to worry now." He nipped her shoulder. "I need to be inside of you."

Cilia nodded and allowed Fiach to carry her to a bed that had materialized in the center of the empty chamber. There was no headboard or footboard to obscure the view, but a large square mattress with red sheets tucked under its lip. She snorted as she noticed the color choice.

Rois piped up. "I thought you would be lovely against the red."

Cilia smiled and caught the Lady's eye. Her old knowledge reminded her that the Lady was not Fiach's mother. She was a friend, who had risked great peril to harbor the *Neir* and *Neiro*, the Phoenix equivalent to Queen and King, when it might have cost her and her court their lives. They were indebted to her, and she had asked to witness a Phoenix mating as payment.

The Lady met Cilia's eyes, and their silver depths shone with lust and eagerness. "There will be plenty of time for talk later," she said again.

Cilia looked at Fiach. The scars and marks of the last few days were absent. His golden skin was as flawless as it had been the first time she smoothed her palms across it. The swirling black tattoos had vanished, leaving his skin even purer than before. She remembered now that the dark brand had been a binding, etched into his very skin. It had kept the truth of his nature at bay until she could find him again and release the fire of his soul. She almost missed the intricate detailing, but his tawny skin was too delectable to warrant any real complaint.

"I can't wait," he whispered.

Cilia didn't think she could either. She crawled over to the bed and waited on her hands and knees for Fiach to join her. His weight settled on the mattress as he moved between her thighs. His hands kneaded her buttocks as he rubbed his crest along the outer folds of her labia.

"I don't think I can do this." Fiach's voice strained. "I want to savor you, but..."

She knew the Fairy Dust still lingered in his system and coupled with their need to reconnect, Cilia was unconcerned with being savored. She dropped to her elbows and reached between their bodies. Her hand found his cock, and the length pulsed in her hands. She rubbed his silken tip against her clit, but by the second pass, he had reached down to angle the head and thrust into her pussy.

"You're so wet for me."

Her response was a scream as he surged forward until his balls rested against her bottom. He jerked within her, but she knew he was unwilling to come so soon. He held himself at her deepest core and waited for his control to return.

Cilia glanced over and saw the court had removed its clothing. Some Sidhe had coupled and were intertwined on the floor, joining in the mating dance. Some pleased themselves, and still more stared transfixed on the spot where Fiach's body entered her own.

But, the eye of one man caught her attention. His long, silver-white hair fell over his shoulders to pool on the floor behind him. He was nude, and his long fingered hands were stroking an impressive erection. He was sliding his palm slowly over the stalk of his flesh, and she knew he was waiting on Fiach to set the pace for their release.

Her inner muscles rippled along Fiach's shaft. He threw his head back and groaned. Cilia watched a flush rise to the cheeks of the man. His arousal fed her own.

Fiach withdrew until the head of his cock almost popped free of her tight sheath. Then he thrust forward and seated himself completely. He pulled and surged with hard steady strokes, and Cilia's eyes rolled closed. A muffled grunt drew them open, and she watched as the Sidhe pumped his hand up and down his hard flesh; his hips pushed from the floor in time with Fiach. A clear bead of liquid perched on the tip of his erection, and Cilia knew he was ready to come. He only waited for them to claim their pleasure first.

She noticed Fiach looking down her back to see where her gaze had gone. He followed her line of sight to the Sidhe who fought for control. Fiach grinned and whispered, "Should I make him work for it?"

Cilia nodded fervently. "I want you to come. Now."

Fiach swiveled his hips against her bottom before making two long strokes, each hard enough to press her face into the mattress and cut her off her air supply. He grabbed her hips and pulled her flush against his hips as his orgasm roared to life. He growled his release and rocked against her as the heat of his ejaculation burned her tender core. She peeked at the man again in time to see his hand coax his own explosion. Milky liquid spurted from his tip and coated his fingers. Cilia's orgasm bloomed as she watched him smooth his fingers down his softening cock, coating the proof of his desire around it.

In the afterglow, Cilia noticed all the couples now sat apart. No one rushed to cleanse the proof of their fulfillment; they simply lounged, sated and blissful.

Fiach pulled free and rolled Cilia into his arms. "Did you enjoy yourself?"

Cilia blushed and hid her face against his shoulder.

"I liked watching as well," he confided.

Cilia looked up and saw the truth in his eyes.

“But I will never share you.”

She laughed. “I wouldn’t share you either,” she gestured to the room full of watcher, “but I enjoyed this.”

He nuzzled her cheek. “Perhaps we can enjoy it again sometime? As spectators instead of spectacle?”

“I would like that very much. But now I just want some time alone with my mate.”

Fiach didn’t look up; he simply said, “You heard her. My *D’Ame* and I have lost time to make up for.” The spectators left.

Cilia giggled until he lifted her leg over his hip and entered her. Then all she could do was bite her lip. He steadied her shoulders and glided gently into her still wet sheath. He pushed her gently to climax, and her muscles milked the fiery liquid from his body. He spoke her name as he filled her. Their mingled fluids coated their thighs and made the skin there tingle.

“I love you,” she whispered as she let the warmth and security of Fiach’s body encase her and lull her to sleep.

Chapter Seven

A timid knocking roused Fiach from a light sleep. Cilia still rested in his arms; his thigh still locked her lower body to his. He lifted his leg and rolled away; he tossed the sheet over her hips and went to answer the door.

Rois waited on the other side. She looked down. He was erect and now that he was awake, the same coursing need from the night before was quickly making his cock bob in eagerness. His skin was still damp from the restless hours spent in bed wanting Cilia but knowing she needed to rest more than he needed release. He had fought the drug before. He could fight it a little longer.

The Sidhe saw nothing disrespectful about admiring another's body, so Fiach was not offended by her interest. His impatient erection throbbed under Rois's gaze, and he wished his mate's wide eyes appraised him instead of the Lady's companion. Her pink tongue darted out to moisten her too red lips.

"Is there something you needed Rois?" he asked, amused by her distraction.

"The Lady wishes you and your *D'Ame* to join her in her private quarters."

Fiach twisted his neck to watch the gentle rise and fall of Cilia's bare breasts as she slept. He hated to wake her, but this meeting would answer a lot of questions for them both. "Give me a minute." As Rois's eyes widened, he chuckled. "I'll wake Cilia and go to my ... to the Lady."

Rois nodded. "I shall await you. The Lady asked me to escort you to her."

Fiach shrugged and clicked the door in place. He crept to Cilia's side of the bed and crawled onto the mattress behind her. His sex swelled. He rubbed the hard ridge of his erection in the crease sheltered between the satin cheeks of her ass. She moaned and rolled against him in sleep.

The movement pressed his crown into her flesh until it rested against the opening of her anus. He shivered remembering all the times he had pleased that forbidden spot. His cock throbbed as his hips tipped up helplessly to press deeper. He knew he could not be inside of her now. He had neither proper lubrication nor the time he needed to enjoy the fruit of such an exploration.

He reached over her side to cup her breast and tweak the nipple between his fingers. She moaned and pressed back harder. He needed to wake her and dress them, or it would be hours before he allowed her to leave this chamber.

"Cilia?"

"Hmmm" was her only response.

He rocked his hips forward and dipped into her puckered hole.

"Oh!" She came awake fully then. "You can't... We don't have any..."

"I know," he grated between clenched teeth. "I just can't stop yet." The painful arousal propelled him forward as he sought relief.

Cilia pulled away, and he groaned desperately. Then she planted her open palms on the mattress and presented herself to him.

"You'll come faster this way," she said.

He knew she was right. He went to his knees behind her and snuggled his cock in the soft valley of her ass. He rubbed his erection through the dry crease of skin; the heated

friction coaxed him closer and closer to climax. When he felt Cilia's hands reach down and squeeze his aching sack, his balls tightened as hot spurts of semen showered her bottom.

He traced a finger through the fluid coating Cilia's skin. The muscles in her lower belly clenched. She was still aroused and mewling beneath him as she ground her back to his front.

His cock sprang to life; it's only wish to be buried deep inside of her. Still, it would take time; time they really didn't have. "Are you sure?"

She rubbed against him again as a rumble of pleasure filled her throat. "Yes. Please, Fiach, I need you."

It was all the encouragement he required. He rubbed the head of his cock through his slick lubricating fluids. Then he coated his fingers and gently pressed one into the tightened pucker of her anus. She whimpered and stilled beneath him. He slipped a second finger inside and slumped further down on the bed, improving her angle.

He poised his cock and prepared to penetrate her. He pressed slowly, and she began to wriggle and squirm. He kept the gentle pressure constant until, minutes later he breached the tight ring of muscle. Cilia exhaled and relaxed around him. He glided deeper inside her. She shivered; her breaths sawed in and out in harsh gasps. He had forgotten how much she liked to be taken this way.

When he was buried completely inside her, he paused to let her accept his invasion. Tiny ripples contracted along his shaft, tearing a growl from his throat.

He pulled out and thrust home; her flesh clutched him greedily. He made two long strokes and a short burst of come exploded from his cock and filled her. Instead of satiating him, the small release made him harden further. He leaned down to massage Cilia's clit as the extra moisture from his release made it easy to pump harder and harder into her ass. She cried out and came against his fingers; she coated him with her juices and bunched her muscles around his penis. His sex swelled and shivered as yet another orgasm overtook him. He pulsed as his seed erupted deep within her.

A hesitant rap on the door brought Fiach to his senses. Even as he softened, he thrust one more time before slipping from her warmth. He collapsed face down beside her and reached for her hand. Their fingers intertwined, and she brought them to her lips for a kiss.

"One minute," Fiach called out breathlessly.

He forced himself from the bed and walked around to where Cilia lay on her stomach, too tired to move. He rested his palms between her shoulder blades and closed his eyes. He envisioned them both clean and fabricated clothing over their sensitized skin.

He pulled her from the bed to the door and found Rois with an ear cupped to the door opposite the one he had just opened. She blushed and straightened herself.

"If you would follow me, I will take you to the Lady." Rois grinned mischievously. "She does not like to be kept waiting, but I think this once she might be willing to forgive."

Fiach snorted. Cilia hid her laughter behind her hand. Rois brought them to a set of double doors similar to the ones leading to his chamber, but these were gilded with gold and jewels in a rainbow of colors. Their guide's pale hands pushed wide the doors and revealed the Lady sitting at a silver table with two empty silver chairs. The rest of the

chamber was decorated in vibrant shades with gold-tone accents. The choice of silver seating was a concession to the fact that gold irritated Phoenix skin.

The Lady nodded and Fiach returned the gesture. He pulled a chair out for Cilia and settled her down before claiming the remaining chair.

“Lady, we owe you thanks.” Cilia began.

The Lady held up her hand to silence Cilia. “Your debt is paid in full. I have longed my entire existence to see what you so graciously shared with my court.” She released a heavy sigh. “It is something none of us will forget.”

*

Cilia blushed. Fiach laid his large warm palm over her own in silent support. She took a deep breath and addressed the Lady. “There are things neither of us remember.”

The Lady nodded gravely. “Of course. The gaps in your memory are from the time it took to implant you each into a receptive womb, and the subsequent time it took for your rebirth. Also, there are some things you will not recall until you have been formally bound by the *Noce*. Some of the knowledge you seek is only found within in the mind of each mate.”

Fiach’s brow wrinkled. “Forgive me, Lady, but I still don’t understand.”

The Lady twisted to address the man who had been raised as her son. “You know of changelings?”

Cilia and Fiach nodded that they did.

The Lady leaned nearer; her voice was just a whisper. “That is what you both are. Only we took a greater risk by exchanging you each with an unborn fetus, instead of a newborn. By giving you new life, the bond between you was severed. It requires only the completion of the *Noce*, and things will be as they were.”

Cilia felt her eyes rounding. Fiach’s face remained uncertain.

The Lady rolled her eyes in a very human gesture. “I exchanged Cilia with the unborn of a member of my Court. Cilia went to live among humans, with just enough of her memory to be able to control and hide her power as she matured. She was Phoenix born and not made, as you now remember, so she had to be aware. In exchange, the female court member received a human child.” A secret smile lifted her lips as she looked at Cilia. “I believe you may have noticed him at the mating?”

She meant the silver haired man. Cilia had been born of his mother and delighted in the pleasures of the son. She felt sick, cold to her core, and disgusted with the enjoyment she had gotten from watching him reach his climax as Fiach came inside her.

Fiach pushed from the table, scooped Cilia into his arms, and then settled her onto his lap.

“What is wrong?” the Lady asked.

“You just told her we got off watching her birth mother’s son ejaculate,” he snapped.

“Oh. I see,” The Lady replied, although she clearly didn’t. “Cilia you are not of the same blood. You were yourself, only given new life through the body of a willing human. There is no blood, no bond between yourself and Cayden.”

Cilia relaxed. The tight ball of self-loathing slacked a little. She snuggled closer to Fiach’s chest. “What about Fiach? How did he end up being a demon born of the Sidhe? Why didn’t you allow him to join me with humans?”

The Lady became saddened. “After your exchange was completed, the Morag attacked Faerie. I was able to hide Fiach through the first wave of the invasion. There was

no time to arrange for his rebirth. A demon lord breached the fortress and came to the great hall. He agreed to leave us in peace as long as the rumors of our harboring the Phoenix were unfounded.” Her eyes met Fiach’s. “He also demanded a night of pleasure with a Sidhe woman.” It went unsaid that Harailt had singled her out. Fiach vibrated with fury at the sacrifice the Lady had given; Cilia’s heart ached for her sacrifice.

“It is in the past. Demons make admirable lovers, so I enjoyed the exchange even if the choice to initiate it was not my own. The coupling was a perfect cover for Fiach’s revival. My court helped me fake the pregnancy. He was implanted in the womb of a demon lover belonging to one of my most loyal guards. The birth was natural to her, whereas if I had attempted it myself,” she pointed at his wings, “the result would have been much less favorable for us both.”

“Harailt knew me. He claimed me.” Fiach spoke into the silence.

“Yes. Someone leaked word that I had conceived. He wanted you. He thought my blood mingled with his would provide him with a stronger, more agile and magically proficient heir. He was right about you, but not because our powers had bred such a powerful child. You had been demon born when Cilia found you the first time and gifted you with the power of your Phoenix. Harailt did not know that was where the power drew from. I refused to give you up. I knew I had to protect you from the Morag until the time was right, until Cilia could find you again. The only solution was sharing you. He would have you half a mortal year and I, the other half.” Her face grew pained then. “I know the things he forced on you, the way he corrupted your youth and innocence. If I had tried to stop him, he would have killed you. He would not have succeeded, but our cover would have been blown. He would have enslaved you and murdered my people. Then he would have gone after Cilia as well, and I could not allow that.”

“It’s all right. I understand.”

The Lady’s eyes shined with regret as she looked to Cilia. “I would have kept him innocent for you. I had hoped to experience your mating fires while you lost the virginities of your new bodies.”

Cilia’s heart hurt. It hurt for the loss of so much time with her mate and for the fact that he had shared the gift of himself with others. She looked into Fiach’s dark and desolate eyes. Shame burned there. His sense of disloyalty was crippling. Cilia tipped her head back, cupped the base of his neck, and pulled him down to her lips. She welcomed him as sweetly as she knew how. She put into words her undying love of him and her acceptance of what had happened to them; she offered forgiveness for what deeds he had committed simply to survive until they found one another again.

When they parted she could feel the quickening of his heart against her cheek, which she laid to rest against him.

His voice rumbled in her ear. “Can you forgive me, Cilia?”

She sat up and rested her palms on either side of his beloved face. “There is nothing to forgive.” Then she rested her forehead against his. “I love you, Fiach.”

His lips pulled up into a sensuous curve. “And, I love you. So much, I want to set the world ablaze and dance in the fire as we watch it all burn down around us.”

He pulled her in for another kiss. Her blood thrummed in her veins. He lowered to trace the vein below her ear with his tongue. His teeth rasped against the soft flesh. Cilia wanted him to pierce her, to feed from her essence and live from her always.

The Lady’s harsh intake of breath broke the spell of the moment. Cilia looked to

their friend, their ally and savior. Her eyes were wide and dark, and her lips were parted; her chest rose and fell with her excitement.

"It is true." The Lady rasped.

Cilia and Fiach's eyes met. Cilia had been born a Phoenix, but by claiming Fiach as her mate she made him dependent on her fiery blood to live. The sheer eroticism of the act ensured that both parties found pleasure with the exchange. By the heated look on the Lady's face, she was not immune to the ritual either.

Cilia arched her neck and brushed the fall of hair and feathers from her throat; she waited for her lover to claim her.

*

Fiach remembered; with relief, he knew why every sexual act and every drop of blood that he had taken from others had been found wanting. He knew, now, that his body had primed itself for taking Cilia's essence and had been starving without it. He had fed from other lovers, but it had never slacked the hunger.

When Cilia revealed the silky strip of flesh at her neck, he lowered his head to nibble along the delicate column of her throat. A soft moan incited him as he bared his fangs and pierced her deeply. Her heat rolled over his tongue and filled his body, making him feel alive with her flame. He suckled the small punctures and coaxed the life-giving liquid from them. The fiery tang of her blood bathed his mouth with her taste and left him wanting more, needing more. He needed a taste of flesh to temper the sweetly spiced richness of her blood. He pulled away and watched a rivulet of blood flow down her neck to curve over one breast.

Cilia moved in tandem, reading the needs of his body. She shifted on his lap until she straddled him and then reached between them to free the erection eagerly pressing against his zipper. Fiach had dressed her in another diaphanous gown, and since he made sure his clothing procuring skills excluded undergarments of any kind, she was deliciously bare and open for him.

He lowered in his chair. His hips tipped upward and positioned the wet tip of his arousal at her entrance. The Lady gasped; her hands slipped beneath the table where Fiach imagined she would pleasure herself as she watched them mate and him feed.

Cilia glowed above him. She rested her palms on his shoulders and began the slow slide up and down his cock. Her juices coated him; her pussy was so soft and warm that he could die now with sure knowledge that he would never find anything more pleasurable than being inside of her. He pulled her close and licked the line of blood still staining her pale skin. Where the line of crimson fluid stopped, he nestled into the sheer fabric of her dress to capture a pebbled nipple in his mouth. He sucked and nipped before returning to lave away the final traces of his earlier carelessness. When he reached her throat and licked over the pinpricks, his erection jumped. It wanted more. He continued to lap at her as the red beads formed against her delicate skin, still so hungry but afraid to feed again so soon.

Cilia rocked against him, and he realized with shame that he had stopped thrusting into her. He was preoccupied with her blood, and his hunger had clouded his mind.

"You need to feed," she said and began slipping up and down his shaft.

He groaned and let his head fall back. "It's too soon. I would take too much."

"I trust you. You've gone too long without my blood; I can spare a little more."

Fiach was tired of fighting the desire to bury his teeth at her neck while he brought

her to orgasm. With her permission granted, he planned to make them both enjoy it.

He pulled her forward into the tight circle of his arms. He pressed her into his chest and brushed his cheek against hers. She slid down the thick stalk of his flesh as she settled further against him. When she flipped her hair over her shoulder, his eyes rolled back, and he pierced her skin below his first puncture. Cilia whimpered as his suckling pressure began, and he lowered his hands to her hips and surged upward. Her moan of pleasure rumbled in her throat and vibrated against his lips. He drank from her in slow languid pulls and savored the searing cinnamon of her vein.

Cilia stilled as she settled more of her weight over him than before. Fiach's eyes opened. Her face was pale but peaceful. He had taken too much, allowed himself to become drunk on her sweetness. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," he whispered against her throat in between licks. The small wound sealed, and he rested his forehead on her shoulder.

"Fiach..."

"I was careless."

"Fiach!" she cried out.

He pulled back to meet her eyes. They simmered with desire and impatience.

"Please..." she whispered.

He released his breath in a low rush as he stood, still buried inside of her, and pressed her back into the wall of the Lady's chamber. He wound her legs around his waist and let her relax for a fraction of a second before he drove his crest to her womb. She clenched around him and writhed against the wall. Her nails bit into his shoulder and drew blood as he continued to pound himself into her weeping core.

He heard sounds of pleasure over his shoulder and flicked a glance to the Lady, who cried out her release. His cock tingled, but her cries were not the ones he wanted. He cupped the cheeks of Cilia's ass in his hands and ground into her. She gasped and bowed; her breath sounded ragged in his ear. He began to piston inside of her with hard fast strokes that had him gritting his teeth to keep from coming without her.

Finally, her pelvic muscles began to contract and convulse around him. She drew him deeper and kept him there as she found her pleasure. Fiach managed one more thrust before his own orgasm claimed him. He throbbed and spurted inside her until he was replete; his climax erupted so greatly that moisture seeped from where they joined and dripped down onto the floor between them even though he stayed lodged in her sheath.

"Oh, God." Cilia collapsed on his chest. Fiach's legs buckled, and he slid her gently down the wall as he went to his knees. The sharp burn of arousal that had plagued him finally subsided. The drug's effects were all but gone. His body shone with sweat, but it was the product of their love play and not the feverish residue of the Fairy Dust that had coated his skin the past few days.

The Lady rose and straightened her gown; her voice was a touch hoarse. "You may have the use of my chamber. Your *Noce* will commence at sundown."

"Can you send us back? When the time comes?" he asked.

"You know how this magic works. We can bring you to Faerie at any time, from any point. Our magic cannot counteract that of the demons. The bars on your cage were enspelled. When you go back, you will go back to your cell." She walked to the door. "Take all the time you need to devise a plan of action. Jarlath is not someone to cross lightly." Then she stepped from the room and closed the door behind her.

Fiach looked down at Cilia; she was slumped against him sleeping. He withdrew from her body and chuckled when he heard her sigh of protest, even though she remained unconscious. He carried her to the bed and nestled beside her. He stroked her hair and tweaked the feathered strands until he too succumbed to the dark lure of a healing sleep.

Chapter Eight

“My Lord? My Lady?”

Cilia stirred on the unfamiliar bed. Fiach draped over her; his weight pressed her into the mattress. She craned her neck around and saw Rois peering around the opened door to the chamber. In that moment, she was grateful that, even though her dress was twisted around her waist, it covered everything important. She was getting tired of putting herself on display. Fiach lay stripped down to his black leather pants.

Rois cleared her throat and continued. “I am sorry to interrupt. I knocked, but you did not answer.”

“It’s all right. We were sleeping pretty hard.”

Rois smiled knowingly. “The Lady suggested that might be the case.”

Cilia raked her fingers across Fiach’s stomach. Even in sleep, his muscles tightened and flexed, and a smile crossed his lips.

“You know how I feel about being tickled,” he warned, keeping his eyes closed.

“Hmmm... I don’t think I remember.” She scratched him lightly with her nails.

In a flash, he rolled over her and pinned her between his muscular thighs. “I think you remember more than you let on.”

Cilia giggled as he released her arms and tickled her sides until she was gulping for air. He circled her wrists then stole her breath with his kisses. When their lips parted, she was flushed and panting. “We have company.”

He twisted to look over to the door. “Hello, Rois.”

Rois blushed and looked at the floor. “Hello.”

He rolled away from Cilia and asked. “Is it time?”

“Yes. The Hall has been prepared.”

“Prepared?” Cilia echoed.

“The *Noce*,” he prompted. He pulled her forward until she stepped from the bed and stood before him. His eyes closed as the whisper of power danced over her skin, and he dressed them. She looked down to see what scrap of fabric he was calling a dress this time when her breath caught in her throat. “Fiach, you remembered.”

She was dressed in a snow-white gown with sapphires sewn into the hem and down the long sleeves that encased her arms. A sapphire choker stretched across her throat and matching blue stones winked in her ears. Her hair was piled on top of her head and was fastened with more glittering gems and small white flowers, but dark curls and long feathers escaped to caress her neck.

She looked at Fiach, and he stole the breath she had regained. His black and crimson hair fell over his shoulders making him severely handsome by any standard. Fine white linen pants, the cuffs of which were dusted with twinkling red stones, had replaced his black leather. His white dress shirt was left open at his throat to allow a tantalizing strip of skin to peek out. The buttons were ruby cabochons.

Rois’s harsh intake of breath was the only thing that merged Cilia’s images of the past with those of the present. Slowly, the here and now became superimposed over the memories of their first *Noce*. They had worn these same clothes then. Fiach had recreated them in perfect detail. Now they were here, lifetimes later, to be bound in their new

bodies they way they had been in the old.

Fiach smoothed his palms up and down her back. "How could you think I would ever forget? You were a living flame, the most beautiful creature put on earth or heaven."

"And you are the most handsome creature to burst from the fires of hell and into the flames of my heart."

He arched a brow. "You are mocking my poetic sentiments."

Cilia feigned innocence. "I don't know what you're talking about, Fiach. Honestly, I was just returning the compliment."

A small giggle escaped her. Fiach rushed forward but she dodged him and ran, as best she could in the flowing white dress, grateful that she only wore a filmy pair of slippers. Rois moved aside and cleared her escape route.

Cilia ran until she had the great hall in sight. She could just make out the shimmering outline that comprised the base of the Lady's throne. Mesmerized by the beauty of the place, her pace slowed as she tried to take in every detail. The momentary pause allowed Fiach to grab her middle and yank her flush against him.

"Shhh ... we'll have plenty of time to play later," he promised.

Cilia acquiesced and smoothed her palms over her fabric-encased hips. She readied for their presentation. Rois strolled past them with a smothered smile then proceeded into the hall. She went to the Lady, knelt before her briefly then rose to her feet, and made the announcement: "The Lord Fiach and his *D'Ame*, the Lady Cilia are prepared to take their vows."

Murmurs of excitement rippled through the crowd. They all wore celebratory clothing and seemed to glow with anticipation. The Lady came to her feet and held her hand up to silence the room.

"Let the *Noce* begin." She approached until she was close enough to touch. She took Fiach and Celia's hands in hers. Their Phoenixes awakened, and their skin heated. The Lady's fair skin pinkened, but did not burn. She nodded to Rois who brought a thin silver chain and wrapped the hand of the Lady that held Fiach, as well as the hand that held Cilia, leaving the Lady as a conduit in the middle.

Rois jumped back and sucked a finger into her mouth. She had slipped at the last moment and burnt herself on Cilia's wrist. Cilia murmured an apology that Rois gestured away.

Rois retreated as the Lady's clear crystalline voice rose over the crowd. In the flowing syllables of her native tongue, she began reciting the vows that would bind Cilia to her mate. The sounds were familiar, but distant, like a song she could hum but didn't quite know the words. Fiach leaned down near her ear.

"Need a translator?" he asked.

Cilia nodded and Fiach began to whisper the phrases into her ear: "Today these two lovers give themselves with clear mind and conscious to one another. They take each other to be their life's partner..." He translated the finer points of the ceremony, and she was content to hear his deep, bass voice flow under the Lady's words. The Lady stopped her recitation and looked down at Cilia. This time she had no trouble understanding.

"Cilia, daughter of the earthen flame, do you claim Fiach as your mate?"

Cilia licked her lips. "I claim him."

Fiach's smile burst onto his face. The Lady looked to him and asked a question Cilia did not understand.

Fiach answered. "I will spend all the days of my life by her side."

The Lady closed her eyes and warmth spread through the silver chains that linked them. Cilia felt her body slip away. She blinked, and then there was darkness.

*

Fiach caught Cilia as she fainted. She had done this the first time as well. The combined force of his powers clashed and merged with her overwrought senses. His new body and soul was bound to hers now. He felt her every breath, every heartbeat, as his own.

Fiach? The worried sound whispered through his mind.

Yes? He answered with thought.

I remember. It's all here.

The how and whys of everything, the truth of her origins, was all there for them both. She was the Phoenix *Neir*, their Queen. They were a matriarchal society so the title and power passed from mother to daughter. Most importantly, the memory of all their lives past was intact; she remembered all that had been shared with him, her *Niero* and King. She groaned.

Fiach nestled her closer. *What's wrong?*

Her gentle laughter flustered him. *I just remembered why no one had seen a Phoenix pair mate before.*

He chuckled low and dangerous. *Have you now? As I seem to recall it has something to do with our telepathy. That only the two of us hear our screams. It's hard to sneak up and witness something that happens without a sound.* Even as he said it, his thoughts filled with the sounds of flesh slapping against flesh. He released a hungry growl.

Fiach! She chastised him. Her low hum of arousal made his cock swell and lift.

"I see the binding was successful," the Lady said.

Fiach tore his eyes away from Cilia long enough to meet the Lady's saddened expression. She realized that, with their bond reaffirmed, they would no longer share their intimate moments. They had refrained from releasing their fires during the mating the court had witnessed. The Lady, no doubt, had held the hope of seeing how bright their flames burned during the act of completion, but it was the pinnacle of pyroardor and not something meant for others to see. He covered a grin. In full flame, they would have burnt down a wing of the Lady's manor as fevered as they had become watching the scene that had played out around them.

"Yes, Lady. Thank you for making us whole again."

The Lady smiled warmly. "You are most welcome. You have our hospitality until you have decided on a course of action."

Rois walked over and carefully unchained the remaining links that bound the trio together. This time she was much more careful and managed to free them without suffering a second burn.

Fiach looked at Rois, with his complete knowledge at his disposal. "Thank you Rois, for everything you've done for us."

Rois's cheeks reddened. "I would do it over again to keep you safe." Then she walked into the crowd and reemerged with a tall, lightly muscled man behind her. His silver white hair fell almost to his knees and shimmered as if covered in glitter. Rois led him forward and smiled before presenting him formally. "Lord Fiach, Lady Cilia, this is the son of my heart, Cayden."

Cayden's lyrical voice tickled his ears. "I am honored to meet you. Rois raised me on stories of your quest to find one another." He cast his mother an amused glance. "She believes in eternal love. She almost succeeded in convincing me as well, but I know too well how fickle Phoenix affection can be."

"Cayden," Rois chided.

"It's all right, Rois; he meant no disrespect," Cilia pitched in. Fiach looked at her and watched her slow perusal of the youth. Instead of the desire, which he imagined he would find, she looked sorrowful.

He's heart broken, Fiach. The mental pathway hummed as she spoke with him.

He's young. He will heal, he soothed. Fiach caught the eye of the young man and saw a depth of sadness shimmering there that no one born of the Sidhe could carry. It was a stark pain only human eyes could express. Cayden's time in Faerie had changed him, altered his appearance to mimic those around him. But, his eyes remained human, and his soul was blighted. "It was a pleasure you meet you as well, Cayden. I hope that we will enjoy a friendship with you."

Cayden's lips quirked upward in a purely fae expression. "I believe I would enjoy such an acquaintance."

Fiach knew what kind of relationship Cayden implied. Cilia's sharp intake of breath left little doubt she had heard and understood as well. He moved his eyes from Cayden to Cilia. She looked flushed, not with interest but with embarrassment. Fiach's heart lightened. This exchange had brought up jealous emotions, which he liked to believe he was secure enough not to indulge in.

He's baiting you, she chimed.

I know. It's a dangerous game he's playing.

Rois paled at Cayden's last comment. She looped an arm through his and drew him away until he disappeared once more into the crowd. Fiach traced a finger down Cilia's cheek. The court still watched, no doubt hoping in the excitement that clothes and inhibitions would be lost. Fiach hated to disappoint them, but two days of excess was enough for him. He didn't intend for anyone to see the smooth curves of Cilia's body again, except through whatever whimsical outfit he deigned to dress her in, and dressing her was a hobby he would never tire of.

A profound hush fell over the hall. The focus shifted away from the *Noce* as a wave of malcontent sweep through the space. The silence was deafening compared to the morning's tittering hum and glib conversation, which had suddenly ceased.

"They seem to be expecting something," Cilia said.

Fiach looked around. The Sidhe were looking at them more intently now, definitely waiting for something to happen. Then it did.

Loud rumbles filled the hall and bounced from the ceiling. Gasps and startled exclamations were followed by low curses and muttered threats. Dark shadows coalesced along the edges of the room. A crack of thunder rolled overhead, and dark mists swirled only feet away from where Fiach stood.

A sharp rumbling voice rose from the foggy vortex. "Phoenix. I have waited too long for this. You will pay for your subterfuge as will your coconspirators."

"No, Harailt. We've paid enough already."

The cloak of mists dissipated, leaving a broad-shouldered man in its place. He was thickly muscled and almost black skinned. Red runes wrapped over each inch of

uncovered flesh. His midnight hair hung in a queue down his back, and his red eyes flashed with impatience. Fiach had not seen his father in years, but his lips still curled cruelly, and an air of malevolence still clung to his skin.

"You hid under my nose, in my house, all this time. I was a fool." He looked at Cilia and made a production of licking his lips. "But this. This makes the wait worthwhile. She is exquisite."

"She is mine."

"Nothing is yours. Your life is not even your own now. Did you think the Morag had forgotten you? That we didn't know the Lady had somehow hidden you? We waited patiently for the day you would grow complacent and reveal yourselves." He sneered at the Lady. "Your sacrifice was for nothing."

"You're wrong, demon," she replied.

"You merely prolonged their lives, not saved them. I should have killed them when I had the chance instead of attempting to cage them. I will not make that mistake twice."

Cilia spoke up. "If you know anything about Phoenix, you know we cannot be killed."

Harailt released a sharp bark of laughter. "You have such a high opinion of yourself." Harailt puffed his chest out. "You are the last of the Phoenix. The rest have been dispensed."

Cilia collapsed to the floor, sobs filling their shared pathway and spilling over her lips. "No! It's not true. It's not possible!"

Fiach dropped to the ground beside Cilia and sheltered her as she cried. He had told her of his father's obsession, but even he had not truly grasped the magnitude of the situation.

"Our families, our people. They can't be gone."

"I assure you they are gone, burned by the Living Ash; they were all destroyed."

Cilia's cries stopped for the span of a heartbeat before they began again.

Can it be true? She whispered, as though afraid he could hear their voices.

We'll have to play along to find out. Are you ready?

I'm ready.

Harailt approached. He held out gold manacles and waited for Fiach to lower his wrists into them. Once the cold metal snapped over his hands, Harailt did the same for Cilia.

"I will return to exact payment for your treachery; either the blood of every court member, or the hand in binding of the Lady *Alayne*." He spat out her name like a curse.

The Lady lifted a hand to her throat. Names have power, and to possess the name of a powerful fae was to hold leverage over that fae. Fiach looked at the Court. Some were incensed, and others were pensive; a few were openly gleeful to have such secret knowledge come to light.

Harailt used the length of gold chain that connected the cuffs to yank Cilia and Fiach to their feet. He led them out of the hall and into the open air of Faerie. Then just as before, they stopped existing in one place and found themselves bursting into being somewhere completely different. They took a few steps forward and were rewarded with a loud pop as they pierced the barrier around the Phoenix homeland.

The sweet aroma and lush landscape of Faerie dissolved in a shimmering haze to red skies that hovered over a baked clay ground. The sun that hung above them looked

dipped in blood. The ground was dry and cracked like the desert, and pockets of steam hissed between the cracks. Fiach inhaled deeply and let the burnt-cinnamon smell infuse his senses. He glanced quickly over to Cilia and saw the look of rapture on her face. This was Lielos, and they were home.

*

Cilia let the waves of heat beat against her skin. The blood sun of her home charged her fires, stoking them higher than the earthen sun could ever manage. She was loose limbed, primed for what lie ahead: the end to the suffering that Harailt and his demons had rained down upon her people in her absence.

They were led over the crackled ground through the barren desert landscape towards their final destination. Demon magic was void in Lielos, so they all marched under the baking sun at an almost human pace. Harailt jerked Cilia's chains, making her stumble and almost fall. Fiach steadied her weight with his hip.

Thanks, she projected, but didn't dare communicate otherwise in case the demon lord had found a way to invade their thoughts.

After hours of being herded by the Morag, the end of their journey came into sight. A deep indentation in the otherwise flat and sparse ground loomed just ahead. Steam piped from the center and cloaked the cavity with a veil of torrid fog. The contents of the basin were obscured, but she knew what lay below and rejoiced in it.

At the cusp of the crater, Cilia watched as a current of dry ash churned and broke in waves against the hard rock ledge. The depths of dry dust seethed and twisted, giving the substance its name, the Living Ash. It was where old ones came to die and where life was celebrated anew, but Harailt didn't know that.

She glimpsed Fiach, who eyed the mixture longingly. His weight shifted as though he were tempted to dip his toe, as though the ash were water where he longed to swim. She sent him a gentle reminder. *Not yet*.

He shook his head to clear it. The small band of Morag surrounded them. All wore eager expressions, ready to press them over the ledge and into the pit. Cilia and Fiach did their best to appear impassive as Harailt leveled a gold tipped spear to her heart and snarled at Fiach.

"Jump." Harailt commanded him into the rippling sea of dust.

Fiach sent her the mental equivalent of a wink before he sprang high, leapt into the swirling mixture, and disintegrated. His body was now indistinguishable from all the other contents whirling in the earthen pool.

Harailt watched the ash consume Fiach's flesh and absorb his body. Harailt's eyes twinkled, lit with a fevered glow. He turned his attention to Cilia and pressed the blade a little deeper. "How does it feel to know you are the last Phoenix?"

"It feels fitting that what you started so long ago will be finished here. Now." She stepped backwards off the lip of clay and joined her mate.

She burst into millions of tiny particles, each no larger than a grain of sand. It was like being tossed into a surging tide of smoldering energy. Other particles bounced into her in greeting. A few, no doubt belonging to Fiach, rubbed a little closer than was polite. Now that she was a part of the flowing ebb, what had been dull gray ash seemed to expand its lungs as fire roared over the top of the surface licking up the walls of hard clay to where Harailt stood.

Cilia moved her consciousness to the edge closest to him. Close enough to hear him

cry out, "It cannot be. They are all dead."

She used that moment of disbelief to concentrate her energy. She did as she was born to do. She called forth her people, who had lain in slumber awaiting the return of their *Neir*. Snaps and pops filled the air as plumes of flame in every color filled the sky. She waited until the earthen bowl was empty except for those of a particularly friendly collection of particles that nestled closer to her own.

She focused her energy. Power sizzled along her skin as her body reformed and became whole. All around stood beings in every shape and size, every shade and shimmer imagined. Some were all flame. Some held the more human bodies that she and Fiach inhabited, but all were whole and fresh from their rebirth. The hot smell of crisp cinnamon filled the air.

Cilia dusted the fine gray powder from her nude limbs. Fiach stepped to her side and took her hand. The low hum of his power vibrated up her arm as he clothed them both.

For once, he had shied away from his favored flowing dresses and given her matching leather pants and a tight black t-shirt. She looked at Fiach, who tried to smother his amusement. They could have been twins. She personally thought he looked much better in the ensemble, but if nothing else, the clothes were practical.

The league of eager demons turned in the face of the flight of Phoenix and scurried towards the edge of Lielos. If they could be stopped before reaching the borders into Faerie, they would be helpless except for the crude weapons they carried. Their demon magic could not aid them now.

Cilia spread her arms wide. Her head fell back, lips parted, as a piercing battle cry was ripped from her throat. The gathering of Phoenix, the peaceful light bringers, leapt for the sky and became living flame. The blur of colors and rush of heat swept over Cilia as she lowered her arms, and the sky ignited with Phoenix descending upon the fleeing army.

Guttural growls and bass rumbles resounded as the demons were overtaken. Their black sticky blood seeped into the parched soil and pooled in the cracks. The air was filled with the high-pitched cries of the Phoenix and the searing heat of their fires consuming the horde and cremating the fallen bodies.

Harailt stood on the fringe of the battle, too engrossed by the dance of multihued flames to notice his army falling around him. His eyes shone with longing and something Cilia thought might be akin to lust. He turned to address Cilia and Fiach where they stood. "This will never be over."

"This is already over."

Harailt turned a slow circle and blinked his eyes, seeming to notice his fallen army for the first time. His hand entered into his robe, but before the blade slipped free of its scabbard, Fiach had called forth his fire. Harailt smiled as flame roared down the length of Fiach's arm and a sphere of heat pulsed from his hand. The fireball met its target, and Harailt dropped to his knees as he was consumed by the scorching blast that streamed steadily from Fiach's palm.

Harailt's face contorted as his flesh was eaten away and his bones were turned to ash.

Fiach's arm dropped to his side, his face flushed from the exertion. Cilia came to his side and gripped his hand between hers. She lowered a kiss to the center knuckle. "You saved me."

“I killed him.”

“Fiach...”

He laid his hot palm across her cheek. “I wanted to for so long. I never imagined he would give me such an easy excuse for doing it.” He looked down on the ashy remains.

“He will never cause our people to suffer again.”

Fiach dropped her hands and went to kneel at his counterfeit father’s ashes. He called a metal beaker to appear in his palm and worked to collect the ashes and put them in the container. Cilia dropped to the ground and helped to scoop the remains into the makeshift urn.

As Fiach twisted the lid shut, he answered the unasked question, the curiosity that he would treat the ash with anything resembling respect.

“The Lady deserves to know he’s not coming back for her.”

All around them fiery beings blazed onto the ground beside them. It was as it should be. The light bringers were freed.

Chapter Nine

Fiach bowed low to the Lady. She tipped her head regally and appraised his offering with interest.

“We would offer the remains of the demon lord Harailt to our Lady.” Fiach extended the urn towards her. She gripped the container uncertainly, as if she distrusted the contents.

“All these years, all this misery reduced to dust.” She passed the urn to a woman standing to her side. “My court owes you a debt of gratitude.”

Cilia interrupted. “We are more than even. You saved us before you had any reason to believe you could be saved yourself. Let us part on equal footing.”

“I accept, and I hope you will allow me to extend my hospitality again in the near future.”

Cilia worried her lip. “I know it’s a lot to ask, but would you grant permission for some of our people to settle in Faerie?”

The Lady’s face shined brilliantly. “I would like that. It has been a long time since we have had Phoenix here. I thank you for the gift of your trust.”

Cilia and Fiach bowed respectfully and turned to leave. Cayden blocked their path. His eyes were red rimmed, and his frame was leaner than she remembered. The healthy glow of youth was gone. His eyes were hollowed and empty as they strived to focus over Cilia’s shoulder.

“Cayden, are you all right?”

His eyes blinked rapidly as he looked around; he seemed confused to find himself where he was. The lost look on his face was disconcerting. He cleared his throat and struggled to find his manners.

“My lord and lady.” He bowed. “Forgive me, I seem to have forgotten myself.”

Fiach’s harsh intake of breath drew Celia’s attention to him. “Fiach, do you know something about this?”

“He is the mate to a Phoenix.”

“But who? How is it possible?”

“Look at his aura.”

Instead of the lively green flow of energy that had ensconced him on their earlier meeting, a slow black pulse seeped from around him. The taint crawled over his skin, and the area around his heart was covered by a swirling void, as if the blackened mass fed from there.

Fiach paled. “His suit has been refused.”

Cayden flinched when he heard the words spoken. They must have been the final blows to his pride because his eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed onto the floor. None of the Phoenix dared to touch him. Instead, they waited on the Sidhe to rush to Cayden’s side. Rois shoved through the crowd and pushed until she was part of the inner circle. She dropped to the floor and angled his head onto her lap; she lovingly caressed his cheek then looked up at Cilia desperately.

“What can I do?” Rois pleaded.

The answer was simple. “Nothing.”

“He is my son, is there nothing you can do?”

Cilia deferred to Fiach. He shook his head and answered Rois.

“We could sever the tie to his mate. If we do that, neither will be whole again.”

Rois looked at him, clinging desperately to the small hope that he had handed her.

“Do it,” she commanded.

“Your son will not be the same as he was without her.”

“You said yourself she rejected him. He will die without your help.”

Cilia’s pathway hummed as she spoke with Fiach mind to mind. *She’s right. He’ll die rather than live without her.*

I know.

I don’t want to do this.

You’re the only one who can. This will grant him the chance to love another day.

Do you really believe that?

I believe no force on earth or in heaven could have kept me from you.

Cilia closed her eyes. *I hope he will forgive me for this.*

Fiach squeezed her shoulder gently for support. He offered no words either way, because they both knew what she was about to do was wrong. It went against the order of things, but it was also the only way to keep Cayden alive.

Rois’s sobbing broke through their quiet communications. It was unseemly for a Sidhe to lose face in such a manner. Cilia extended her palm to rest over the cool fabric that covered Cayden’s heart. She used her power as *Neir*, and called the essence of Phoenix from his limp body. When the scalding heat rushed up her arm, she hissed in pain. Fiach rubbed the sting away and watched as Cayden’s eyes opened. The boy assessed the gathering of people and his place on the floor with confusion.

“This is most improper.” The words were delivered without inflection. His blank expression was the perfect reflection of his tone.

Rois hugged him to her and whispered liquid syllables of thanks in his ear. Cayden allowed himself to be coddled for a moment before breaking away to sit up. Once he was upright, he pushed off the floor to stand. Everyone watched him with interest. He shrugged his shoulders to straighten his shirt and slipped his hands into his pockets before walking off in the direction of his rooms.

“Cayden?” the question hung in the air between the mother and her son.

Cayden turned around to face Rois. The cool silver pools of his eyes were quiet and detached. “Yes, Mother?”

“Are you ... that is ... do you feel all right?”

He canted his head without changing his expression. “You really should work on controlling your emotions. I know raising a human child was taxing, but you can’t let that experience mar the rest of your existence.” With those parting words, he turned on his heel and left.

Rois slumped back on the ground. She wrung her hands and looked at the floor to hide her face. The Lady rose from her throne and came to Rois’s side.

“My son is gone,” she whispered.

The Lady rested a palm on her shoulder. “He is alive. The rest will work itself out.”

Rois shuddered and looked up to Fiach. “You warned me, but I did not believe it.” She cast a glance at Cilia, but still spoke to Fiach. “You would have chosen death rather than be parted from her?”

Fiach paused. He might have tried to find a kinder way to soften the harshness of his truth, but he had lived a new life in a new body without his mate. He unknowingly had committed sins against her faith in him that left scars on his soul. "I would have, yes."

Rois shook her head in silent agreement and rose from the floor. The Lady looped an arm through hers and guided Rois towards her private parlor, away from the shell of her offspring.

"We should leave them to mourn in peace," he said.

Cilia agreed. They walked hand in hand through the great hall and to the edges of Faerie. The few Phoenix that they had brought over followed behind them solemnly. The weight of what had happened lay heavy on their hearts.

At the edge of Lielos, the Phoenix gathered. All but the youngest stood in pairs. As Cilia and Fiach approached, they bowed low.

A yellow plume of flame glided forward and bent a little lower than the rest. "My *Neir* and *Neiro*, much has changed in this world since we left it. What will we do?"

Cilia met the stares of all her worried subjects. "I have lived contentedly among the humans for a very long time. I plan to offer any who would come with me that same chance at happiness." She gave a little laugh at some of their shocked expressions. "Anyone who is more comfortable here or in Faerie may have leave to settle in these places as well. The purpose for your new lives will be yours to decide. After what you have all suffered, I only want your happiness."

After a nervous pause, the Phoenix divided themselves into thirds, one-third for each plane. The couples wishing to stay in Lielos banded together and waited. Most were of the oldest families, too long away from home for comfort and too set in their ways to desire any new adventure. They would be fitting guardians for the Living Ash in Cilia and Fiach's absence.

"Thank you friends for your faithful service. Enjoy your freedom." The group dispersed, each seeking their ancestral homes to begin the long process of rebuilding.

A young woman, whose purple aura was coiled with the black swirls of misery, caught her attention. Enveloped by the crowd, she disappeared from sight, and Cilia turned her attention back to her remaining subjects.

The third wishing to migrate to Faerie was more animated. Their excitement showed clearly in the way they each stood and cast surreptitious glances towards the border that wavered just on the edge of their horizon like glittering beacon that called them towards the excess of the Faerie court. Most would burn out with time and seek to return home, but for now their enjoyment would be a worthwhile change of pace for those trapped too long in the basin of Ash.

"Enjoy your stay with our fae cousins. If you tire of courtly life and wish to come home, you each know the way."

The small crowd briskly set off for the border of Faerie and the acceptance of the fae's hospitality.

The third wishing to brave life among humans stood silently together with linked hands for courage. Cilia grinned at their trepidation. She recognized each face as belonging to a devoted friend. She appreciated their courageous attempt to forge a new life and reaffirm their allegiance to their *Neir* and *Neiro*. Life among humans had been rewarding, but the company of their own kind would enrich it even further.

Fiach kissed her temple. "Are you ready?"

He wrapped his arms tightly around hers, and the other Phoenix shuffled closer. Their joined power was strong enough to send the small group safely to the human plane and to their mountainous home.

One matter remained unresolved. The thin threads of demon magic still bound Celia and Fiach to Jarlath's prison. In his eagerness to obtain them, the demon had overlooked their birthright, one they hadn't known they possessed. He had caged the *Neir* and *Neiro* Phoenix, and there was a high price to pay for such disrespect.

Jarlath? Fiach asked. Barely subdued anger simmered below the surface. His gaze lowered to her wrists. The gold burns were long since healed, but the outline seemed etched in his memory. He was eager for retribution.

Yes. Her thoughts went to the small gathering of Phoenix that they had sent to their home without escort. *How long will this take?*

He pantomimed checking his bare wrist for a watch. *We'll be home in time for dinner.*

Good.

Cilia stepped under the protective shield of his wings until her cheek rested on his chest. She closed her eyes and allowed him to flash them to the catacombs and back to where their journey of discovery had begun.

His feathers tickled over her skin as his wings withdrew and nestled between the blades of his shoulders. Cilia peered around the same cavernous cell where they had been held. The bed was overturned, and the table and chairs were smashed into kindling against the black rock wall.

Evidently, Jarlath had not been pleased to realize that his pets had escaped him. She had assumed he would realize they had to return and walk clear of the bars before they were free to materialize anywhere else, but the heavy door was propped open. The way to freedom lay clear.

What do you think happened? She asked.

I think someone beat us here. He pointed to black paw prints tracked with the tar of demon blood. The ground beyond the cell was brushed clean except for the few feline paw marks.

Their eyes met, and the name fell from their lips simultaneously. "Kathel."

"Aye." A deep purr reverberated down the long tunnel leading out of the catacombs. "A wee *Noce* gift for you from the Lady and myself."

"I thought she said fae magic couldn't counteract the enspellment on the bars."

Kathel's large black body came into sight. The cat's nine black tails thumped in tandem on the dirt floor; the sharpened silver tips tinkled together. "I see no fae magic here." His purring laughter bubbled from his chest. "I might have seen a certain cat force demon guards to open a cell door to release dear friends of his."

"And what happened to the guards?"

Kathel licked his lips. "I'm certain there was only the one, and he left after unlocking the bars."

"And, Jarlath?"

"The name seems familiar. It could be that he was slightly eaten and sent to the Hall of Lords as a message that the Phoenix had risen and a warning that any attempt to harm them was more trouble than any demon wanted."

"That's a lot of information to get from a half eaten corpse."

The black cat shrugged. "It's open to interpretation, of course."

Cilia stroked his thick black fur; the silky strands tickled her fingers. "When we bargained with you to help rescue Stella and Max, you knew all along that you couldn't hurt me didn't you?"

Kathel hummed. "I did." His large teeth glinted in a fierce grin. "But you didn't and neither did the lad. The price was satisfied; that's all that matters."

She rested her face in his midnight fur and hugged him tightly. "You're a good friend."

"You and the boy are the only ones I've ever had, so I'm in no place to judge."

"We've decided to stay among the humans until we can find our purpose again. Our cabin is at the base of a small mountain range ... out in the middle of nowhere ... lots of wild game with no large predators to hunt it ...?"

Kathel roared in merriment. "I would love to see the Lady's face if I told her I had forsaken her to become your resident house cat."

Celia's face fell. He rubbed his muzzle along her neck.

"You are kind to offer, but the Lady holds my leash. If I were free to choose, I would gladly spend my days sunning in the yard and curling before your fire at night."

"I understand, but I had to offer."

"And I will never forget that you did." His large eyes crinkled at the corners. "I think it's quite possible that, as royalty yourself, you could request me as your ambassador to Faerie. Any negotiations between our people might take place in a small cabin in the mountains. Such things often take days at the time to reach a satisfactory resolution."

Fiach chuckled at their wordplay. "So how soon should we expect a visiting dignitary?"

Kathel's tails thumped. "I have to get back to the Lady's side. People will wonder at her involvement in this most unfortunate accident in the catacombs, and I must be there to protest my innocence."

Cilia snorted. "Of course. Thank you for the gift Kathel, and I hope to see you soon."

He turned his attention to Fiach. "Take care of the lass, boy."

"I will old one. She will never want for anything."

Kathel nodded and stalked down the long tunnel leading from the underground prison. He hummed along and picked up his pace until he vanished from sight.

Cilia took Fiach's palm in hers. "I'm ready to go home."

"As am I." His large wings enfolded them both, and in a blast of illumination, they found themselves on the porch of their cabin. The anxious Phoenix, which they had sent ahead, swarmed them, seeking assurance.

"I think we're going to need a bigger house," she said.

He looked at the dozen or so couples and their offspring. Then he thought of Kathel's impending visits. "I think you're right."

Chapter Ten

Fiach watched Cilia stop and correct one of the Phoenix that had chosen to follow them home. She wanted their mannerisms perfected before they were introduced to the human world. They had purchased a large estate deep in the woods where forest fires were common occurrences and where the sight of a beautifully winged man or an unusually large panther might be overlooked.

Max had spent the weekend helping with the human study lessons. He had answered all the questions asked of him and demonstrated why a dog was truly man's best friend. Many of the Phoenix children were now eager to adopt their own puppies since the animals here were much more friendly than the wild fae pets they'd had at home.

Cilia caught him staring. She gave a final squeeze to the arm of her student then walked until their toes touched and her scent enveloped him: cinnamon and burnt matchsticks; she smelled like heaven.

What are you thinking? She asked.

I'm thinking with all this company I haven't gotten as much attention as some of your students have. My human interaction skills need work, too.

I think you might be right. You did barter two in a demonic trade. I think you might need a tutor. She tapped her chin thoughtfully. *To save face, I think I should give you your lessons privately.*

Fiach grinned slowly, his lips pulling up high enough to show the white tips of his fangs, which had dropped at the first scent of her. Cilia stared at the sharpened points, and her eyes flashed black.

Where should these lessons take place? He asked.

I have it on good authority that we have a very spacious supply closet downstairs.

Does it lock? The sharp claws of hunger shredded his reasoning.

Does it matter? She countered.

I was only thinking of the delicate sensibilities of your students. He pulled her forward and pressed her softness against him. His tongue laved over her pulse then sucked the skin over his teeth.

Chuckles erupted from the make shift classroom. There were no sidelong glances here. No curiosity over what was to come. All the males took their mate's vein to survive, and the females relished in the act of nourishing their partners.

I think my students can handle a little independent study.

Cilia had drug Fiach a few steps towards the door, when it swung wide and admitted a young woman, whom she remembered had chosen to inhabit Lielos. The dark swirls that had tainted her aura were gone. In their place was a cool, serene mask of indifference.

The woman's shoulder length black hair marked her as Phoenix. Purple feathers contrasted against the stark tresses. Her eyes were dark and wide; her stare was intense but disinterested. A man and woman followed her inside. Their coloring was so similar that it left no doubt about her parentage. The father approached stoically with an arm around his mate, whose sunken eyes and red nose showed signs of deep and recent mourning.

The pair shuffled their daughter through the doorway. She kept behind them as they dipped their heads in greeting.

"Welcome," Cilia smiled hesitantly. "Is there something we can help you with?"

"Our daughter," the woman began. She dissolved into sobs and clung to her husband's side. His large palms smoothed down her arms and tucked her close.

"We heard about the Sidhe boy. We have reason to believe the Phoenix involved is our daughter, Sine."

Fiach swung his gaze to the young woman. She dissected her surroundings with clinical detachment. When she felt his eyes on her, she glanced up and appraised him, then dismissed his presence and went back to her slow perusal of the room. There was definitely something lacking there. Some spark of life had snuffed out.

It's her isn't it? Cilia asked.

It would appear so. She's hollowed out, just like Cayden.

Aloud she asked, "What can we do to help you?"

"You severed their bond. Is there no way to repair it?" the father asked.

Fiach rested a hand on the other man's shoulder. "You know the only ones who can repair the bond are the ones who entered it in the first place."

"You would have us expose Sine to the boy further?" the mother squeaked. "He gave her up to save his life. A true Phoenix would have died rather than endure the half life he has cursed them to."

Cilia cut in. "It was at the request of the boy's mother that I broke their bond. Cayden was unconscious. If he had been aware, I'm certain he never would have willingly allowed it." She softened her tone. "Your daughter rejected him. If we hadn't severed their tie, he would have died. They had already bonded, and you know yourself that only happens once in a Phoenix's existence."

The woman pressed her face back into her husband's side as silent cries wracked her body.

"At least with them both living, there is a small chance they can be rekindled. Take Sine to the Lady and explain who she is. Cayden's mother is a companion of hers. The Lady will do anything in her power to help them come to a happy resolution, but only time will tell."

The weary parents murmured their thanks and gathered their daughter to leave. She followed them quietly, allowing them to guide her by the elbow as she stared ahead without focus. What little bit of awareness she had evidenced blanked as they led her away.

*

The trio's departure held everyone's rapt attention. With the exception of Fiach and Cilia's separation, no other mated Phoenix pair had ever survived long after their connection was severed.

"I hope their ending can be a happy one," Cilia said.

"Without knowing the reason Sine rejected Cayden, there's nothing we can do. Neither is in a position to shed light on the subject now. All we can do is trust that love will find a way."

A gentle tug on his pants leg drew Fiach's attention to the floor. The length of fabric was twisted around the chubby hand of a small child. A sprinkle of dark hairs gathered with a ribbon and curled down one round cheek. One hand balled in his trouser leg and

hauled the toddling body upright. Her plump face was pinkened, and her chin shone as her thumb popped free of her mouth. He looked around, but the other pairs were back at their studies and not paying any particular attention to the tiny person hanging from his leg.

Cilia scooped the child into her arms and settled the baby girl on her hip. “Where is your mother little one?” she cooed.

In response, a moist hand wrapped around a dark blue quill and tugged. A giggle bubbled over her little cupid’s-bow lips. Cilia freed the feather and tossed the child lightly in the air. Peals of laughter chimed as the child anticipated each gentle throw.

A young woman skidded through the doorway left open by the retreat of Sine’s parents and clutched her chest. “Thank goodness! Ailis got away from me.” She realized her *Neir* held the child aloft and dropped into a courtesy. “I’m so sorry, my lady, I didn’t mean to disturb you.” She dropped again. “Or you my lord.”

“It’s no trouble at all, Apirka. Your little one is delightful,” Cilia replied.

Dull thumps pounded in the outside hall, and Fiach met Cilia’s eyes. They shared the question of what came next. A lean man jogged into view and grinned sheepishly at the small assembly. “My lady,” he bowed. “My lord. I am...”

Fiach lifted a palm to cut short his apology. “It’s quite alright. Children have minds of their own, and little Ailis is perfectly safe exploring this wing of the house.”

Ailis took notice of her parents and began to fidget in Cilia’s arms and to reach for her mother. Apirka grabbed the wriggling toddler and settled her on the curve of her hip. Ailis’s hand extended for her father, who stepped close enough for the child to grasp his hand and attempt to place his thumb in her mouth.

“Thank you both,” the pair chimed. The young couple left amid a murmur of baby talk and soft cooing laughter.

Fiach fitted Cilia’s back to his front and wrapped his arms around her shoulders, leaving his hands to tempt the neckline of her shirt. He was silent and thoughtful a heartbeat too long for her comfort.

What are you thinking? She asked, letting the words hum between them.

I was thinking how beautiful a daughter would be with her mother’s eyes and...

Cilia interrupted to tug his wing. *And, perhaps her father’s wingspan?*

Fiach inhaled her unique scent; his cock stirred to life against the soft curve of her bottom. *I like the way you think, Firebird.*

She snuggled under the weight of his embrace. *It’s a big commitment. Are you in or are you out?* She asked.

He rolled his hips against her. *I’m in, and I don’t think I’ll be out for a long, long time.*

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>

**Meet LSB Authors At The House Of Sin
Lsbooks.NET**

We invite you to visit Liquid Silver Books

LSbooks.com
for other exciting erotic romances.

2007: Terran Realm

Urban fantasy world: TerranRealm.com

Featured Series:

The Zodiac Series: 12 books, 24 stories and authors
Two hot stories for each sign, 12 signs

The Coven of the Wolf by Rae Morgan
Benevolent lusty witches keep evil forces at bay

Fallen: by Tiffany Aaron
Fallen angels in hot flight to redeem their wings

The Max Series by JB Skully
Meet Max, her not-absent dead husband, sexy detective Witt, his mother...

And many, many more!