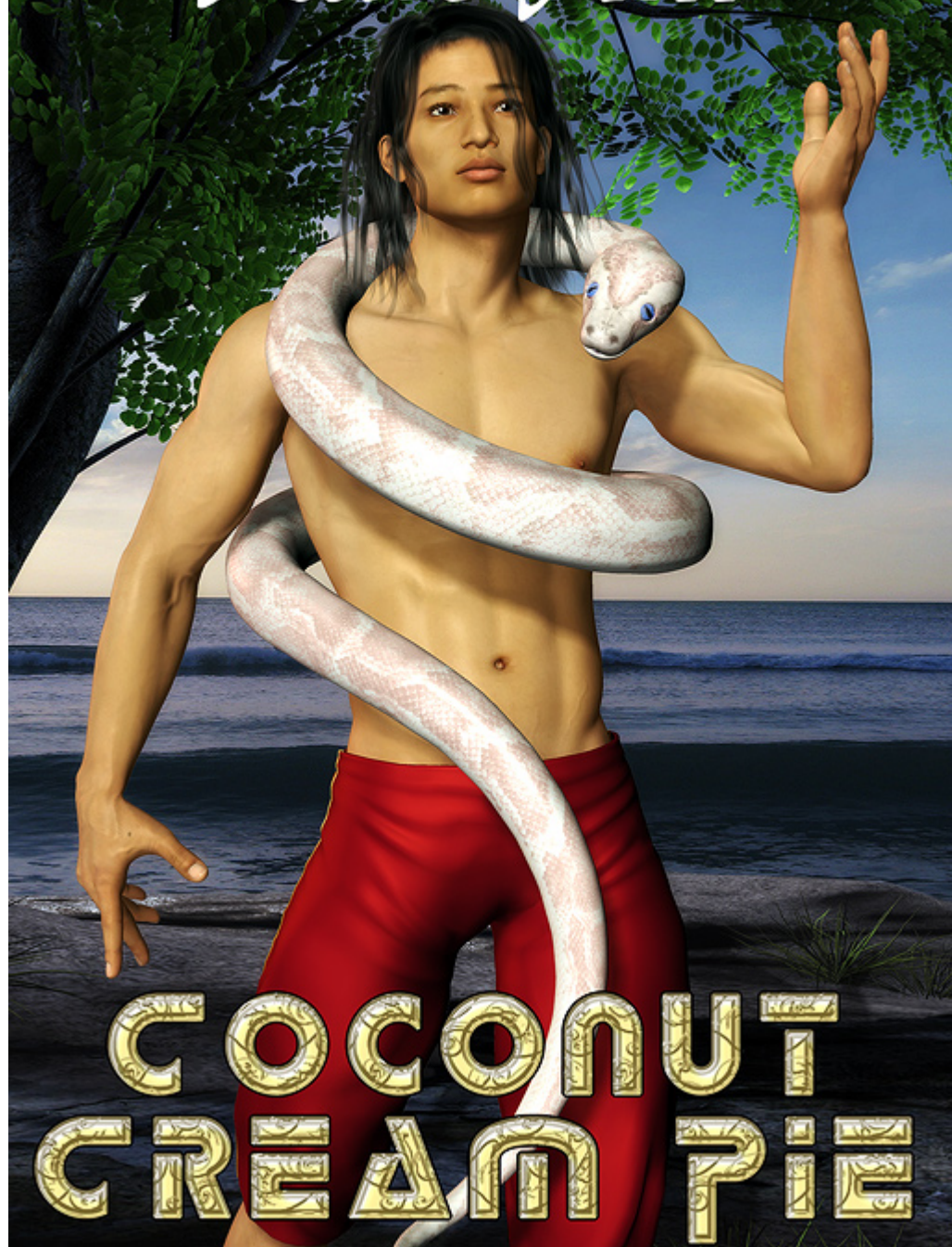


Changeling Press

Kate Hill



Coconut Cream Pie

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Coconut Cream Pie

Kate Hill

Antjuan, a magical dancer with the power to summon snakes, is having a bad week. First he and his roommate Dylan are robbed. Next his rich and pretentious archrival in the upcoming dance contest shows up at his dilapidated studio to gloat. Then he's shot with a near fatal dose of compulsion dust while protecting a friend who's involved in the dangerous magical underworld of Grimton City.

To recover from the attack, Antjuan travels to the Wicked Wild where he can relax in the fresh air. Bad luck seems to follow him because while swimming in Hot River, he is nearly drowned by enchanted reeds. Fortunately Seth, a gorgeous snake shifter, comes to his rescue.

According to legend, the sexual magnetism of snake shifters rivals that of vampires, and the lust that ignites between Antjuan and Seth proves it. When Antjuan incorporates Seth into his act, they give snake dancing a whole new image. But will it be enough for them to win the dance contest and prove to the magical community that snake shifters aren't as evil as people believe?

Chapter One

Antjuan counted the money spread on the scratched wooden tabletop of the apartment he shared with his close friend, Dylan. Holding up a tarnished coin, he smiled and said, "Elfin. This is worth a lot."

From where he sat across the table, his handsome, black-haired friend Dylan reached for the coin. Antjuan placed it in his hand and Dylan raised a sleek black eyebrow. "Unusual too. The clan who uses it doesn't venture outside of the Wicked Wild."

Dylan would know, of course. Though he'd lived in Grimton City for years, he was of pure Elfin blood. He was unusual for his kind, but most of the people Antjuan hung out with were out of the ordinary. And Dylan was run-of-the-mill compared to the towering man seated with them at the table.

Half Elf and half Wildman, Shane looked like a savage but was one of the gentlest people Antjuan had ever known. At the moment he appeared too busy counting the profits from the fundraiser they'd just held to support the shelter Dylan ran to help magical people in need.

If not for the shelter, Antjuan didn't want to think about what might have happened to him. Years ago he'd been a crazy, mixed-up kid surviving on the streets of Grimton City. Dylan had given him a proper job and a place to live as well as some good advice that helped him make the right decisions about what to do with his life.

That had been ten years ago. Now, at twenty-seven, Antjuan certainly wasn't rich, but he loved his life. While doing maintenance work around the shelter, he had pursued his education, studying both social work and dance. He used his skills to help Dylan expand the shelter, and last year he'd rented space in a neighboring building and opened a dance studio.

Dylan, as usual, had been tremendously supportive. He was more like family than Antjuan's own had ever been. Because they were so close and both gay, many people assumed they were a couple, but that couldn't be further from the truth. They were good friends, more like brothers.

"Look. Here's more," Antjuan said, scooping up additional Elfin coins.

He handed them to Dylan, who stared intently at Shane. The wild-haired giant pretended not to notice.

"Cousin, if you want to fool an Elf, don't use Elfin coins to do it," Dylan said.

"Huh?" Shane said, trying to look dumb.

"Only someone who has been in the Wicked Wild could get hold of these coins. Someone like you or your charming wife."

Both Shane and his werewolf mate, Charity, often visited friends and relatives in the Wicked Wild, a savage area of the magical world where many dangerous beings, such as werewolves and Wildmen, dwelled. It had a terrible reputation, but Antjuan knew the popular belief that only evil people lived there was untrue.

"Shane, you donated all those jars of healing salve for us to sell at the fundraiser. You didn't need to slip in this money on top of it all," Dylan said.

"I didn't. I'm innocent." Shane held up his hands defensively. "It was Charity's idea and her money."

"You're married," Antjuan interjected with a teasing half-smile. "Share and share alike, right?"

"That's true to a point, but marriage vows don't make the independent streak of a former werewolf queen disappear. Besides you guys need all the money you can get if you plan to expand the shelter's soup kitchen."

"When Charity gets back from visiting her pack, I'll thank her properly," Dylan said.

The men finished counting then Antjuan added their totals together, happy to find they had exceeded their goal. This winter they would be able to feed twice as many people as last year. Until he'd come to Grimton, Antjuan hadn't believed some magical

people could live so poorly, but regardless of the power circulating in them, magical cities were just like any other.

Antjuan regretted some of the things he'd done to survive when he'd arrived, a penniless seventeen-year-old who had spent his life in a temple near Hot River.

Hot River wound through the entire magical world, connecting and cleansing it. All his family were magical dancers, priests and priestesses who served the River by keeping the temple. In return, the river had rewarded them with the gift of magical dance. His mother and father, the High Priest and Priestess, could communicate directly with the river through dance. Antjuan's sister could control the river's tide in the area where she danced. His twin brothers could dance for hours underwater, able to breathe as easily as they could on land.

Antjuan's power had been summoning water snakes. Whenever he danced, the snakes came to him. This power frightened his family. When he first began summoning snakes, his parents had thought Hot River had cursed him. They had asked what they'd done wrong, but this question angered the River. In truth Antjuan had never considered his ability a curse. He liked the feel of the snakes around him when he danced, but his family's reaction had made him ashamed of his power. He often left the temple, following the river deep into the Wicked Wild, where he could dance with the snakes in peace.

This led to punishment since his parents felt he was shirking his responsibility at the temple. Antjuan had to admit that was probably true, but he didn't feel the same dedication they did. He respected the River, but he didn't want to spend his life trapped within the confines of the temple. His family would never understand, so he left.

Finally free, he wanted to travel as far from the temple as he could. There were no water snakes in Grimton City, but he was still able to dance. Unfortunately the kind of dancing he needed to do to survive wasn't the sort he was proud of.

That was behind him now. At times he even returned to the Wicked Wild to dance on the banks of Hot River and once again feel the graceful water snakes against his flesh. He loved the strength of their bodies pulsing around him. His experience with

them had been the most important part of his training. From them he'd learned about suppleness and elegance of movement. No matter how far from the wilderness he traveled, he remembered all the snakes had taught him. To him they weren't to be feared, but admired.

"I better get back to my shop," Shane said. "I still have salves to mix for tomorrow."

After he left, Antjuan placed the money in a bag while Dylan left the table to make a pot of coffee.

"First thing tomorrow I'll go to the bank," Dylan said, yawning.

As usual, the yawn was contagious. Antjuan stretched, ignoring the soreness in his shoulders. He'd been practicing intensely for the dance contest at the end of the month. The annual contest was a major attraction for Grimton City. For centuries magical dancers had flocked to the city to compete, but only six prizes were awarded. Antjuan had come in second two years in a row, and last year he had tied for first place with another local dancer, Theo. They had been forced to split the prize money, but this year Antjuan intended to win it all and not just for financial reasons. Though first prize was enough to cover the cost of renovating his dance studio, the most important prize would be beating Theo. The man had a bad attitude. He'd been completely graceless about tying for first place and had made a big show of snubbing Antjuan, saying that a street dancer didn't even belong competing with classically trained artists. For months he'd been mouthing off to anyone who'd listen about how he was going to win this year's contest.

"I don't know what's wrong with me, but I feel like I could fall asleep standing up," Dylan said, rubbing his sleek black goatee, his amber eyes half-closed.

"Me too," Antjuan admitted.

"Fuck the coffee. I'm going to bed." Dylan turned off the coffeemaker and headed toward his bedroom.

"Hey, aren't you forgetting something?" Antjuan called. Dylan turned to him and Antjuan tossed him the bag of money.

The Elf nodded in thanks and disappeared down the hall. Antjuan leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes. He'd just rest for a minute then go to bed.

* * *

Antjuan strode naked through the jungle. His feet moved silently on the dirt and he pushed aside the silvery-green reeds hanging thick from the tree branches. They grabbed at his arms, legs and neck and his heart beat faster. The almost unbearable humidity made breathing difficult. Sweat beaded on his flesh, trickled down his ribs and back.

He felt another presence behind him and though he couldn't see who it was, he knew it was someone he cared about, someone who aroused him like no one ever had before.

The unseen man tore the reeds from Antjuan, freeing him from their grasp. Then his arms slid around Antjuan. He caressed the dancer's chest. The roughness of his palms stirred his passion. Cool, firm lips nuzzled Antjuan's neck. They warmed against his heated flesh. His mystery lover's entire body had felt cool at first, but now pressed so close to Antjuan, he heated up. His cock stiffened, pressing against Antjuan's ass and the dancer's cock hardened in response.

His heart pounding, Antjuan leaned back, loving the sensation of the mystery man's hard, supple body. He felt the warm, wet flicker of his lover's tongue trailing along the side of his neck and down his shoulder.

Antjuan had always been strong and athletic, the sort of man who fought when necessary. His friends considered him the sort of person they could turn to when they needed support and he was always happy to help. Yet part of him craved to be overpowered and cared for. Something told him the man who now kissed and caressed him was the man he'd dreamed of -- one who matched him in strength, who could dominate him at times and submit to him at others. They knew each other's deepest desires and didn't hesitate to fulfill them.

His lover's nails gently raked over Antjuan's chest and stomach, then a hand curled around his cock and stroked with the perfect pressure and rhythm. His erection swelled and ached, desperate for release.

Closing his eyes, Antjuan panted, his body aflame. He placed a hand over his lover's sinewy forearm, feeling the muscles flex as he continued pumping Antjuan's shaft.

Just when he was on the verge of exploding, the man released his cock and pushed him toward a thick tree. Bracing his hands against it, Antjuan bent his head forward and thrust his ass toward his partner. His entire body tense with anticipation, he waited. His lover caressed his shoulders and arms, then ran his tongue down the length of his spine. It flicked along the indentation of his ass and Antjuan drew a sharp breath. It wouldn't be much longer before he came.

Then the man's body pressed close to his. The tip of his cock pushed against Antjuan's ass and he filled him slowly, giving him time to adjust to his thickness.

"Oh yeah," Antjuan breathed, his fingers biting into the tree trunk. He gasped as his lover thrust into him and reached around with one hand to once again pump his shaft.

Antjuan pressed his face against the tree, feeling the roughness of the bark. His lover's breath teased his ear as the man spoke in incoherent whispers.

Hovering on the brink of orgasm, Antjuan moaned and writhed.

* * *

"Wake up. Hey!" Dylan shook his shoulder and Antjuan opened his eyes.

His body still tense from the erotic dream, it took him a moment to focus. When he finally did, he straightened his neck and grimaced at the stiffness in it. He rubbed it and groaned.

"Damn," Antjuan muttered, glancing around. "I slept in the kitchen?"

"More like you were hit by compulsion dust. So was I."

When made by a skilled magical practitioner, compulsion dust could force others to bend to the will of the one who created it. Usually it put people to sleep, but it could be used for sex, to inspire fear or other emotions.

Compulsion dust was the only logical explanation for Antjuan falling asleep in an uncomfortable kitchen chair and having the most weirdly erotic dream of his life.

"And the money from the fundraiser is gone," Dylan said, his amber eyes flashing with rage.

"What?" Antjuan jumped to his feet, the lingering effects of the compulsion dust fading. Fury almost overcame him as well. Someone had stolen from them, but being manipulated by compulsion dust was nearly as bad, at least to Antjuan. He'd had enough problems in his past due to evil magic used by the pimps he'd encountered as a youth in Grimton City.

His fists tightened and he clenched his teeth so hard his jaws ached. For a moment his head spun.

Dylan, in spite of his own shock and anger, noticed Antjuan's distress and placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," Antjuan said, releasing his pent-up breath. "Well, no, but I can handle it. We have bigger problems right now."

"Can't argue. Without that money we can forget our plans for the soup kitchen. Shit!" Dylan curled his lip and slammed his fist into his palm.

"Wait a minute," Antjuan said. "That money is gone but we still have the contest at the end of the month."

"If you win, that money is for your studio."

"When I win, it'll be mine to do whatever I want and I want to put it into the shelter."

"Antjuan, I can't --"

"When I was out on the street doing shit that could have gotten me killed, you didn't say 'Antjuan, I can't'. You said clean up your act, kid, and I'll give you a place to stay until you get your life together. That's what the shelter is. It's hope for a lot of

people like me. People whose magic is misunderstood or misused. It's more important than renovating my studio. I can do that another time."

"You're talking like you've already won."

Cocking an eyebrow, Antjuan said, "You think I won't? This year I'm going to dance my ass off and I'll win."

"I don't doubt you will."

"Good. I'm getting that money back for us, Dylan."

"And you're going to whip Theo's ass?" asked the Elf with a knowing look.

"Not even if he begged, but I am going to dance him under the table."

Dylan chuckled and slipped a firm arm around Antjuan's shoulders.

His smile fading, Antjuan said, "I wonder who ripped us off? It could be someone from the shelter."

They lived in the apartment above the shelter and during the fundraiser, many of the regulars had helped out. They only had to guess how much money had been taken in.

"I thought of that," Dylan said. "But it would have to be someone very skilled in creating compulsion dust, so skilled that we didn't even notice the usual reddish haze that accompanies it. Some of the people are highly skilled in other branches of magic, but I can't think of anyone we know, other than Shane, who has the skill to make compulsion dust of that quality."

"You're not suggesting that Shane..."

"Of course not," Dylan scoffed.

Though Antjuan had learned to be suspicious of people, Shane was one of the few he would trust with his life.

"I'm just saying whoever created the dust and took the money knew what they were doing. We'll have to be extra careful from now on."

"I know. Something like this makes you feel..." Antjuan wrinkled his nose in disgust.

“Violated,” Dylan said, his brow furrowed in anger again. “I know. But there’s nothing we can do about it now except report the robbery to the authorities.”

“I better wash up and get to the studio to practice before my first class starts,” Antjuan said. He needed to keep sharp because now more than ever he had to win that contest.

Chapter Two

Around noon Antjuan was partway through his third class of the day. He found it difficult to concentrate on teaching when his thoughts kept drifting back to the theft. In addition to that concern, Cass, one of the shelter's regulars, hadn't showed up that morning to practice with Antjuan for the partners division of the dance contest. As part of his rehabilitation, Antjuan had taught Cass how to use dance as a way to channel his magical energy. The younger man had a talent for it, and this year Antjuan had decided to enter both the single and partners divisions in the contest.

It concerned him that Cass had skipped practice without calling. It wasn't like him to ditch his friends or shirk his responsibilities. Antjuan couldn't help worrying, especially considering some of Cass's old ties on the streets.

After dismissing his class, Antjuan was about to meet Dylan for lunch when, to his surprise, Theo strode through the studio door. As usual, he wore his long black hair braided down his back and he was impeccably groomed in black pants and a gray sweater that hugged his long, lean dancer's body. Antjuan hated to admit Theo was handsome, but his good looks didn't count for much considering the obnoxious attitude that accompanied them.

"So this is where you practice." Theo's hooded gaze swept the studio. Wrinkling his nose, he added, "It's even worse than I imagined and, believe me, I wasn't expecting much."

Antjuan knew his place wasn't the biggest or the best. He realized it needed work, but it wasn't nearly as bad as Theo suggested. "You're here to sign up for lessons, right?" Antjuan said flippantly. "Hell knows you can use them."

Theo forced a smile. "Your attempt at humor is as pitiful as your dancing skills. And to think I came all the way down to this part of town to do you a favor."

"You're so full of shit it's coming out your ears, but I'll humor you. What favor?"

"I was going to offer you one of my studios to prepare for the contest. After all, I want my top competition to give me at least some challenge."

"How stupid do I look, Theo?"

The man cocked his head and smirked, "Do you really want me to answer that?"

"The only reason you want me to train at one of your studios is so you can spy on my routines."

"Oh please," Theo scoffed. "No matter what you do, a street dancer will never win against bloodlines like mine. I am a direct descendant of Dionysus." He curled his lip and looked down his longish nose at Antjuan.

"If you expect me to pay homage, you'll have to wait until after I eat my lunch. I never kneel on an empty stomach."

"You see, that's what I'm talking about. You are crude. Rude. Riffraff. The tie between us last year was a sheer stroke of luck on your part. Traditionally only classically trained dancers from old magical families win the Grimton contest."

"I learned to dance in *El Templo Primero del Rio Caliente*," Antjuan said, then almost wished he had held his tongue. Almost. The expression of utter surprise on Theo's face made it worth breaking his own rule about never discussing his family with anyone besides his closest friends. The only people who knew the truth about his background were Dylan and Shane.

Finally Theo offered a patronizing smile and said, "How sad that you've fabricated an esteemed ancestry. Everyone knows that no priest of Hot River would leave the temple to scratch out a living in a Grimton slum."

"Some people serve in temples, others in shelters and some only serve themselves," Antjuan said. In spite of his tainted past, sometimes the priest in him still surfaced.

For a long moment he and Theo held each other's gaze, then the black-haired dancer turned and exited without a word.

No sooner had his unwanted guest left than Antjuan cursed and clenched his fists. He wasn't sure why he let that bastard Theo get to him. Compared to some of the other problems he and Dylan faced, Theo's rich-bitch attitude meant nothing.

Speaking of Dylan, it was time to meet him for lunch.

Antjuan locked up the studio and walked to the shelter. Inside, several people greeted him. A woman informed him that Dylan was still in the laundry room and Cass was with him.

This relieved Antjuan. At least Cass was around. He probably had a good reason for not showing up this morning.

Nearing the laundry room, he heard Dylan and Cass' voices. When he stepped in, the Elf and the shorter but stockier-built blond stood folding laundry from an oversized hamper. They turned to him and Dylan said, "Good. We can use someone else to fold."

"Fold? I want lunch," Antjuan said with a smile. Dylan tossed a towel in his face and Antjuan folded it then joined them by the hamper. "Where were you this morning, Cass?" Antjuan asked. "We were supposed to practice, right?"

Cass shrugged and kept his amber eyes cast down at the laundry he was folding. "My mother is sick. She needed me this morning."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Antjuan said.

"I need to take some time off to help her out, so I can't come around here for a while. I either have to give up dance practice and working here at the shelter or quit the greenhouse, and the greenhouse pays the bills."

"Is there anything we can do?" Antjuan asked. "Maybe if she sees a healer it'll help. Shane's wife knows a really good magical healer who lives with the werewolf pack --"

"No," Cass interrupted. "Thanks anyway."

Antjuan and Dylan exchanged looks. Cass was acting like he had when they'd first met -- closed, suspicious, and hooked on tricktus powders. Such powders enhanced magical abilities and provided temporary ones while at the same time

destroying the user's physical body. Since working with Dylan, Cass had kicked the powders and enhanced his natural magical talent of caring for rare enchanted plants.

The thought of Cass returning to his old lifestyle worried Antjuan, but he didn't want to jump to conclusions. A sick family member could certainly explain Cass's behavior.

Dylan excused himself to prepare lunch. Once he'd gone, Antjuan tried initiating conversation with Cass, but the younger man had no interest. Talking actually seemed to make him nervous.

"I need to go," Cass said. "I really am sorry about the contest, Antjuan."

"Don't worry about it. I have enough to focus on with the singles division." That part of the competition was most important. The financial prize was larger and he could still beat Theo. There was always next year for the partners division. "I hope your mother heals quickly, Cass."

Cass nodded and hurried toward the door. Something clinked on the concrete floor and Antjuan saw a coin roll from Cass's pant leg, most likely from a hole in his pocket.

The younger man dove for the coin, but Antjuan reached it first. A bolt of utter surprise and then anger shot through him. It was one of the rare Elfin coins, like the ones Shane's wife had donated to the fundraiser.

Antjuan's gaze met Cass's and he knew it was no coincidence that he had possession of the coin.

Cass raced for the door, but Antjuan grasped his arm hard. Though the younger, stockier man struggled, Antjuan was even stronger, his body like a piece of malleable steel from years of dancing. Pinning Cass to the wall, he shouted, "Dylan! Get in here!"

"This isn't what you think," Cass choked against the pressure of Antjuan's forearm pushing against his throat.

"Really?" Antjuan snapped. "I can't wait to hear your explanation."

"What's going on here?" Dylan demanded, striding toward them.

"I just found our thief, my friend."

"Antjuan, calm down," Dylan said, placing a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"If you don't believe me, just take a look at this." Keeping his arm braced against Cass's throat, he used his free hand to toss the Elfin coin to Dylan. "Looks familiar, doesn't it?"

"I had no choice," Cass said, still clawing at Antjuan's arm.

The scratches stung, but Antjuan didn't care. He was far too enraged to notice the pain. He growled, "That's bull!"

"Antjuan, let him go," Dylan said in his usual calm voice. Though he didn't look like a typical Elf with his bearded face and city clothes, he retained that soothing Elfin manner of speaking. At times, such as this one, it drove Antjuan crazy. Dylan should be furious right now, not cool and collected. "I said --"

"I heard you," Antjuan said, glaring at Cass. He held the youth for several more seconds before stepping away from him.

Panting, Cass rubbed his sore neck.

"Tell us why you did it," Dylan said.

"Just call the cops," Cass told him, his expression both guilty and angry.

"Nobody's calling the cops."

"The hell we're not," Antjuan said.

"Calm down. Both of you," Dylan continued. "I know you weren't working alone, Cass. The compulsion dust you used on us last night was created by a master."

Shaking his head in disgust, Antjuan said, "So you're back to playing with evil? Who's supplying you this time? Who did you give our money to?"

"I'm not telling you anything," Cass said, his amber eyes blazing.

Torn between anger and sorrow, Antjuan shook his head. He didn't like seeing a kid who had come so far turn back down the path to self-destruction and he hated how much this must hurt Dylan. Sure, Dylan had been working with people like Cass long enough to know he couldn't save everyone, but he still got close to most of the people he helped.

"This is the thanks you get for giving him his life back," Antjuan said.

"I gave him nothing. He took his own life back," Dylan stated, his gaze locked on Cass's. "All I did was give him an opportunity."

Cass momentarily closed his eyes and shook his head. "You don't understand."

"Then explain it," Dylan pressed.

"I'm out of here." Cass strode toward the door.

Antjuan made a motion to follow him, but Dylan grasped his arm. "Let him go."

"Why won't you at least call the police?"

"Because if I start blowing the whistle on people I've helped just because they make a mistake, no one will trust me."

"He completely turned on you, Dylan. Your shelter turned his life around and now he goes back to the same evil that ruined him in the first place. It's as if he said 'fuck you' right to your face."

"You know as well as I do that not everyone makes it the first time."

"All I know is that when you offered me the same chance you offered Cass, I didn't want to fuck it up."

"You're rare, Antjuan. You're an unusually strong person. Maybe Cass needs more time."

"Maybe?" Antjuan scoffed. "You have more patience than I do, my friend."

Chuckling, Dylan grasped Antjuan's shoulders and shook him gently. "We should have lunch, then you can get back to your studio and dance off some of these bad vibes."

Grudgingly, Antjuan agreed, but only to appease his friend. He didn't intend to let Cass off so easily, nor did he want the younger man to throw his life away. Later he would find Cass and try to talk some sense into him. If talking didn't work, maybe a belt in the mouth would. At the very least it would make Antjuan feel better.

* * *

After his last student of the day left the studio, Antjuan put in another practice session for the contest. Though he didn't want to be too tired for his potentially

dangerous plans for tonight, he needed to keep his temper in check. The best way to do that was to rid himself of frustration through vigorous dance.

Finally satisfied with his performance, Antjuan concluded his session and stretched out on the floor for a few moments of meditation. He closed his eyes, listening to the rasp of his breathing and the pounding of his heart as it slowed to normal. Heat emanated from his body. Sweat trickled down his sides and wet tendrils of hair clung to his face and neck. He felt a little tired and sore, but at the same time refreshed.

Though his temper was under control, the intense practice had stirred his sexual desire, as it often did. There was something about dance that aroused the same passions as sex. It generated heat and tension, creating pre-orgasmic sensations that made it fantastic to perform and erotic to watch. Unfortunately, when the dance excited him this much, it was impossible to concentrate unless he allowed his body to reach the climax it had been striving for.

He rose to his feet. His heartbeat that had slowed after the physical workout now quickened with anticipation.

The studio was locked for the night, so there was no chance of anyone interrupting him. In the shower room, he opened the curtain to one of the spacious showers and turned on the faucet. He pulled off his sweat-drenched tank top and pants and tossed them aside. Full-length mirrors faced the showers and even when he stepped beneath the stream of water he didn't draw the curtain so he could see his reflection in the glass.

He examined himself. He was tall and very lean, his muscles hard from years of dancing. To keep himself looking smooth and sleek, he waxed off most of his body hair, though he kept a little in the pubic area. Not too much. The less hair, the bigger his cock looked and he liked that. So did most sex partners. Yes, he had a good body. It might seem egotistical for him to think so, but he was just as honest about his faults, such as his nose that was too long and his forehead that was rather wide.

Probably worst of all, he had dark eyes instead of green, hazel or amber like the rest of his family. His eyes were so black that one couldn't tell the difference between

his pupils and his irises. The black-eyed snake boy, his family had called him, not a loving nickname, but as a means of ridicule when they tried to convince him to curb his talent for summoning water snakes.

He closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head. His family was the last thing he wanted to think about at the moment. Instead he let his thoughts drift to the sexy dream he'd had last night. While he hated the idea of being hit by compulsion dust, that dream had been incredibly arousing. Just thinking about the sensation of his mystery lover's hands on his body made his cock twitch.

Curling his hand around the shaft, he pumped steadily, making it pulse and swell even more. He opened his eyes partway and through the slightly steamy mirror, watched his muscles tighten and flex as he masturbated. He stroked quickly, pushing himself to the edge, then paused, his hand gripping the base of his cock to keep from coming already.

Sometimes when he wanted to explode fast it was better to make himself wait. After a moment he continued stroking. He imagined it was the man from his dream rubbing his shaft. Panting, his heart pounding, he could almost feel the man's hot, wet tongue sliding between his ass cheeks.

His hand glided over his cock and this time he knew he couldn't hold back even if he wanted to. Through half-open eyes he watched his reflection in the mirror. His face and chest flushed and tendons stood out in his neck. His hips pumped and his cock looked ready to burst.

He turned to face the water as a massive orgasm broke over him. Closing his eyes, he felt his essence spurt from his cock. His hand continued squeezing, forcing out the last droplet of pleasure.

* * *

After leaving his studio, Antjuan spent several hours tracking down Cass. It wasn't difficult to locate him. Antjuan had been part of that dangerous magical subculture long enough to know where to look for a young man in trouble.

He approached Cass outside a bar known as one of the best places to connect with dealers in street magic.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Cass demanded, his face tense.

"Funny, but that's just what I was going to ask you." Antjuan stepped closer to Cass, edging him nearer to the brick side of the building. "Except I already know."

"What I do with my life is my business, so fuck off, Antjuan."

"If you were the only one affected, I wouldn't give a damn. You've already made it clear you couldn't care less about me, Dylan or the shelter, but what about your mother and sister? Don't they mean anything to you? How do you think they'll feel when they find out what you're doing?"

Cass looked like he was about to reply, then his gaze drifted past Antjuan and a fearful look crept into his eyes.

"Get out of here, Antjuan."

"Why? Who's coming?" Antjuan turned around and saw two tall, powerfully built men dressed in black approaching. "Are they the ones who've been supplying you? Are they the reason you stole the money?"

"Antjuan, please," Cass said in a harsh whisper. "Do us both a favor and get out of here."

The men approached. One wore a beard and the other was smooth shaven, but both had blue eyes so pale they almost looked white. That was a sign of heavy use of tricktus powders.

"Weren't you told to come alone?" asked the bearded one.

"No problem, Gawain. He's leaving." Cass shoved Antjuan hard in the shoulder, but the dancer stood his ground.

Though Antjuan sensed danger from the men, he felt confident he and Cass could escape a potentially deadly situation. He knew by the look in Cass's eyes he didn't want to be here. It wasn't difficult to see he was in over his head and Antjuan wasn't inclined to abandon a drowning man.

He noticed a small crowd of people heading toward the bar. If he and Cass were going to ditch these guys, now was the time. They'd be less inclined to attack in front of witnesses.

"Let's go, Cass." Antjuan nudged him toward the entrance to the bar.

"You know what'll happen if you don't show up for your engagement," Gawain said, staring hard at Cass.

"You don't have to go with these guys," Antjuan pressed.

The group, talking and laughing, swept past Antjuan and Cass and entered the bar, once again leaving them alone with the Tricktus Twins.

"You're turning into a problem." The smooth-shaven one, who was about Antjuan's height, stepped so close to the dancer that they stood chest-to-chest. Their gazes locked.

Oh yes. This guy's brain is hovering around planet tricktus. Antjuan knew he had to be careful. This situation could be deadly, but something told him if he abandoned Cass now it would be the end of his young friend.

"Jarv, make sure this guy minds his own business," Gawain said to the smooth-shaven thug.

From the corner of his eye, Antjuan saw Cass and Gawain head toward the alley beside the bar.

"Cass, don't do this," Antjuan warned.

"Sorry," Cass said, glancing at him with a rather forlorn look.

Antjuan, you're a complete idiot.

Yet that knowledge didn't prevent him from punching Jarv then flipping him onto his back. Between living on the streets and learning the art of Wildman fighting from Shane, he could take care of himself.

"Antjuan, look out!" Cass bellowed.

Antjuan glanced toward him in time to see Gawain aiming a gun at him. Cass leapt on top of the bastard, but not before he fired. Still, because of Cass's attack, the bullet merely grazed Antjuan's shoulder instead of landing a fatal hit.

On the pavement, Cass and Gawain wrestled for possession of the gun. In spite of the sting in his shoulder, Antjuan staggered toward them. Extreme exhaustion overtook him and he realized the bullet must be magical, the metal probably mixed with compulsion dust. He dropped to his knees and tore the gun from Gawain's hand. Cass punched Gawain square in the face, rendering him unconscious. That was the last thing Antjuan saw before blackness took him as well.

* * *

Antjuan awoke in the ER at Grimton Hospital. Dylan and a doctor stood by his bed. The Elf's face was tense, but he managed a slight smile.

"Hey, how are you feeling?" Dylan asked.

"Tired," Antjuan admitted.

"That's completely normal after what happened," the doctor said, then proceeded to ask the usual questions to make sure Antjuan still knew who he was, the date and the planet he was on. Though he answered, all he felt like doing was closing his eyes and falling back to sleep.

"You're lucky you got here when you did," the doctor said. "The bullet only left a shallow cut, but there was enough compulsion dust in it to kill you rather than merely put you to sleep. If you had gotten here a moment later, it would have been too late to reverse the effects. I'm not one to encourage auto theft, but that young man who brought you in did the right thing."

"Cass?" Antjuan murmured and glanced at Dylan. "Where is he?"

"He's in the waiting room talking to Joel."

Closing his eyes and rubbing his temples to ease his throbbing headache, Antjuan asked, "Who's Joel?"

"A cop who's on a case involving Elves. He was following Cass. It seems our young friend is in a lot of trouble."

"You were right, Dylan. He's not as bad as I thought. He did save my life, even though I'd like to belt him for getting involved with those tricktus freaks."

"He had a good reason," Dylan said. "Before he went clean, he used to work for those guys. I guess he was one of their best thieves. Their boss needed him to steal from us because it had something to do with Elfin coins. Even Cass isn't sure why the coins are so important to this crime lord, but unless he stole from us, they threatened to kill him, his mother and sister."

Antjuan sighed deeply. "No wonder he did it." He glanced at the doctor. "Can I get out of here now?"

"Yes, if you feel up to it. The physical wound will heal and magically you're in no danger anymore."

"I have a dance contest at the end of the month. Will I be recovered enough to compete?"

The doctor looked thoughtful, then shrugged. "If you rest and avoid stress for the next few days, you should be fine. However, I'd be careful not to tear the wound again."

"If I see a touch healer, will it interfere with my recovery from the compulsion magic?"

"No, it won't harm it. It might even help, if you're lucky enough to know a real touch healer. That's a very rare gift. We've tried to hire one here at the hospital, but most of them aren't comfortable working in an atmosphere that blends science and magic."

That was true. The only touch healer Antjuan knew of was a member of Shane's wife's werewolf pack. Under normal circumstances he wouldn't waste her skills on a minor wound, but he needed to win the prize money for the shelter.

A short time later, Antjuan and Dylan walked into the waiting room where Cass sat, deep in conversation with a ruggedly handsome, smooth-scalped man. Well, he was sure an attention grabber.

"That's Joel," Dylan said, a rather wistful note in his voice.

Glancing at the Elf, Antjuan smiled slightly. Dylan stared at Joel as if he wanted to drop to his knees then and there and suck the gorgeous cop's cock. He'd never seen the usually cool Elf look so passionate.

"Kinda hot looking, isn't he?" Antjuan teased.

Dylan's lustful expression faded, once again calm and collected. "Really? I didn't notice."

"Yeah. Right."

Cass's gaze flickered toward Antjuan and he looked relieved. Joel also glanced in their direction, then he and Cass stood and approached.

"I'm glad you're all right," Cass said to Antjuan. "I am really sorry about what happened, but --"

"Hey. I understand. No problemo, my friend. By the way, no more stealing cars," he teased.

"It was Gawain and Jarv's car. I had the bartender call an ambulance, but it was too slow," Cass said.

"Unfortunately your assailants regained consciousness and fled before the police arrived," Joel said.

"Joel is going to put me and my family into protective custody," Cass said. "I told him everything I know about Gawain and Jarv. I wish I knew more about their boss."

"At least you and your family will be safe," Dylan said.

"Now there really is no way I can compete with you in the partners division," Cass told Antjuan. "All that practice and now everything is screwed up. Is it too late for you to find someone else to dance with?"

"I told you not to worry about that. My main concern is beating Theo one-on-one."

Dylan glanced at Antjuan. "But if you want to win anything, I think the doctor was right about you taking some time off to rest. You should take a long weekend to

Hot River. You can stop by the werewolf pack so Cassia can heal your shoulder, then you can just chill out with no worries."

"I don't know. With all the shit that's been going on around here, I don't like leaving you alone."

"I'll be around to keep an eye on him," Joel said. His gaze met Dylan's and Antjuan could almost feel the heat they generated.

"Yeah, he's going to stick around." Dylan smiled slightly, then his brow furrowed and he added, "Because of the case, I mean."

"Yeah. Sure," Antjuan said, grasping Dylan's arm. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

He and Dylan stepped to a private corner of the waiting room.

"Is something going on between you and Joel?" Antjuan asked.

The Elf closed his eyes briefly, a lustful look on his face. "Gods, I hope so."

Chuckling, Antjuan said, "In that case I feel better about taking off for a few days."

"I'm not trying to get you out of the apartment or anything. I really want you to recover."

"And I can use the time away."

"Then it's settled. I'll call your students and cancel your classes for the next few days."

Antjuan nodded and sighed deeply, trying to ignore the lingering drowsiness. It would feel good to be in the Wicked Wild again, relaxing in the warmth of Hot River and communing with the water snakes. It had been too long.

Chapter Three

The next day, Antjuan arrived in the Wicked Wild where the werewolf queen's mate, a non-shifting expert in magical healing massage, healed his shoulder. Though his physical injuries were no longer a problem, the lingering effects of the compulsion dust overdose left him feeling tired. He decided that instead of traveling all the way to the place where he'd grown up, he would camp out on the very edge of the Wicked Wild, near Hot River Campground. Though the wolves had invited him to stay, he wanted some time alone. He also knew that in spite of their generous invitation, they preferred that males stay out of their village.

He had rented a dirt bike at the campground. Certain paths through the Wicked Wild were treacherous, but he enjoyed the excitement. If he'd been feeling better, he'd have appreciated the challenge even more, but at the moment all he wanted to do was lounge around, enjoying the fresh air and peace.

Once he found the perfect place, it didn't take him long to set up camp. He built a fire, spread his sleeping bag nearby and stretched out on top of it. The afternoon was pleasantly warm, even with the shade from the trees, but Antjuan liked hot weather. Closing his eyes, he listened to the soft forest sounds -- the wind in the trees, the scurry of small animals and the gentle lapping of the nearby river.

Soon he drifted into a light sleep.

When he woke a few hours later, he yawned and stretched, feeling rested. It seemed the fresh air was doing wonders for him already.

He grabbed a towel and walked to the edge of the river where he undressed and waded, naked, into the water. In this area the river was fairly calm and the warm water -- typical of Hot River -- felt wonderful.

Antjuan closed his eyes and floated on his back, then turned over and enjoyed a leisurely swim. He headed toward the middle of the river and was about to turn back to shore when he felt something grasp his ankle. He gasped in surprise before a hard jerk on his leg pulled him under.

He glanced down and saw silvery-green reeds wrapped around his ankle. Kicking hard, he forced his way to the surface and managed to snag another breath before the reeds pulled him below again.

This time he reached down and tried to break their slippery hold, but more reeds stretched toward him. They tangled around his legs and his wrists, sapping his strength. The sensation was similar to what he'd felt from the overdose of compulsion dust. His lungs ached and he knew within seconds he'd involuntarily gulp water.

An enormous white water snake slithered around Antjuan. The reeds recoiled, freeing him, but he was too weak to swim. The snake's body brushed against his and then a sinewy arm slid around Antjuan and hauled him upward.

With the help of his unusual rescuer, he broke the surface, choking and gasping. Though his eyes were too blurry to see clearly, he knew whoever had him was rock-hard yet supple and an incredibly strong swimmer.

When they reached shallow water, Antjuan stood rather shakily, but his rescuer kept an arm around him and guided him onto dry ground.

"Take some breaths and the spell will pass," the man said in a voice that was deep but very soft, as if a snake had somehow mastered the power of speech.

Still coughing, Antjuan rubbed a hand across his eyes and stared at the eerily gorgeous creature squatting beside him. Pure white scales covered his hairless body from head to toe. Slanted blue eyes blinked slowly within a chiseled face. Gleaming white fangs shone against his slender, pinkish lips. Broad-shouldered, long-limbed and muscular, he stirred Antjuan's passion in spite of his weakened state.

A snake shifter.

Incredible. They were rare creatures who usually kept to themselves, yet they were feared for their dangerous magical powers. According to legend, their sexual

magnetism rivaled that of vampires and with a mere look they could lure victims into their deadly embrace.

Slowly, Antjuan's breathing and heartbeat returned to normal and he leaned back on his elbows, sighing deeply.

"Feeling better?" the snake shifter asked.

"Yes. Thank you. If you hadn't been there --"

"The reeds would have killed you. They're not as strong as you might think. It's their magic that weakens their victims, but it's only temporary."

"Why didn't it work on you?"

"The reeds hate snake shifters. What were you doing swimming here anyway? The area is clearly marked. No swimming."

Antjuan straightened, his brow furrowed. "I didn't see any sign."

"It's right --" The shifter pointed a long, slender finger behind Antjuan, then dropped his hand, his eyes narrowing in annoyance. He stood and walked toward a clump of vegetation and picked up a fallen sign. Holding it up, he shook his head and spun the sign toward Antjuan. The *no swimming* message was practically unreadable beneath the graffiti. The snake shifter clicked his sharp teeth and said, "I hate vandalism. Pranks like this aren't funny."

"Prank?" Antjuan said, curling his lip. He stood and approached. "Someone could have been killed. Namely me."

The shifter walked closer to the water and shoved the sign pole deeply into the ground. Then he turned toward Antjuan and his gaze swept him slowly. The sultry look in his eyes sent a sexual thrill through Antjuan. His cock pulsed to life and he almost headed for his towel. Almost.

Glancing at the tall, lean shifter, he saw his alabaster cock also stirred, its smooth, bulbous head the same pale pink as his lips. The muscles in his sleek body rippled as he moved. This guy walked more fluidly than most dancers performed. Briefly, Antjuan imagined what it would be like dancing with this particular water snake.

"Thanks again for what you did," Antjuan said.

The shifter now stood so close that Antjuan could see his narrow black pupils in his blue irises and the tiny, delicate scales on his face. He vaguely recalled the feel of the shifter's flesh from the rescue. It hadn't felt rough, merely uneven but pleasant. The urge to touch it again almost overcame him.

"You're welcome," the shifter replied, then turned and headed for the trees.

"Wait," Antjuan called. For some reason he didn't want this guy to leave.

"Yes?"

"The least I can do to pay you back is offer you something to eat. I was going to have dinner."

The shifter tilted his head slightly to one side, those intense eyes once again kindling Antjuan's passion. He walked toward the dancer, a faint smile on his lips.

"What's your name?" Antjuan asked as he picked up his towel and dried off.

"Seth."

"I've never met a snake shifter before."

"I'm not surprised. Most of us keep to ourselves."

Antjuan pulled on his clothes and Seth observed him the entire time. His heated gaze excited Antjuan so much that he found it difficult to zip his jeans. His hard cock refused to cooperate.

He was torn between arousal and annoyance when Seth stared at his crotch while he struggled with his erection.

"Forgive my rudeness, but you don't seem very dangerous," Antjuan said in an attempt to redirect Seth's attention.

The shifter's smile broadened, his fangs once again coming into view. "That could be a dangerous assumption. However, in my case you're in luck. I don't have the usual aversion to humans."

Antjuan raised an eyebrow. "So it's true, you dislike us."

"Probably because you loathe us."

"Humans don't usually lure their prey and strangle them in their coils."

An annoyed look crossed Seth's strangely handsome face and he said, "Shall I list the violent methods your kind prefer, including trapping and beheading my kind whenever you have the chance? Perhaps I should have left you to the reeds."

Again Seth turned away, but Antjuan jogged after him and grasped his arm. The shifter spun toward him and their gazes locked. Antjuan couldn't describe the emotions churning inside him. What the hell was it about Seth that he found irresistible?

"I apologize," Antjuan said. "I didn't mean to insult you. Don't go."

After a moment's hesitation, Seth followed Antjuan to his camp.

"What are you doing out here anyway?" Seth asked. "It's dangerous for someone not accustomed to the Wicked Wild."

"I was born and raised in the Wicked Wild. Not this part, though. I come from the tropics."

"Really? Many snake shifters live in the tropics. What part are you from?"

Antjuan didn't answer right away, but began removing the food he'd packed in the storage area of his bike. He rarely talked about his family and never to strangers, yet he wanted to talk to Seth. Even more, he wanted Seth to talk to him. Meeting a snake shifter on pleasant terms was a once in a lifetime opportunity, not to mention this sexy shifter turned him on more than anyone he'd ever met.

"I grew up in El Templo Primero del Rio Caliente."

Seth looked surprised. "You're a priest?"

"No. I'm a dance teacher in Grimton City."

"You abandoned the River?"

"Never," Antjuan said fiercely. "I just realized that for me living at the temple wasn't the best way to serve Hot River."

Seth nodded and walked around the camp, staring curiously at Antjuan's equipment. He ducked his head into the tent.

"Looking for something?" Antjuan asked.

"I'm just curious. Humans are interesting."

Antjuan's gaze lingered on Seth's tight ass and long, muscular legs. "So are snake shifters. Come on and have something to eat. You can look at my stuff later."

Seth approached and knelt beside Antjuan on the sleeping bag where he'd spread the food that had been kept cold by a magically insulated bag created for campers on Hot River. He'd brought turkey sandwiches, apples, and a large slice of his all-time favorite dessert, coconut cream pie.

Passing Seth a sandwich, Antjuan's gaze again dropped toward the shifter's semi-erect cock and the hard curve of his thighs. It was a little strange to be sitting here eating dinner with a naked snake shifter, but Antjuan wasn't about to complain.

"Can you eat this or do you need to swallow live animals?" Antjuan asked with a grin.

"As a snake I swallow beasts whole, but in this form I eat like a man." He lifted the top off the sandwich and examined the contents. "I've observed humans eating this type of food. It smells like meat, but scarcely resembles it."

"It's processed. Try it."

Seth's calm blue eyes fixed on Antjuan, as if waiting for him to eat first.

Antjuan took a bite of the sandwich, savoring the taste. He hadn't eaten since breakfast and was hungrier than he realized.

Seth began eating, too. He chewed slowly and with good table manners, considering he was a jungle beast sitting there naked.

"Tell me what kind of magic you wield, human. How were you able to call to me while underwater?"

"My name is Antjuan -- and I called to you?"

Seth nodded. His enchanting forked tongue swept over his lower lip and he leaned closer to Antjuan. "You called."

"I'm a magical dancer. When I perform I can summon water snakes, but I wasn't dancing among the reeds I can assure you."

"Then your magic is progressing because I heard you distinctly."

"Is that why you didn't kill me?"

His eyes flashing with annoyance, Seth shifted to a cross-legged, yoga-style position. "I don't hunt your kind. Humans are interesting but knowing them is difficult because they're apt to strike before asking questions."

"Not all humans are like that. I happen to like snakes," Antjuan said, unwrapping the slice of coconut cream pie. His mouth watered just looking at it.

Seth glanced at the sweet. Antjuan could hardly wait for him to taste this. He took a forkful of the pie and held it out to Seth.

The shifter opened his mouth and accepted the offer. At the first taste, his eyes widened slightly then closed as if in ecstasy.

"What is this called?" the shifter asked.

"Coconut cream pie," Antjuan said, eating a delicious forkful.

"And I thought there was only one kind of cream worth swallowing."

Antjuan laughed, nearly choking on his pie. "That's a good one. I have to remember that."

This time he dipped his finger into fluffy white topping. Without hesitation, Seth swept his tongue over Antjuan's fingertip, licking away the tasty dessert. He didn't stop there, but held Antjuan's wrist and ran his moist, slender tongue over the dancer's palm and between his fingers. Then he dipped his long, pale finger into the pie and offered it to the dancer.

Antjuan licked away the pie then used the tip of his tongue to tickle Seth's palm.

The men finished feeding each other the pie.

After the last lick, Seth said, "You have an unusual gift, being able to summon snakes, including snake shifters. Someone like you could bridge the gap between our species."

"That's asking a lot."

"Then start small. Start with you and me." Placing his food aside, Seth stared at Antjuan with such intensity that the dancer's temperature rose and his cock swelled even more within the frustrating confines of his jeans.

"I can handle that," Antjuan said softly. He reached for a thermos of cherry-flavored water. After swallowing a mouthful, he offered some to his sexy guest, who took a sip.

Almost simultaneously the men leaned closer, their lips hovering mere inches apart.

"Is this the kind of research you intended?" Antjuan asked.

"It seems to fit."

A smile flickered across the dancer's lips and he said, "We'll find out."

Seth's tongue darted out and swept across Antjuan's lips. With a groan of desire Antjuan leaned even closer, touching his mouth to the snake shifter's. His lips were firm and moist. Seth placed a hand behind Antjuan's head and deepened the kiss. His snake tongue parted Antjuan's lips and the dancer's tongue met it with hungry strokes.

Though Antjuan was no stranger to sex, he'd never responded like this to a kiss. Every flick of Seth's tongue against his seemed linked to his cock. It ached with need and more than anything he wanted to climax with Seth and feel the shifter come too.

He slid his arms around Seth and caressed his back. The shifter's muscles rippled beneath his touch and his cool flesh warmed.

"I love how hot you are," Seth breathed against Antjuan's lips. "We're cold-blooded you know, so you can make me warm."

"I want to." Antjuan's gaze held Seth's and the lust between them was almost tangible.

"Good." Seth shifted his position and tugged Antjuan in front of him. Again he felt the shifter's strength and relished it. He liked the sensation of their hard, powerful bodies locked together.

Seth's cock prodded his ass, but he didn't fill him yet. Antjuan was glad of that. The shifter had a rather thick erection and they needed some kind of lubricant. Antjuan was about to suggest that he get the container of magically-enhanced lube from his backpack. It was created to increase sensation, so Antjuan usually took it with him. Even if he didn't have a partner it was great for self-love too.

Seth seemed to read his mind about needing some lubricant, though, and he had an even better idea about how to get it. The shifter pushed Antjuan to his hands and knees then knelt behind him. That sexy snake tongue rolled over his ribs, tracing each one, then Seth licked down the length of Antjuan's spine, pausing at his lower back. He lapped while one of his hands slid around and kneaded the dancer's balls that were already pulled up tightly with passion.

"I want to fuck you, human," Seth said, his voice a soothing whisper. He sounded so snaky yet unbelievably sexy.

"Yeah. That's what I want," Antjuan breathed, his fingers gripping the sleeping bag and his ass thrust toward Seth.

The shifter's sharp little fangs pricked his buttocks and Antjuan shuddered with passion. It felt so fucking good. Seth's tongue flicked over the love bites then rolled down the indentation of Antjuan's ass. Over and over he swiped the sensitive crevice with his tongue, each time forcing it a little deeper. Finally that slender, forked tongue pushed against Antjuan's throbbing sphincter. It tickled and aroused the dancer, making his pulse race and quickening his breath.

Seth took his time with Antjuan's ass, making sure it was moist and ready for his big, hard cock. Already Antjuan hovered on the edge. The entire situation turned him on so much that he marveled at his own self-control.

He'd never imagined being fucked by a snake shifter. Dancing with normal snakes was thrilling, but this far surpassed it. This was an enormous, beautiful serpent in human form, one who could share his thoughts and desires like a man while providing the wild sensuality of a snake.

Seth gave a final trill of his tongue around Antjuan's pulsing sphincter then stood. He wound his fingers through the dancer's hair and guided him to a kneeling position in front of him.

Antjuan's heart pounded with excitement. Though he wasn't usually submissive in his love affairs, it was one of his fantasies. This gorgeous snake shifter seemed more than willing to take charge and Antjuan decided to go with it.

With a little grunt of desire, Seth thrust his hips closer to Antjuan, his bulging pink cock head brushing against the dancer's lips.

This was too fucking sexy for words. Antjuan grasped Seth's stiff cock and took the crown between his lips. He ran his tongue over it and used the tip to flick the underside. Then he sucked the head into his mouth while stroking the shaft with one hand and kneading his balls with the other.

Seth groaned and grasped handfuls of Antjuan's hair. His hips rocked to the rhythm of the dancer's sucking. After a few moments of this intense teasing, Antjuan withdrew his lips from Seth's cock head and licked his shaft until it glistened with saliva, then he sucked the crown again until Seth pulled away.

The shifter's blue eyes gleamed with lust and his chiseled chest rose and fell with each eager breath.

Panting with desire, Antjuan once again moved onto all fours and glanced over his shoulder, wearing his most intense expression. Now he was beyond ready for Seth to fuck him. He was desperate for it.

The shifter knelt behind him, grasped his hips and pushed his smooth, slick cock head against Antjuan's ass.

Antjuan couldn't keep from groaning with pleasure-pain as the shifter's cock pumped into him.

Seth reached around and stroked his lover's shaft as he thrust.

By now both men were so turned on that it didn't take long for them to buck and writhe with out-of-control passion.

Antjuan wasn't precisely sure who came first. All he remembered was the incredible slam of the most powerful orgasm of his life.

He and Seth collapsed onto the sleeping bag, a hot, panting tangle of limbs and quivering muscles.

Finally they recovered enough to roll onto their sides and hold each other's gazes.

"Humans certainly are interesting," Seth said.

Grinning, Antjuan reached out and caressed the delicate white scales running down the tip of his lover's nose. "So are snake shifters." He flopped onto his back and laughed.

"What?" Seth asked, pushing himself onto his elbow and leaning over Antjuan. He placed a hand on the dancer's chest and stroked it. The tip of his finger drew little circles over Antjuan's nipple.

"I came out here because I'm supposed to be resting."

Seth's brow furrowed. "Why? Are you sick?"

"I was overdosed by compulsion dust."

"That's not the kind of thing you should dabble in."

"I didn't," Antjuan snapped. "I was attacked."

"Sorry. I didn't know."

Sighing, Antjuan cupped the back of the shifter's head and caressed, loving the sensation of the uneven flesh against his fingertips. "Of course you didn't. I'm the one who should apologize. The past few days have been..." He paused and shook his head. "You don't even know me, so why should I dump my problems on you?"

"Sometimes it's better to dump problems on a stranger. I can give you impartial advice."

For a moment the men held each other's gazes. Antjuan was right about Seth being a stranger, yet he couldn't deny there was something between them that didn't generally exist between strangers.

"Talk to me, Antjuan. Not just for you, but for me. I'm alone too often."

"Why?"

"Other snake shifters don't understand my interest in humans. Humans don't want to socialize with snake shifters. So that means I'm --"

"An outcast," Antjuan said softly. "I know how you feel. Or at least I used to. Dylan changed things for me. He changes things for a lot of people."

"Who's Dylan?"

"My roommate."

"Ah." A knowing smile spread across Seth's lips. "Cheating, are we?"

"No. Dylan and I are friends, not lovers. He literally pulled me off the street where I was ruining my life. Dylan runs a shelter in Grimton City. He helps out magical people in trouble. It doesn't need to be any major life crisis. Sometimes he's just there for people who need a friend."

"People as in humans?"

"As in anyone who wants help. You know," Antjuan sat up and Seth followed him, "if you want to learn about humans, you should come to Grimton City with me. Dylan and I can introduce you to people. We've had shape shifters at the shelter before. Cursed ones, like werewolves."

"Speaking of werewolves, there's a pack of females not far from here. You better watch out when they go on the prowl."

"It's all right. I know them."

"You really do have some unusual friends." Seth rose to his feet and headed out of camp.

"Where are you going?"

"To wash up in the brook."

That sounded like a great idea. Antjuan felt hot and sticky after that outstanding fuck. A dip in the river was exactly what he needed before settling down for the night. With any luck, he wouldn't be sleeping alone.

Chapter Four

While bathing in the brook, Antjuan and Seth continued their conversation. The snake shifter was surprisingly easy to talk to and Antjuan found himself opening up to Seth more quickly than he ever had to anyone, even Dylan.

He told him about being shot and the crimes surrounding the Elfin coins. He talked about his friends from the shelter, and his dance students and the plans he had for remodeling the studio. Of course he couldn't help discussing the contest at the end of the month and how much he wanted to beat Theo.

Dusk fell and Antjuan realized he'd been talking for quite a while.

"Wow," Antjuan said, pushing tendrils of wet hair from his face. "I can't believe how much I've been talking. You must be sick of listening."

"Not at all. The way you describe your friends makes me feel almost as if I know them myself. I've been thinking about your suggestion that I go to the city."

"If you'd like to visit, I'm sure Dylan won't mind if you stay with us."

"I wouldn't want to impose."

Antjuan nearly hesitated, then he remembered the sexy cop who was already staying at their apartment with Dylan.

"It won't be a problem," Antjuan reassured him. "Think about it."

"I will."

"I haven't given you much of a chance to talk. Tell me about yourself. Do you live around here? What's your family like?"

"I come from a big family. They live deeper in the Wicked Wild, but I spend much of my time around here. It's close to Hot River campground and I can observe human-like magic users. Most of the time I stay hidden, though. They get nervous when they see a snake shifter, particularly when I'm in my snake form."

"I'd like to see you as a snake," Antjuan said, his heartbeat quickening. The idea of watching Seth change form excited him. Antjuan had always thought snakes beautiful and something told him Seth would be lovelier than most.

A faint smile touched Seth's lips and he nodded. He sank below the surface of the water. By now night had almost completely fallen, but the full moon cast its light on the brook. Antjuan had little trouble seeing the enormous white snake break the surface and glide across the water directly toward him.

He felt both awed and apprehensive, especially when Seth's undulating body wrapped briefly around his then continued to shore. If he wanted to, Seth could no doubt squeeze the life out of Antjuan. Instead he waited on shore, his finely-shaped head lifted toward the dancer.

Antjuan walked toward him. When he stood ankle-deep in water, Seth slid closer and stopped, his lower half coiled tightly as he raised his upper half higher until he was nose-to-nose with Antjuan. His blue eyes looked exactly as they had in his human form. He was even more beautiful than Antjuan had imagined he'd be.

"Seth," he said, his voice almost a whisper.

In reply, the snake flicked his tongue over Antjuan's cheek.

Unable to resist, Antjuan lifted his hand and touched the snake. He was hard yet supple, his muscles rippling. Those intense blue eyes stared into his as Antjuan continued stroking the sexy shifter.

"You are amazing," Antjuan said.

Again Seth's tongue darted over Antjuan's cheek, then his forehead and lips. His touch was so light, like fairy wings fluttering against his skin. It fascinated him how a creature this powerful, so potentially deadly, could also be gentle.

Maybe snake shifters were misunderstood, or at least ones like Seth were.

Seth curved around Antjuan's shoulder and slid partway down his back. His tongue flicked along the dancer's spine and Antjuan closed his eyes, arching his head back.

His experiences with water snakes had never been like this, but those snakes had been mere beasts. Seth was also a man.

For several moments he stood while Seth traveled over him, wrapping around his arms, legs and waist. It was during this rather unusual but sensual exploration that the idea struck Antjuan.

He'd danced with smaller water snakes, but why couldn't he dance with this snake shifter, if Seth agreed? He already knew he and this shifter fit together perfectly. Making love was much like dancing and even after one fuck it was obvious they were made for each other. Yes, Seth was a very large snake and quite heavy, but Antjuan was strong. He had no doubt he could handle the snake shifter, especially if he and Seth trained together. Unlike a normal snake, Seth could learn choreography.

If he and Seth entered the dance competition as partners...

Wait. He wasn't even sure if Seth would want to do it. They had just met and even though they already got along well, Antjuan didn't want to rush things. Of course if Seth was as interested as he claimed to be in learning about human-like non-shifters, joining Antjuan in the city would be the perfect opportunity for him. While there they could work out a routine.

Seth curled around Antjuan's ankles then rose up his body. As he moved, he shifted back to his man shape and this time when they stood face-to-face, the snake shifter wrapped his sinewy arms around Antjuan's neck and kissed him.

When the kiss broke, Seth said, "Something has excited you. When I moved against you I could feel your heart beating faster."

"You excited me." Antjuan grasped Seth's tight buttocks and tugged him even closer. Trapped between their bodies, their cocks swelled.

"Glad to hear it."

"And I had an idea, if you're willing to try it."

"Talk to me." Seth kissed and licked the side of Antjuan's neck.

Closing his eyes and moaning with passion, Antjuan tilted his head to the side, making it easier for Seth to tickle the sensitive flesh with his tongue.

"Would you dance with me?"

"Dance?" Seth paused in his kisses.

Antjuan opened his eyes and the men stared at each other. "I told you about how I dance with snakes, but I'd much rather dance with you."

"I'd like to try that." Seth grinned. "Tomorrow, though, when it's warmer. The night's getting cool and I need to find someplace warm to sleep. Remember, I told you my kind are cold-blooded."

Antjuan smiled. "You didn't feel cold earlier."

"That's because I had you to warm me." Seth kissed Antjuan again and he noticed the shifter's lips did feel cooler. In fact, Antjuan was getting rather chilled too. Even in the summertime the woods grew cool at night.

"My sleeping bag is warm," Antjuan said, casting Seth his most inviting look. "You're welcome to share it."

"Now that's a much better option than climbing into an abandoned burrow or fallen log."

"Let's go." Antjuan took Seth's hand and they walked back to the campsite.

Antjuan wrapped up the remainder of his food and tied it to a high tree branch while Seth brought the sleeping bag into the tent.

By now Antjuan was shivering a bit, since he was still naked and his hair damp from his swim. When he ducked into the tent, he found Seth already in the sleeping bag. He couldn't help smiling at the sight of his lover lying there, his blue eyes calm and ready for sleep.

After toweling his hair until it was nearly dry, Antjuan slid into the sleeping bag. It was a rather tight fit since neither were small men, but Seth pressed his body to Antjuan's, resting his head against his shoulder and closing his eyes.

Soon Antjuan warmed and his heat seeped into his lover. Seth gave a pleased groan. His long, sinewy leg slid between Antjuan's, who squeezed him a little tighter before drifting to sleep.

* * *

The next morning Antjuan awoke alone in the sleeping bag. He sat up quickly, wondering if Seth had been part of an incredibly erotic dream. That thought nearly made him panic, mostly because he couldn't wait to see his lover again.

He climbed out of the bag and lifted the tent flap. He smiled with relief, while at the same time his heartbeat quickened with excitement.

Seth had found a sunny spot on an enormous rock a short distance from the campsite. His eyes closed, he lay on his back absorbing the heat, his supple body conforming to the curve of the rock.

He was just as gorgeous as last night -- broad shoulders, long limbs and sleek muscles, all covered in alabaster snakeskin.

Antjuan sighed with pleasure, sat back on his heels and closed his eyes for a moment as he stretched his arms. After such a long, peaceful sleep he felt more rested than he had in months. Even the lingering effects of the compulsion dust overdose had almost faded completely.

Not wanting to disturb his lover quite yet, Antjuan quietly walked to the brook and washed, then he pulled on snug black shorts and approached the rock. He leaned over Seth, bracing a hand on either side of his head. By the faint smile tugging at the snake shifter's lips, Seth knew who had him trapped.

His blue eyes opened and gazed into Antjuan's.

"Good morning," Seth said, lifting his head and brushing his lips against Antjuan's.

"You look nice and relaxed."

"Just getting some sun to get the blood moving."

"Something else might help warm you up." Antjuan kissed Seth's neck, then moved lower, pressing his lips across the shifter's broad chest and down the center of his sleek stomach.

Seth gave a low moan, his body arching toward Antjuan's roaming mouth.

Trailing the tip of his tongue along the joining of Seth's pelvis and thighs, he curled his fist around the shifter's hardening cock and stroked him to full mast.

Yesterday Seth had been dominant, but today Antjuan wanted to take the lead. He wanted to pleasure his lover but hold off on his own climax until later, after they'd danced. No doubt the buildup would lead to a mind-blowing orgasm.

Right now Antjuan had another kind of blowing on his mind.

He took Seth's thick, pink cock head between his lips and sucked, then flicked his tongue along the underside in a manner that drove the shifter wild. Seth groaned and thrust into his lover's mouth. To hold him steady and control their movements, Antjuan grasped Seth's hips.

After a few moments of teasing, Antjuan released Seth's cock from his mouth and stroked the shaft with one hand, kneading the shifter's smooth balls with his other. He licked and kissed Seth's inner thighs, loving the feel of his flexing muscles. Seth had great legs -- long and muscular. As a dancer, Antjuan really appreciated powerful legs.

Again he sucked and licked Seth's cock, and it took only a few seconds before the shifter's entire body tensed on the verge of explosion.

Grasping handfuls of Antjuan's hair, he tugged and said, "That's enough. If you want to get fucked, it better be now."

"Stay where you are." Antjuan tightened his grasp on Seth's hips. "Just lean back and enjoy the ride."

Once more he took Seth's cock head into his mouth. With a groan of surrender, the shifter fell back against the rock, his hips thrusting in time with Antjuan's rhythmic sucking. Then he relentlessly flicked his tongue on that ultra-sensitive place on the underside of Seth's cock head.

The shifter came long and hard, animalistic moans and growls erupting from his throat as his come shot into Antjuan's mouth.

His eyes closed, Antjuan sucked and swallowed, not wanting to disturb a moment of Seth's pleasure.

Finally the shifter lay still, except for the rise and fall of his chest as he recovered. Antjuan released his softening cock and leaned against the rock, one arm still partially supporting his lover.

He kissed the side of Seth's neck, feeling the throbbing of his pulse against his lips. Seth's ears were rather small and very close to his head, almost unnoticeable. Using the tip of his tongue, Antjuan traced the shape of his ear and Seth grinned, writhing a bit. It seemed his ears were as sensitive as a human's.

Finally the shifter turned to face Antjuan. Seth's calm yet sexy blue eyes stared deeply into his. "It's your turn."

"I'd rather dance first, if you still want to?"

Seth nodded and pushed himself off the rock. He walked to the center of the clearing and spread his arms. "Tell me what to do. I'm all yours."

Smiling, Antjuan approached. "Sounds great to me. Usually when I dance with snakes I let them lead because they don't take very kindly to choreography."

"They have minds of their own."

"Yes."

"So do snake shifters. However, we are willing to cooperate if we're treated right."

Antjuan slipped his arms around Seth and kissed him. His tongue slid into the shifter's mouth and Seth responded enthusiastically. His arms tightened around Antjuan and his tongue met the dancer's with demanding strokes. Seth's body pushed against his, almost forcing Antjuan to step back. Groaning with pleasure and challenge, Antjuan pushed in return, but he didn't succeed in moving Seth any more than Seth had moved him. For several moments they stood, locked in a passionate power struggle, their muscles straining against each other while their lips and tongues plundered and pleased their eager mouths. This was the sexiest wrestling match Antjuan had ever engaged in.

When the kiss broke, they stood, their arms still draped around each other and their breathing heavy from exertion and lust. Their gazes locked and the exchange of emotions between them was too powerful for words.

"I'll always treat you right, Seth," Antjuan said in a husky whisper. "That's a guarantee."

"Then I'll cooperate. Tell me what to do."

"Change into your snake and wrap yourself around me any way you want. I'll follow your rhythm and turn it into a dance."

Seth nodded and closed his eyes. His arms melted around Antjuan, his head resting against his shoulder. As Antjuan returned the embrace, he felt Seth's muscles ripple and his body quiver as he changed into the magnificent white snake.

At first Antjuan merely shifted his stance and lifted his arms in a variety of poses, giving Seth the chance to slide around him as he pleased. Antjuan took the time to grow accustomed to Seth's weight, length and movements.

Then he mimicked the shifter's undulations. When Seth began to follow his moves, his long, pliable body moving as one with Antjuan, the dancer smiled.

This was even better than he'd imagined. It was as if he and Seth were one. Surrendering completely to the dance, Antjuan closed his eyes and enjoyed the sensation of his lover's body.

After a while, Seth curled around his ankles, then eased up his body, switching back to his man form.

"I thought I might be getting heavy," Seth said.

"It's the kind of weight I like," Antjuan told him. "How about I put on some music and we can really do some dancing?"

"Sounds great."

Antjuan went to the tent and got his music player with speaker attachments that he'd brought so he could dance at his campsite. While he selected a song, Seth shifted back into the snake.

The music inspired Antjuan and Seth even more, and soon they were lost in each other's undulating bodies. Antjuan enjoyed himself so much that he didn't want to stop. Finally Seth shifted to his man form to give them a break.

Panting, they faced each other. Antjuan wiped sweat from his eyes and smiled, "That was fun."

"Yes, but you're still supposed to be recovering from your attack, true?"

Seth was right. Though Antjuan felt much better, he could still use another day or so of rest and he felt unusually tired after practicing. Of course that could be due to the fact that he wasn't accustomed to dancing with a snake that weighed as much as a tall, athletic man.

"You're right, and I wasn't even thinking that you might be tired too," Antjuan said.

"I'm fine."

"I'll say you are." Antjuan grinned, took his lover's face in his hands and kissed him firmly on the mouth.

Dancing with Seth had aroused him so much that his cock ached.

Reaching between them and fondling Antjuan's cock through his snug shorts, Seth said, "If I didn't think you needed rest I'd pay you back for this morning."

"There's no way I can rest now. Dancing usually makes me horny and with you it's even worse."

"How about if I do something to calm you?" Seth smiled, slowly sinking to his knees in front of Antjuan and pulling off his shorts.

Antjuan kicked the shorts aside, his heart pounding with anticipation. Seth caressed his legs, running his nails over Antjuan's inner thighs. Seth cupped Antjuan's balls and kneaded while flicking his tongue over his stomach. Antjuan's abdominal muscles tightened and released, then tightened again. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the feel of Seth's wet tongue flicking over his ribs. The forked tip of it dipped into Antjuan's navel.

"Your body is fucking gorgeous," Seth said, reaching up and running his palms over Antjuan's smooth chest. Antjuan momentarily grasped his wrists, pressing his hands snugly to his sweat-beaded flesh and wondering if Seth felt the pounding of his heart.

The shifter continued licking his ribs and using his fangs to gently scrape his flesh. When Antjuan released his wrists, Seth grasped his cock and began sucking and licking the head.

Antjuan thrust into his mouth, his ass and leg muscles tight and his neck arched back. He ran his hands over Seth's head, loving the feel of his skin. It amazed him that this wild, forbidden creature was willing to share all this with him.

Seth sucked him so deeply into his mouth Antjuan thought he might swallow him whole, like a real snake.

Slowly Seth drew back, freeing Antjuan's cock except for the crown of his erection. He sucked the swollen head, lightly scraped it with his fangs, then lapped the underside.

Pushed beyond his control, Antjuan came so hard that he couldn't keep the guttural moans and groans from his throat. His entire body tightened and his legs shook from the pleasure. It amazed him that he even remained standing. This was the best fucking orgasm of his life.

Seth stood and Antjuan staggered against him. The shifter held him as he recovered, his fingertips lightly stroking his spine.

Then Antjuan straightened and met Seth's gaze. "Will you be able to come to the city with me?" Antjuan asked, almost fearful that Seth would refuse.

"Yes. I'd like that."

"How long can you stay?"

"That depends. Out here I hunt to live, but there --"

"If I got you a job for room and board, would you stay for a while?"

Seth narrowed his eyes. "What kind of job?"

"Be my partner for the dance contest. You can live with me. It'll be great for your studies of non-snake shifters." Antjuan grinned.

"Not to mention we can fuck all we want." Seth folded his arms across his chest, a teasing gleam in his eyes. "I don't know. I've never even danced before, let alone entered a competition."

"You're a natural. We'll have the coolest routine there -- a snake dance where the snake becomes a man. I've missed dancing with snakes."

"You don't have any at home?"

Antjuan shook his head. "I don't think it's fair to take them to the city. In the Wicked Wild they would come to me and we'd dance, then they could go back to the jungle. It might sound corny, but I respect wild snakes too much to make them live in a cage in my apartment."

"That doesn't sound corny," Seth said, slipping his arms around Antjuan's neck. "All right. If you think I can enter the contest, I'll give it a try."

"Even if Theo beats me in the singles division, there's no way anyone is going to give a better show than we will in the partners. Best of all will be the practice." Antjuan ran his hands down Seth's back and grasped his gorgeous, rock-hard ass.

The handsome snake shifter ran his tongue over Antjuan's lips.

Tightening their arms around each other, they kissed.

Chapter Five

The next day, Antjuan and Seth traveled to Grimton city. Antjuan loaned Seth jeans, a t-shirt and sneakers.

"I don't like these shoes," Seth said, walking a bit awkwardly at first. "Snake shifters rarely wear clothes and we don't wear shoes."

"Trust me, you don't want to walk around the streets of Grimton City barefoot. The city isn't clean like it is out here."

"Many species in the Wicked Wild don't wear clothes, but I understand human magic users and creatures like Elves are shy about nudity."

"I think we prefer to call it modesty. My people are a little different. Temple dancers admire the human form and we sometimes dance naked. Nudity is allowed in the contest."

"A good thing, because there's no way I can shift properly when confined by these." Seth ran his hands over his denim-clad thighs.

Though the snake shifter said he found the clothes difficult to adjust to, he looked great in them. His long, sinewy legs were made for jeans. Antjuan couldn't resist grabbing the hard curve of Seth's gorgeous ass.

The shifter turned, grasped the back of Antjuan's head and kissed him hard. Moaning with pleasure, Antjuan wrapped his arms around the shifter. Their pelvises pressed close and their cocks swelled.

When the kiss broke, they stared intently at each other. Seth's eyes gleamed with desire. His slender lips parted and he swept his forked tongue over them.

Seth walked to Antjuan's sleeping bag and searched through it until he found the container of lube Antjuan had showed him earlier that day.

"Get over there," Seth said in a husky voice. He shoved Antjuan toward a tree and Antjuan obeyed.

He loved it when Seth took charge. In his entire life Antjuan had never been submissive to anyone. Oh, he'd done some ill-advised things, such as sleeping with guys for money when he was a desperate young man on the streets, but he'd never submitted emotionally to anyone.

With his big, athletic body and confident attitude he'd never had trouble attracting men, but most of his lovers expected him to take the lead. He didn't mind being the leader in the bedroom. Sometimes he wondered if he didn't enjoy the feeling of power because at certain moments in his past he'd been powerless.

Seth was different, though. He seemed to genuinely enjoy being with Antjuan and even though he appeared to prefer dominating their sexual games, he had as much interest in pleasing Antjuan as he did in satisfying himself.

Placing his hands on the tree trunk, Antjuan glanced over his shoulder at Seth, but the shifter grasped the back of his head and made him face the tree. Keeping a slight pressure on his scalp, Seth spoke so close to Antjuan's ear that his breath tickled. The shifter's voice both soothed and aroused his lover. "I want to fuck you again before we leave, Antjuan. How about it?"

Antjuan nodded, his entire body aching for Seth.

"Good," the shifter said.

He tugged Antjuan's tank top out of the waist of his jeans, then he unzipped them and slid his hand down the back of them. Seth grasped Antjuan's ass and kneaded it, then ran his fingertips along the indentation.

A shiver of raw desire rolled through Antjuan. He was glad his fly was open because his cock was already pole-hard. It brushed against the tree trunk. The bark felt a little too rough and he gave a low groan.

Seth stepped back slightly, giving Antjuan a bit of room to reposition himself more comfortably. The shifter pushed down Antjuan's jeans all the way to his ankles and used his own denim-clad knee to spread his partner's legs a little wider.

Then Seth's fingers, slick with lube, fondled his ass, teasing and stroking his tight sphincter. Antjuan closed his eyes and moaned. The magical lube aroused him even more. His ass and cock pulsed, almost desperate for Seth.

He didn't have to wait long. Seth's body pressed close to his and he eased his cock into Antjuan, who practically growled with desire. He writhed as Seth thrust. The shifter grasped Antjuan's wrists and pinned them hard to the tree while at the same time dipping his serpent tongue into Antjuan's ear.

"Seth, you fucking sexy bastard," Antjuan panted, his heart pounding and cock on the verge of exploding.

The shifter hissed provocatively and gently raked his fangs along Antjuan's shoulder. He released one of the dancer's wrists and reached down to fondle his straining cock. The frustrating sexual ache was almost unbearable.

Seth's hand and hips pumped faster, his supple body molding to Antjuan's wildly bucking one.

Groaning and panting, they burst in ecstasy.

* * *

"Hey, Dylan, I'm home!" Antjuan called as he opened the door to their apartment and stepped inside, Seth behind him.

Both the dancer and the shifter paused in surprise.

On the white faux fur rug in the living room, Dylan, his long black hair wild, balanced naked on all fours, offering his ass to Joel. The cop, kneeling behind him, was nude, too. His well-defined muscles were taut with desire and his hands clutched Dylan's lean hips. The tip of his impressive cock hid between the Elf's tight ass cheeks.

Joel's eyes widened and he dropped his hold on Dylan and leapt to his feet.

The Elf pushed hair from his face and glanced over his shoulder at the newcomers.

"Wow," Antjuan said, curling his lip. "Sorry. We'll come back later."

He and Seth backed into the hallway and Antjuan quickly closed the door.

"Was that the cop you told me about?" Seth asked.

"Yeah."

The shifter smiled slightly and cocked his head to the side. "He has an interesting idea of protective custody."

"I'll say, even though Cass is the one in protective custody, not Dylan."

"Well, he certainly has some kind of custody."

Antjuan and Seth headed for the stairs, but the door opened and Dylan, this time wearing black pants, stepped into the hall.

"Hey come back. We're --"

"Finished?" Antjuan raised an eyebrow.

"Baby, we hadn't even started yet, but forget it now." Dylan spoke to Antjuan but his gaze kept drifting to Seth.

Now was as good a time as any for introductions.

Walking back inside, Antjuan said, "This is Seth. He's going to stay with us for a while."

"In the shelter? Sure, we've got room," Dylan said, sitting beside Joel on the couch. The cop had also pulled on his pants and shirt and was now lacing up his shoes. He lifted his rather sharp gaze toward Antjuan and Seth.

"No, he's staying in my room," Antjuan replied.

Dylan didn't speak, but Antjuan knew his friend well enough to realize something was wrong. He wasn't sure why Dylan would have a problem with Seth, especially when he had turned their living room into his own private love sanctuary.

"My lunch is over. I need to get back to the precinct," Joel said. He stood and walked to the door. Dylan followed and they stepped into the hallway for a private goodbye, leaving Seth and Antjuan alone.

"Seth, will you put my backpack in my room? It's down the hall. The door on the left." He tossed the shifter the pack and Seth nodded, seeming to realize Antjuan wanted a few moments alone with Dylan.

He disappeared into the bedroom just as the Elf stepped inside.

"Who is this Seth?" Dylan asked. "Did you meet him in the Wicked Wild?"

"We spent the weekend together."

"He's a snake shifter."

"You're quick, Dylan," Antjuan said with a hint of sarcasm.

"His kind generally don't socialize."

"How would you know?"

"Everyone knows. Look, Antjuan, I'm not so sure I want a snake shifter staying in our apartment."

"If he was a big, bald cop it would be a different story though."

Dylan curled his lip. "If you're referring to Joel, he's a great person."

"How do you know Seth's not?"

"Ant, you've only known him a few days."

"As opposed to the few days you've known Joel?"

"I don't want to argue."

"Neither do I. Seth and I talked a lot over the weekend. We danced a lot too. He'd going to enter the partners division with me at the end of the month."

Dylan stepped closer to Antjuan and whispered, "I'm sure he's probably nice but having a shifter like that around can be dangerous."

"No more dangerous than the out-of-control werewolf you took into the shelter last year. Or how about the cat shifter who sharpened her claws on our new couch?"

"Like many cursed shifters she had temporary amnesia when she changed to her beast shape. She offered to pay for the damages."

"It's not about the damages, Dylan. It's about trust and mutual respect. Don't you trust me to bring home someone decent? Seth wants to learn about other kinds of magical people. His own kind rejected him because he thinks snake shifters can integrate with the rest of the magical world, even though they've been shunned and hunted. I told him your shelter and my studio would be safe havens for him to learn about other species."

"And in return he'll dance with you?"

"And he'll teach us about his kind. Isn't that worth something? Or are you going to be just like my family when I tried to tell them dancing with water snakes wasn't evil?"

Dylan closed his eyes and sighed deeply. "You know I don't want to do that."

"Seth came out of the safety of the Wicked Wild to get to know us. If he can do that, can't we at least give him a chance?"

"Yes," Dylan said, holding Antjuan's gaze. "We can. That's what we do. Give people chances."

"And if we enter the contest, there's a chance for me to win two prizes. That means I might have enough to replace the stolen money and start remodeling my studio."

Seth stepped into the room, but kept his distance, a cool look in his eyes. "I didn't want to cause trouble," he said. "Antjuan, I think it's best that I find other accommodations."

"No," Dylan said. "I didn't mean to make you feel unwelcome."

"Yes, you did," Seth said. "But it's understandable. My kind keep to themselves and when our paths happen to cross other species, it usually ends in disaster for one or the other."

"Antjuan tells me you'd like to change that. Maybe we can help." Dylan took a step closer to Seth and offered his hand.

After a moment's hesitation, Seth accepted Dylan's handshake.

"Let me finish dressing and we can go to the shelter and introduce you," Dylan said.

The Elf walked to his room and Antjuan followed, sticking his head in the door while Dylan pulled on one of his black, poet-style Elfin shirts.

"I'm guessing we'll be seeing a lot of Joel around here?" Antjuan asked.

"Yeah. You'll have a snake shifter spending nights in your room and I'll have a big, bald cop spending nights in mine."

Antjuan chuckled. Dylan grinned and threw a balled-up sock at him.

In the living room, Antjuan rejoined Seth, who stood looking at a collection of photos hanging on the wall. They were of Antjuan, Dylan, Cass and many other people from the shelter and the studio.

Antjuan slipped his arms around Seth from behind and nuzzled his neck.

"Sorry about that. Sometimes Dylan and I need to work things out."

"I don't think he wants me here, regardless of what he says."

"He'll be fine, and once he gets to know you he won't be able to help liking you. Besides, he didn't ask my permission before fucking Joel on the living room rug."

A short time later, Antjuan, Seth and Dylan went downstairs to the shelter. They walked into the main room where the regulars were eating lunch. Sabrina, a young fairy who volunteered at the shelter, approached the trio.

"I thought you were off for the rest of the day?" she asked Dylan.

"I'm just stopping in for a minute. Everybody, this is Seth. He's going to be hanging out with us for a while and working with Antjuan at his studio."

The men and women, many of whom Antjuan knew well, remained quiet for several moments. Then some whispered among themselves. All looked suspicious of Seth.

Antjuan's stomach tightened. He hadn't expected this reaction. Not here. Still he should have known that depending on the circumstances, all people had the potential for exclusivity and to treat others cruelly.

"Hello, Seth," Sabrina forced a smile and offered him her hand.

The snake shifter accepted her greeting.

A few others said hello, but most returned to their meal, still casting sidelong looks toward Seth.

A tall, burly guy of ogre ancestry stood from the folding table and approached, his dark eyes narrowed at Seth. "You're a snake shifter?"

"Yes."

"We don't see many of your kind in Grimton City."

"I'm sure that's true," Seth replied, not the least bit intimidated by the glowering giant.

"We like to keep it that way."

"Kronus," Dylan said, "Seth is our guest."

"If he's going to be around here, I'm not sure I want to be."

A couple of other people spoke in agreement with Kronus.

Antjuan's stomach clenched and he didn't try to keep the fury from his face. He took a step closer to Kronus. Most likely the giant could kick his ass, but at the moment he didn't care. One thing he couldn't tolerate was prejudice, especially when the victim of it was a man he was falling for.

Seth grasped Antjuan's hand tightly. Their gazes met and the shifter shook his head.

"Our door is always open to everyone," Dylan stated, stepping between Antjuan and Kronus. No doubt he realized Antjuan was close to turning this argument into a physical brawl. "If you choose to leave, it's up to you, but no one is going to dictate who can and cannot stay here. Not without a damn good reason."

"His origins are reason enough," Kronus growled. "I've heard that his kind strangle and devour full-blooded ogres twice my size."

"That would take a lot," Seth said.

"Are you calling me a liar?"

"No. I'm simply stating that like most creatures in the Wicked Wild, there has been some exaggeration of our abilities. Most snake shifters avoid other magical creatures and they certainly aren't on our menu. If we kill people, it's in self-defense, much like ogres."

"How dare you compare your kind to mine?" Kronus bellowed.

Antjuan could practically see the steam coming out of his nose, but at the moment he didn't care. He was angry enough to fight ten men like Kronus.

"I think it is a good idea for you to leave," Dylan said. "At least until you cool down."

Growling at Seth and Antjuan, Kronus stormed out of the shelter, slamming the door so hard behind him that Antjuan thought the glass would shatter.

"Anyone else care to go?" Dylan asked.

Though some people grumbled, they all resumed eating without further incident.

"I don't fucking believe this," Antjuan said, still fuming.

"Don't worry about it," Seth told him. "I usually get this reaction from people."

"That's beside the point," Dylan said. "I'm sorry too, but once people get to know you, I'm sure things will get easier."

"No, it won't," Antjuan said. "Come on, Seth."

He turned and left abruptly. Dylan and Seth followed him back to the apartment.

On the way up the stairs, Antjuan said, "I'm taking you back to the Wicked Wild. I never should have brought you here."

"Why?" Seth asked.

"Who knew that these people, some of whom I call my friends, would be such assholes?"

"Antjuan, you should think about this," Dylan said.

Antjuan stopped so abruptly that Seth and Dylan nearly crashed into him on the stairs. "Who are you to talk, Dylan? You didn't exactly give him a warm welcome either."

"I already apologized for that."

"You can return to the Wicked Wild if you want," Seth said. "But I'm staying in Grimton City."

Both Antjuan and Dylan stared at him.

"Doesn't it bother you to be treated like that?" Antjuan demanded.

"Yes, but the attitude toward my people won't change if we keep ourselves segregated. We can't turn and run every time someone calls us evil or dangerous. Most magical beings are potentially dangerous. They've simply learned to live together. Antjuan, you can't expect them to accept me right away." Seth cupped Antjuan's cheek.

“Just because you love snakes doesn’t mean everyone does. Give them a chance. Give me a chance. That’s the reason I came here. Besides, if I return to the Wicked Wild now, how are we going to practice for the contest?”

Dylan folded his arms across his chest, leaned a shoulder against the wall and jerked his thumb in Seth’s direction. “Seth, you’re a very cool guy. If Antjuan doesn’t want you to stay in his room, you can stay in mine.”

“Over your dead body, Dylan,” Antjuan said, sliding a possessive arm around the snake shifter.

Dylan gave a snort of laughter. “I knew that would get you.”

“So it’s settled. I’m staying until the contest. Then we can see where we go from there,” Seth said.

Antjuan smiled at him. This snake shifter was an amazing creature in more ways than one and Antjuan was glad he was his.

Chapter Six

Antjuan and Seth spent the remainder of the afternoon at the dance studio. No students were scheduled until the following day, so they were able to focus on practicing their routine for the contest.

Around five o'clock, they locked up the studio and returned to the apartment. Dylan had called earlier and invited them to have dinner with him and Joel.

When they arrived at the apartment, they found Joel in the living room. He was sitting on the couch, his white shirt unbuttoned at the throat and his sleeves rolled up, exposing sinewy forearms dusted with reddish-brown hair. His piercing gaze riveted toward Antjuan and Seth, and he inclined his head.

"Hey," the cop said in greeting, then picked up the bottle of beer resting on the coffee table in front of him and took a swallow.

In all the years Antjuan had known Dylan, he'd never seen him attracted to the rugged, question-my-manhood-and-I'll-kick-your-ass kind of guy like Joel. It was strange, but after the way he'd fallen head-over-heels for a snake shifter, Antjuan figured he had no room to criticize.

"How's the Elfin coin case? Got any new leads?" Antjuan asked.

Joel curled his lip. "Nothing yet."

They were engaged in small talk with the cop when Dylan glanced in from the kitchen and called them to dinner. They sat around the table and dug into the delicious-smelling casserole, or at least three of them did.

Joel cocked an eyebrow at the small portion on Seth's plate. "Maybe you should have made extra, Dylan. This guys eats too much."

"I'm sorry. Can you eat this kind of food? I didn't even think to ask," Dylan said.

"I have no problem with this kind of food. It's very good, but I ate yesterday," Seth replied. "My kind eat more often than regular snakes, but usually only every other day."

"I guess you learn something new all the time," Joel said. "So tell me, Seth, what are you doing in Grimton City?"

"I'm here to enter the dance contest with Antjuan and hopefully learn more about the behavior of different species."

"Why?"

"Because it's interesting and my kind don't usually have contact with others."

"And you come from what part of the Wicked Wild?"

"Is this an interrogation?" Antjuan interjected, staring hard at the cop.

"No. Just curious," Joel replied, returning Antjuan's look.

"It's all right. I don't mind talking about me or my kind," Seth said. "Ask what you like, Detective."

"Why don't we just enjoy the meal?" Dylan suggested. "There's coconut cream pie for dessert."

At the mention of that particular dish, Antjuan and Seth exchanged glances and smiled. Antjuan doubted he would ever think about coconut cream pie again without remembering the first time he and Seth made love.

Seth's relaxed attitude and willingness to answer questions about himself, even to a nosy cop, soon broke the ice and dinner went smoothly. Dylan and Joel seemed to warm to Seth, and Antjuan wasn't surprised. He only hoped others would be charmed by the snake shifter as well.

That night when Seth and Antjuan retired to bed, they lay on their sides, facing each other. Antjuan smiled and trailed his fingertips along Seth's sharp cheekbone.

"Antjuan, there's something I want to tell you," Seth said, taking his lover's hand, his long, slender fingers gently stroking Antjuan's. "I wasn't going to talk about it right away, but you've been so nice that I want to be honest."

A twinge of apprehension struck Antjuan. After all, he'd only known Seth a few days. Maybe Dylan and the others were right about snake shifters?

"What is it?" Antjuan asked.

"Don't look at me like that. It's nothing bad. It's about my interest in other species. What I said was true, but there's more. Because I've been adamant about snake shifters mingling with other species, my father assigned me to the task of making the first overture."

"Like an ambassador?"

"Sort of. The truth is, my father believes I'll fail. And I started to think he's right. I've been observing magical creatures for years, but whenever I try to approach them, it ends in disaster. You're the first non-snake shifter who has been receptive to me. When you said we could work together, it was the chance of a lifetime."

Antjuan felt torn and a bit used. But why should he? After all, he wanted Seth partly because of the dance contest. He liked the idea of performing a shocking, beautiful dance with a forbidden creature. So Seth had his ulterior motives too. What was the big deal?

Yet it was a big deal because Antjuan genuinely liked Seth.

"You make it sound like your father is important. Like he has the power to decide whether or not your people mingle with mine," Antjuan said a bit coolly.

"He's our King," Seth replied.

Antjuan gave a snort of humorless laughter. "Now you want me to believe you're a prince? What's going on, Seth?"

"It's the truth, but being the son of the Snake Shifter King isn't the same as being a prince in your world. Snake shifters have very large families. I'm so far from inheriting the throne that it will never happen. If I manage to bridge the gap between my people and the outside world, that will be a way of making a mark for myself. And it's not just about that. All my life I've believed we could fit in if we tried hard enough. We've been secluded for so long. I needed to find some kind of common ground."

"And I'm it," Antjuan said flatly.

Seth grasped his chin and held his gaze. "It's more than that. No matter what happens, whether our plan works or not, I care about you, Antjuan. I hope telling you the truth hasn't changed how you feel about me."

Sighing, Antjuan tugged away and lay on his back, staring at the ceiling. "Our plan, huh?"

"Isn't it? It was your idea to use dance as a way to communicate. What if we can interest human-like magic users and snake shifters in learning the dance together? It would be a first step."

Antjuan saw the merit in Seth's idea. He'd been snake dancing all his life. His family had shunned him for it, but deep inside he knew there was a reason Hot River had given him this gift. Maybe it was his destiny to work with Seth for this purpose.

"I only wanted to be honest," Seth said. "It wasn't my intention to hurt you. I like you a lot, Antjuan, and I don't want to ruin what we have... or could have. Maybe I wasn't meant to shatter the boundaries between snake shifters and other magical people. Maybe I was just meant to..."

"What?" Antjuan turned to meet his lover's gaze.

"Maybe I was meant to be with you. Of course you probably think that's another load of crap."

"I don't think what you've said is crap. And I do believe there's something between us. When I asked you to be my dance partner, you didn't get all bent out of shape..." Antjuan grinned and shrugged. "Well, you got physically bent out of shape, but I mean you didn't take offense or insinuate that I only wanted you for the dance. Why should I think you don't want me for myself while at the same time hoping I can help with your work?"

Seth grasped Antjuan's face and kissed him hard. Antjuan tugged Seth closer and opened his mouth to the shifter's probing kiss.

He actually felt glad now that he knew the truth.

When the kiss broke, Antjuan said, "I don't think we should tell anyone else about you being the King's son. Not right away. Let them get to know you first."

"I agree. One snake shifter is enough to take, but if they thought the entire realm of Snake Shifters wasn't far behind me, they might get a little crazy." Seth's brow furrowed. "Are you worried too? I would never hurt you, Antjuan. I swear what I'm telling you is true."

Antjuan might be a fool, but he believed Seth. Something in the magic that allowed him to summon snakes also let him sense their moods. That was part of the reason he'd been able to dance with wild snakes all his life and never get hurt. His magical instincts told him Seth was being completely truthful and he hoped he was right.

* * *

The following morning at the dance studio, Antjuan introduced Seth to his first class of the day. Unfortunately, their response to the snake shifter was no warmer than it had been from the people at the shelter.

After class, Antjuan and Seth had a free hour to practice for the contest. It was toward the end of that practice that an amazing thing happened.

Students trickled in for the next class while Antjuan and Seth were dancing. At first they were surprised by the enormous snake slithering over their instructor, and that surprise turned to utter shock when Seth shifted into his man form to continue the second part of their routine.

When the practice ended, the group of students who had gathered around applauded.

"That was fantastic," said a young witch named Kelly.

"I've never seen a snake shifter before," said another student. "And I never thought they danced."

The other students gave similar responses and none could keep their eyes off Seth, yet this time their apprehension was mixed with interest rather than fear or hatred.

Feeling a spark of hope, Antjuan introduced his lover to the students.

"Would you dance with me?" Kelly asked. "I've never danced with any kind of snake before."

The others also expressed interest in snake dancing. Seth agreed to join in the class, giving everyone a chance to dance with him.

The lessons were fantastic. Most of the other students who stopped in also expressed interest in snake dancing, so Seth was kept quite busy. Antjuan noticed the snake shifter had a knack for judging the best moves to use with different dancers. He allowed the taller, bigger ones to feel his full body weight and with the smaller dancers, like Kelly, he supported most of his weight by anchoring his coiled tail on the ground or wrapping it around the ballet bar.

When the last student of the day left, Antjuan locked the door while Seth, in his human form, sprawled on the studio floor.

"I feel like I could sleep for a month," the shifter muttered.

Antjuan squatted beside him and lightly trailed his fingertips across the shifter's chest. "I didn't mean for them to wear you out."

Seth opened his eyes and grinned. "It was fun. I'm a little sore, though."

"How about a warm shower then we can stop by my friend Shane's store and get some salve so I can give you a massage at home?"

"Sounds great."

The shifter raised himself on his elbows and Antjuan bent to kiss him.

"If all these students want to snake dance, we're going to have to work out a schedule that's fair to you," Antjuan said.

"It'll keep me in shape, that's for sure."

"You're already in great shape." Antjuan slid his hands over Seth's gorgeous body. The snake shifter pulled him closer, then rolled him onto his back. Placing a hand on either side of Antjuan's head, he covered his mouth in a deep kiss.

A short time later, after showering and locking up the studio, Antjuan and Seth stepped into Shane's store. The half-Wildman sold magical salves and other items made

from natural ingredients. Shane had great talent for making enchanted remedies as well as salves for pleasure.

In the shop, Shane and his wife, Charity, stood behind the counter labeling jars.

"We heard you had a friend staying with you," Shane said.

Antjuan introduced Seth and was glad to see that Shane and Charity greeted him pleasantly.

"Dylan said things have been a little rough since you got here," Shane said.

"Today has been better," Seth replied. "It just takes time."

"That's true," Charity said. "Some of us from the Wicked Wild are misunderstood. We werewolves aren't exactly welcomed with open arms, either."

"Well, everyone knows how much people love Wildmen," Shane said with a hint of sarcasm.

"I love Wildmen." Charity cast him a lustful look.

Shane grinned and winked at his wife.

"Is this a social call or do you guys need salve?" Charity asked.

"I need more of that massage salve, the one that helps muscle soreness," Antjuan said. "We've been dancing a lot."

"Yeah, the contest is coming up," Shane said. "Charity and I already have tickets."

"We want to watch you kick Theo's ass," Charity said as she rang up the sale while Shane wrapped up the salve and handed it to Antjuan.

After leaving the shop, Seth and Antjuan went home. They found the apartment empty, since Dylan was spending the night at Joel's. It felt good to have the whole place to themselves.

"You know, after all that dancing today, I feel like I could eat again already," Seth said.

"We have lots of leftovers," Antjuan told him. "Even some coconut cream pie."

"Mmm." Seth flicked his tongue over his lips.

"Let's eat in bed," Antjuan suggested.

Seth wrapped his arms around him from behind. "Sounds good to me."

"How about that massage first?"

Seth grunted his consent. He cupped the bulge in the front of Antjuan's jeans and squeezed a bit before releasing him and leading the way to the bedroom.

The men undressed and Seth sprawled stomach-down on the bed while Antjuan opened the jar of salve. The soothing herbal scent filled the room and Antjuan scooped some out and placed the container on the nightstand. Then he straddled Seth and massaged his broad shoulders and back. He relished the feel of the snake shifter's skin and muscles.

After a few moments, Seth moaned with pleasure and Antjuan smiled. He shifted position to kneel beside him so he could massage the shifter's long, hard legs.

Then he rolled Seth onto his back. The shifter closed his eyes, his breathing relaxed, yet his cock partially erect. Obviously Seth found the massage as arousing as Antjuan.

The dancer reached for more salve and continued rubbing him, starting with his arms. His hands moved down his rock-hard biceps and triceps and gently kneaded his sinewy forearms.

Antjuan moistened his lips as he massaged the shifter's chiseled chest and abs, working his way down to his pelvis.

Settling between Seth's legs, Antjuan rolled his tongue over his groin. He grasped the shifter's cock in one hand and stroked while taking his balls into his mouth and sucking. He rolled his tongue over the smooth sac.

Seth reached down and grasped handfuls of Antjuan's hair. He writhed and moaned, especially when Antjuan released his balls to suck on his cock head.

By now Seth's cock was big and hard, his balls drawn up tightly with lust.

Antjuan's wet tongue lashed the underside of his cock head and Seth moaned. When he was overcome by passion, Seth didn't talk but he moaned and groaned a lot. This turned Antjuan on, knowing that he excited his lover beyond words.

Just when he thought Seth was about to explode, the snake shifter shoved him away and reached for the salve.

"Is this stuff all right to use as lube?"

"Yeah." Antjuan smiled. "That's why it's one of my favorites of Shane's creations."

Grunting with pleasure, Seth grasped Antjuan roughly and pushed him onto his stomach. Seconds later, his salve-slicked hands parted Antjuan's ass cheeks and his damp fingertips teased his sphincter. His belly clenched and his cock swelled. His asshole tingled and throbbed beneath his lover's stroking fingers.

Antjuan's pulse raced and he closed his eyes. Reaching up, he grasped the thick wooden rungs on the headboard. Seth's cock entered him slowly. The shifter's tongue lapped his ears and the back of his neck. He scraped his nails down Antjuan's ribs then reached up and placed his hands over Antjuan's on the headboard as he thrust.

Seth came quickly, his body tense and straining and his breath quick against his lover's ear. He rested for mere seconds before dismounting and pushing Antjuan onto his back.

Antjuan hovered on the edge, his ass still pulsing, his balls drawn up tightly and his swollen cock ready to explode.

Settling between his legs, Seth grasped his thick shaft and held it steady since it was twitching around. His serpent tongue flicked over the head then relentlessly teased the underside. Antjuan gave a shout of raw pleasure as he came, his hips bucking wildly.

When it was over, he lay with his eyes closed. He felt Seth leave the bed, probably to clean up in the bathroom. No doubt after Antjuan's crazy orgasm, he'd gotten a little messy.

The shifter returned moments later and lay beside Antjuan who opened his eyes and smiled. Seth looked so damn sexy lying there, his eyes closed and supple body relaxed.

"I thought you were tired," Antjuan teased.

"I am," Seth replied in a lazy voice. He opened one eye and glanced at Antjuan.
"But not too tired to eat something."

"You just did."

The shifter turned and playfully nipped Antjuan's shoulder.

"Stay and relax. I'll bring dinner here," Antjuan said and stood. He walked to the bathroom to wash up. When he stepped out, Seth had fallen into a light sleep. Antjuan covered him with the sheet and brushed a kiss across his lips.

Smiling faintly, Seth murmured, "Don't forget the coconut cream pie."

* * *

The following weeks passed quickly. Antjuan and Seth's time was filled with dance practice and Seth's study of the magical beings in Grimton City. His friendship with the dancers seemed to pave the way for other relationships, especially with the people at Dylan's shelter. Seth hadn't been scared off and he continued spending time there. As time passed, most people found his pleasant manner and genuine interest in others impossible to resist, just as Antjuan had.

As the contest neared, Antjuan became a little edgy. Not that he didn't feel ready, but he always got nervous before performing and this year so much depended on him winning.

A few days before the contest, Theo paid another visit to his studio. It was between classes and Antjuan and Seth were using the time to stretch and talk. The door opened and Theo, dressed to the nines as usual, strode in.

"So it's true. You have a snake shifter here." Theo curled his finely-shaped lips and his gaze swept Seth.

"If you want lessons with him, Theo, we're all booked up," Antjuan said sarcastically as he rose to his feet.

Seth remained seated on the floor, his long, sinewy legs stretched in front of him.

"So this is your competition?" Seth asked in his softest, sexiest voice. Antjuan had told him about Theo.

"Between us, there is no competition," Theo stated.

"Oh, I'm certain of that. Antjuan is gifted," Seth said. He rolled onto his stomach and bent his legs over his head until his toes touched the floor in front of his face. His extreme flexibility was a benefit of his nature.

Theo couldn't keep from watching the shifter's gorgeous body as it moved from one contortionist pose to the next.

"You don't have a chance of winning, Antjuan, unless you use this beast as a prop," Theo scoffed.

"Antjuan can handle me. Can you?" Seth said, his voice morphing into a hiss as he undulated across the floor toward Theo, changing into his snake form on the way. Theo seemed to freeze. His face drained of color when Seth wrapped his long, sleek body around him, his coils tight. His serpentine face stared into Theo's.

"Get it off me," Theo said, his voice unsteady.

"If you ask him nicely, he might comply," Antjuan suggested, scarcely able to keep the smile from his lips.

"Get off," Theo murmured, but by the look in his eyes he was on the verge of screaming.

"Ssssay pleasssse," Seth hissed.

Antjuan thought he might explode from holding back laughter.

"Please!"

The snake shifter slid down Theo's body then wrapped around Antjuan who stood calmly, one hand caressing his lover's rippling back.

"Are you sure you don't want lessons, Theo?" Antjuan winked.

"You're sick."

"And you're wasting my time."

Now that he was free of the snake shifter, Theo's sleazy grin once again curved his lips. "See you at the competition. And there you'll be on your own. You won't have your attack snake to help you out."

He turned and left.

"That's what he thinks," Antjuan said.

Seth shifted back to his man form, but kept his body pressed close to Antjuan's. "Don't let him get to you. The man is obviously insecure. Why else would he act like that?"

"Because he's an asshole."

Seth chuckled. "That was my second choice."

* * *

As usual, after so much practice and anticipation, the contest seemed to arrive in no time.

Antjuan had waited until the last possible moment to sign up for the partners division. This first time dancing with Seth, the element of surprise would work in their favor.

Many of Antjuan's students and friends came to watch, including Dylan, Joel, Shane and Charity. Several of his students, including Kelly, had entered the competition. There was no mean-spirited rivalry between them, such as with Theo. Only a healthy sense of challenge.

Entrants spanned the magical world. A variety of magical beings from fairies to Frost Giants came to show off their skills. Antjuan was pleased to see his students performed well, and he was happy with his own routine for the solo division. Theo's was a little flashier, since his magical skill was to conjure colored lights as he danced. Antjuan couldn't deny the man's talent and he knew beating Theo would be difficult.

Antjuan could scarcely believe it when his score again tied with Theo's. This was the first time in the history of the contest the same dancers had tied two years in a row.

Once more he'd have to split the winnings with his arch-rival. Theo didn't look any happier about the outcome, yet this time he kept his distance instead of making uncouth remarks to Antjuan. No doubt that was mostly because he was still afraid of Seth.

When it came time for the partners division, he and Seth were scheduled to perform second to last. Throughout the evening, the snake shifter had drawn stares,

whispers, and even some rude comments, but as usual Seth kept his cool and his dignity.

Antjuan felt a pang of guilt about subjecting his lover to people's ignorance, but Seth had been adamant about fulfilling his duty to both his lover and his kin. Antjuan knew by talking to Seth that his father expected him to fail in paving the way for good relations between snake shifters and the rest of the magical community. He also knew Seth refused to give in to defeat.

Finally it was time for them to perform. They watched as the couple before them accepted their applause. Antjuan's heartbeat quickened and his body tingled, but he was more eager than nervous. He smiled and glanced at Seth who looked almost frozen, his blue eyes staring, unblinking, toward the crowd.

"Are you all right?" Antjuan asked.

"Yeah," Seth murmured. "I've never done this before."

Taking Seth's face in his hands, Antjuan stared deeply into his eyes. "You've done this countless times. All you're doing is dancing with me. Don't think about the crowd. Just focus on us."

"I know this is important to you."

Antjuan had never seen Seth vulnerable before. It was completely uncharacteristic and rather endearing. In spite of how easily Seth talked to people, performing in front of them was a different story, yet he was doing this for Antjuan.

At that moment winning the competition ceased to matter. Right now he just wanted Seth to get through this and hopefully enjoy himself in the process. That's really what dancing was about and Antjuan had almost forgotten that.

"What's important to me is that we go out there, have fun and show people that a snake shifter and a human dancer can work together. Are you game?"

"Yeah," Seth stated with confidence, his posture straightening. "I'm game."

Antjuan brushed his lover's lips with a kiss before Seth shifted into his snake form and draped over his shoulders. They took the stage and people murmured at the sight of a pure white snake wrapped around the dancer.

The music started and within seconds Antjuan lost himself in the dance. He knew by the feel of Seth's body and the sureness of his movements that he'd lost his stage fright. Their bodies moved to the rhythm of the slow, sexy music that gradually increased in speed. Then, their bodies pressed close, Seth shifted to his human form. The audience gasped in appreciation as the two men -- a long-haired human and a hairless snake-man -- seemed to undulate as a single body.

The music's tempo increased and the partners hips blurred in a sexy dance of untamable lust and forbidden love.

When their performance ended, the crowd went absolutely wild, but the biggest payoff was in the judges' scoring. There was no doubt Antjuan and Seth had won the partners division.

Backstage, they received congratulations from several of Antjuan's students and some other performers. He and Seth even managed to gain more students from people who were interested in dancing with a snake shifter too.

It was then Theo approached and said, "People, you should stay away from this beast. It's dangerous. Do you know when I paid a visit to Antjuan's studio, his pet snake almost strangled me?"

Some people looked scared, but Kelly shouted, "At least it would have shut you up. Listen, almost everyone at Antjuan's school has been dancing with Seth for weeks and he's fantastic. If you want to really explore magical dance, you have to work with a snake shifter. It's absolutely enchanting."

People seemed more apt to listen to Kelly than to Theo. Obviously the lure of dancing with a forbidden creature was stronger than the tang of sour grapes.

Still speaking from a safe distance, Theo called, "You and this snake should have been disqualified. It was a partners division and animals aren't allowed."

"He's a snake shifter," Antjuan stated. "And the rules say the contest is open to all magical species."

"He's right," Kelly quipped. "You should read the rules before you enter."

"I don't know why I waste my time among riffraff," Theo scoffed and walked off, nearly crashing into Joel and Dylan, who had come backstage to congratulate their friends.

"He reeks of jealousy," Seth observed. "It won't surprise me if he actually ends up taking lessons once my kinsmen agree to help us. He won't be able to resist."

"You think so?" Antjuan wrinkled his nose. "I wouldn't wish him on a snake shifter." Turning to Seth, Antjuan smiled. He placed his hands on his lover's shoulders and gazed deeply into his eyes. "Thank you, Seth. For everything."

"I loved every minute. I'm just sorry you had to split the prize money with Theo. As if he needs it."

"It doesn't matter. Combining my half of the winnings with half of our winnings from the partners division will almost replace the money stolen from the shelter."

"Thanks, Antjuan," Dylan said. "You really saved our asses this year."

"What are you going to do with the other half of our winnings?" Seth asked.

"That's yours, not mine."

"In that case the shelter can keep it all."

Dylan smiled. "You guys are the best."

Winking at Dylan, Antjuan slid an arm around Seth and said in a teasing tone, "Yeah. We know."

"Modesty. It's his most attractive quality," Seth joked.

He and Antjuan glanced at each other and everyone else seemed to fade into the background. Their gazes locked, they edged closer to each other and their lips brushed in a chaste kiss filled with the deepest kind of love.

Chapter Seven

About a week after the contest, Kelly approached Seth and Antjuan at home. Just a few days before, they had disclosed Seth's connection to the Snake Shifter King and asked if any of the dancers who had been training with Seth would like the opportunity to practice with a snake shifter of their own. The idea sparked the interest of several dancers, including the young witch.

In the morning, Seth and Antjuan would travel back to the Wicked Wild, into the Realm of the Snake Shifters. Seth hoped to convince his father that the exchange program would be the first step in overcoming the barriers between their people and the rest of the magical world.

"I would like to go with you to the realm of the Snake Shifters," Kelly said.

Seth and Antjuan exchanged glances.

"It might be dangerous," Seth warned. "There are many twists and turns in the Wicked Wild, not to mention unscrupulous people."

"We've got those here," Kelly reminded him.

"But the Wicked Wild isn't like Grimton City," Antjuan said.

"I've been there before," she told him. "And it's a risk I'm willing to take. Last night at the witch's civic meeting I told them about what you guys are trying to do. I was surprised to learn that a couple of other witches have had friendships with snake shifters too, but they were afraid to say it."

"That's news to me," Seth admitted. "I thought I was the only one."

"Don't you guys think it would make a better impression on Seth's father if one of the students who wants to snake dance actually shows up to ask about it?"

Again Seth and Antjuan looked at each other.

"She's got a point," Antjuan said.

"Then I can go with you?" Kelly asked, looking hopeful.

"Yes, if you'd like to," Seth said.

The witch happily left to report back to her superiors while Antjuan and Seth continued packing for the trip. They hadn't gotten far when Dylan, Joel, and Shane stepped into their room.

"We have something to tell you and we want you to keep quiet and listen," Dylan stated.

Antjuan lifted an eyebrow. "Go on."

"It's not that we don't like Seth, but we think you should take some people with you when you see his father," Dylan continued.

"You mean you like him but you don't trust him," Antjuan said, annoyed.

"This is for both your benefits," Joel stated.

Antjuan raised his eyes to the heavens. "Oh brother. This I have to hear. How do you figure?"

"Seth has been trying for years to work this out, but no one, the snake shifters included, have been very receptive," Dylan said. He held up his hand when Antjuan opened his mouth to interrupt. "Let me finish. Shane and Charity have agreed to go with you. We've also contacted the Princeton family of Hot River and one of their guys will accompany you."

"The Princetons?" Seth narrowed his eyes. "They're magical animal control. You want to send hunters into my realm?"

"Not a hunter, but someone who can talk to your people and then report back to the mayor of Grimton City," Joel said. "Remember, if snake shifters start coming into the city, the Mayor will eventually find out about it. Why not start off openly with him? I'd go with you myself, but I'm still following leads on that Elfin coin case."

"Wait a minute," Antjuan said. "This is turning into a --"

"Let them talk," Seth ordered in his soft but commanding voice.

"Think about it," Dylan told them. "You'll have Oakes Princeton to speak as an authority figure, Charity to speak for the werewolves of Hot River -- after all, she was a

former queen. And you'll have Shane who has good relations with both the Elves and Wildmen. They can help you with your goal, Seth."

"And we have Kelly to represent the witches," Antjuan said thoughtfully.

"We accept your offer," Seth stated. "We'll all leave tomorrow."

* * *

In the deepest part of the Wicked Wild it was hard to tell night from day, due to the thick foliage that blocked out most light.

Seth led the way down the rocky, twisting paths. Antjuan followed directly behind him, then Kelly, Oakes Princeton, Charity and Shane followed up the back.

When they'd started their journey, everyone had been talkative and relaxed. Now they had grown silent and tension hung in the air.

Even Seth, who was born in these parts, appeared cautious.

"Stop," the snake shifter said, coming to such an abrupt halt Antjuan almost crashed into him. The shifter hissed softly and a chill crept up Antjuan's spine when he heard several answering hisses.

Three green snakes seemed to melt from the trees and shift to human form. They circled Seth's group, their gleaming eyes wary.

"Outsiders aren't allowed in our realm," said the shifter standing closest to Seth. "You know that, Prince Seth."

"Shelby, we are here to speak to my father. These outsiders come in friendship."

The three green shifters hissed again, exchanging skeptical glances.

"You know what my duty is," Seth continued. "I have come to fulfill it. These outsiders will be treated with respect or else you will know my wrath."

Shelby bowed his head to Seth. "We will escort you to the King. The outsiders will not be harmed, but until the King states otherwise, we must keep them under watch."

"Lead, then, and we'll follow," Seth ordered.

One snake followed behind their group and the other walked beside them while Shelby led the way through the jungle.

"I thought you said you weren't important?" Antjuan whispered to Seth. "These guys act like you're important."

"I said I wasn't going to inherit the throne," Seth replied. "But I'm still a prince."

"Is your father going to be mad that we're here?" Kelly asked nervously.

"You won't be harmed," Seth assured her.

"That doesn't answer her question," Charity said.

"I can't predict how my father will react, but I do know if I ask that you not be hurt, you'll be safe in our realm."

"I'm feeling better by the minute," Kelly muttered.

"You did ask to come," Seth told her. "And I warned it might be dangerous."

"Yeah but what do I know? I'm just a curious young woman."

"Cool it, Kelly," Charity said. "Everything will be fine."

"You're a werewolf and your husband is a Wildman. Why should you be scared?"

"Kelly." Antjuan dropped back and slipped an arm around her. "Don't panic. We'll protect you."

"I know. You're right. I'm sorry." The witch sighed deeply. "I really do want to be here."

One of the green shifters -- tall, young and sleekly-muscled -- approached and dipped his head toward the witch. "You don't look dangerous."

"I don't look dangerous?" she scoffed. "Is this guy for real?"

"Outsiders lurk in the trees, waiting to sever our heads," the guard continued.

"That's not true, Stowe," Seth told him, raising his eyes to the heavens.

"One of my brothers was beheaded."

"I'm sorry to hear that, but I can assure you witches don't hunt snake shifters," Kelly said.

Stowe narrowed his eyes, still looking skeptical.

Little more was said on the way to the realm of the Snake Shifters. As they neared it, many shifters, both in man and serpent forms, mingled in the area. They

stared at the outsiders and whispered amongst themselves. Antjuan realized how Seth must have felt when he'd first come to Grimton City.

"Wait here," Shelby said. "I'll alert the King and return with his orders."

The shifter disappeared down a large hole in the ground.

"We live in burrows," Seth explained. "It's better protection against the elements."

Stowe, who lingered beside Kelly, edged even closer and poked his longish nose against her hair. The witch impulsively slapped his face.

Looking stunned, the shifter said, "I meant no offense. I've never been this close to a human before. Your hair is... very beautiful."

Kelly glanced at him from the corner of her eye and ran a hand through her long black hair. "You can't just sniff a girl's hair." Her gaze raked the tall, lean shifter from head to toe. "At least not without asking first."

Leaning close to Seth, Antjuan whispered in his ear, "Something tells me Kelly has found a dance partner."

"I think you might be right," Seth whispered back. "Stowe usually isn't this relaxed around females."

Moments later, Shelby returned and led them to the King's burrow.

Antjuan and the others gazed at their surroundings. Though underground, the snake shifter burrows were spacious and impeccably clean. The rounded walls were lined with precious metals and polished wood. Depending on the shape they wished to take at the moment, snake shifters walked or slithered down the corridors.

Seth's group stepped into a particularly large room, the walls covered with paintings of snake shifters frolicking along Hot River. In the center of the room, a male and female snake shifter sat on oversized black silk pillows. Both were in their human form, the male covered in stunning black and white skin, the female white with blue eyes, just like Seth.

"Mother. Father," Seth said as he approached and knelt respectfully.

"I'm so glad you're finally home," said the Queen, placing a hand on Seth's head.

Seth took her hand and kissed the back of it. "I've missed you."

"You have brought outsiders," the King stated, his voice cool, soft yet authoritative. It reminded Antjuan of Seth's voice.

"I have found a way to fulfill my duty," Seth stated, meeting his father's gaze with an almost defiant expression. "These outsiders wish to learn about us."

The King's dark blue eyes swept Antjuan and the others.

"Your Majesty," Antjuan said, bowing his head. "Your son has come to mean a great deal to many people in Grimton City. There are people who want to know snake shifters. All we need is the chance."

For a moment the King studied Antjuan in silence, then he turned to Seth and said, "I am interested in hearing about your experiences. You and your companions will join us tonight for a discussion. In the meantime, arrange for accommodations for them."

Seth nodded. "Yes, Father." He turned to Antjuan, a gleam in his eyes that suggested everything was going to be fine.

* * *

After several days of discussions with the King and Queen, it was decided that an exchange program would be the first step in introducing the snake shifters to other magical people in a positive way.

They returned to Grimton City with several snake shifters who had volunteered for the program.

After a month, Antjuan and Seth brought their students from the city to dance in the snake shifters realm. A few days after their arrival, Antjuan was surprised when he was summoned to the King's burrow and found his parents there.

"What are you doing here?" Antjuan asked.

"Is that a proper greeting for your parents?" demanded the King.

Though Antjuan didn't want to contradict the King, he couldn't bring himself to offer a more friendly welcome to his parents, so he merely stared at them, waiting for an answer.

"We have come to ask that the priests and priestesses of El Templo Primero del Rio Caliente train here with the snake shifters," Antjuan's father said, his amber gaze meeting his son's.

"The King has approved," his mother added.

Antjuan's brow furrowed. "Why?"

"So we may learn to commune with the River's sacred serpents," replied his father.

"Sacred?" Antjuan could scarcely believe what he was hearing. "All my life you feared and hated my snake dancing. Now you want to come here. Why have snakes suddenly gone from evil to sacred?"

"The River told us of its affection for the snake shifters and its wish that we come here to dance with them," Antjuan's mother said.

"Why didn't Hot River tell you this before?" Antjuan asked.

"Because it said that it wanted the temple dancers to understand this on their own. You were the first to realize it and we were ignorant." His mother stepped closer and placed a hand to Antjuan's cheek. "We ask your forgiveness and your help in learning this mystical art."

Antjuan wasn't sure how to react. He couldn't help holding a grudge over the past, yet at the same time he was pleased his parents wanted to join the attempt to integrate snake shifters with the rest of the magical community.

"It is my wish that you help train them," the King said. "However, the choice is yours."

"If the River and King Sept want you to be trained, then I will not deny my duty," Antjuan replied.

"You may go," the King said.

"Mother, Father, if you follow me I'll show you our training burrow," Antjuan said.

It felt strange walking with his parents down the winding corridors of the snake shifters' underground realm. He had never dreamed this would happen. Life as an

outcast hadn't been easy, but maybe it had prepared him for this purpose, to help his people bond with Seth's.

In the training burrow, Seth was supervising the dancers, including Kelly and Stowe who were inseparable, even when not practicing. When Antjuan and his parents arrived, Seth left his students and approached them. He welcomed the High Priest and Priestess and paired them with two snake shifters so they could start dancing.

Standing side-by-side, Antjuan and Seth watched their students.

Seth touched Antjuan's hand and said, "Are you all right with your parents being here?"

"Yes." Antjuan smiled. "I guess it is a good thing."

"I believe it is." Seth slipped his arms around Antjuan's neck. His provocative gaze met his lover's and he said, "Now dance with me."

Seth shifted into his snake form, his supple body wrapped around Antjuan's, absorbing his heat. His tongue flicked along the side of the dancer's neck and Antjuan momentarily closed his eyes before he and Seth began moving in the sensual rhythm that stoked their passion.

He'd never imagined that his talent for snake dancing would bring him his one true love.

Kate Hill

What do trips around the world, endless nights of breathtaking sex, and a muscular, 6-foot 3-inch, brown-haired, blue-eyed significant other have to do with Kate Hill? Absolutely nothing, but she can dream, can't she? In reality Kate is a single, thirty-something vegetarian New Englander who loves writing romantic fantasies. Visit her online at <http://www.kate-hill.com>, www.myspace.com/katehillromance, or join her newsgroup at groups.yahoo.com/group/katehill. Stop by Kate's Amazon blog at www.amazon.com.