



Deny the Dark

Mara Lee

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Prologue

She had hoped he would make it easy. But she should have known better. Alex never did things the easy way if he could do them the hard way. Danny knew he got a perverse sense of satisfaction out of driving her insane and completely fucking up her life. It was as if he lived for this shit.

She scowled and threw a couple more pairs of socks and a handful of panties into her bag.

“The pink is my favorite, care to model them for me?” Alex drawled.

She really didn’t care which pair of panties he liked the best. And she was impressed by her ability to ignore the annoying sonofabitch.

“This technique of yours will not work ... nothing changes by ignoring me.”

“I’m blocking you out.” She continued to pack her bag, keeping her back to him. He was not going to get to her. He was not going to get to her. She just had to keep telling herself that.

Alex smoothed his hand across Danny’s hair, and laughed when she swatted his hand away. He smiled broadly. “Why are you even here?” she finally asked, exasperated. “You could have just summoned me, Your Majesty,” she bit out, sarcastically.

“Yes, I could have. But I decided that I like you like this ... in your element. It’s nice to see you in your home.”

Well she hated it. She hated having him in her home. It was uncomfortable enough being at the clan, but at least she knew what to expect when she was called to meet with him on his turf. This was her home. This was her space. And she didn’t want him in it.

“I forbid it,” Alex said suddenly, his voice no longer light.

Spinning around, Danny narrowed her eyes. “Excuse me?”

“I forbid you to go.” Alex snorted. “We have negotiated nothing. I will not have you traipsing off to foreign territory without even a by your leave.”

“Well, you have no say in this.”

“I am your Alpha!” Alex roared.

“My Alpha, yes, but my master ... never.” She stood her ground, even in the face of his mounting anger. “And this is not something that requires negotiation. I will not be staying with a certain enemy Alpha. I will not be staying with the Stone Claw Clan. This has nothing to do with Pack business or politics.”

“Then you have no reason to go,” Alex said, voice short.

Danny threw up her hands. “This conversation is over. You can just show yourself out.”

Alex grabbed Danny by her shoulders. His eyes were blazing with fury and his nostrils flared. His beast was rising.

“You’re not frightening me. And I’m telling you again, I’m going.”

“You do not wish to anger me, Dennison.”

Sighing, using her full name was never a good sign, Danny relaxed in his arms and tried to even out her breathing. She really didn’t need this right now. And she didn’t feel like fighting him either—surprising, but true. She had begun to even out her life, so to speak, and she enjoyed finally being able to breathe. She liked not always being on the

defensive and killing things. It was never too early to begin work on your karma. That was Danny's new motto and she was going to try to stick by it.

"You're right, Alex. I really don't want to anger you. And I'm not trying to anger you. Right now I have a lot to do, and you're not helping me any."

"It is not my job to help you, Dennison," he said softly.

"It is your job to help your Pack member. I'm not asking for much. I'm asking you to understand, not to like, but to understand that this is something that I have to do, that I'm obligated to do. I am going." Danny took a deep breath. He was not ripping her head off—yet—so she continued. "I have done everything that you have ever asked of me, Alex. I have honored all of my obligations to the Pack. And I have honored all my obligations to you. Have I not?"

Alex said nothing.

Danny nodded. His silence was answer enough for her. "This is not a matter for the Pack. This is not a matter for you. This is *my* matter. The only reason we're having this conversation now is because you always want to know my business." His eyes narrowed slightly. "You know there is nothing you can do ... short of fighting me right now ... and let me assure you that I don't feel like fighting you. Can you not just understand and let it go?"

"No," Alex finally said. "I cannot. I cannot just *let you go*."

Danny rolled her eyes. "You're not letting me go, not like that, not in that way."

"Dennison..."

God she was exhausted and she hadn't even begun her trip yet. "Please, Alex..."

"Have you ever said please to me before?" Alex's expression had softened.

"Probably not."

Alex touched the side of her face gently. "You will stay far away from the Alpha of the Stone Claw Clan."

Danny nodded quickly. Oh lord. Was he actually acquiescing?

"You will stay away from him, Dennison. And you will check in with me." Alex's eyes began to glitter with a hard, sharp, edge. "And you *will* deny the dark, do you hear me?"

"Deny the dark. Yes, I hear you loud and clear, Alex." Whether or not she would actually *listen* to him...

Chapter One

Thad looked good—for a dead guy. His fair hair was brushed away from his handsome face. His complexion was pale, expectedly, but it still gave Danny pause. He was so very pale, and fine, blue veins were apparent beneath his soft white flesh. He looked well and truly dead. Danny couldn't pretend, no matter how animated Thad was, that he was alive ... human. He would never be human again.

"It's still me," Thad said quietly, having read the unease on Danny's face. "It's still me, Danny."

Smiling, Danny shrugged. "Sorry, I'm still getting used to ... uh ... your state."

"My state ... that's very diplomatic of you."

"I know ... I can be at times."

Thad finished loading up the rental car and then turned to face her. "Thank you for this."

Danny waved his thanks away. "You don't have to thank me for anything."

"Yeah, I do."

"No, you really don't. I mean, he called for me too, remember?"

"Uh-huh. But you could have sat this one out, so to speak. My master, my allegiance. You could have chosen another time to answer his summons. He would have understood."

At that she raised her eyebrows. "Okay, you haven't spent a lot of time with master vampire Savior Knight, have you? Because understanding ... well, it isn't a word that he is all too familiar with."

"He could surprise you."

"I sincerely doubt it," Danny said dryly.

"Get in," Thad said, chuckling.

"Why do you get to drive?" she complained as she slid into the passenger seat of the car.

Thad wiggled his eyebrows. "I rented the car ... I get to drive."

"Stupid logic," Danny muttered.

"Logic that you use all the time when you're getting your way."

"Yes, but when it's my way..."

"It's fine. Yeah, I know."

She wrinkled her nose, crossed her arms across her chest and sat back reveling in the butter-soft leather. She loved the smell of leather.

"Has he told you anything?" she asked suddenly. She wasn't exactly certain why she bothered asking. She knew the answer already.

"Not really."

"Not really, as in a little? Or, not really, as in ... nothing." Danny waited. Thad frowned. "Or, not really as in..."

"All right, all right," he groaned, "I get your point. He merely summoned me, Danny. And with his summons he," Thad's voice softened and took on that slow sexy Savior drawl, "asked to see his wolf, that flower of elegance and beauty who will surely give you a time of it."

It was uncanny how much he sounded like Savior. It was uncanny and very, very unsettling.

Thad must have read the surprise on Danny's face, because he smiled. "Yeah, I know, I'm good."

"Scarily so."

"It's a talent, what can I say?"

"He called me a 'flower of elegance'?"

"Uh-huh."

"That's disgusting."

"You crack me up, Danny."

"How so?"

"Only you would think such a compliment is disgusting."

"Uh, I'm sure there are other people in this world who don't want to be given stupid little pet names."

"Most women would like to be called such a name."

"I'm not 'most women,' Thad."

He cleared his throat. "I'm well aware of that."

"Not sure how to take that, Thaddie boy."

"Any way you want, Danny girl. You will anyway."

At that, she laughed. Thad did know her well.

"Did you pack your ... uh ... well that, that thing that you..."

"Spit it out, Thad."

"Did you pack that vinyl outfit of yours?"

"Asking for any specific reason?" Danny popped a peppermint into her mouth.

"Just liked it, that's all. It, uh, definitely makes a statement. I think it'll come in handy." Thad frowned and gestured towards her. "Do I get one?"

"Didn't know you had taste buds left?"

"You are such a bitch."

Danny shrugged, nodded and smiled. "Just figuring this out now?" She turned on the radio, and jacked up the volume.

"Trying to deafen me?"

"Is it working?"

"Getting there ... supersensitive hearing, remember?"

If anyone had supersensitive hearing it was her. Wolves had senses like nobody's business. "Where are we stopping, Thad? I'm assuming you've chosen a location."

Thad nodded. "The Hollowing."

"Excuse me?" She had to have heard that wrong.

Thad sighed dramatically. "The Hollowing."

"The same Hollowing that is owned by a master vampire?"

"It is the safest place for me to take my rest, Danny."

"I wouldn't let anything happen to you."

"This is for the best."

Spending the day at The Hollowing didn't sound like 'the best' to her. In fact, it sounded absolutely ridiculous. There had to be hundreds of places they could bunk down for the day. Why in the world did Thad have to choose the one lodging that happened to be held by a master vampire?

“*He* set it up, didn’t he?”

“If you are referring to my master,” Thad nodded. “He did think that this was the best idea.”

She knew it. That slimy, Machiavellian bastard! “Well, choose something else.”

“There is no choice.”

“Thad...”

“If you would like me to drop you off at some other location, just tell me. I will. I will take my rest at The Hollowing, and you can spend the day at the Holiday Inn.”

The Holiday Inn had a pool, didn’t it? Danny shook her head to clear it. As much as she would enjoy spending the day lounging by the pool drinking cocktails, ...she knew in her heart of hearts what would happen to Thad if he was caught disobeying his master. She was certain that Savior had made the directive and she was equally certain that if she did not spend the day at The Hollowing, Savior would take out his displeasure on Thad. And that was not acceptable.

“The Hollowing it is.”

“Really?”

“Don’t sound so surprised.”

“I am. I thought you’d fight harder than you did.”

“Would you like me to?”

“What do you have against The Hollowing, Danny?” Thad sounded genuinely bewildered.

“Are you joking?”

“No, I’m curious. You’re a magi, Danny, and a wolf...” he laughed, “and you’re Dennison Lee, the invincible...”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Thad, it’s The Hollowing! The same Hollowing that is written up in *Paranormal Report*.” Danny winced. “*The Hollowing, an enchanting realm where time has no meaning and sensibilities no place ... run by Master Vampire Rickart Sven, this reporter wishes the rest of the world would live within the boundaries of The Hollowing...*”

“You see ... that doesn’t sound so bad,” Thad said.

Danny rolled her eyes. “Jesus, Thad, I swear, reading that article, I think I threw up a little in my mouth.”

“Lovely, real descriptive there, hon.”

“Well, I did. Seriously, I have *no* desire to spend any time at The Hollowing, and even less interest in possibly bumping into master vampire Rickart Sven.”

“I will be sleeping, along with all the others *like me*. I don’t think you’ll be, uh, bumping into the big guy.”

“With my luck...”

Thad nodded. “True, very true. You have the worst luck ever.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“Do you disagree?”

She couldn’t. She couldn’t think of anyone who had worse luck than she did. It was like the fates were conspiring against her—all the fucking time. And people thought she was paranoid. She wasn’t paranoid. She was just used to being the *wrong person at the wrong time in the wrong place*. Being *that* person would make anyone more than a little uneasy ... and perhaps more than a tad bit paranoid.

“Danny?”

“Mmmmm?”

“Are you still with me?”

“Yeah, I’m still with you.”

“You were a million miles away there for a while.”

“Whatever.” Danny turned toward her window and focused on the scenery whizzing past her eyes.

“You’ve just shut me out.”

She didn’t answer. She had shut him out. Why was it she was always *that* person? The person with the terrible luck, the person who couldn’t seem to catch a break. Oh, she had spent years telling herself that there wasn’t anything different about her. That she was as normal as the next person, and that she made her own luck. She had control. She could do anything ... and if it seemed that she couldn’t ... well, she would change it. By sheer force of will she would make the situation change to her liking. But recent events had made her realize something—she didn’t know jack shit. And control ... ha, what fucking control was that?

Alexander, Draco, Savior ... you want to talk about control, power ... they had all the control and they certainly had all the power. She was left grasping at straws ... or trying to keep them from grasping her straw. It was so little she asked for, and yet everyone wanted it. Everyone wanted the little she had.

Well fuck that! Control was slipping—yes. Power? She was learning lately what little power she had over life-altering events. Nonetheless, she was not about to let those who might try to take everything from her into her life. She could not allow them to even have a taste—well, another taste. For if they had a taste ... they would want it all, hadn’t the past taught her anything?

Oh, she didn’t believe for a minute that she was the most beautiful, the most desirable, even the sexiest woman out there ... no, that had nothing to do with it. Man, wolf and evil bloodsucking dead wanted her because they couldn’t have her—or because someone else wanted her. Men, be they wolf or not, were all the same. They all played the same old game. They all beat to the same drummer. If they couldn’t have her, or someone else wanted her, *boom*, she was numero uno, the big fucking cheese.

“Danny ... Danny ... Danny, talk to me.”

“Huh?”

“Jesus, you scared the crap out of me.”

“Huh?”

Thad pulled the car over to the side of the road and cut off the engine.

“What are you doing? Do you want to get us killed? What’s wrong with you?” Danny shouted.

“I was going to ask you the same question. You totally went all weird on me. And you said, ‘huh’ twice, did you realize that? I don’t think I’ve ever heard you say the word ‘huh’ and you just uttered it twice in less than a minute.”

“You nearly got us killed because I said ‘huh’?”

“You were in a different world, Danny. You just spaced out on me. And,” Thad sighed, “I’m not used to you spacing out. You’re like the most composed person I know.”

Composed? Wow, she was becoming a fine little actress. “Thad, believe me when I tell you I’m as far from composed as possible.”

“Then you sure put on a good front.”

“You have no idea,” she muttered under her breath.

“What?”

“Nothing.” Danny tried to gather her thoughts. “Listen, Thaddie boy, maybe I was taking a minute to feel sorry for myself, but it’s over now, I’m done and I feel much better.”

“Why would you feel sorry for yourself?”

Danny stared at him incredulously. “Are you serious?”

“Wasn’t it you who told me a couple of days ago that you were in a ‘good place’ that you felt at ease and even peaceful? That you enjoyed not killing things, and felt good about getting out of the mercenary business?”

“I wasn’t in the mercenary business,” she ground out.

“Uh-huh, okay. You were in the ‘right hand for money’ business, does that sound better to you?”

“Not really.”

“My point is ... I thought you felt good about your life, Danny.”

“I did too,” she murmured, “I did too.”

“So what happened?”

“Do we really want to talk about this here, on the side of the interstate?”

“You mean ... do *you* really want to talk about this here on the side of the interstate.”

“Thad...”

“Danny, please, talk to me.”

“We have a long ways to go, we should get going.”

“Danny, don’t shut me out, please...”

“*What?* What do you want me to say?” Danny screamed. “Do you want me to tell you how fucking screwed up my life is? Do you want me to tell you that I feel like I’m spiraling out of control and I don’t know how to get back on track? Do you want me to tell you how each and every day I feel the beast gaining on me ... stalking me, and that someday soon it’ll overtake me?” She squared her shoulders and narrowed her eyes in defiance. “Well I won’t. Do you hear me,” she turned her flinty eyes back toward him, “I won’t! Whatever this fucking screwed up life holds for me, I’ll take it, just like I’ve taken everything else. It’s like you said ... I’m the one and only Dennison Lee, *magi* wolf ... and I can do anything, right?”

“Danny, I ... I...”

Danny held up her hand to stop him. “Yeah, let’s forget about it, okay? Can we get this show on the road?”

Thad swallowed and nodded. “Yes, I think that would be a good idea ... a very good idea.”

Chapter Two

It was a crawling pestilence ... dawn—that glowing orb of humanity that had the power to end it all for her friend. Her senses were sharply alive, she could almost feel the onslaught of dawn on her tongue. She could almost taste its sweet bitterness. She turned to Thad and could see by the tightness of his mouth and the creases by his eyes that he could sense the sun as well. He knew how near it was.

“You have to go under,” Danny murmured.

Thad nodded. “Yes.”

“How far are we?”

“Not far at all.”

“Will you make it?” Danny wished she could take over the driving but she had no idea where *The Hollowing* was.

“Yes,” he answered curtly.

And just like that she felt it ... the cool breeze of magic, the beautiful scent of power. It surrounded her, enfolded her like a glove, and made her feel at home. “It’s beautiful,” she murmured.

“What?”

Danny closed her eyes and breathed in the sweet scent of it all. “Can you not smell it ... sense it? It’s wonderful.”

“I think I still smell the New Jersey Turnpike,” Thad muttered. “I never knew super senses would be so nauseating.”

“It smells like the wind and the water, like the cool brine of the ocean and the musk of the forest, it smells like coming home.”

“Whoa ... definitely smelling different things. How can I smell what you’re smelling?” Thad made a sharp left and suddenly they were driving down a dirt road. The scent of the forest was thick and brash around them, and Danny shivered with delight.

“There, there it is,” Thad announced.

There what was? All Danny could see was empty fairgrounds. The power, oh she smelled the power, and the scent of magic was everywhere. But this was hardly what she imagined when she read about *The Hollowing*. Maybe they took a wrong turn.

“A representative was supposed to meet us.” Thad’s voice wavered.

“I think we’re shit out of luck.” Danny jumped as another shock of energy hit her hard and fast. “Let’s get out of the car.”

“Don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“Don’t be such a baby. What? Are you going to sit in the car and wait until you’re vampire flambé?” She unlocked the door and hopped out of the car. Her nostrils flared as she caught the unmistakable scent of wolf. “Thad, get the hell out of the car, you weenie. You have exactly a minute before I pull you out by your hair.” Thad swallowed heavily and Danny watched the flittering expressions cross his face.

“You are not what I expected.” The new voice was silky smooth and laced with malice.

Danny turned slowly. She was neither startled nor surprised by what she now faced. For everything within her spoke of a known call. This woman was wolf, and strong, very

strong indeed. The woman was uncommonly lovely, with dark eyes and equally dark hair. She was slender as a reed but impressively muscled. Her hair fell in a curtain down her back and spilled over her shoulders, a curtain as black as midnight. Danny's beast began to roar as it recognized the threat, and she tempered her power down, refusing to begin her stay in unknown territory with the shedding of blood.

"Wolf caught your tongue?" The mystery woman smiled a cool and absolutely unfriendly smile.

"I am Dennison Lee, and my companion Thaddeus Whitt needs to go under. We were told he could take his rest here." Danny kept her tone respectful even in the light of the woman's malice-filled eyes. If spending time in Savior and Draco's territory had taught her anything, it was reserve and the need to be cautious. Wow. It seemed she was growing up after all. That or she just really needed to get laid.

"Very nicely put, and here I was told what a reckless wolf you are."

"Can we quit with the small talk now and get this show on the road?"

"So there is a temper hidden beneath that cool façade."

Cool façade? Who was this she-bitch kidding? "I'm not in the mood to watch my friend burn to a fucking crisp, so yeah, I'd like to get him safely ensconced for the day." Danny didn't even flinch when the other woman's power began to thrust forth. She was strong ... but Danny was stronger.

"Cloverly, you were to bring our guests to the meeting hall immediately. Our master will be *most* displeased with you. You have wasted precious time." The new speaker was not a wolf, he was a vampire, and he was studying Danny with interest apparent in his silvery eyes.

"This is no concern of yours, Antoine."

"Oh, but I believe it is, Cloverly. I see the evil promise swirling about you as we speak. You will not have the opportunity to ruin this fortunate meeting for our master."

"You are not master of me, Antoine."

"Nay, you are right about that, but do you truly wish to pit your wolf against me? If you wish, we shall deal with this little problem here and now, otherwise, you shall depart to our master and explain why our guests were made to wait for an audience."

Cloverly hissed, but in a seamless mating of magic and power she was shifted to her wolf form. She tossed Danny one last malevolent look before racing off toward the empty fairgrounds. The moment Cloverly was gone, the vampire Antoine turned the full force of his magnetic eyes onto Danny.

"I apologize to you, Dennison Lee, and comrade, for Cloverly's deplorable display. Please, follow me, we have little time and our master has been made to wait over long."

"You'll have to get out of the car now, Thad," Danny quipped, pulling open the driver's seat door. Thad obediently stepped out of the car.

"Now, please follow me." Antoine began to briskly walk toward the fairgrounds. As they made their way across the fairgrounds it seemed to mold and melt and form into something utterly opposite to the empty space that Danny had first encountered when they arrived.

Danny clenched her hands into tight fists as she strove to remain detached, when a gentle, invisible hand seemed to caress her ankles and move up her legs. "Stop," she finally hissed when the caress became increasingly intimate.

"Stop, my friends, she is unaccustomed to our family and our ways," Antoine

murmured, and instantly the groping ceased.

“What is going on?” There was little magic that escaped Danny’s notice. She could sense it as part of her soul. But this strangeness, these odd invisible caresses were foreign to her, and began to upset her balance, and her control. And if there was one thing Danny hated above all else, it was lack of control.

“Our master will explain all to you ... but first, first,” Antoine stiffened, “I believe we all must take our rest.” His voice grew low and he murmured, “He shall be most displeased with this turn of events, most displeased indeed.”

When the three of them had reached the main encampment, Danny noticed that the dead end was in fact an entrance. There was a large iron door built into the side of the hills that surrounded the fairgrounds. Antoine spoke a set of hushed words and the doors swung open for them. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness almost immediately. She took in the smooth and adorned walls of the hall and the beautifully tiled floors. No mere cave was this. They reached the end of a long corridor and Antoine pulled open a set of double doors.

“Whoa.” Danny knew that her eyes had probably widened significantly but considering what she was now looking at, hell she was amazed she was as composed as she now was.

It was Nero’s Rome, okay without the rivers of blood and extreme orgies (not that she couldn’t imagine an orgy taking place any minute). There were lush, rich brocaded pillows strewn everywhere. Heavy tapestries adorned the walls and drapery was a whispered caress in every corner. And upon all of this beauty and lavishness were the dead.

“You may take your repose here, young Thaddeus,” Antoine murmured, leading Thad to a corner that was unoccupied. “Every consideration was taken for your comfort, and if there is anything else that you may require ... you have but to call. Are you in need of a donor at this moment?”

“Yuck,” Danny blurted out, clearing her throat when all heads swung in her direction.

“You find our appetites distasteful? As a wolf, I find that interesting.” Antoine’s eyes were casually assessing her.

“As a wolf I understand, as a woman ... I find it a tad bit icky, bordering on downright disgusting.” Danny watched as Antoine’s eyes grew wide right before he burst out into thundering laughter. The entire room broke out into titters at his display.

“Honest, you are refreshingly honest...”

“More like downright blunt,” Thad said.

“That too, young Thaddeus, that too, but, in our world ... it is quite lovely to see one as honest and blunt as your comrade here. Now, you shall take your repose.”

“What about Danny?”

“Don’t worry about me. I can handle myself just fine.” Danny gave Thad a reassuring smile.

“Of that I have no doubt. However, I will have to ask you to come with me, Dennison Lee.” Antoine held out his hand to her.

Danny snorted. “Uh, yeah, fine, but you’re deluded if you think I’m taking your hand.” The vampires around them gasped, but Antoine did nothing but chuckle.

“Then come, Dennison Lee.”

"I'll see you tonight, Thad."

"Yeah, see you tonight, Danny ... uh, watch your back, okay?"

"Will do, Thaddie boy, will do." Danny gave him one last lingering look before she followed Antoine out of the massive room.

* * * *

How did she put this nicely? "Uh, don't you have to konk out for the day?"

"Indeed, I shall find my own rest as soon as I deliver you."

Deliver indeed, he made her sound like some errant package. "And where would you be delivering me?"

"We have arrived." Antoine swept his arms wide and Danny took in the large, gleaming room.

"Nice digs," she whistled.

"I am glad you find my abode satisfactory." A cool wind preceded the new, chocolate smooth voice.

It really wasn't fair that vampires had such beautiful voices. It was just another mark against them in her opinion. Danny felt cool fingers touch her shoulder and she stiffened immediately.

"If you want to keep those fingers, I'd suggest that you remove that hand from my shoulder, now!" Her voice was like iron.

And just like that he was before her, like a glittering gem of the highest order. His hair was a fall of spun cornsilk and his eyes were gleaming amber. He was beautiful, as only the dead could be.

"Dennison Lee, *magi* wolf, welcome to *The Hollowing*, welcome to my territory."

"Master vampire Rickart Sven, thank you most kindly for your hospitality." She bowed her head respectfully.

"It is a little late for that, don't you think?"

Danny cocked her head to one side in inquiry.

"You show respect a little late," Rickart said coolly, measuring her every move with his eyes.

"If you're talking about earlier ... I don't allow anyone to grope me." *At least, not without my consent.*

"You are a fiery thing."

"Isn't it a little late, uh, early? Shouldn't you be getting where the sun don't shine?"

"I am touched by your concern."

Danny shrugged. "Not concerned, just curious."

"I believe I shall keep my secrets my own for now. Come, sit."

"I think I'll stand, thanks," she spoke bitingly.

"You'll sit." His voice was no longer cool or smooth, but sharp like a million daggers scoring her skin. His power was radiating forth, and he was strong—shockingly so.

Compulsion, she fucking hated compulsion. Danny gritted her teeth as his power continued to bombard her. His compulsion was nothing like Savior's. It was not sweet and cajoling. No, Rickart Sven's power was cruel and painful. Every pulse of it bit into her skin and ate away at her. He was strong, and he was determined—a lethal combination. Somehow though, she did not believe that he wished her dead, it was all a

play of power. He was determined to put her into her place and show her who was in control. She had been down this particular road before, this game was nothing new. She had always hated it, and she hated it still.

Danny drew the threads of her magic to her and began to weave a comforting shield to protect herself from Rickart's malicious power. The woven magic took time however, and each moment she took to compose her shield, he chipped away at her.

"This macho shit has got to stop," Danny grit out, as she drew more power to her hands. "Seriously, I get it. You're the big cheese..." She grunted and began to work on her offense. She didn't want to attack the master vampire. Not only was she fairly certain he could harm her ... but talk about fucking terrible politics.

"Stand down, little *magi* wolf." Abruptly, the assault on her senses stopped.

Every time she entered a new territory she was "attacked." When had welcome taken on a whole new meaning? When did welcome suddenly mean, *let's visit some pain on the magi wolf*?

"Don't think clicking my heels together is going to work," she muttered.

"Pardon?"

She sighed. "Nothing, just making a little, uh, movie reference."

"You are indeed as strong as they claimed."

"Who claimed?" Danny bristled when he seemed to ignore her.

"I cannot remember the last time someone withstood my compulsion ... and fought back as well. For I could certainly feel the heat of your power against my own. You were testing your force against mine."

"I'd call it self-defense."

"Delightful, you are deliciously bold." Rickart sighed. "Now on that note I believe I must take my leave of you. I find myself suddenly fatigued."

Fatigued? He had to be downright frigging exhausted. Danny knew it had to be early and was already shocked at how alert and unharmed he appeared to be. How was it possible?

"Through those doors you shall find your room. I believe you will find everything to your satisfaction. I will expect your company promptly at dusk." With those words master vampire Rickart Sven dematerialized.

"Aye aye, captain," Danny muttered. "Annoying, pompous ass." She strode purposefully through the doors he had indicated and was pleased to find herself in a lovely room. The walls were a soothing shade of blue and the entire room smelled of sweet lavender and jasmine. Somehow she very much doubted that master vampire Rickart was an interior decorator to boot. She wondered who had adorned and designed the room.

Danny walked over to the huge bed in the center of the room and plopped herself down. She sank deliciously into the bed and sighed with pleasure. She was tired. God, how had she missed how frigging exhausted she was? She'd take a small nap, just a very small nap, and then ... well ... she'd explore.

* * * *

It was exhilarating and incredible—the forest was alive with the sweet pull of magic and power.

Danny raced through the trees and let the cool wind rush through her thick fur. When

had she last felt so alive? This place was amazing. It seemed to beckon her ... all of master Rickart's holdings seemed to beckon to her. She could nearly taste the dew of magic on her tongue and she longed to drink deep of it.

A fierce snarl followed by snapping teeth drew her attention. Standing not five feet from her was a dark wolf. There was sense of immediate familiarity. She had encountered this wolf before. Oh yes, it was the wolf who had greeted them, what was her name again ... Clever, Clovis ... Cloverly, that was it, her name was Cloverly.

With an easy pull of muscle, sinew and bone, she shifted. She stood, naked, in front of the snarling wolf, sure that she would not be attacked.

"I would rather face you as the woman I know you to be, Cloverly."

The wolf cocked its head to one side, regarding Danny with knowing eyes. It seemed to mull over her words for a moment before a swirl of magic gripped them both in its hold. Moments later the lovely Cloverly stood before Danny in her human form. She tossed the dark curtain of her hair over one slender shoulder. Her eyes were cool and biting and her mouth drawn in a tight, unyielding line.

"Fancy meeting you here."

"I do not like you," Cloverly spoke, and her voice was harsh and angry.

"You don't know me. Who knows, you could get to know me and find out that I'm the nicest person ever. And then wouldn't you feel like an ass?" Not much chance of that, but hey, one could try.

"I know all that I need to. You are not welcome here. You will leave, or I will be forced to make you leave."

Really? Well at least she had a large set of...

"Listen, Cloverly..."

"I didn't say you could use my Christian name."

Picky, picky, she needed to teach this whelp a lesson. "What is it about she-wolves anyway? Is it built into our fucking DNA? The 'I'm the biggest bitch ever,' gene? I swear, I'm getting tired of this crap. This is why I don't have girlfriends." Danny almost laughed at the befuddled expression on Cloverly's pretty, pinched face. She looked seriously confused.

"Girlfriends?"

"Yes, you know, a bunch of girls that you get together with and hang out, maybe grab some Mexican and consume some alcoholic beverages. Take in the newest Brad Pitt flick and make lewd comments about his ... attributes. Those are girlfriends, and that's what they do." Danny frowned. "Or at least that's what I've heard they do. Hell, that's what they do in those girlie movies."

"We are wolves," Cloverly murmured.

"Yeah, I'm aware of that ... but are we not also women? Where the fuck is the rule that states we're not allowed to have normal, female, *human* friends, or perhaps even normal, female wolf friends? I'm sort of sick of people trying to kill me all of the time, aren't you?"

"People try to kill you?"

"Or at least threaten to kill me. Isn't that what you're doing right now?"

"I ... I..."

"I'm just saying," Danny barreled on, "wouldn't it just be easier to be, uh, friends, than to fight and possibly maim or kill one another?" She hadn't really ever thought

about it before, she usually just rushed into a situation and ended up getting herself into a fine mess. She hadn't ever really tried *talking* to an enemy before. It didn't help that her natural, uh, stubborn streak and penchant for giving lip usually had creatures both alive and dead ready to strangle her ... or worse.

"You wish to take him away from me," Cloverly said. Her words were nearly hushed and weighty with emotion.

"Huh?"

"My love, you wish to take him away from me."

She just wanted to run, a nice run in the woods. Instead she was stuck playing frigging word games with an angry wolf. An angry wolf who was now beginning to confuse her. "Taking a chance that I may sound totally confused ... what the hell, I am confused. What in the world are you talking about?"

Cloverly took a step toward Danny. Her eyes seemed to flash fire. "You've come here to take Rickart away from me. I will not allow it."

"Take Rickart where?"

"Are you dumb as well as addled?"

"Addled?" Danny snorted. "I'm assuming that you weren't just flattering me. Listen, I'm not taking Rickart anywhere."

"He is mine, as I am his. We belong together and you cannot have him."

Oh, this was about jealousy. Well, now she wasn't nearly as confused. Jealousy, it was always about jealousy. And Danny knew that if anything was as close to wolf way, it was jealousy. Bitches couldn't help it. They were both women and wolf and in both the need to have, mark and possess a mate was instinctive. When they found a suitable mate, one strong and powerful and even better—master or Alpha ... they would fight down to their last breath for the right to claim their mate.

It was rare, or at least Danny didn't see much of interspecies mating, especially between wolves and vampires, but it made sense. Both wolves and vampires were creatures of a dominant, superior nature and they both had a system that required a master or leader. They had clans, though vampire's referred to their groupings as nests, and they had rigid laws and rules to keep order within their sects. Why wouldn't a strong wolf fall for a strong vampire? She had fallen under thrall of Savior's pull, had she not? She could try to fool herself into believing that it was merely compulsion that had drawn her to Savior, but that was all it would be ... fooling herself. She knew there was something in Savior that called to her, and lord if it didn't scare her ... even now. For how could she give in to the dead? She was a creature of life, a daughter of the earth. And he was a creature of death, and ruled nothing but the dark. It seemed an impossible pairing.

"There have been whispers all week of the arrival of the *magi* wolf. Whispers and talk of the union between you and ... and ... the master."

Danny blinked. She had been so deep in thought she had almost forgotten that Cloverly was standing in front of her. It was a new habit, a bad habit that she would have to break—losing herself in her thoughts and forgetting her surroundings. She had to be on guard. In this world ... one had to always be on guard.

"I am not here for your master. I am here for my friend."

"Your friend?"

"Yes, my friend, Thad. He needed a place to rest before we began the next leg of our trip. *The Hollowing* was the safest place for him to bunk down. This had nothing to do

with your master, and everything to do with not letting my friend fry.”

Cloverly narrowed her eyes. “It seems too easy. There must be another reason you came here.”

“Nope, that’s about it.”

“I thought you had no friends.”

“No *girl* friends. Thad he is, was, my apprentice, and well ... yeah we became friends.”

“And this was a favor to your friend?”

“I guess you could say that, yes.”

“You are a wolf, like myself, but you are also *magi*, one infused with deep powers. Your union would be much desired by our master.”

“Isn’t it interesting how everyone always thinks they know your life better than you do? Why would I be a good match for your master? Do you know anything about me, other than what you see before you? What makes you think that your master and I would be a suitable match for one another?” Why, for that matter, did all the men she meet seem to believe they’d be a suitable mate for her. And of course, they didn’t think she had any say in her own life, let alone her own body.

“Power calls power,” Cloverly said simply.

“Yes, that is true. Power does call power. But did you spend one moment thinking what two like powers can do to one another?”

“What?”

“Did you ever think that two powers that are too similar to one another cannot be combined and magnified? That they would only neutralize or destroy one another?”

“I have never heard of power doing such a thing.”

“No? But how much do you know of *magi* wolves?” Cloverly’s silence was answer enough for Danny. “I thought so. Listen, by nightfall we will be gone. And you may have your master vampire, and all the shit that comes along with one.” Danny saw Cloverly’s eyes darken and cursed her stray tongue. Of course she would have to throw that last gibe in there.

“You will leave by nightfall?”

“Oh yeah, I have no desire to stay here any longer than I need to.”

Cloverly cocked her head to one side and finally nodded. “Then see that you do.” With those words, she turned on her heel and began to walk away.

“Wolf nature.” Danny sighed and made a disgusted sound deep in her throat.

“Sometimes I hate being a wolf.”

* * * *

Danny stepped into the shower and let the cold water cascade over her body. She was on fire. She wasn’t sure what the problem was, but it had begun not too long after Cloverly had left her. Her body was on fire, and she felt as if she were being eaten alive by the flames that licked at her. Danny knew that the water was on as cold as it possibly could go, and yet she was still burning up.

“Danny.” The shower curtain was pulled open to reveal her naked form.

“Fuck. What do you think you’re doing, Thad?” She wrapped the curtain around her dripping body.

“Uh, don’t know if you noticed this, but the water is freezing.”

“No shit, Sherlock. Now, is that why you’re here, to tell me how cold the water is? Or is there another reason you’re disturbing my shower.”

“We’ve been called to dinner.”

“I’d rather just get an early start, and eat something on the road. We can stop by an Arby’s or something.”

“We’ve been called to dinner,” Thad restated, his voice firm.

Danny widened her eyes and snorted. “Oh, it’s like that, is it? Well, if you would kindly remove yourself from my bath, then I’ll put on some presentable clothes and come with you.”

Thad stood his ground, his eyes twinkling merrily.

“You have a minute to get out of my bath before I...” She called on some minor power and let it fill her hand.

“Oh, it’s like that, is it,” he said, mimicking her words. “Fine, I’ll wait in your room.” He left the bathroom whistling.

Danny slid out of the shower and water sluiced off her body. She didn’t bother with a towel as she was still burning up. She ran a hand through her thick, wet hair to separate some of the knots and then wrung it out. She walked into her room to find Thad sitting on her bed, thumbing through a rag magazine.

“Did you know that Brangelina moved to New Orleans?” he said, without looking up.

“Do you really think I care?” She began to rummage through her bag for some appropriate clothes.

“How can you not care that...” Thad stopped mid sentence.

Danny turned and batted her eyes innocently. “Yes, Thad? Was there something that you wanted to say?”

“Uh, just that they are the most ... uh ... gorgeous couple ... uh, that ... they are ... uhm, they are...” he finished helplessly.

“Yes, that was real informative of you, thank you.” She found her black leather pants and began to pull them on *sans* panties.

“You ... you ... you are...” Thad gulped.

“Yes?”

“Do you have a camera I could use? Some moments are meant to remember.”

Danny rolled her eyes. She fished her black sequined top out of her bag and drew it over her head.

“I like your hair down.”

Danny wound her hair up into a tight bun and secured it with two long silver sticks. She pulled on her leather boots and nodded.

“Ready.”

Chapter Three

They were back in the same gleaming room where she had initially met master vampire Rickart. It was now set for dinner. A long dining room table graced the middle of the room and beautiful golden plates and goblets adorned the table. The crystal chandeliers were gleaming and everywhere Danny looked, gold winked at her. Standing at the end of the long table was master vampire Rickart all decked out in a long gold duster and golden tunic, complete with tawny colored slacks, with his flaxen hair falling free around his shoulders. Danny was pretty certain that on anyone else the ensemble would have been ridiculous and overdone, but somehow on the master vampire ... it just worked. The fact that he was insanely beautiful didn't hurt matters any. When someone was as good-looking as master vampire Rickart, well, a paper bag would serve as designer duds.

"Ah, you have arrived just in time for dinner." Rickart smiled, revealing pearly-white teeth.

"Did I have a choice?"

Rickart's smile widened. "Not really."

"Didn't think so," Danny said. She strode farther into the room, quite aware of the eyes that followed her movement. She hadn't missed the fact that she-bitch Cloverly had slid over to Rickart and twined her sinuous body around his, resting her hand very possessively on his chest.

"She is hardly dressed for dinner," Cloverly hissed.

She had hoped that they were over this nasty baiting thing, or at least that they could leave the nastiness to a minimum. "Nice to see you too, Cloverly. And I would say that *you're* the one that is hardly dressed for dinner." It was true, the she-wolf was nearly naked, save what appeared to be a gold bikini top and a fringe that seemed to believe it could pass itself off as a skirt. Danny was almost gleeful when Cloverly scowled fiercely at her. It's not like she wanted to start a fight—not exactly. But maybe all this, "growing up" stuff was beginning to get to her. She wasn't a "peaceful" person by nature, and trying to be too nice just served to get on her nerves.

"Easy, my wolf." Rickart caressed Cloverly's cheek. "Please, be seated."

Danny sighed. It didn't appear as if she and Thad were going to get out of *The Hollowing* as early as she had hoped. She took a seat at the opposite end of the table and Thad sat next to her.

Cloverly sidled up to Danny. "You said nightfall," she spoke softly. "You said you'd be gone by nightfall."

"Don't blame me, blame your vampire. I'd be on the road and on my way to an Arby's by now if I hadn't been called to this little shindig." Danny strove not to scratch her shoulder, it was burning fiercely, it was all she could do to keep herself from dropping to her knees and rubbing her skin against the table like a cat intent on grooming.

"You will leave now." Cloverly hissed.

"My sweet Clover," Rickart called, "you will amend that tone of yours now."

"Rickart..."

"I will hear nothing at this moment, Clover. Come here."

Cloverly growled at Danny but obeyed her master.

"We will have supper and then we will discuss necessary matters." Rickart snapped his fingers and suddenly servers were standing at the table ready to wait upon them. "I have had my chef prepare a lovely steak for you, Dennison. I hope it will meet to your satisfaction." He didn't wait for her response. "There are beautiful new potatoes and baby carrots, but I can have the chef prepare some other side dishes if you prefer."

"Potatoes and carrots are fine," Danny answered. The servers were already sliding dishes onto the golden table and the scent of food wafted up to her from the serving platters. A massive steak was placed in front of her and Danny could see blood pooled beneath the chunk of meat.

"I took the liberty of telling the chef to prepare it rare," Rickart said.

"The bloodier the better," Danny quipped.

"And of course, we have not forgotten about you. Serve our youngling now."

It was somewhat disconcerting to see and smell blood as it flowed from a pitcher into Thad's large goblet. As a wolf, it wasn't as if blood freaked her out—not hardly. But to see it so thick and smell its copper richness put her off slightly.

"Danny?" Thad asked questioningly.

"It's okay, go ahead." She could hardly fault him for drinking blood from a goblet. And she'd rather see him drink blood from a glass than from some donor's neck any day. The fact that it was Thad, her sweet, annoying, former apprentice Thad, didn't help matters any. It was still hard for her to accept this transition of his. It was hard to accept he was now one of the dead. Danny watched Thad drink deep of his blood and she cut into her steak, it ran red for her. "Perfect."

"You will not get away with this!" a voice thundered.

"Now what?" Danny muttered. Having her dinner interrupted just further annoyed her. The quicker she finished eating, the quicker she could leave this place. Her senses were assailed, she smelled the forest and the quiet welcome of the earth, and she knew without looking that the voice belonged to a wolf.

"This is outrageous!" Rickart stood suddenly, his beautiful face was now suffused with rage. "How dare you interrupt us!"

Danny turned around in her chair so that she could face this new intruder. The man standing not five feet from the table was flanked on either side by two equally imposing men, but it was the huge man taking center stage that commanded attention and threw forth all the power of Pack—here was the Alpha.

Fuck. Just what she needed.

The man's eyes were the color of glaciers and just as cold. He suddenly turned those magnetic eyes onto the wolf standing pressed against Rickart's side.

"Cloverly." The man whispered her name and Danny saw the flash of fear that crossed the girl's face. She cast Rickart a look before she made her way over to the intruding wolf. She gasped when he wrapped one hand around her slender neck and held her in front of him.

"Garrison, please." Cloverly struggled to speak.

"Silence!" The wolf Garrison tightened his hold on Cloverly's neck. He turned his furious eyes to Rickart. "You dare, you dare!"

"I dare much!" Rickart snarled. "This is my holding, this is my land, and you will leave now."

“I think not.” Garrison strode forward, his hold still on Cloverly’s neck. He was all but dragging the wolf with him, looking like Christopher Robin in a murderous rage, hauling Winnie the Pooh by the neck. “You think I do not see what is taking place here? You think I do not understand what your plans are? I see it all. I see through you, you dead bastard!”

And just like that Rickart was flying through the air toward the Alpha. Wolf Garrison had a split second to throw Cloverly to the ground before he brought his arms up to ward off Rickart’s fangs and claws. His bodyguards began to tear at Rickart’s back, shredding his coat, along with his flesh, like so much paper. Rickart sank his claws into the Alpha’s shoulder and twisted his head to sink his fangs into one of the bodyguard’s neck. Blood spurted forth and filled the air with its metallic scent.

Danny popped the last piece of her steak into her mouth, chewing slowly and watching the display with dispassionate eyes. When Rickart came an inch away from decapitating one of the attacking wolves with his wickedly sharp claws she stood from the table, wiped her hands off with a pristine white napkin and began making her way toward the battling group.

Suddenly she found herself face down on the ground, and there was a searing pain shooting through her body. She looked down to find Cloverly in wolf form, and her massive mouth was wrapped around her leg.

“You’ve *got* to be kidding me,” Danny muttered. She kicked out with her free leg and managed to hit the fierce she-bitch dead center in the middle of her head. Cloverly yelped and Danny took that moment to blast her with a powerful bolt of energy. The other wolf shot back and Danny knew that she hadn’t irrevocably harmed her, it was just a zap of energy and she’d be better in a bit—better and sporting some singed fur. She stood and winced, her leg was frigging killing her. That nasty bitch had a wicked bite. “All right, this cave-wolf behavior ends now!”

She summoned up a binding spell and, using some blood that had splattered on the floor, she finished locking the magic threads together. She cast the spell and watched as the magic found its targets. Moments later each of the battling creatures were thrashing against an invisible hold. It wouldn’t hold for too long. She hadn’t used enough blood. If she had used her own, the field would have been stronger. But her leg was bleeding like a sonofabitch and she really didn’t feel like donating any more blood to the cause.

“You will release me now,” Rickart said. His face had reverted back to its former calm beauty.

“Oh, will I?” Danny felt the tingling in her leg and knew that her body had already begun to heal. “Since introductions weren’t made,” Danny turned from Rickart to the other warded wolves, “I’m Danny, and you are...?” The Alpha was obviously seething. His cold, ice-blue eyes were flashing and he was grinding his teeth. “Yeah, this is the part where you say, ‘Nice to meet you, Danny, I’m...’ This would be that place.”

“Dennison Lee, *magi* wolf,” he spoke finally.

“Seriously, does *everyone* know my name?”

“You are a *magi* wolf, *the magi* wolf. I would assume that all Alphas have been watching your progress.”

“Terrific, I’m thrilled,” she said sourly.

“I am Garrison Ford, Alpha of the High River Clan.”

Danny’s lips quirked. “Cute, your folks have a thing for the actor?” At his blank look

she shrugged. The High River Clan, Danny had heard of the High River Clan. When she was growing up, the High River Clan was a clan carried on many lips. And the Alpha, Clinton Ford, was a name spoken in a hushed voice. He was reputedly brutal and cruel and held his clan in an iron hand. Many feared heading into Alpha Ford's territory, and though his clan was not the largest by far in the United States, the reputation of their Alpha kept them safe and free from those who would try to take their territory by force.

"Any relation to Alpha Clinton Ford?" Danny asked, keeping a watchful eye on the shimmering magic of her fields—they wouldn't hold for much longer.

"His son," Garrison spoke, his voice rumbling. He made a motion to a still Cloverly. "I would see my sister tended to."

Danny's eyes widened in surprise. Well, wasn't this a strange turn of events. "Your sister?"

"Half, we share the same mother."

She would never have guessed it. There was little in Alpha Garrison Ford that she could detect in his sister. Oh, he was as handsome as she was lovely, but there the similarities ended. He had eyes like winter ice and hers were deep and rich, like heavy chocolate. Her skin was golden brown, unlike his porcelain complexion, and she was as lithe as a runway model, whereas his body was built like a linebacker. And yet, there was something in the shape of their features that bespoke of a familial relationship. One would have to look very close though, very close indeed.

"She will be all right?"

Nice to see that he was showing concern now, she wondered where his concern was when he was practically choking his poor sister.

"She's going to be fine. She's a little bit stunned, that's all. She'll come out of it no worse for wear in a minute or two." Perhaps she had added a little bit too much energy when she had zapped Cloverly. Oh well, the bitch had bitten her. "If I let you guys go, will you swear that you won't attack me?"

"We will," Garrison said.

"Will you swear not to attack one another?" Silence met her question. She planted her hands on her hips. "I'm going to let you guys rot there if you don't swear to keep your claws to yourself."

"I will not attack the Alpha at this time," Rickart spoke from his field.

"I echo the dead bastard's words."

"And your bodyguards?"

Garrison waved her words away. "They will obey me."

Danny let the fields down, and just in time, too. She was fucking exhausted. It took a great deal of energy to keep up multiple fields and even more energy when the ones who were fielded were as strong as the Alpha and the master vampire were.

"I believe I am owed an explanation," Rickart spoke silkily.

"*You* are owed an explanation?" Garrison narrowed his eyes. "You brought her here and you are owed an explanation."

"What the hell do *I* have to do with any of this?" Danny exclaimed.

"Foolish question," Rickard said. "It is as the Alpha said earlier, your every movement has been carefully watched since you were but a pup. What do you have to do with any of this? Have you not realized by now, Dennison Lee, everything has to do with you."

Oh fuck that! She had not rejoined the Pack to be pulled into all this other crap. “And here I thought no one cared about me,” she said sarcastically. “Listen, I’ll be leaving soon. In fact, how about I leave now?” She began to walk away when she felt the unmistakable call of the forest and earth. It filled her nostrils and flooded her belly. The force grew stronger until all she could do was grit her teeth and pray that she wouldn’t fall to the floor and shift.

He was calling her beast.

“I think we have matters to discuss.” Alpha Garrison’s voice was compelling and soothing, a far cry from the harsh tone he had displayed earlier.

Danny groaned and wrapped her hands around her middle. Thad rushed up to her and put his arms around her shoulders.

“Danny what’s wrong?” he asked. His eyes filled with concern and his hands were kneading her shoulders.

“Powerful, he’s fucking powerful,” Danny groaned. She was being swallowed alive. She couldn’t even call her own power, her beast was screaming at her and she knew she had made a huge error in damping down her beast all these months. When she had taken her job at *Universal Portal* she had made herself a promise that all the craziness she had been working with would be put aside. She had obligations (forced obligations) to her Pack and Alexander, but that would take up a minimum of her time. All else would be devoted to becoming a “normal” healthy girl, who didn’t have to worry about what coven was after her ass or what vampire wanted to suck on her neck nightly. She had made herself a promise. And she had worked on suppressing her beast. Now she realized what a mistake that latter part was. She was and always would be both wolf and woman. She could neither suppress nor kill one half of her soul.

Her beast would always know and it would rebel at the first sign that she was trying to destroy it.

This Alpha was taking full advantage of the fact she was weakened from expelling strong magic, and banking on her raging beast. He was winning, damn him to hell, he was winning.

Danny dropped to the ground, writhing. Her head fell back and she let out an inhuman roar of rage, pain and helplessness. She could not let it go. She could not lose control of her beast—not like this ... not now.

“Danny!”

She vaguely heard Thad scream her name, but his voice was faint and she was struggling to remain conscious.

“Let her go, she wishes to be let out.” Alpha Garrison began to circle her. He thrust a little more power into her and watched as her eyes began to change. The pupils began to disappear until her eyes became solid and sharp as the night sky. “Show me how beautiful you are, Dennison Lee, show me how beautiful you can be...”

Danny screamed as her beast was ripped from her body. The pain was devastating and she could barely breathe. She lay curled on the ground panting and tried to gain her bearings.

“So beautiful, your fur is blacker than the night sky.”

Danny flinched when she felt the Alpha of the High River Clan running his hands through her fur. She wanted to bite his hand off, but she could barely muster the energy to move her head, let alone to snap at him. She was out of shape and she had let herself

go. If this move on Alpha Garrison's part had taught her anything, it was that she had to re-condition herself. She could not let this happen again, not without a fucking huge fight. He had called her beast out, and it had been painful. It served her right for being egotistical and lazy. Had she truly thought her mage abilities would keep her safe from attacks such as these? One part human, one part wolf, she could never forget that, she could never forget her soul rested upon a delicate balance ... that if upset, would end up destroying her in the end.

"Impressive display." Master vampire Rickart knelt down on the opposite side of Danny. He too began to run his hands through her thick downy fur.

They were petting her. Damn it all to hell, they were petting her. She managed to lift her head and growl. "Easy there, girl, you'll shift to human form momentarily." The voice belonged to the Alpha of the High River Clan and she began to struggle to get out of their warring grips. She rolled to her side, moved out of their reach, and slowly trotted over to Thad. She nudged his leg and licked his hand when he scratched her behind the ears.

"What did you do to her?" Thad asked. His voice was hard and angry.

"Nothing that didn't need to be done. She showed her claws, and I showed mine. She may have the power of the mage running through her lovely veins, but she is still wolf," Alpha Garrison's eyes glittered, "and the wolf answers my call. The wolf belongs to me."

"You hurt her," Thad growled.

"She resisted," he shrugged his large shoulders, "and it hurt. It is always easier to give in than to fight," he smiled then, "but somehow I believe she will always fight, won't you, Dennison? You will fight to the last breath."

Danny pressed herself further into Thad's side and growled at the Alpha, baring her teeth.

"Yes, you're a fighter but there is no need to fight now, Dennison. Sheathe those claws of yours. You're safe, I promise, and I will not press you further."

Thad dropped to his knees. He held Danny's head in his hands gently and smiled into her face. "I ... I ... I think that the words he speaks are true, Danny, and, I need you in human form to deal with this situation."

Danny recognized the wisdom of Thad's words. Taking wolf form had healed her wounds. It was the way of the wolf, to heal quicker, faster in their wolf form than in any other. And communication would be, of course, easier when she shifted back to her human form. She took a deep breath and relaxed her body. Shifting was as natural as breathing when done with an open and easy air. It was as the Alpha had said, if you resisted the call of the beast, you would feel pain ... how much pain was usually entirely up to you.

"Your jacket, please." Danny's transformation had taken less than a minute to complete. Thad handed her his jacket and she slipped it over her shoulders. It was short, but it would do for now. "Thanks for showing me my place," she spat out, eyeing the Alpha of the High River Clan with undisguised malice.

"I did nothing that was not within my rights."

"You have *no* rights over *me*, Alpha."

"Please, call me Garrison."

Clenching her hands into tight fists she fought to remain calm in the light of her burgeoning anger. She was furious, yes, but she could not lose her control again. She was

a forced member of the Striker Clan, yes, but she was still a member, she was still Pack. And she was, in this situation, a representative, and her actions would reflect upon the integrity, the reputation of her Pack. She had already lost control once—yes, the Alpha of the High River Clan had forced his power on her and had called on the resources of the wood to bring forth her beast, but she was still partly to blame. She had denied her beast (as she so often did) and had, in the process given a deplorable display. She could but ask one question. “Why?”

“Would you like to answer that question,” Garrison turned his cool eyes onto Rickart, “or would you like me to answer it?”

“I still have no idea why you invaded my dinner party tonight,” Rickart answered dryly.

“Cloverly, how are you feeling?” Garrison asked the question of his sister. Danny had totally dismissed the other wolf.

“I’m fine.” Cloverly walked over to her brother and took her place dutifully behind him. She stood as a good, obedient daughter of Pack, but her eyes told another story. They were filled with heat and longing, and they speared the master vampire Rickart as if never to let him go. The Pack demanded her loyalty, but her heart was obviously with the vampire she was forbidden to love.

“Tell Dennison Lee why I gave you to this dead creature, tell her how you came to be here.” Garrison demanded.

“Garrison, please...” Her voice broke.

“Tell her now.”

Cloverly dropped her head. “I was given as a trust to the master vampire Rickart Sven. It ... it was a sign of ... friendship. I am sister to the Alpha of the High River Clan, it was a great gift...”

God, if anyone wanted a reason as to why she hated Pack and Pack politics ... well, this would be the perfect reason. This lovely wolf had been given away. She might as well have been a package. And she was the sister to the Alpha, and even as such, she could be bartered and given away. Part of her understood—the part of her that was wolf. But the part of her that was woman ... that part was absolutely disgusted. Cloverly obviously had power, but not enough power to rise to a position of dominance in her Pack. And in Pack, power was everything. Only the strong survived the way of the wolf.

“You gave your sister away like so much baggage,” Danny spat out.

“It was a strategic move, a move that you couldn’t understand, not being part of our clan.”

“You’re right, I don’t understand, and frankly, I don’t want to fucking understand. You are a miserable excuse for a...”

“I wouldn’t finish that sentence if I were you,” Garrison said. He walked over to the golden table and picked up a fork. Spearing a potato, he popped it into his mouth. “Do you have anything in this circus that could pass itself off for real food?”

Rickart snarled, “I wasn’t quite prepared for more company,” he snapped his fingers and servers appeared at his side, “please bring out a couple of steaks for our ... uninvited guests.”

“Cloverly was given to you in good faith but you had to have more, you greedy bastard.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about, Alpha.” Rickart eyed the torn cuffs of his

coat with disdain. He pulled off the ruined frock coat and slung it over his arm.

"Our forces about equal one another..."

"Really?" Danny quipped. She had no idea that the High River Clan was that large. She had always been under the impression that it was a rather small Pack, strong, but small.

Garrison's gaze swung toward Danny. "We have steadily increased our numbers in the last ten years. You will understand why, of course, this is not information that we have spread around."

Danny nodded. "Of course."

"We are close enough in number ... but the nest that you rule slightly overwhelms our Pack at this time. You knew my intent when I gave you Cloverly, and yet you still brought her here..."

It was beginning to come together for Danny. With their nest and Pack so close in number, the Alpha would have given the master vampire a good faith gift, a gift that meant something to him, to show his intent. Alpha Garrison had given Cloverly to master vampire Rickart Sven to appease him. It was only when Danny had entered the territory that the Alpha had suddenly begun to believe that perhaps the master vampire was moving against him. She was a *magi* wolf, and it appeared as if the Alpha of the High River Clan had felt threatened.

"Her appearance was mere coincidence," Rickart answered smoothly.

"You are a liar."

"Actually," Danny sighed, "he isn't. My appearance here has nothing to do with him. My friend and I needed a place to stay and this was the safest place for us."

"But you came here, you came to *The Hollowing*."

"It was suggested to us..." Danny halted. It was suggested to them. Savior Knight had suggested that they stay at *The Hollowing*. That fucking bastard. Ten to one he had something to do with this entire mess. She had no idea what, but it was all too much of a coincidence not to be somehow tied together.

"Your union with the master vampire would be an abomination," Garrison continued. He ate a couple of more potatoes.

"Oh, but your sister's union with the master vampire would be completely acceptable?" Danny asked. She watched as all the blood drained from Cloverly's face.

Garrison in turned frowned. "What?"

"You were afraid that I would somehow hook up with the master vampire. But you weren't afraid that your sister would somehow develop feelings for the man you gave her to? That she wouldn't crave more than being a mere gift, a whim to be disposed of by her brother whenever he felt like it." Danny knew by the shocked expression on the Alpha's face that the thought had never occurred to him. He truly had no knowledge of his sister's feelings for Rickart.

Garrison stood abruptly and turned to face his ashen-faced sister. He was standing before her in three large strides. "Is this true? Do you have feelings for that thing of death standing there?"

"I ... I..." Cloverly was shaking. The strong wolf that had faced Danny down in the forest was completely gone. In her place was a scared, unsure and terrified young woman.

"*Speak!*" Garrison shouted. He raised his hand, as if to strike her, but was suddenly

halted by Rickart, who had grabbed his forearm forcefully.

“You will not harm her,” Rickart said quietly.

“How dare you!”

Rickart released the enraged Garrison and came to stand by Cloverly’s side. “She is mine.”

“She is my sister!” Garrison roared.

“But she is my property. She was made such the minute you gave her to me.”

“I think you are both fucking idiots,” Danny spoke up, almost laughing at the shocked expression that filtered across all their faces. “You, you primitive cave-wolf, you gave your sister away as if she were an unwanted gift you have received and wished to discard. And you, you bloodsucking bastard, talk about her as if she’s some damn piece of real estate. You both are fools. And frankly, I’m shocked that she has feelings for either one of you.” Danny turned to Thad. “Since it’s been established that I’m not ‘joining’ with anyone, or trying to wrest control away from the local Pack, I’m going to my room. I need a shower, a clean set of clothes ... hell, just need some clothes, and then, we can be on our way.”

She started out of the room to have Garrison’s voice shout out after her, “You are not excused.”

Danny waved her hand back at him. “See you all later. This has been super fun.” She fucking hated her life sometimes. Or more appropriate, she fucking hated people.

Yeah, she just hated people.

Chapter Four

She'd been spending a lot of time in the shower lately. Danny rinsed out her hair and sighed in pleasure as the cold water ran down her heated body. Dumb men. Dumb, idiotic, insensitive, moronic men, she wanted nothing to do with them. She was so intent on her shower, and the pleasure that the water was bringing to her burning body, that she ignored the weakening of her shields and the depletion of her mental barriers. And then it was there ... the soft crooning in her ear and the cool caress of a voice that was unfortunately known to her.

"*Ashleya.*"

"Go away, you annoying bloodsucker." Danny rubbed her eyes to rid it of some errant soap.

Savior chuckled and his voice grew more commanding in her mind. "You have been very hard to reach, *ashleya*. You've been working on those shields of yours."

"You betcha." Danny frowned as her body began to heat up. There was cold water pouring over her, and yet she was burning up. She scratched at an itchy patch of skin on her shoulder and yelped when her fingers came away bloody. Damn it. Had she taken off skin?

"But tonight I can hear you ... almost feel you by my side. You are very vulnerable tonight."

"Try pissed," Danny spat out.

"Ah, and what has happened to upset you so?"

"Like you don't know, you Machiavellian *shithead*." Danny sniffed and reared back as a strange foreign smell invaded her nose. It smelled a little like sulfur ... but no, she had smelled sulfur a lot in her lifetime and this wasn't sulfur. What in the hell was she smelling?

"What is wrong, *ashleya*. You have suddenly grown still and quiet."

Danny ignored him and knelt down in the tub. There was something strange coming out from the drain. She wrinkled her nose, it smelled horrible. She poked at it. Her finger came away sticky and dark. It was tar, and yet it wasn't. Her eyes widened as the strange tar-like substance began to fill the tub.

"What the hell?"

"*Ashleya* ... speak to me ... what is happening, where have you been, where are you now? Speak to me ... please ... please... *Ashleya.*"

Danny managed to get one foot out of the tub before the black ooze covered her entire leg and began to crawl up her body. She opened her mouth to scream but could not even manage a yelp before her entire body was swallowed whole by the ooze and she was suffocating under the weight, heat and pressure of it all. Her last thought was of Savior. And even though he was an asshole, she really would have liked to have felt his arms around her one more time.

And then there was nothing, nothing but the dark and the pain of utter helplessness.

* * * *

Consciousness returned slowly, awareness even slower. And there was pain everywhere. She could barely breathe through the sheer torture of it all. What had happened? Where was she?

Danny blinked, it was dark, very, very dark, and her eyes were adjusting slowly. She was unused to being so blind. For usually her eyes could sense the whispered wind in the night sky, they were just that sharp. She got to her knees and groaned when her body protested the movement. As her eyes adjusted to the dim light, she realized just how screwed she really was.

She was lying in the middle of a barren wasteland, upon the cracked earth, and there was nothing but the scorching heat that burned her flesh. There was no sun, no lit sky, nothing but the ground she sat upon and the flames that seemed to lick her flesh. Nothing in her life had prepared her for this. For there was being lost ... and then there was *being lost*.

Danny ignored the pain that wracked through her body as she got to her feet, and gave a sigh of satisfaction when she remained steady. She took inventory of her body, needing to check for any major injuries. The worst of her injuries seemed to be her sensitive, burned flesh. It wasn't horrible, more like sunburn she experienced when she went to the beach for the weekend, but it wasn't pleasant either.

"This is a fine predicament," she muttered. And had barely gotten the words out when something flew past her, almost taking off her head. Danny dropped down immediately, instinctively looking for a place to take shelter, it became painfully obvious however that there was no shelter to be found in this barren place. Whatever it was that flew past her landed a foot or two away and seemed now to be staring directly at her.

"Come with me," it finally spoke.

Blinking owlishly, Danny eyed the strange creature that spoke to her. "No offense, but why the hell would I do that?" The thing that was speaking to her was huge. It had the appearance of a crow, and yet it was much larger ... and much uglier.

It cocked its head to one side. "If you do not, the black jackals will hunt you down and feed upon your pearly flesh and drink of your warm blood."

Descriptive, real descriptive. "Thanks for that visual but I'm still not going anywhere with you, birdie boy." Danny tried to call some magic to her hands, but found her power sluggish. It was like trying to run through a sea of molasses.

"You have little choice, *vieste*, you will come with me, or you will perish in this place."

This place ... this place ... she didn't even know what "this place" was. Dying alone in a barren wasteland was not on the top of her "things to do" list. And frankly the talking bird was about as scary a Tickle Me Elmo. Actually, Tickle Me Elmo was a lot scarier than the big black crow.

Mind made up, Danny walked over to the bird. "Uh ... how..."

"Straddle me, and hold on tightly."

Danny obeyed, and within seconds they were in the air. She held up her head, hoping to catch the passing breeze but gasped when thick solid flames seemed to hit her hard in the face. Flames ... how were their flames in the sky?

"*No!*" the bird cried. "Keep your head down low. Shield it as best you can. There is little we can do for your body, but your face we can protect."

Danny tucked her face into the crook of her arm, and sighed when she gained a little relief. "What, what does *viесе* mean?"

"*Viесе*, it is the word for human in our tongue."

"I'm not a human." She was shocked to realize she meant it. She was becoming increasingly aware of her wolf self, and how unfair she had been to it. She had tried so strongly for so long to honor the part of her that was woman, that she had been suffocating the part of her that was wolf.

"Of course you are a human ... you smell like a human."

"You have a crappy nose then. I smell like the forest, like the earth, as do most of my kind."

"Your kind?"

"Yes, I'm a..." her words broke off as they were suddenly plunging at a remarkable speed toward the ground below. "Good God..."

"You will not find *him* here. Oh no, you will not find *him* here at all." The bird landed with a small thud.

Danny dismounted and took in her new surroundings. It was still almost unbearably hot, but at least she didn't feel as if her flesh was burning off her body now. They had landed in a courtyard of sorts, or what appeared to be a courtyard. In the center stood a fountain, but there was no water spurting up deliciously, no, there was only the black tar-like substance that had filled Danny's bathtub. She walked cautiously over to the fountain and stuck out her hand.

"No, do you not know anything?" the bird shrieked. "Do not touch the *magun*."

"The *magun*?"

The bird made a disgusted sound deep within its throat. "The *magun* is the black pool of life. The elixir, if you will. *You* cannot touch it without feeling pain, you are a puny human." The bird drew back. "How did you come to be here? Did the *magun* take you?"

"If you mean, did that frigging disgusting black slime cover my body, yeah, it did."

"How..." The bird seemed genuinely befuddled. "How is that possible? You should have been burned alive."

"It is as I told you ... she is not one of them."

Danny jumped as the new voice broke through the still hot of the air. It was a beautiful voice, the most beautiful voice she had ever heard. There was a warmth, a lovely soothing heat about it ... and she wanted to feel that lovely heat wash over her.

"Milord," the bird spoke reverently, "I have done as you asked. I have fetched your *viесе*."

"She is not a *viесе*, Capshaw. No, she is not one of them. Bring her inside. I have waited long enough."

"Yes, milord. Come, come," the bird poked Danny, "you heard him, come, you must meet our master."

"His voice..." Danny could barely find the strength to move, she wanted to stay and hear that beautiful voice again.

"Yes, yes, it is a beautiful voice ... you will hear it again inside, come now."

She shook her head to clear it a little and wondered what the hell was wrong with her. She was vaguely aware that she was behaving ridiculously. Being transfixed by a disembodied voice? She knew lots of men, lots of men with beautiful voices, and none of

them had her literally stopped in her tracks.

"Where are we going," she asked, following the bird past the fountain and up a steep incline of stone steps. She eyed the massive golden door in front of her and hesitated. The doors swung open and the bird strode through.

"It is all right, come along."

Danny followed the bird through the doors and suddenly felt some blessed relief. It wasn't nearly as hot here as it was outside. "Thank God, thank frigging God," she groaned.

The bird seemed to cringe. "Stop saying that."

"What? Thank..."

"Yes, stop saying *his* name."

"A little sensitive are we?" she asked sarcastically.

"It is inappropriate. Here, we are here."

"Here" was a giant stone room. There was little adornment save the clear panes on the large arched windows that graced the walls. The strangest thing was that Danny couldn't see anything. There was no view. In fact it was as if the windows were pressed against another wall, they were completely black, revealing nothing.

"You can leave now, Capshaw."

Danny spun around at the sound of that beautiful voice ... that same beautiful voice in the courtyard.

Something happened in that moment, something that had Danny shaking to the very depths of her soul ... she *knew* him. This man, this impossibly beautiful man standing before her, she knew him. It was impossible ... she had never seen him before, and yet, yet, she knew him. Who was he ... what was he?

He was like the elements that surrounded him. His hair was a long curtain of midnight, a graceful sweeping of the night. It cloaked a face so beautiful, so striking that one could get lost in it. His eyes were solid black, with brows and thick black lashes that curled invitingly, beckoning one to their depths. His cheekbones were high and regal and his lips were tinged a blood red. When he swept the heavy cloak of hair away from his face, Danny saw that his ear was pointed sharply at the end, and a delicate ruby hung from its lobe.

His garment was so black that one could have easily mistaken his cloak of heavy hair for his long robe. It completely covered him from his neck to his ankles and it was encrusted with twinkling black gems. His face, so beautiful, and pearlescent skin, shone in sharp contrast to his severe ensemble and other dark features.

"Danny." When he spoke, it was to say her name softly, reverently even.

"Who are you?" She could barely get the words out her throat was so dry.

"I am Asmodai," he said simply.

"Asmodai..." Even his name was beautiful.

"And you are Danny..."

"Yes." Danny swallowed. She was suddenly very, very aware of her nakedness. And though being naked rarely bothered her, standing before this beautiful man, in his oh-so-proper wear, made her feel decidedly out of place ... and a little uncomfortable to boot. "You wouldn't happen to have a spare robe lying about, would you?"

He blinked, and his ruby red lips curled up into a smile. "But of course." With a graceful sweeping of his hand, he conjured a robe, and held it out to her.

Whoa, it looked like someone else had some pretty strong mage abilities. “Well, that must be a handy trick,” Danny quipped, taking the robe and slipping it on.

He inclined his head, his smile widened.

“Nice.” Danny ran her hands over the soft fabric of the robe she was wearing. It was softer than anything she had ever felt. Way softer than the \$19.99 bathrobe she had purchased at Target last Christmas.

“I am pleased you approve. May I be so bold as to ask you ... how does your skin feel?”

“Burned, dry, really, really worn.” She laughed, but it was a brittle laugh. “Answer enough for you?”

Asmodai walked toward her, opening his hand to reveal a small vial. “Rub this over your skin ... it will soothe it. It will also help to protect you from the heat.”

“Sunscreen,” she said dryly.

“Of sorts.”

Danny hesitated for a minute before taking the vial and popping its cork. She *was* in pain, and how much worse could this stuff actually be to the pain she was in presently? She let a couple of drops of the liquid form in her hand and found she was transfixed by the dewy stars that seemed to appear in it. The liquid was actually twinkling and, like the rest of this bizarre place, it was hot, very hot in her hand. She undid the robe and let it fall off her shoulders, rubbing the liquid over her heated skin, surprised at how deliciously cool it suddenly felt upon her heated flesh.

“That feels wonderful.”

“Yes, it would be a relief. Your flesh is so sensitive. It is not used to this heat.”

“Listen,” Danny continued to rub the liquid into her skin, “I don’t mind, in fact I love the sun, but this ... this is ridiculous.”

“Indeed. But it is not the sun that produces this heat, little Danny, for there is no sun in this place.”

“So why is it so fucking hot here?”

“Ah, would you like a lesson in the departed, child?”

“The departed?”

“*De Morteset*, they are the departed, the souls we collect in the pit. They radiate an astonishing amount of heat and it burns but brighter each day with each soul we collect.”

“*De Morteset* ... is that French?”

“Do you speak French, little Danny?”

“I barely speak English,” she said with a short snort.

“No, it is not French, not the French as you would know.”

“Do you always speak in frigging riddles?”

He laughed deeply. “I did not realize that I spoke in riddles. Is the truth a riddle?”

“Great ... now you’re asking me deep questions.”

His laughter deepened. “Come, would you like something to eat?”

“Yes.” Her reply was immediate.

“Whatever you would like, you may have. All is available to you.”

“Filet mignon, new potatoes with garlic, parsley and butter, a side of mac and cheese with hash and a baguette.”

“My, my, what an appetite you have.”

“Well, my dinner was sort of interrupted ... and yeah, I can eat. Have to keep my

strength up, you know.”

“Indeed, indeed. Well, if you would just follow me.” He turned and began to leave the great room.

He had a great butt. Even beneath that thick black garment she could tell. She fought the urge to lick her lips.

“Yes?” Asmodai turned suddenly, his eyes twinkling with a deep born knowledge.

“Uh, nothing...” She swallowed when he began to walk toward her. “I was just...”

“Looking? Were you looking, little Danny?”

She decided to play it cool. “Don’t know what you’re talking about.” Stupid Danny, really, really stupid, she didn’t even believe herself.

Asmodai stopped when he was but an inch away from Danny. He looked down at her with those dark, dark, eyes and smiled that unbelievably beautiful smile of his.

“Stop it,” Danny snapped.

“Stop what? What am I doing?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about.” He reached out to capture a stray lock of her hair in his hand. After running the silky hair between his fingers he cupped her flushed cheek. “That, stop that.” She swatted his hand away.

“Oh, little Danny, do you truly wish for me to stop?” Far from deterred, he smoothed his fingers over her chapped lips. “Do you? I see the swell of your breasts. I can hear the delicious beat of your heart, and your flesh ... somehow I do not believe it is the heat which produces that beautiful flush now.”

His fingers were warm, very warm, and there was a gnawing need deep in her belly. This need was growing stronger, and she could not deny it, no, she could not deny it.

“Please stop ... I ... I ... can’t do this.” She had to keep her wits about her. She had to keep her sanity.

“Do what?” Asmodai wrapped his hand around her thick hair and drew her head toward him. She did not resist him. In fact, her body seemed languid and pliant. “You are beautiful, very, very beautiful, so alive...”

“Please...” Danny gasped when she felt his breath warm on her cheek.

“My name, little one ... say my name.” He whispered his command against her lips.

“Asmodai...”

Asmodai sighed and drew her closer still. “Yes, yes, say it again...”

“Asmodai...” Danny had barely spoken his name when his mouth consumed hers. His lips were soft against hers, but there was nothing gentle in the way he commanded the kiss ... possessed her mouth. His tongue begged entrance, and when she parted her lips, he surged forth. His tongue learned her mouth and parried with her own. And she met his kiss with all that she had ... all that she was. His kiss was all, it was everything she needed, wanted, and her body cried out for him.

Asmodai pulled away. His eyes were bright and brilliant. “*Ache me ect te.*”

She knew not what he said, and yet she did. She knew somehow that this moment, this one moment would change her life forever. Was she going to let it? Was she going to let this moment *be*?

“*Ache me ect te*, you are the light. And I shall have it this once ... I shall have the light.” Asmodai spoke the words and Danny felt them down to her soul.

“Yes,” she whispered, and somehow it was right. There was such *need* in his eyes, there was such yearning. That need reminded her of ... Savior, yes, she saw that need

reflected in his eyes as well, but there was something else in Asmodai's eyes. Something that spoke to her and made her wish to ease him, to help him and be there with him. It was more than need. It was more than yearning, it was ... the absolute, the infinity of the moment stretched upon his face as clear as dawning. And it was right.

Danny reached up, wrapped her hand behind Asmodai's head and brought his mouth to hers. There was a moment of pause on his part, she could feel it. His lips stilled upon hers and then it broke free, the wild. The flames licked her body and she felt absolutely consumed by it. Her robe was gone in a moment and his hands were everywhere. She felt his hands, warm and insistent upon her breasts. He circled her nipple with his fingers and it tautened under his touch.

"You are beautiful."

Danny arched into his hands, begging him with her body to take more. She gasped when he pinched the hard peak of her breast and moaned when he twisted the tight flesh. The pain was lovely, and she wanted more.

"Ahhhh, you like that, little Danny." Asmodai pushed her back until she was pressed against the cold, hard plane of the wall. He moved his mouth to her neck and began to lick delicate trails down her soft flesh. When she began to shift and move in obvious pleasure he sank his teeth into her subtle flesh, bringing a torrid cry of delight from her lips.

"More," she said.

"Oh yes, so much more..." His mouth moved to her breast and he locked his teeth around her nipple and bit. Immediately after his teeth sank into the delicate tip he soothed it with his tongue, laving the bud and caressing it softly. His fingers tickled her thigh and he laughed a laugh full of pleasure and delight when her legs parted for him.

"Please..."

"My name, little Danny, say my name."

"Asmodai."

"Again."

"Asmodai." Danny gasped when his fingers lightly drew over the sensitive folds of her pussy. It was too much, and not nearly enough. "Fuck me, Asmodai! Fuck me!"

Asmodai plunged three fingers into her pussy, she was wet and dripping for him. He rotated his fingers deeply within her warm depths and finding that tight kernel hidden beneath her fold, he tweaked it.

Danny groaned and pressed against his hand. Her body was on fire, and this fire was wanted, needed ... desired more than anything. She dug her hands into his back and found, to her delighted surprise that he was bare, completely unclothed. Her eyes drank him in.

He was beautiful. His skin shimmered like a cultured pearl upon a bed of broken oyster shells. And he was perfect, absolutely perfect. She felt his hands insistent upon her flesh, and knowing what he wanted, and craving it as much as he, she lifted and was instantly hoisted up. She hooked her legs around his waist and it was effortless. He held her as if she weighed no more than a feather and his eyes burned into her.

Danny nodded. And let out a scream of pleasure when he buried his cock deep within her welcoming body. He was huge, and deliciously hard. Their rhythm was perfect.

"Silk, flames and burning light," Asmodai murmured, thrusting harder, "you are

perfection.”

Danny groaned. “You’re not so bad yourself, big guy. Harder, give it to me harder,” she demanded.

“As my lady wishes.” Asmodai bit the soft flesh of her neck as he simultaneously thrust so deep that his cock bumped her cervix. He smiled when Danny let out a shriek of pleasure and hitched herself closer to him.

The stone was cold and hard against her back, and Asmodai’s cock was even harder as it plunged in and out of her body. Her heart slammed against her chest and her beast was rising furiously. She could feel its claws insistent and determined and she knew that her skin was rippling with the effects of it.

“Ah, my wild one ... does she wish to come out and play?” Asmodai grabbed her ass, caressed it gently just before he dug his fingers into the smooth flesh hard enough to leave bruises.

No. No. She wasn’t going to let her beast out. She might have reconciled her two halves—for now, that didn’t mean she wanted to go all beast-like on him. She would have this moment as a woman, and she would feel all there was to feel with her human emotions.

Danny raked her hands down Asmodai’s back and let out a piercing scream when his thrusts became fiercer, stronger. She was building, swelling, nearly brimming over. God, she was so close. And then ... she felt Asmodai’s fingers gently caress the soft swell that graced her shoulder and the flames that threatened to consume her burst forth. Her climax shook her core and she was swept away.

Chapter Five

Danny lay on the cold stone ground. Her eyes, wide and knowing, stared up. She had just fucked a near stranger against a wall, and she completely didn't care. In fact, she felt more peaceful and easy than she had in a long time.

Her world was ruled with a stifling rigidity. Often that structure caused a fierce rebellion on her part. When had she not been rebelling against the confines and the cage she had been born into? It was, by the grace of the powers that be, that she was still alive. She had behaved carelessly for most of her life and she recognized this fact, oh yes, she recognized this fact well. Being "special," being "the one" had made her not but a little omnipotent and more than a little spoiled. She behaved carelessly, recklessly, because she knew—even unconsciously—that she would be spared. For who would dare to destroy something, someone, as special as she?

It was a terrible mentality, a spoiled one. And it needed to stop. Yes, her world was rigid, but it always would be rigid. The ways of the wolf were hard and merciless, and the ways of the *magi* nearly worse. By the sheer fact of her split self, she would always be at war, and her existence would always rely upon a balancing act that would, at times, cause her a great deal of pain. She could not take her nature for granted, and she could not assume her gifts would spare her the pain that her nature would inflict.

She was wolf and woman, and it was time she began to act like both.

"You think quite hard, little Danny." Asmodai smoothed a hand down her hip, his eyes dark and probing.

"Yes, I came to some interesting conclusions."

"What would those be?"

"Hmmm ... just some things that I think will make my life a whole lot easier."

"Has it been hard, your life?"

Danny laughed. "I guess you could say that ... but I'm partly to blame. I'm nothing if not stubborn. And that stubbornness has caused me a great deal of grief, unnecessary grief. I think it's time I correct some things, and perhaps own up to others."

"You are an extraordinary woman."

"Thank you, you're pretty extraordinary too." Danny was overwhelmed by the sheer beauty of his jet black eyes. They were solid black, and yet, yet they conveyed so much. There was so much depth to those midnight windows of his. It was like staring into the sky and seeing far beyond the stars. "I think it's time," she whispered, gracing him with a soft smile.

"Time for what, little Danny?"

"Time for me to leave this place." And in a second the soft sky she saw in his eyes changed, and there were flames and burning tempests there. "Asmodai..."

Asmodai got to his feet, pulling Danny up with him. He looked glorious in his nakedness.

"You would leave me?" he asked softly, menacingly. "You would leave me after what we have shared?"

She wasn't going to pretend it hadn't meant something to her. Unlike sex with her fellow wolves, and even with Savior, whom she had genuine feelings for, being with

Asmodai had meant ... more. There was something in him, something about him that her soul seemed to recognize. It was strange, mystical even, for she hardly knew him. And yet she did know him, know he would intrinsically play a part in her life. That now she had let him in ... he was in.

"You cannot leave me." Asmodai spoke simply. His words, though simple, were impassioned.

"I don't belong here. You know I don't belong here. Lord, I don't even know where here, is."

Asmodai opened his mouth to speak and stilled suddenly. His head whipped back and when he returned his gaze to her his eyes burned with some strange light. "They come," was all he said.

"Huh?"

"Please, wear this." Asmodai handed her a black gown which he had conjured up on the spot.

"That is still an impressive trick," Danny said with a laugh. She undid the top buttons and pulled the gown over her head. It was totally not her style, but then, beggars couldn't be choosers, right? "Like it?" She did a little twirl. The skirt flared out nicely and the fabric felt surprisingly soft. If she could change one thing, it would be the rigid neck. The dress covered her up to her chin, and was unyielding and stiff.

"Yes, I do like it." Asmodai held out his hand to her, he was now dressed in a black gown similar to the one he had worn when he had first appeared to her.

Danny took his hand, it was burning hot.

"We shall face them together."

"Face who?" She had barely gotten the question out when the doors burst open and the room filled with scorching heat and the horrible stench of rotting flesh. "Ick, someone needs to take a bath," she muttered. Her eyes were watering something terrible and she could barely see through the tears and the steam that seemed to encompass the entire room.

"Brother, the changing winds have signaled your success."

"Indeed," Asmodai said, his voice dry as dust.

Danny sneezed and then blinked a couple of times to clear her eyes. The steam had dissipated and the room was made clear to her once again. Standing in front of her were three men, three beautiful men. All tall, with long black hair and arresting features and there was no doubt as to their relationship to one another.

"Good genes run in the family, you guys are way lucky," Danny quipped.

The tallest of the three men turned his dark eyes to Danny. "So you are the *amour*."

"The what?"

"The love. We had some doubts whether or not he would be able to bring you here. You humans are so pathetically fragile." His eyes seemed to brighten then. "Ah, yes, but I remember now ... you are different ... stronger somehow ... and more powerful. It seems that your power and strength has protected you from the flames of our world, and the burning transition."

"This is a fascinating lesson ... but would you mind putting that all in layman's terms, for us ... uh, half humans? Frankly, I have no idea what you're talking about."

The beautiful man swung his gaze to Asmodai then. "Brother, have you not enlightened your guest? Ah, I see ... you haven't then."

“What the hell is going on here?”

“Ah, you are closer to understanding than you know, *amour*.”

“That is enough, Apoll,” Asmodai hissed.

“Asmodai?” Danny queried, “Are you going to tell me what is going on here?”

“Yes, Asmodai, tell the *amour* what this is about.”

“Danny, I would first introduce you to my brothers. The lout who is speaking to you now, is Apoll. The ugly brute on the left, Apocal, and the silent one on the right, Ashed.”

“Hmmm, Mom was real original, right?” When silence met her statement, Danny clucked her tongue and nodded. “And I see you guys have a real good sense of humor. I guess you don’t have much to laugh about around here ... bummer.”

“Brother, do you have any idea what she’s talking about?” This came from Apocal.

“Nay, but humans have a way with nonsense,” Apoll replied.

“Hey!” Danny cried, indignantly. “You want to talk about nonsense? This, this is nonsense. You guys busting into your brother’s house without a by your leave, interrupting us when we were ... uh ... well ... interrupting us. Treating me like I’m some weird mold to be studied, and talking through me.”

“She’s fiery,” Ashed spoke softly. “That would appeal to Father.”

Apoll narrowed his eyes. “Fiery? I do not know if it is fire that burns her tongue, or something else ... something much more dangerous. You should watch your *amour*, Asmodai, watch her closely.”

“You are an arrogant, chauvinistic, jack...”

“I think we would do better in the sitting room,” Asmodai spoke, cutting Danny off. With an easy pull of magic and little energy expended on his part, he transferred them all to a large sitting room.

Danny landed unceremoniously in an oversized cushioned chair. “Well, at least it’s comfy,” she grumbled, as she settled herself. Aware of her sniping, Danny knew she should probably heed her errant tongue, especially since she had made herself that promise ... that whole, “going to be a more self-aware, and less stubborn, person,” promise. Well, she was, going to be more self-aware and less stubborn ... right after this.

Apoll, Apocal and Ashed settled themselves gracefully upon the large couch facing Danny and Asmodai. Their faces betrayed nothing and they were unnervingly still. If Danny hadn’t encountered this technique before, such behavior might have disturbed her. As it was, it wasn’t anything she wasn’t used to. Alex always played the “stone card” when he was most unsure. The stone card was the term she had affixed to Alpha’s stony, rigid demeanors. It was sort of a cross between a stare down and a, “let me try to make you feel really uncomfortable.” Usually Alex pulled out the stone card when he was trying to get information out of her, and was fairly certain she wasn’t going to give in.

“Is someone going to speak ... or is this going to be a silence contest?” Danny asked, eyebrow raised.

“She shows a shocking lack of respect and her manners are deplorable,” Apocal said coolly.

“Yeah, I like you too,” she shot back.

Asmodai held up an elegant hand. “Perhaps you should tell me why you are here, brothers.”

“You know very well why we are here,” Apoll ground out. “You brought a human to your side ... a human,” he hissed.

"She is much more than that, brother. Her presence here is a testimony to that fact. How many humans do you know who could survive the burning transition?"

"*That* is interesting," Ashed spoke out. "There has not been a survivor of the burning transition since Michael's fall."

"Michael's fall?" Danny asked.

"Yes. The father of the damned." Ashed smiled a sad smile. "His fall from grace was a marked event."

Somehow Danny felt pretty certain she was missing something of a large importance. It was as if she was hearing the words, but not really *hearing* the words.

"Your *amour* is confused, Asmodai." This from Apoll. "Shall we bring her out of the dark, brothers?"

"Apoll, it is not your place to..."

Apoll slammed his fist down, "*No!* It was not *your* place to bring that thing here. But now that she is, she must know what your folly has brought her to. Do you know who we are, girl?"

"Well, I know what you aren't?" Danny snorted. "You're not polite, that's for certain."

He laughed, but it was a brittle laugh. "No, we are not polite. I suppose we have had no use for ... niceties here. Quite the opposite in fact. And do you see our dear brother, Asmodai, as being ... polite, kind?"

Danny looked over at Asmodai. He was stiff and cold, his eyes devoid of any emotion and his hands were crossed in his lap. Danny sighed, and because it felt right, she reached over and covered his cold hands with her own. She smiled when his eyes grew brighter and filled quickly with emotion, emotion he obviously had a hard time suppressing.

"Asmodai is as he is ... unique, beautiful ... special. And yes, I see him as being kind. He has been nothing but kind to me since I've arrived here." Danny squeezed his hand.

"Well, our brother has found himself a comrade, a diligent partner in arms, how disturbingly touching." Apoll shook his head. "Since you've arrived here ... do you know how you arrived here?"

"By lieu of some awesomely gross black goop."

"The magun."

"If that's what that stuff is called, yeah, by way of that stuff. One second I was taking a bath, the next ... wham, I was drowning under that stuff. Absolutely gross by the way. I don't suggest it."

Apoll, Apocal and Ashed shared a look before they all burst out laughing. "You have given me the first true laugh I have had in a thousand years, girl," Apoll said, "for that I should thank you."

"No problem, anytime. That's me, the stand-up comic."

"Now, to more serious matters..." Apoll leaned forward. His fingers formed a steeple and his dark eyes grew bold and searching. "The magun is the burning tar that fills our fiery pits. It often regenerates our damned but proves fatal to all those who have a spark of humanity left in their fragile bones. You should not be able to touch, let alone survive drowning in a pit of magun. You should have been burned alive."

Danny whistled. "Glad that didn't happen. Burning alive," she scrunched her nose,

“not a pretty way to go.”

“No. It wouldn’t be. But you survived. You survived the burning transition and made it to our hallowed halls.”

“That does bring me to a question ... where is here?”

Apoll grinned, a decidedly evil grin. “Have you not figured that out already, girl?” He paused, as if for dramatic effect before continuing, “You’re in Hell, little girl. You’re in Hell.”

Danny blinked a couple of times. She could feel Asmodai’s hand hard and insistent under her own. He wrapped that hand around hers and squeezed. The pressure became so hard, so tight, she was certain within a moment or two her bones would snap under the force. She used her free hand and smoothed it over his, asking him without words to ease up ... to let her go. A second later he released her hand.

She sighed. “All right, just to make certain I heard you correctly. You did say that I’m in Hell, right?”

“Indeed,” Apoll frowned, “you seem remarkably calm considering the news just now imparted to you.”

“Well, I’m not certain what causing a fuss or getting riled up would accomplish. I’ve heard stranger things before.”

“Have you?” This came from Ashed, the quiet one.

Danny nodded. “Yeah, I have. I mean, come on, I’m a wolf and a *magi*, I live in a world where men run as wolves and the wolves try not to eat the supposedly fragile humans. Where vampires cavort and covens hold domain, and all watch one another warily. I live everyday surrounded by mayhem and madness and see each dawn as one more day I have survived it all. Considering all of this ... is it so strange to be told that I’m in Hell ... mmmmm ... not really. I’m pretty much in Hell everyday,” she finished coolly.

“And you do not find it odd that you be brought to this place?” Apocal asked harshly.

“I do have a couple of questions about that,” Danny said. She turned her gaze to Asmodai then. “How *did* I come to be here,” she held up a hand. “No, I don’t want anyone else to answer this question but Asmodai. Asmodai, tell me, how did I come to be here?”

“You defeated Harrod.” Asmodai laughed bitterly. “You came to be here because you defeated one of my minions.”

“One of your minions?”

“Aye, one of my daimons.”

“Daimons? You mean demons? I defeated a demon?” Danny said, questioningly. Her eyes widened and she swallowed as it all came back to her in a rush—the horrible stench of death and rot, and the rush of blood and pain that hit like a serrated knife. “Oh fuck, I did defeat a demon...”

Asmodai nodded. “You did. Harrod was one of my daimons, a minion. He marked you, but you still found a way to destroy him, and dispatch him back to Hell. I found him on my domain, his essence was almost completely gone ... you had taken care of him well. Before he was dispatched to the black pit, I was able to swallow what little essence he had left, and in turn take in his memories and experiences. I saw you.” Asmodai reached out and smoothed a tendril of hair away from her face. “So beautiful and still,

with such power and purpose on that lovely face of yours, I saw you. Through Harrod and the marks that tied me to him, I could taste your blood and your sweet flesh upon my tongue and I had to have more. I had to have you here ... I knew that you were more, and I had every faith in your ability to survive the burning transition."

"Oh, I feel so much better now," Danny spat out bitterly. "You had faith I wouldn't burn to a crisp on my way down to Hell, thanks Einstein."

"You are being sarcastic?" Asmodai said, it was more statement than question.

"Yeah, this would be me being sarcastic."

"Danny ... I would have told you this..."

"When," she interrupted, "when would you have told me any of this? Tell me truthfully, Asmodai, if your brothers had not come today, if they had not interrupted us and brought your perfidy to my attention, would you have told me anything? Or would you have continued to let me wander, lost and confused?"

"I would have told you, I could keep nothing from you, my *amour*."

"*Amour*?" Danny frowned. "Your brother called me that. What exactly is an *amour*? A love, I know that, but somehow I think it means more than that." Danny heard Apocal snort and she shot him a dirty look before turning her attention back to Asmodai.

"*Amour* means beloved. It is also our word for a beloved who is bound to a daimon lord."

"Are there many *amours*?" Danny asked.

"No," was Asmodai's taut response.

"There has been but one *amour* in our long esteemed history," Apoll spoke then, "but one, and she was not like you. She was not of the elements."

"So she wasn't a wolf," Danny said.

"No," Asmodai sighed, "she was not a wolf."

"I am not bound to you," she said suddenly, quickly, as if the thought had just come to her.

"Do you hear that, brother, she is not bound to you." Apoll's eyes narrowed into fine slits and he laughed. "If she is not bound to you, I am able to challenge for her, that or she is carrion ... which shall it be, brother?"

"Nay, you will not have her that easily, brother," Asmodai growled. "She is mine, whether or not she acknowledges that fact here and now. And we have mated, as I am certain you know. The mate bond cannot be broken."

"Not simply, no, but it can be broken," Ashed said. He stared intently at Danny now, his dark, dark eyes probing.

"Strange how she affects you all," Apocal spat. "She is a fragile human, no more capable than a bird whose wings have been plucked off, and yet you want her. Yet you are drawn to her. What captures you so?"

"She smells of wind," Apoll said.

"She smells of fire." This from Ashed.

Asmodai spoke to Apocal, but his eyes were for Danny only when he said, "She smells of earth. She smells of the earth, brother. Can any of your minions claim that? No, they smell of death, of rotting flesh and burning pits. To touch her is to touch life, a life you shall never have."

"How poetic," Apocal said dryly. "I am still unaffected." His eyes grew sharper then, and a small tight smile drew up on his face. "Father will not feel her sway. In fact, it will

take all your pretty words and your wiles, brother, to keep your head.” Apocal stood. His look speared Danny and he snorted. “Enjoy your brief stay in our realm, puny human.” With those curt words he disappeared.

Apoll laughed. “Our brother tends to fall to the dramatic.”

“Yeah, so I see.”

“But his words have the ring of truth to them. Our father will not be pleased by this development. You are not to be here, it is most unorthodox.”

Danny laughed bitterly. “Uh-huh, that’s me, Miss Unorthodox. Listen, why would your father care one way or the other where I’m staying, or with whom, for that matter?”

“The pits take you, brother!” Apoll shot Asmodai a furious look. “Have you told her nothing?”

Asmodai’s jaw tightened and he stiffened considerably. “I did not quite have the time, brother,” he bit out, “before you so rudely interrupted us.”

“Poor excuse indeed.”

“Uhm, hello...” Danny waved her hand back and forth. “Since I’m the topic of discussion, I would like to know what’s going on.”

“What’s going on? What an interesting turn of phrase.” Apoll cocked his head to one side. “What is going on is a rather complex set of politics.”

“Oh hell,” Danny spat out. “Earth, Hell, fuck that ... the moon, it’s all the same, politics. We can’t get away from it, can we, boys?” She clenched her hands into fists. “So, why don’t you enlighten me as to what this set of politics is about.” Seriously, she just couldn’t catch a break. Why did everything have to be so damned complicated? And jeez, just when she thought she had heard it all ... it seemed that even demons had their political system. What a frigging hoot.

Apoll’s eyes seemed to twinkle at her words. He cleared his throat. “Hell is overlooked by the High Lord, Saitain.”

“Satan?” Danny whistled, “Wow, that’s deep stuff.”

“No, Saitain, although I do believe those inhabitants of Earth refer to him as Satan. High Lord Saitain has four sons, and those four sons rule the domain referred to as Hell. Each son rules one province. With the High Lord Saitain’s watchful eye perusing it all.”

Oh, dear lord. Oh, dear lord and merciful angels above. Cognition and awareness seeped into Danny’s sluggish bones, and her heart seemed to stop beating all together. She could feel her own pulse on her tongue and her limbs suddenly went cold.

She turned to Asmodai then. “You’re Satan’s son?”

“Danny...”

“Don’t!” she shrieked. “Are you, or are you not, the son of Satan?”

Asmodai swallowed and then seemed to gather himself up. When he spoke it was with cool distinction. “The High Lord Saitain acknowledges me as his get, yes.”

Danny slumped into the chair and took several deep breaths. She still didn’t feel as if she could get enough air into her lungs. She was suffocating and she needed air.

“Please, my *amour*, be at ease.” Asmodai rushed to kneel in front of her. He took her cold hands in his and rubbed them, his eyes filled with concern and fright. “Take deep breaths, my *amour*, my Danny. Deep breaths ... let the air fill your lungs and do not be frightened.”

Danny let his calm and soothing words balm her soul and her lungs seemed to open on his command. She took a couple more deep purifying breaths and nodded slowly. “I’m

okay, now. I'm okay."

"Danny ... it changes nothing, the circumstances of my birth, the circumstances of how you came to be here ... nothing has changed."

"*Everything* has changed." Good lord, how could he not see it? How could he not see that everything had changed? Her heart was aching, bruised, and for the first time in longer than she could remember ... broken. Yes, it was ridiculous. She knew nothing of this man ... this demon prince. This moment proved that beyond a reasonable doubt. But it didn't matter. She had known. She had known the minute she had laid eyes on him that he was a kindred spirit. She saw in his eyes, those dark pools, so much, so much shared aching and so much shared pain. Now, even in the midst of this betrayal and anguish, she still wished to wrap herself around him, to keep him close and to have, for the first time in her lonely life, a true mate. Nothing had prepared her for this. Nothing had prepared her for meeting a man who spoke to her, *really* spoke to her. Since she had found him, how did she prepare to let him go?

"So you see now what you have come to?" Apoll spoke quietly, fervently. "You should not have survived the burning transition, but my brother is correct when he says that your survival speaks volumes. Your presence here at his side says much but this is a realm of the unnatural, little girl, and there is no place here for one of the Earth."

"Let Father decide," Ashed interjected.

"What?" Apoll frowned.

"I said, let Father decide where her place should be. She is here, is she not? I believe that all who end up in this realm belong to our father, is that not so? That only he decides where one belongs, and to whom they belong to." This last was directed at Asmodai. "So, let our father decide her fate."

"You are all nuts." Danny jumped to her feet. "I'm not staying here and I'm not going to be paraded in front of your dad like some choice of meat."

"Prime choice indeed." Apoll smiled. "Brother, I believe that is an excellent suggestion. A wise decision indeed. We shall take our little wolf to our father, and let him decide her placement."

"No!" Asmodai shouted. He stood in front of his brothers in a flash. "No, she will not be taken to our lord. She was brought here with my magic, and she was brought here for me. And with me she shall stay."

Although it was definitely true she would rather stay with Asmodai than to go before Satan, she hated his possessive voice and his authority. She'd had enough of this barbaric show on Earth, why did she have to deal with it in Hell?

"Listen, I have a say in this. I'm not your wolf. I'm not anyone's wolf. I'm Danny Lee, and I'm my own person. And this person is going home." Danny got up but hadn't made it one step before Asmodai had her upper arm in an iron grip.

"And how do you suppose you will leave our domain?" Apoll asked.

Danny frowned. "Hadn't quite gotten that far yet ... but I'm sure I'll think of something. Maybe I'll take another bath in that black goop." Although that sounded as pleasant as having all of her teeth pulled.

"You cannot test the *magun*," Ashed said. "You cannot know if it will burn you on the second sway."

"The second sway?" Danny asked.

"Aye, the second sway of life. When you try to test it a second time who will say it

will not take your life on the second attempt?"

"Real morbid thought," Danny quipped.

"We tend to be, morbid, that is." Ashed smiled then, and it was a beautiful smile. It made his lovely face seem younger, freer in fact.

"My brother is correct," Asmodai spoke, "you cannot test the *magun* again, *amour*. And you cannot leave this place. There is no exit."

Danny glared at him. "If there is a fucking way into this hell hole, then there is a fucking way out. And take your damned paws off me."

Asmodai released his hold on her arm.

"I came through a dimensional field, and there are two-way dimensional fields, you know." Danny ran a hand through her disheveled hair and sighed. "I'm going to find a way out, and none of you are going to stop me."

"You could search for an eternity, *amour*, and not find a way out of our realm."

"Then show me," she reached out and ran a caressing hand down his cheek, "show me, Asmodai."

"My *amour*. I would give you the world and beyond, all that you ask for, but please do not ask me for that. I cannot let you go."

"He is beguiled, Ashed."

"Yes, it would seem so, Apoll. I believe we must take her to Father posthaste."

Danny had a minute to register the strange light that seemed to invade Apoll and Ashed's eyes, and opened her mouth to scream, "No" but it was too late. Suddenly she was spiraling down a horrible black tunnel and her entire body was wracked with pain. She tried to move, tried to free herself from the black vortex, but she couldn't. She couldn't do anything. And just when the pain reached its worst point the darkness overtook her and she knew no more.

Chapter Six

She'd been passing out a lot lately and she didn't like it. She didn't like it one little bit. This time at least she came to and was nestled within the soft folds of a down comforter. The bed was more like a country, it was just that big, and it was stacked with huge soft pillows and equally soft throws. All in all, it wasn't a bad way to wake up—of course, coming to clothed would have been preferable.

"Naked, niiiice." Danny sighed. She sat up and groaned when a soft wave of nausea hit her. She remained still and took several deep breaths to calm herself and was pleased when her equilibrium returned momentarily. She began to take stock of her situation. The room was lovely, and under any other circumstance she would have liked to stay in a room like this. The walls were lined with warm colored tapestries, the room was filled with rich mahogany furniture, and on the floor was strewn a bearskin rug. Danny could have done without the bearskin rug. It was just a little too close for comfort. It wasn't too long ago that hunters trapped her kind and skinned them for sport. Seeing the rug with its poor head attached seemed a bit heartless and she couldn't help being a bit grossed out. But she lived in a world that was much more treacherous than hunting for sport, and now she found herself in Hell. It would seem she would just have to get over her qualms and accept the violent nature of her existence. Death, death was commonplace in her world. Heck, the bear had probably gotten off easy. Somehow she had a feeling she wasn't about to be as lucky.

Danny startled when the far side wall magically dematerialized. A small, gray-haired woman with a surprisingly easy, soft smile entered and stopped in front of her.

"I'm Madchen, child."

"Danny, my name is Danny."

Madchen nodded. "Danny it is, then. Here, I brought you some garments to wear."

"What happened to the garments I was wearing?"

"They incinerated upon contact with the vortex." Madchen shrugged. "It happens."

"Uh-huh, it happens, great, just great," Danny muttered, but she held out her hand and took the garments that Madchen offered her. "They're, uh, very..."

"They are for meeting the High Lord. You must be properly garbed."

Danny fingered the stiff leather and frowned. "This, uh, is the outfit you want me to wear when I go in to meet the big guy?"

"You are dominant, are you not?" Madchen laughed. "Of course you are. One needs only see you, smell you, to know that you will submit to no one. But this is, as I am sure you know, a test of wills, if nothing else. You must look the part, it will aid in the overall effect."

"A show," Danny shook her head, "all the world's a show."

"Yes, child. Now dress quickly. The High Lord does not take kindly to waiting."

Danny stepped into the leather pants and frowned when the straps did not seem to hook into place.

"Here, here," Madchen said impatiently, "let me help you." She expertly wound the straps over Danny's front, covering her breasts, and hooked them in back, tying them off near the base of her backbone. She snapped two leather bracelets on either one of

Danny's wrists and went in to snap on the studded collar.

"No fucking way," Danny snapped, backing away. "There is no way I'm wearing that thing." Danny did not do collars. What wolf would?

"It completes the outfit."

"I don't care if it sings karaoke. I'm not wearing it."

Madchen wrinkled her nose. "Fine, fine, slip on the shoes and we'll be off then."

Danny strapped on the wedge-like boots and nodded appreciatively. The shoes felt great, in fact, the entire outfit felt pretty darn terrific. Of course, she would have liked a little bit more cloth, the straps hardly covered her breasts, and from the waist up she was almost completely exposed.

"Yes, yes, you'll do. Come, we must go now." Madchen motioned for her.

"Where is Asmodai?" Danny asked the question she had been afraid up to now to ask.

Madchen stopped walking. "You will see him soon. Please, child, you must come now."

Danny nodded. She heard the urgency in Madchen's voice and knew it would do her no good to sit and stew in this adorned room. She followed Madchen, painfully aware of the stillness and the heat that blew around her. It was dark, but Danny's eyes attacked the dark immediately.

"Through these doors, child." Madchen stopped in front of a set of heavy stone doors. "I am sorry, this is as far as I can go. But believe me ... remain true to yourself, to your wolf and you shall be fine. I sense it in you."

"Sense what?"

Madchen smiled. "The power of above and below, a heady combination indeed. You are a force to be reckoned with, child."

"I'm just a wolf and a *magi*."

"No, you are much more than that. Take it from a *seeress*, I know what I sense ... you are a force to be reckoned with, child, and soon the world will have to face you, and you will have to face the world. Now go, embrace what must be."

Danny gave Madchen one last look before she pushed against the heavy stone doors; they gave under her weight and swung open.

* * * *

She comes, she comes ... she comes at last.

Danny heard the voices as they echoed around her. She kept her eyes trained forth, but was very aware of the stares that seemed to burn from the shadows and recesses of the grandiose room.

"Ah, the *amour* who has captured my son's dead heart."

The man who spoke was beautiful, as beautiful, or more so, than his sons. His regal, patrician features gave away his identity immediately. There was no doubt that this man was related to Asmodai. His hair was midnight black and framed a face that would make angels weep. He had blacker than black eyes and a mouth that seemed to be blood-kissed. There seemed nothing to betray his age. He could have been as young as his sons, or as old as the heavens. This was an ageless man. But if you looked close, if you looked into those deep black eyes, infinity was there, an infinity that was not present in the eyes of his sons.

She is unafraid, she shows defiance. She is unafraid ... she is unafraid...

"Could you make them stop doing that? It's really distracting, all that chattering."

The man blinked, once, twice, three times, and then he broke out into booming, thunderous laughter. The rest of the room fell completely silent, and there was nothing but the great man's brilliant beautiful laughter.

"Indeed, indeed, all my children may be released for now. Please, leave us," he smiled. "Leave my lovely guest and me alone."

And just like that they were alone. Danny felt no other presence than that of the powerful man in front of her and she could smell nothing but her own hesitance.

"Welcome, *wulfin*." At Danny's bewildered expression his smile widened.

"*Wulfin*, those who take wolf form and owe us allegiance."

"I owe no-one allegiance."

"Do you not? Do you not have a Pack, or are you rogue?"

Danny stiffened. "I'm not a rogue."

"Ah then, if you are not a rogue, then you owe allegiance to an Alpha, the Alpha of your Pack. Or have the dynamics changed so much since I last visited your Earth?"

"No, there are still Alphas."

"Who is your Alpha?"

"Alexander Holt." His name was bitter on her tongue. *Her* Alpha, she had promised to stop lying to herself. And if she stopped lying to herself she would realize there was some truth to this man's words. She was not a rogue. And she owed what she had signed on her contract to Alexander. After that she could take to the winds—somewhat—but until then, until then she did owe Alexander something. It was burning pain, the acknowledgement ... but it was also liberating. It was liberating to know that sometimes things had to come in their own free time, and that when they came ... they were brilliant, and truthful.

"Once all owed their allegiance to us ... once the *wulfin* answered to me. But that was a long time ago, the world was all dark and the portals were not open to the likes of you."

"So ... what, this is some sort of pissing contest?" Danny rolled her eyes. "Don't you have enough to rule down here? You need more? Why does everyone need more?"

"It is the way of all creatures, is it not? All creatures want, need, more. Only the strongest survive."

"Listen, mister Satan..."

"*Michael*, you may call me *Michael*. Saitain seems so formal somehow. And we are all friends here, are we not?"

Danny frowned. "Uh, that seems like a rather normal name for uh, well ... the ruler of Hell."

"Are we not all worthy of a name, *wulfin*?"

She stiffened. "Yeah, we are, and by the way, my name is Danny, you can use it."

Michael laughed. "Point taken. What is your full name?"

"Dennison."

"Interesting, unique, fitting for you, I think. I shall call you Dennison, then."

Danny shrugged. "Whatever floats your boat."

Michael stood then and began to move toward her. "You are a fascinating creature, Dennison."

"So I've been told." She took a couple of steps back. She knew such a move could be taken to be one born of fear, but this had nothing to do with fear, and everything to do with pain. The closer that Satan, Michael, whatever his name was, got to her, the closer she came to feeling as if she was going to burn up. There were no flames, no fire that she could see, but the heat was unbearable.

"You flinch, you show fear."

"I'm not flinching. I'm fucking hot."

"You have survived the burning transition, and yet you cannot stand in front of my fire?"

"I'm standing just fine, thanks. That doesn't mean I'm not sweating like a sonofabitch. Mind turning the burner down a bit?"

"You are astonishing." Satan, or Michael as she was beginning to think of him as, grinned, revealing two rows of bright, white teeth, bright, white, sharp teeth. "I know you are afraid. No one stands in my wake and does not feel fear, and yet ... yet I do not smell the stench of fear upon you. No," he breathed deeply, "in fact I smell something quite lovely. You smell of light, wind and the earth ... you smell alive."

"I am alive," Danny said simply.

"Are you?" Michael snorted. He came closer still. "There is nothing alive in this realm, nothing of life here, but here you stand."

"Yes, here I stand." Danny straightened her shoulders. "But I want to go home."

"Do you, do you truly wish to leave? You wish to leave my son? You wish to leave Asmodai?"

At the mention of Asmodai, Danny stiffened. Asmodai, her beautiful demon prince. No. She had promised truth, she would give herself the truth. There was a part of her that did not wish to leave his side. It mattered not that she had had such a small moment with him, she felt something akin to ... God ... she couldn't even say it ... for saying it may make it true.

"You love him," Michael spoke and there was wonder in his voice. "You *love* my son."

"No," Danny snapped, her response immediate.

"No? Can you tell me what I see in your eyes is a lie? Can you honestly tell me that, Dennison?" Michael smiled slightly. "I can sense a lie, I can always sense a lie ... 'tis something of a curse, but is my nature all the same."

"I must go home," she whispered. "I cannot stay here."

Michael's eyes were searching, probing. "Can you not?"

"There is no moon here ... no light."

"You need no moon to shift, although the light makes such transitions easier."

"How do you know so much about my kind?"

"I told you, Dennison, once all of the *wulfskin* owed me fealty. Once when the moons were entwined and above and below were all but one shining orb..." Michael's voice deepened. "The worlds have separated, yes, but knowledge of those days does not fade."

"Even so, I cannot stay here. You said it yourself, I don't belong here."

"Did I, did I say that?"

"Yes ... you said there was nothing living in this realm and since I am..."

"Yes, yes," Michael held up a hand, "I remember my words."

"Then you see why I can't stay here. I have things I have to get back to. I have

people who are depending upon me.”

“What people, Dennison?”

Danny scowled. “None of your business.”

“I believe that if you wish to leave my realm, then it is very much my business. I would know what you feel you have to go back to.”

“I have a life, remember. I’m alive. I have a job, and friends—sort of. And I have responsibilities to my ... my ... my Pack. I was traveling with a friend to a territory that I had to get to, and before I got there I was taken. I need to get back.”

“Really? Well my son believes you belong here, with him.”

“Well your son is a little bit delusional.”

Michael blinked several times and then burst out laughing. “I believe you just called my son, the Prince of Hell, delusional.”

“You’re not deaf. I very much called your son delusional.”

“My, my, I do not believe anyone has ever said that of him.”

“Maybe they wanted to, but they were too afraid ... he *is* the Prince of Hell after all.”

“Perhaps ... perhaps...”

Danny wasn’t sure she liked what she saw on Michael’s face. It was sort of a smile, sort of a very disturbing smile, and it did little to put her at ease, in fact, it did the exact opposite.

“I think there is something I must see...”

“Huh?”

That strange light was back in his eyes, and that disturbing smile was still present on his face.

“Yes, something indeed.” And with those cryptic words he simply disappeared.

“Great, just frigging great.” Danny sighed, she was exhausted. She had been ignoring the pains and fatigue that wracked her body up to now, but now ... now she just wanted to sink into a long deep sleep.

Then she heard it, the long, hideous howl of a rabid animal, wounded perhaps, but more likely out for blood.

Danny had a minute to register this new development before *it* was standing before her. The creature was massive, at least eight feet tall. From the top of its massive head, two large horns twisted out, sharp and deadly. Its eyes were burning red and when it opened its mouth two rows of razor sharp teeth were revealed. Its body was a cross between a really deformed human being and an ancient demon come to life. In one huge hand it held a sword and in the other a long, ready whip.

“Uh.” Danny wrinkled her nose. “You’ve got a little drool hanging out ... do you have a tissue ... or perhaps a beach towel, I could fix that for you.” In response, the creature opened its mouth and let out a huge, terrifying shriek. Spit and other disgusting matter sprayed out toward her. “Oooh, your breath is fucking foul.” Danny dropped and rolled to her side when the whip came toward her, barely missing her side. “That didn’t go over so well, did it?” She took a deep breath and tried to bring a little magic to her hands. She felt the tingle and the slow burn of power, but it was sluggish and slow. “What the fuck?” she muttered, beginning to feel a bit of anxiety.

The whip caught her high on her shoulder and she only had a second to deal with the pain before she had to leap to her left to avoid being skewered by the deadly blade that sliced the air. There wasn’t any choice now. Her magic was slow, as if tumbling through

a barrel of molasses and until she could bring it more forcefully to her hand, she had to think of an alternative way to survive.

She had to call her beast.

Danny got to her feet slowly, warily, for the creature was stalking her. It seemed now to be taking its time. It watched her as intently as she watched it, and both measured each other's steps. She prayed to all the earth elements that this would work. She didn't have much in the way of choices. She took deep breaths and tried to bring the scent of the forest to her. She imagined the fall leaves, the brush, thick and beautiful, the air so pure and clean and the moon as it shone, luminescent.

And it came.

Danny's muscles stretched and elongated. She felt the rippling cords and flesh, and the moving beat of her heart as it changed its pace. Her pants ripped and the straps snapped and she was free ... her wolf was free.

Danny eyed the creature, its eyes were burning brighter now and it sniffed the air, as if it recognized the change in her. It rushed her, and she knew then that she had the advantage ... she was a thinking, thoughtful being, and she would be able to defeat this mindless violent thing. She dodged the blow of its fist and sprinted between its legs. When she came back around she sank her fangs into the creature's leg. It howled and screamed and began to thrash its massive leg back and forth frantically to shake her off. Danny held on, even though the blood that rushed into her mouth tasted foul and burned her tongue. Suddenly she felt the brush of the creature's whip hit her hindquarter and she yelped, letting go.

She sprang back and shook her head, spitting out the creature's blood. She had managed to wound it, could see the hard torn flesh of its leg and its blood, black and thick as it pooled upon the ground. She could make this work for her. She lunged at the creature, slashing it with her claws then quickly sprung away. It was huge, sure, but it bled like any other being, and what bled could be destroyed.

The sword came down quickly and Danny sprinted to her right, but not quickly enough. She felt the tearing, burning pain and growled. It had definitely gotten a strike in.

Danny pushed the pain away and went in for another attack. She sprung up and clawed the creature's belly. It roared in anguish and staggered back. Danny didn't give it time to recuperate before she rushed the creature again.

She was getting tired, panting and breathing hard but she wasn't about to give in, not now. She noticed most damage seemed to be done on the creature's stomach. She had struck it several times and had broken its tough flesh. It was bleeding profusely from its stomach wounds and seemed to be slowing down ... or maybe it was just wishful thinking. She needed to go for its gut. When she dived toward the creature it seemed to have her number. It brought its huge sword down and caught her on her side, opening her right up.

Okay, that really hurt. Danny stumbled back; looking down she saw her blood, thick and red, spewing out of her. Now, that was a major wound. Her body would heal it, but with her magic as sluggish as it was it could take a while.

She didn't have a while.

Danny moved back, she needed to put more space between herself and this creature. Now that she was wounded and her reflexes weren't quite as sharp, she needed more space to maneuver.

Suddenly the air was filled with acrid smoke. It was very nearly suffocating and Danny struggled to breathe. Her eyes watered and her nose burned with the foul scent. The smoke came from the monstrous creature in front of her. It was very literally on fire. This was not a fun development. The creature moved toward her. It knew it had the upper hand now, for how did she deal with a monster brandishing a sword and whip ... oh and just happened to be on fire.

Danny focused on calling the forest. If she could bring the forest to her perhaps her magic would follow. She darted back a couple more feet, needing some more time. With her eyes sharp and steady on the encroaching beast, she felt the soft wind and the rich aroma of the woods fill her nose. It moved through her pain-filled body and surrounded her with a light she had not felt since entering this dark place. It hadn't left her. It was still here ... it was still here for her.

With the knowledge that her magic was still present, and feeling the elegant presence of the forest, she allowed the power to thrum through her. There was worry in the red eyes of the creature in front of her, she could tell. She knew it could see her power, just as she could feel it strong and steady within her. Opening her mouth she let out a giant growl and saw the streams of energy ... magic, spew forth. Her power was potent, and immediately took the form she had wanted—rope. The long magical threads wrapped themselves around the monster.

The creature roared and struggled against the bindings that now held it. Danny watched as it attempted to cut the cords with its sword and she threw some more magical ropes its way. While it worked to free itself, Danny attacked. She tore at the creature furiously with her claws and continued to ravage it mercilessly. The creature swayed and she jumped out of the way just as it hit the ground.

This was her chance. Danny didn't hesitate—she went for the throat, tearing it out with one sure swipe.

“Very well done, indeed.”

Danny growled and whirled around. Michael, a.k.a. Satan stood not four feet away from her, smiling that fucking annoying smile of his.

“Yes, that was very well done, very impressive. Are you not impressed with your *amour*, son?”

And just like that, Asmodai materialized by his father's side.

Her heart fluttered, after everything, her heart still fluttered at the sight of him.

“She is a beautiful wolf, son. In fact, I cannot decide whether I like her better as a woman or as a wolf.” Michael's eyes filled with unnatural heat and Danny felt a strange uneasy feeling fill her belly. She growled as a wave of nausea passed through her and tried not to show her discomfort, fairly certain he was exerting some control and doing something to her equilibrium.

“Father, stop,” Asmodai spoke, his voice cool. “You cannot keep her as a wolf.”

Damn him. He *was* fucking with her. He was trying to keep her in her wolf form. Danny's growl intensified and she bared her teeth.

“Ahhhh my little wolf doesn't like that.”

“She isn't *your* little wolf, Father,” Asmodai said, his voice no longer cool, but filled with decided heat.

“Indeed, indeed ... but she isn't yours, either.”

It was ridiculous. The High Lord of Hell and his son, the Prince of Hell were fighting

over who ought to claim her as theirs—at least in name. If she wasn't so damned tired and sick of all this macho bullshit that she had to deal with, *all the time*, she would have chuckled. As it was, she was ready to tell everyone to go fuck themselves.

"She has remarkable power, son. Yes, yes, I see why your brothers wanted her to have an audience, but you were reluctant, were you not?"

"Not reluctant, Father."

"Oh? You did not tell me of your plans for her when you brought her here. I was alerted to her presence the moment she entered my realm, but would not have known the true extent of her power had your brothers not brought her to me."

"Yes, my dear, devoted brothers ... how kind of them. I am certain they had only my well being in mind."

She needed to change back. She could hardly participate actively in this conversation as a wolf and she felt significantly healed enough to take human form. Danny took a deep breath and prayed her magic would listen to her. She had expended a lot of power and energy fighting the creature and she wasn't sure how much she had left, especially in this unpredictable place. She brought her magic to hand and was pleased to feel the hum of power move through her. Her transformation took only moments. Then she was standing in front of Asmodai and his father.

Danny's first order of business was making sure she was all right. She checked her side and saw the wound was still open. Well, it seemed being in Hell slowed down the healing process. That, or there was something poisonous about the sword that had stabbed her. The latter didn't seem possible, she hadn't sensed anything out of the ordinary with the weapons the creature carried ... but then again, she had been getting conked on the head a lot lately and passing out.

"Use this." Asmodai handed her a small jar of what appeared to be face cream.

"Uh-huh, what is it that I'm supposed to use?"

"Smear a little over the wounds. It should help the healing process."

Danny hesitated.

"You do not wish to use something that will help to ease the pain?" Michael asked.

"If it was Ibuprofen, I'd be there. Excuse me if I'm a little hesitant about smearing some weird stuff on my wound when I don't know what the hell it is."

"You didn't hesitate before," Asmodai said quietly.

She knew he was referring to the "sunscreen" he had given her when she had first arrived in his domain.

"I wasn't bleeding from a wound one of your creatures inflicted then, either," she snapped.

Asmodai clenched his jaw but remained silent.

"She is fiery ... magnificently fiery."

Oh boy, that horrible strange light was back in Michael's eyes. And those eyes were completely trained on her.

"*She* would also like something to wear," Danny snapped. She gave Asmodai a small smile when he conjured a gown and handed it over to her. "Thanks."

"My pleasure, *amour*." Asmodai turned to his father. "Well, Father, have you seen everything that you wished to see? You pitted her against the *Hegamon*," Asmodai swept his hand toward the fallen monster, "and you see what she did to it ... does this display satisfy your curiosity?"

“She is quite wonderful. I can see why you wanted more than a mere taste. But now there is the question of your brothers...”

“What?” Asmodai snapped.

“Well, the realm is divided between the four of you ... why should you be the only one to have an *amour*?”

“She is mine!” Asmodai shouted.

“Uh, hold your horses there,” Danny snorted, “this possessive thing has got to go. I don’t stand for it on Earth and I sure as hell won’t stand for it in,” she laughed, “in Hell.”

“So you don’t consider yourself Asmodai’s?”

Danny began to answer when she caught Asmodai’s eyes. They were urgent and pleading. She paused, realizing he was pleading with her to take caution. It was obvious that Asmodai’s father was trying to trick her; how, she wasn’t sure, but he was definitely trying to trick her.

“What happens if I say that I don’t?” Danny asked.

“Oh, a sly one you are,” Michael said. His eyes had grown hard and his mouth formed a tight line. “If you are not Asmodai’s ... then you are unclaimed, and to use a quaint expression you humans like so much, up for grabs.”

“Listen, my time here has been interesting.” Danny cast a disgusted look in the direction of the monster she had defeated. It still writhed on the ground and made horrible little shrill sounds, wheezing through its nearly severed throat. “It is time I went home.”

“I am assembling you all for a meeting three days hence,” Michael spoke, ignoring Danny completely. “You will be prepared, and I know you understand my meaning.”

“Father...”

“We will speak of this no more at this time. Bring all your grievances to me three days hence. And you,” Michael turned to Danny then, “I shall see you by my son’s side, *wulfkin*. And do try not to destroy any more of my *Hegamons*.” He let out a short burst of laughter and dematerialized.

Danny walked past the fallen *Hegamon*, giving it a bone-breaking kick for good measure and stopped when she stood directly in front of Asmodai. She graced him with a small, genuine smile. “Seems your family is just as fucked up as mine. Only I can’t claim to have the Devil as my dad. Too bad.”

Chapter Seven

“Do you or do you not wish to heal?” Asmodai frowned, as he probed Danny’s wound gently.

“Hey, hey, hands off.”

He smiled. “Really? Do you not enjoy my touch, *amour*?” Asmodai laughed when she growled.

“Not when you’re poking at me, I don’t.” Danny swallowed. He was staring at her with *that look*, the look that made her want to forget about everything and just jump his bones.

“What are you thinking, *amour*?”

“None of your damned business.”

Asmodai unbuttoned the top buttons of her gown and ran his hand along her smooth collarbone.

“Uhm, I don’t think...” Danny broke off when she felt his hand curve around her breast. A glorious warmth filled her and she leaned into him. “This is not ... we still have things we need to ... uh ... talk...” It was becoming difficult to think of reasons why this was a bad idea. Asmodai pinched one ready nipple and then caressed it gently.

“You were saying, *amour*?”

“I was saying?” Danny frowned. “Saying what?”

Asmodai laughed. “Exactly, my *amour*. I believe words are no longer necessary.” He grabbed the top of her gown and ripped the dress down the front. Buttons popped free and the fabric gave as easily as a knife through butter. He stared at her for a long moment, as if drinking in every pore, every curve, every nuance of her body. “You are so very beautiful.” He reached out, caressing her from the slope of her neck to the swell of her breasts. Leaning forward he placed gentle, delicate kisses upon her face, they were as soft as butterfly wings and light as feathers.

“I won’t break,” Danny whispered. She smiled when Asmodai placed another soft kiss upon her cheek.

“I know, indeed, you are all fire and storm, beauty and cruel desire. There is nothing soft ... and yet ... yet ... everything is soft. I cherish that softness about you, my *amour*. I cherish that soft light ... that lovely soft light.” Asmodai ran a hand down her cheek, “Don’t take that light away.”

Heavens above, how was she supposed to remain unmoved in the face of such tragic loneliness and such a beautiful declaration of need, want and desire? Danny wrapped her arms around him and held him tight. She wanted to take away all the pain she saw in his eyes. She wanted to fill that awful dark void with the light he so wanted and needed. But she knew all the warmth in her body and all the light she possessed would not change what he was ... who he was. She could never take away that dark taint, but she could give him a moment ... the moment.

Danny drew his face to hers, smiling a broad, brilliant smile before crushing her lips against his. Asmodai let out a groan before returning the kiss in full. His tongue sparred with hers and his hands roamed free over her neck and shoulders.

“We have this moment,” she whispered, after breaking free of the all consuming

kiss. "We have this moment, and shouldn't we live in it? None of us can know what the future may bring ... so let us relish our moment."

Asmodai nodded, a large predatory smile breaking out on his handsome face. "Oh yes, *amour*, let us live in it." With a flick of his hand the room washed away. They were now standing in the center of a lavish bedroom bathed in gentle red light. He laughed delightedly at the look of sheer wonder on her face. "There is not much that I cannot do ... that I do not control within my realm, *amour*."

"Yeah, so I can see." Danny wriggled her eyebrows. "I think you're way overdressed for this moment."

"Do you?"

"Oh yeah ... need a hand," she held out both, "or two?" she asked impishly.

"Indeed ... I would love a hand." Asmodai's gaze followed her every move. He watched as she began to work on the intricate buttons at his throat. With each patch of revealed flesh she placed a gentle kiss there.

"You have the most perfect skin," Danny breathed in wonder. She quickly undid all the buttons down to mid-chest and pulled the two folds of the gown away to reveal a perfectly muscled plane. She let her hands wander over him. She loved how soft and yet how hard he was.

"It is the purest form of torture, your touch."

Danny smiled. She continued to work his gown down his body. When it was but a soft pool about his feet, she looked up the length of his body. She began to knead his calf muscles, delighting in the moans and soft sounds of pleasure he made. After a moment she replaced her hands with her mouth. She bit gently and then ran her tongue over the taut cords.

"A wicked angel paying homage ... that is what you look like, my *amour*."

"Paying homage ... I can do that." Danny worked her way up his body, still kneading him, and placing kisses upon his skin. When she reached that long, length of hard flesh jutting out from his body, she stopped. She cupped his balls and blew gently against him. She smiled when he shivered and let out a gasp. "Yes ... I can certainly pay homage." Her beast was beginning to thrum. The anticipation of carnal delights had begun to excite it and for once, she was very, very, glad to give into it.

"Dennison..." Asmodai groaned.

Danny ran her hands from the base of his cock to the head. She enveloped it in the warm, tight glove of her hands. She applied a bit of pressure to the head and then abruptly released him.

"Dennison..." Asmodai repeated her name and this time it sounded like a prayer.

"I know ... oh, I know..." She wrapped her lips around the head of his cock and began to suck. She took just the tip of him within her mouth and, curling her lips up and under, she began to run her tongue up and down the length of him. When she felt him swell and harden within her mouth she increased her suction and took more of him into her mouth. He hit the back of her throat. She took a breath, relaxing herself, and allowed him to press on ... he slid down her throat. She was so very, very, full, and it was wonderful, beyond wonderful.

"My beautiful *amour*," Asmodai ground out, burying his hands within her thick hair and twisting the locks almost painfully around his fingers. "Yesssss," he hissed.

It was incredible. He was hardening still within her mouth and stretching her wide.

His cock pulsed and jerked and Danny knew that he was close ... very close. She increased her suction and squeezed his balls gently. And then, with one slim finger, she pressed softly against the puckered ring of his anus, penetrating him slowly. Asmodai roared his pleasure, jerked his hips forward, and spilled his seed within her mouth.

Danny leaned back, swallowed every last drop of him, and smiled like the cat that ate the canary. Her eyes widened when she saw the look that filled Asmodai's eyes. She had a moment to register her surprise and to let out a small shriek, before he grabbed her, tossed her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and threw her upon the large bed.

"Ooooooh, Tarzan, Jane likes," Danny chortled.

"Who is this Tarzan?" Asmodai asked, kissing her calf and widening her legs.

Danny gulped and watched as he began to place similar kisses up her leg. "Uh, no one, no one of any importance."

"Good ... there should be no one but me, my *amour*, just me."

Danny groaned and bit down on her lip when he blew gently against the soft hair at the apex of her thighs. She was growing increasingly hot, and it had nothing to do with the nature of where she was, and everything to do with the man she was with.

"Would you like more ... tell me..."

"I..." She took a deep breath.

"Yes ... tell me..."

There was nothing to do *but* tell him. How could she not? "Yes, I want more ... I want it all, Asmodai ... I want you!" she exclaimed. His smile was as brilliant as the sun she missed so much. It filled his entire face, and brought about such a transformation she was fairly stunned by it.

"Oh, my *amour*, my Dennison, my Dennison, my beautiful Dennison." Asmodai repeated her name as if it were a litany before placing his mouth over the soft lips of her pussy and laving her with his tongue.

Danny arched off the bed and twisted the sheet within her fingers. She widened her legs even further and her head fell back limply as Asmodai continued his delicious assault. His mouth seemed to be everywhere at once, and his tongue ... his tongue explored it all. Her heart beat frantically and the swell became stronger, harder within her.

"Yes," he breathed against her.

"Asmodai ... I ... I..." It would not be contained any longer. Asmodai ran his tongue over her clit and sucked the hard kernel into his hot, wet mouth and it all burst forth. Her climax hit her hard and fast, sending her over the edge. Her body shook as spasm after spasm rocked her.

"Beautiful..." Asmodai whispered. "Absolutely beautiful."

"Oh, Asmodai ... it is ... we are..." She broke off as the words became too heavy and the emotions too deep.

He smiled gently, and cupped her face, cradling her between his two hands. "I know ... I know..." He moved over her body and with infinite care, entered her.

Danny let out a sigh and wrapped her arms around him. Her body was still wonderfully sensitive after her orgasm and his cock was amazingly thick and hard within her. Bending her knees, she encircled his hips with her legs, twining around him like a vine in search of the sun.

It was beautiful. They were one and their bodies fit perfectly. Her heart had never

felt so full and with each of his strokes she got closer to the peak ... the absolute quiet and sweet harmony of her beast.

"Now, now ... let it go ... let it go now..." Asmodai dug his hands into the soft cheeks of her ass and hitched her closer. When she gasped he increased his speed and, latching his mouth on the side of her neck, he bit, hard.

Yes! This was what her beast wanted, desired, and Danny let the pleasure, the wonder of the moment, build.

Danny felt Asmodai's leaping pulse and knew he was as close as she. They could have this together ... they could come together.

"Come with me," Danny whispered before she bit his shoulder as hard and strongly as he had bitten her.

And he did.

Both exploded with a shimmer of energy and power, and tumbled into the desperate abyss of pure pleasure together.

It was beautiful.

* * * *

Danny trailed her hand down Asmodai's cheek and smiled into his bright eyes. They were twinkling, sparkling like stars. She was sated and infused with a lovely, sweet hope, this moment was theirs, and theirs alone.

But it was just a moment, and moments fled like sands of time that sifted through the hourglass, then reality sank in.

"Thank you." Danny pressed her forehead against his and held him close.

"Why ... why are you thanking me?" Asmodai asked quietly.

"Because..." Danny let out a sigh, "because this time with you has been beautiful, and strangely," she laughed, "peaceful. I haven't felt this peaceful in a long, long time."

"You could feel this peace forever. We could be together always."

"Asmodai..."

"We could! We could be together always." Asmodai held her closer still, burying his head within the soft cloud of her hair. "I found you. Nothing in Heaven or Hell was able to stop my search for you. It should not have been possible ... they all said that no amount of magic or power would be able to bring you here. You would not survive the burning transition. You would be torn alive by the jackals, or the scorching fires would consume you. I told them different." Asmodai kissed her eyelids gently and caressed her cheeks. "I told them you would survive ... you would. And I knew if I brought you to a place where the portals were strong, such a transition would be easier."

Danny drew back and frowned. "Wait a second. What did you just say?"

"Pardon?"

"What did you just say?"

"I said, I knew you would survive, my *amour*."

"Uh-huh, and that if you brought me someplace where the portals were stronger..." she nodded, "yeah, run that part by me again."

"Merely that bringing you to *The Hollowing* allowed the magun to work full force. The portals at such an energized and powerful place would be doubly strong and allow my magic and yours to twine. Thus, your transition to Hell would have been made much simpler."

"You brought me to *The Hollowing*?" Danny sat up in bed. "How is that possible? Savior called for a meeting with Thad and with me. It was Savior's call that brought us to Rickart Sven's territory." When Asmodai remained silent, Danny probed further. "Right? You don't even know Savior ... you don't know any of my friends. There is no way you could have had anything to do with my being at *The Hollowing*." Danny wasn't sure who she was trying harder to convince of that fact. "Oh God," she blurted out, ignoring Asmodai's wince at her mention of the Big Guy. "Oh, my frigging God. Okay," she nodded. "Okay, now is the part where you tell me *how* you managed to bring me to *The Hollowing*. And I'm going to try to reserve my absolutely seething, ridiculously burning anger at you, for *after* your better-than-life explanation."

"I have been able to think of nothing but you since drinking in Harrod's essence."

"Explanation is not starting off so good," Danny snapped.

Asmodai ignored her and continued. "I have been able to reach you through the mark."

"The mark that your demon made when he so rudely attacked me?"

"Gathering information, bits of your whereabouts and your companions has not been difficult since there was still a tie through the mark. My powers are quite strong, as I'm sure you have been able to ascertain, and I have the ability to recreate an image, a voice, anything I so wish ... with just a little help from the dark energy that surrounds me. I needed you at *The Hollowing*, do you understand that, my *amour*? I needed you close to the magic at the strongest point of the portal. Only such a need would have driven me to..."

"To what, driven you to do what?" Danny's voice was cool and detached.

"I contacted your comrade."

"You contacted Thad?"

"Aye, I made contact with your comrade, told him that I needed a meeting ... and that *The Hollowing* would be a suitable place for him to take his rest."

"And he listened to you because he had no reason to doubt his master, Savior Knight." It was painfully clear now. Asmodai had arranged everything, had arranged it all through deception and deceit. "You must have expended quite a deal of energy to reach out to Thad from Hell ... oh, and to copy Savior's voice," she finished dryly.

"There was a measure of difficulty, yes, but it had to be done."

"Ah yes, it had to be done. You needed me at *The Hollowing*. You needed me at the opening of the portal. You needed, you needed, all about you..."

"Danny..." Asmodai beseeched her with his eyes.

She shook her head and moved even further away from him. When he tried to come closer she held up a hand to stop him.

"My *amour*, listen to me..."

"No, no, I am done listening to you." She smiled, but it was cold and condemning. "I'm finished for now."

"We must speak."

"We will." She laughed a brittle laugh. "We will most certainly speak about it ... later. Right now I want some time alone ... some real time, time where I'm not being attacked by demons and monsters with whips and swords, where I'm not being paraded before Satan and accosted by his sons. Do you think you can do that?" she finished coolly.

Asmodai slid off the bed gracefully. His face was no longer passive. It was filled with desire and mourning. A strange partnership perhaps ... but ever so fitting in lieu of the current revelations.

"I will return later." He looked as if he wanted to say more but restrained himself.

"Yeah, you do that." Danny watched as he walked out of the room. Once he was gone she collapsed on the bed and gave into her exhaustion. Her limbs felt like gelatin and even her aches ached. For the first time since entering Hell she was vividly aware of her situation. It was obvious that she had to find a way to leave this place, and it was just as obvious that part of her was reluctant. "Stupid, stupid, *stupid* Danny," she muttered, in absolute disgust. How could she have let this happen? How could she have let herself *feel* for this dark creature? But that was the truth, she did feel for him. She felt so much in fact that she was beginning to fear ... fear the strength of her desire and the need that erupted in her when he was next to her.

She couldn't allow this to continue. She could not allow these feelings to be awakened within her. Soon, very soon, she would be returned to her rightful place, a place without Asmodai, and she would continue with her life as it was known to her—a life without her dark prince. The hurt, the pain, the loneliness and desperate need that she saw in his eyes had to be ignored ... it absolutely had to be ignored. "Oh, God in heaven." Danny covered her face with her hands as it became so incredibly clear. Staring into Asmodai's eyes, those black orbs, was like staring into a pool of crystal water and seeing her own reflection. All of her life she had been separate and different. Her gifts, the very nature of her power had kept her from the rest of the world. She hid her loneliness and her anger behind a carefully created mask and kept that mask in place, often by force or sheer strength of will.

Asmodai ... her dark prince ... he too wore that mask, that carefully crafted mask. But when he stood so beautiful and rigid in front of her, and when she peered into his lovely, regal face she saw ... she saw the truth. And the truth tore through her like a knife. She felt for him, she ached for him ... just as she ached for all the years she had lost behind her own cold and friendless mask.

He was her mirror, and it shattered her. He was the truth serum and the fear of discovery. He was eternal solitude and aching want. And yet, if the years of loneliness and indifference had taught her anything, it was that you could depend upon no one for your survival. The world owed you nothing and you were responsible for your own happiness or your own unhappiness.

The White Knight did not exist and Prince Charming was but a fairy tale told to young impressionable girls—something she had never been, something she had never had the opportunity to be.

Lord. She had to get out of here. She had to get out before she gave in ... before she gave in to him.

* * * *

Yes she was in Hell. She was definitely in Hell. This fucking labyrinth was her Hell. All the rooms had multiple doors, and all the doors led to multiple corridors which led to multiple hallways that led ... nowhere.

Danny had been walking aimlessly for what seemed to be hours. She had no idea where she was or how to leave, and with each step was becoming increasingly annoyed.

She wasn't even sure she was in Asmodai's house. With Asmodai's ability to shift and meld space and time, and his conjuring powers ... she could be anywhere in his domain ... if she was even in his domain.

"Hell and damnation," Danny screeched, she was reaching the end of her rope. She was tired and unbelievably hot, she wanted a cold bath and some clothes. She had searched in vain for something to wear and when finding nothing, she had to deal with walking around butt naked. Nudity wasn't something she usually had an issue with—on Earth—but walking around stark naked in Hell was definitely unnerving. "Arggggg..." Danny slumped down against the wall and took a couple deep breaths. She needed to get her bearings and she needed to figure out a course of action. It wasn't doing her any good to walk around like a numbskull. What were her options? She didn't have many. She could continue to scour this place hoping to find an exit. She could sit on the hot, tiled floor and wait for someone to come. Or she could take a chance and call out to *him*. None of the choices seemed all that great.

"I need help," Danny spoke out loud. She swallowed heavily, took another deep breath and tried again. "I need help, please." She didn't have to wait long. Seconds later Asmodai stood in front of her as beautiful and tragic as he had been when he had left her.

"My *amour*, my Danny..." He held out his hand to her.

Danny straightened her shoulders, and ignoring his hand she stood. "I'm making this clear now, I didn't want to ask for your help, but I had no choice."

Asmodai laughed. "Thank you for clarifying the situation for me."

"Where am I? And how the heck do I get out of here?"

"You are in one of my father's holdings. And there is no exit unless..."

"I know, I know, not unless someone helps me out. I'm so aware of that fact by now." Danny massaged her temple.

"Your head hurts," Asmodai cried out in alarm.

"No shit, Sherlock. I don't suppose you have some Ibuprofen around here?" At his blank look she groaned, "Medicine for headaches."

With a familiar twist of his hand, Asmodai conjured a small box. "I have..."

"No, no, that's okay."

"You will not accept anything..."

"Uh, listen, I'm just not comfortable taking some strange sort of medication."

"I was not speaking about the medication, my *amour*."

"Oh?"

"I was speaking of your nature. You will accept nothing." Asmodai clenched his hands into tight fists. "You are unbending."

"Yeah, you know what, I am. I am unbending. I'm also in Hell, Asmodai. I. Am. In. Hell!" she finished, punctuating each word strongly. "If it had escaped your notice, let me bring it to your attention again, you kidnapped me, big boy." She realized she was getting worked up and should probably try to calm herself down, but now she had begun she couldn't stop. "You gooped me up in a fucking tub and sucked me down the drain to Hell. I woke up with first-degree burns all over my body and the wickedest hangover of my life. I was promptly whisked off the ground by a giant bird and dumped on your doorstep. I met your brothers, and your delightful dad, the Devil ... and was attacked by a giant flaming thing brandishing a sword and whip." Danny took a deep breath. She needed some more air to get this all out. "So excuse me if I'm not in the best of moods

right now. Excuse me if I'm less than gracious." Danny gave him the middle finger. She realized by his lack of response that he had no idea what the gesture meant. Great, she had wasted a perfectly good bird on the dead guy in Hell.

"Perhaps we should retire for the night," Asmodai said abruptly.

"For the night? Is it night right now? How the heck do you even tell?" Danny missed the moon. She missed the sky. She missed the welcoming Earth. "Take me home, Asmodai," she suddenly beseeched him. All her anger and fury left her in a rush, like the clouds after a storm. It was doing her no good to rant at him. Hell, he didn't even know what a good Earth rant was. "Take me home."

"I cannot."

"Yes, yes, you can." Danny clasped her hands together as if praying and rushed on. "You can. You brought me here, you can take me home."

"Do not ask it of me." Asmodai turned away from her.

"You can't just keep me here. You can't..."

"Yes!" he shouted, spinning around, and grabbing her by her shoulders. "I can! I can keep you here. You are mine, do you understand that, my *amour* ... you are mine."

Danny's body went completely still. "I don't want to hate you. Please don't make me hate you, Asmodai."

"Danny..."

"Don't, Asmodai ... don't do it. If you continue to force this, you *will* be completely responsible for the consequences. And if that isn't clear enough for you, let me put it this way. If you keep me here against my will, I will never forgive you. I will never forgive you and I will come to hate you."

"I don't know how to let you go. How do I do it?" he finally whispered, his voice tortured and broken in pain.

"Oh, Asmodai..." Danny cupped his face in her hands and brought his forehead to her own. "You just do it. You just let go." Pain was welling up strong and fierce within her.

Asmodai pulled away then, his face now remote and detached. "Three days hence, after our assembled meeting with Father, we shall discuss this matter again ... and ... and if you still wish to go ... then I shall take you home."

"Asmodai I must..."

"No, this is how it shall be, my *amour*."

There was determination and something stronger present upon his face now. And Danny, who was quite aware of her unbending nature, realized that here, now, she would have to give in ... if only for a little bit. "Promise?"

"What?"

"Do you promise to take me home after the meeting?"

"Do you doubt me?" There was underlying fire in his question.

"Hell yeah, I doubt you." Danny rolled her eyes. "I think I have every reason to doubt at this moment. But ... if you give me your promise ... I'll believe your promise, Asmodai."

Asmodai clenched his jaw. He nodded stiffly. "Then you have my promise, my *amour*. If you still wish to go, I shall return you to your home after we meet with my father."

And she believed him.

Chapter Eight

She knew her mouth was hanging open but it was just such a shock, such an absolute shock to her. She was standing in the most ... normal, basic, generic human bedroom she had ever seen. There was beige carpeting on the floor, and a small area rug by the entrance. The walls were painted sea foam green and there were paintings of the forest and of the ocean gracing those walls. A sleigh bed was placed in the left hand corner of the room, it was covered with a cream duvet, and all the mahogany furniture looked as if it could have been purchased from Pottery Barn. Not that she had any problem with Pottery Barn, in moderation—everything in moderation. This room looked like a catalogue gone insane. The lamps on the nightstand were antique bronze with cream shades and there was a little alarm clock in the form of a wolf. An oval shaped mirror graced the wall near the bed and there were small silver hooks placed here and there for hanging clothes—clothes which she didn't have.

"You are displeased?" Asmodai asked, cutting through the silence.

Danny turned to look at him. She swallowed. "I'm just surprised, that's all."

He frowned. Looking genuinely bewildered, he asked, "Why? Is this not an Earth bedroom?"

"It's Martha Stewart's wet dream."

"Who?"

"You haven't gotten her yet? What a shame." Danny laughed and shook her head.

"Sorry, bad joke. It's just that this room is so..." she struggled to find the right word, "uh, it's so..."

"You are displeased," he repeated. "I thought if I could re-create your human bedroom I could give you a sense of ... belonging."

"You did this for me?" Stupid question, Danny, stupid, stupid, question. Of course he did this for her. "Asmodai ... it was such a sweet thought."

"Sweet," he scrunched up his nose and it looked adorable, "sweet is not the same as adoration..."

Adoration? Yeah, she definitely didn't adore this room. "Uhm, it's just that ... as sweet as this room is ... if you were looking to re-create my bedroom ... well ... my bedroom doesn't look anything like this."

"I have seen..."

"If you're going to say that you've been spying on me and you've seen my bedroom," she glared, "then don't."

"No. I have not invaded that sanctuary but I have seen many Earth bedrooms ... and I was quite certain that this was the proper bedroom for..."

"A reserved sixteen-year-old, or my grandmother."

"Ah, I see now," his face brightened, "you are saying that the bedroom is ... perhaps too old-fashioned for you."

"Exactly!" Danny was elated that he was able to touch on it. She hadn't wanted to offend him, but she had been two steps away from telling him that if she had to sleep in this sterile department store showcase environment, she would hurl.

"I could perhaps..." Asmodai walked over to the walls and passing a hand over

them, they changed colors immediately. They were now a bright crimson. He turned to look at her and must have known by her expression that this wasn't right either. "It is too red?"

"Yeah," Danny answered simply.

"This, perhaps?" The walls changed again to deep aubergine.

The deep, rich color of the walls was perfect. Danny smiled. "It's beautiful. Now, can we get rid of some of the frou frou shit?"

"What?"

She gestured to the rug, the walls and sighed. "All the extras aren't me, either. I like things simple and strong. My room is uncluttered and makes a statement with just the color and the basic design. I don't need paintings and ... and ... all this stuff." She thought of all the bedrooms she had been in and seen and couldn't help but smile. Savior's room wasn't her taste, neither was Alexander or Draco's for that matter ... but each of their rooms expressed them and thus made sense to her. Her room ... her room was the same. It said something about her.

Danny watched as Asmodai one by one disappeared the extra pieces that cluttered her room until there was nothing but an empty aubergine slate.

"Tell me, my *amour*. Tell me what you want."

Danny bit her lip and took a moment. It wasn't as if she was planning on spending much time in this room, however, when someone gave you complete control and told you to "go crazy" ... it was pretty damn exciting.

"Your eyes are glittering ... you are happy." Asmodai's expression was one of complete joy.

"Yes, I am. Thank you." Danny began to "walk the space." She had done this many times before, of course, usually she was drawing chalk lines to call demons or staking out a space for a coven or some other unruly client. This was her space and Asmodai had given her *carte blanche*. "Four-poster," she said suddenly. When she was little she had always wanted a four-poster bed. Her mother had scoffed at her, calling her wish, nonsense and telling her that wolves had no use for beds, let alone four-poster ones. She had spent most of her early life curled up on a mat—her mother's idea of "conditioning." "Do you know what a four-poster bed is?"

Asmodai grinned boyishly. "I think I do. Four-poster says it all, does it not?" Asmodai waved his hand and there was a massive four-poster bed sitting in the center of the room.

"It's beautiful," Danny breathed. She ran her hand over the dark-grained wood and smiled. The detailing was incredible and it looked exactly like her dream.

"It is what you wanted?"

"Oh yes." Danny didn't know why she felt so damned emotional all of a sudden, but she did. Perhaps it was the knowledge that Asmodai had given her one of her dreams, had made it happen for her. And that he had cared ... genuinely cared. He had wanted to make a place of peace, comfort and happiness for her and it had hurt him when he thought he had failed. Her own flesh and blood denied her. Her mother had never cared for her comfort. She had done little in the way of mothering, and she had lashed out when she had realized that Danny, her own daughter, was a threat to her. It was strange to suddenly have this ... this connection.

"Is there anything else?" Asmodai asked.

Danny grinned and in quick succession listed off some items. In less than five minutes the room was finished. Nothing had been overlooked, every detail was perfect and it certainly looked like her bedroom on Earth, plus a few things.

"It is like home?"

"Yes, Asmodai ... it is like home."

"I'm glad. It is what I wanted for you."

"Asmodai..." Danny began but was suddenly interrupted.

"Milord, milord!"

Both Danny and Asmodai turned. Capshaw was standing at the entrance to the room, hopping from one foot to the other in agitation.

"Why do you disturb us, Capshaw?"

"One of the recent dead is causing an issue, quite a problem..."

"Such a trivial matter to disturb me with..." Asmodai's voice was heated, and his eyes seemed to burn with anger.

"I beg your pardon, milord, but he is causing quite a disturbance at the pool and agitating all the others."

Asmodai growled, spun on his heel, and strode from the room. Danny was left staring after him. "You've got to be kidding," she muttered, as she rushed after him.

"This is none of your concern," Asmodai called back over his shoulder, as he continued to stride down the long hall.

"Uh-huh, you keep telling yourself that."

"Truly, I cannot be bothered with having to worry that you shall..."

"Shall what?" Danny called back.

"You do not know our ways. Let me deal with the dead and I shall return to you posthaste."

"Believe me ... I've dealt with plenty of dead before." They reached the end of the hall and the two large double doors swung open for them. Danny, right on Asmodai's heels stopped short. "Whoa, talk about a Ghost Rider moment." Danny jumped back as a man on fire ran past her screaming. It was serious chaos in Asmodai's courtyard. There were demons and assorted strange creatures running back and forth shrieking and Danny massaged her temples. "Ahhhhh," she groaned, "this is worse than hearing a baby cry for twelve hours."

"*Stop!*" Asmodai's voice rang out authoritative and strong and all actions ceased. "I would know why you are disrupting my peace, and causing my *amour* discomfort."

"I'm fine," Danny whispered when all heads swung her direction. "Nothing some aspirin won't fix." Danny watched as a severely burned man walked toward Asmodai. She had seen an array of burn patients during her life, but this was one of the worst cases she had ever encountered. His face was unrecognizable, his features having been literally melted off. His body was one massive wound and there were parts of him that were still smoking. It was terrible.

"I will not enter until I know what has become of Sarah," the man spoke through his horribly misshapen mouth.

Asmodai smiled, it was not a friendly smile. "You have already entered. You do not have a choice."

"So this is..." the man spoke haltingly.

"Yes, it is."

“And Sarah ... where is she?”

“I would know first why you have caused this disruption and why you have brought your troubles to my door.”

“I cannot have peace until I know what has happened to her...”

“I am not in the business of granting peace,” Asmodai said. “You must submerge in the pool.”

“No! What has happened to her?”

“She is where she is supposed to be.”

It happened so fast that by the time Danny realized what was going on it was too late to do anything about it. The man had his arm wrapped firmly around her neck and was squeezing quite forcibly. The heat from his still smoking body was scorching, and pieces of his skin and ash were dropping onto her forehead and sliding down her face.

“That’s my ... my ... windpipe you’re squashing,” Danny mumbled. Wow, he had a strong grip for a burned dead guy.

“You will release her, Aaron.” Asmodai’s voice was cool and yet there was an underlying heat there. He took a step forward.

“Do not come any closer. I will snap her neck like a chicken. I will.”

“Would rather,” Danny coughed and tried to swallow, “would rather you not do that, Aaron.” She used his name intentionally trying to personalize the situation.

“Don’t make me hurt her.”

The pressure was beginning to get quite intense and Danny realized that her window of freedom was narrowing considerably. He was not about to let her go, not without some force. She had seen many in the throes of anger, rage, fear and helplessness and this man, Aaron, as Asmodai had called him, was in the throes of it all.

Danny focused her energy on partial shifting. The magic seemed a bit less sluggish, perhaps because she only needed to control a very small unit of power. Her magic answered her call and she felt her hands shift accordingly. Without hesitation she thrust her hands back, digging her claws into the man’s soft, decaying flesh. He screamed, immediately releasing her and stumbling back.

Nope, never wait for a knight in shining armor, or Prince Charming. This princess could save herself.

“I’d like to say I was sorry to do that...” Danny pushed back a strand of stray hair and shrugged. “But ... I’m not. In fact, I hope it hurt like a bitch.” She was done playing little Miss Nice to the mean burned guy. There was such a thing as personal space and he had crossed the line ... by a wide margin. Hey, he was already dead. It wasn’t like she could do much more damage, right?

“Very well handled, my *amour*,” Asmodai came to stand beside her, and placed his hand on her shoulder. “You’ve been a very bad boy, Aaron. And I’m afraid that I am done showing you any mercy. You are not in the presence of *Him*. There is no grace or mercy here. You are in my court, and in my court...” Asmodai flicked his hand and Aaron was levitated off the ground, “I reign supreme.” Asmodai kept one hand on Danny’s shoulder, soft and caressing, with the other he controlled the twisting and struggling Aaron. “I could easily pull you apart right now, Aaron. I could send you to the pool in a thousand little pieces, quite a messy way to spend your eternity below. Unpleasant, very unpleasant. Do tell me why I shouldn’t.” Asmodai sighed. “On the other hand, I do not believe I am interested in your opinion.” With a second flick of his wrist,

Aaron was engulfed in flames and then ... gone, just gone.

"What was that about?" Danny asked. Asmodai was still caressing her shoulder.

"Nothing to concern yourself about."

"I think I'd like to come to that conclusion on my own, thank you very much."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. So, spill. What the hell was that about?"

"Some of those who descend are not quite ready ... Aaron was one of those who was not quite ready to accept his state." Asmodai started to guide Danny back into his domicile.

"Who is Sarah?"

"Who?"

"Don't give me that. Aaron asked about Sarah. Who is Sarah?"

"She doesn't matter."

"She obviously mattered to Aaron."

"But she does not matter to this situation, nor does she matter to you."

"Tell me about Sarah, Asmodai." Danny stopped, halting their progress.

"Sarah was Aaron's wife when he was alive."

"His wife?" Danny frowned.

"Yes. When he was alive, Aaron was married to Sarah. She was his true love. His saving grace, you might say." Asmodai scoffed and waved his hand off-handedly. "It is too bad that his love for her was not stronger than his love of money. You see, in one life, Aaron was a loving, attentive husband, in another life, he killed people for money." Asmodai laughed a brittle laugh. "It was quite a double life that he led."

"He was hit man," Danny said blandly.

"More or less, although he wasn't nearly as discerning in his marks as a hit man would be. He had no loyalty to a family. He went where the money was."

Danny cleared her throat. This was hitting a little too close to home for her.

"Unfortunately for Aaron, one of his marks had a very large extended family,"

Asmodai continued dryly. "One night, in retaliation, that family burned Aaron's home to the ground. Aaron and his wife Sarah were sleeping at the time. He tried to save her ... in fact, he almost succeeded, but in the end they were both lost." Asmodai must have read the horror on Danny's face because he shook his head. "Do not feel sympathy for him. He knew long ago that he was lost. He continued on his path well aware of the consequences of his actions."

"Mmmmm ... you think that he thought, 'Oh, I'm going to Hell one day, so what the heck, I'll just continue to kill people?' Yeah, I'll buy that. Sure people always think about Hell when they're doing something they shouldn't be doing," Danny quipped sarcastically.

"Your sarcasm is not lost on me, my *amour*."

"Sarcastic, *moi*? Never."

"There is some ... anger lacing your words, my *amour*. I would know where this anger is directed."

"Oh, are you afraid I'm going to throw a hissy fit? Don't worry, that's not my style ... usually."

"What has upset you? I have already apologized for Aaron's appalling behavior."

Was he kidding? Did he not get it? "This isn't about Aaron. Well, maybe a little

about Aaron. But not in the way that you think.”

“Then tell me.”

Danny sighed and thought carefully. She didn’t just want to run off her mouth. She really wanted this to come out right. She needed to find the right words. She had a tendency to run off her mouth without thinking. God, wow, she did do that. It was a bad habit. Perhaps she should look into...

“You realize you *can* talk...” Asmodai said with a small smile.

Danny gave him a dirty look. “Look, you say you *know* things, that you *see* things, then you must be very, very aware of what I do for a living ... okay, what I did for a living.”

A warmth, a strange light entered Asmodai’s eyes. “Oh yes, I am very aware of what you did. You are very good at your job, very, very, good at your job.”

“It’s not my job anymore.”

Asmodai cocked his head to one side quickly, giving him the appearance of an owl. “Oh?”

“No, I’m a cashier now.”

“A cashier,” he repeated.

“Yeah, at a store,” Danny said stupidly. She rolled her eyes. Of course at a store, it was like being around him made half of her brain matter disappear. “You knew that.”

“That you work for that odd woman?” Asmodai nodded. “Yes, I was aware of that.”

“Odd? You think my boss is odd?” Danny couldn’t help but laugh. It started as a slow bubble and then became a full blast of raucous laughter. Oh lord, he thought Whitefeather was odd? And what was she, the next presidential candidate?

“She is a strange woman. Her energy ... it is hard to place.”

Danny stopped laughing and cleared her throat. “But she’s not going to Hell,” Danny said, voice now dry. She couldn’t imagine Whitefeather going to Hell. She was one of the truest, most honest and genuine people she knew.

“Are you asking me if your boss will descend after she dies?”

“Hmmm, okay, the way you say it sounds a whole lot better.”

“I am not at liberty to say, my *amour*.”

“Now you sound like a lawyer. Fine, fine, don’t answer. Wow, we got off track, didn’t we?”

“Indeed. We were discussing your anger, and your misplaced sympathy toward Aaron.”

“I don’t feel sympathy for him, Asmodai.”

“Do you not?”

“It’s what you said about...” Danny stopped, gathered her thoughts and tried again. “I killed things all the time, and I never felt any guilt or remorse,” she finally said bluntly. The whole eloquent thing never seemed to work for her. She should just know by now that she was going to her grave as brash as she had been when she had come from her mother’s womb. It was just her thing. It was part of what made her so irresistible and endearing ... yeah, right.

“Oh, this is about your remorse.”

Danny shook her head. “No, no, it’s not like that either.” And it wasn’t. “I guess, I just don’t like to think of things as that black and white, Asmodai. Sometimes the right thing, isn’t the right thing, do you understand?” By his blank look it was obvious he

didn't. "Okay, how about this, life is made out of a lot of gray as well. There has to be some room for ... for ... interpretation. I killed things, creatures, does that make me bad? Does that make me doomed ... am I going to Hell because of it?"

Asmodai chuckled. "You are *in* Hell, my *amour*."

"You know what I mean, don't be dense. There are more than two sides, there is gray..."

"There are only two sides in my world," Asmodai said simply. "You ascend, or you descend. It is that simple. There is no gray, as you put it. It is simply black or white."

"So, I'm doomed."

"Doomed? I don't understand this doomed."

"Doomed, as in, my soul is black and I'm not going to Heaven. I'm lost, tainted, all that crap." Wow, sobering thought.

"You consider your crimes, so to speak, to be the same as Aaron's?"

"Well, we both..."

"Aaron killed for money. He killed for the pleasure of killing, and the thrill he received from it. He murdered innocent people. Yes, some of those that he killed were innocent. Their only crime being that they were caught in the middle of some larger scheme or plan. Was his last act on Earth selfless, and done with love and caring toward another human being ... yes, it was. But his soul was tainted long before the sacrifice that he made. And nothing he did would redeem those acts that blackened his character and brought him to our attention. You, you my *amour* are nothing ... let me repeat, nothing, like Aaron. You did not kill innocent beings. Perhaps you made your living off destroying certain creatures ... but that is not nearly the same thing as Aaron's many crimes. Your crimes, if they are even that, lay within your own heart, my *amour*, they are not the things that will be weighed come judgment time."

Danny said nothing, but her heart and mind were filled to capacity. She was not doomed. She was not past redemption. God, oh God, just that thought alone brought a light to her soul.

Asmodai pulled her close, wrapping his arms tightly around her. He buried his head within her hair and caressed her back soothingly. "My little one ... you were afraid, you were afraid that you were tainted?"

"My activities are sometimes questionable, and then there was that demon that bit me ... I guess I thought..."

"No, little one, it does not work that way. Your journey is far from over ... and with each moment you create part of your story. You are not finished, and you are not judged now."

Danny smiled slightly against his chest and asked, voice muffled, "Then am I going to uh ... well ... the big guy?"

Asmodai laughed.

"Wait," Danny's smile widened, "let me guess, you're not at liberty to say."

"No, I'm not." Asmodai pulled away then, his eyes probed hers deeply, "But I shall tell you that the power that fills that remarkable body of yours, the magic that is as true to you as your heart ... it is consuming, and it is not evil."

"Woo hoo, I'm not evil," she muttered sarcastically.

Asmodai shook his head. "I said that your magic and power is not evil. I did not say that *you* were not."

Danny swallowed. *Fuck*. Well that sucked.

Chapter Nine

She was suffocating. Oh God, she was suffocating. She tried to take a breath, she wanted to take a breath ... but she couldn't. She just couldn't do it. This was it. This was the last moment of her life ... the very last.

"Fucking A." Danny sat straight up from bed. A dream, it had all been a dream. What a shitty dream.

Danny got out of bed and began to walk to her window before she realized she wasn't in *her* room and there wasn't a window to walk to. She raked her hands through her hair and took several deep, cleansing breaths.

She was still in Hell. And somehow she knew it was the day of the *meeting*. So, she was *really* in Hell.

"So, what does one wear to a meeting with Satan and his four sons?" Danny muttered, and was chagrined when her four-poster bed was suddenly overwhelmed with clothes. "You know, it's rude to eavesdrop," Danny said, walking toward the bed and studying the huge mound of clothing. She ran her hands over the myriad of fabrics and took in the colors and textures, automatically cataloguing what she would never wear. A brilliant swath of scarlet grabbed her attention and Danny pulled it out from under several other gowns. The scarlet gown was sensational and even to her untrained fashion eye, stood out. It was strapless, made from some gauzy, light fabric, it seemed to move as effortlessly as the wind. There was nothing flashy about the dress. No sequins, no feathers, no bells and whistles. It was just a dress. A dress, simple, understated and devastatingly beautiful in that simplicity.

Danny slipped the dress on and struggled for a minute with the zipper. When it was securely in place she took a deep breath and then exhaled slowly, reveling in the softness, the pure comfort of the cloth against her skin. It was a dream, it wore like a dream ... yes, she would wear this dress and hopefully she would do it justice.

"You look ... there are no words for how you look, my *amour*." Asmodai spoke from behind her and Danny straightened her shoulders. "I have never seen one such as you ... brilliant, beautiful ... flame, and ice and magnificent earth in one."

"You really should stomp your feet or something, you know, to let someone know you're coming," Danny sniped. Although she knew that this coming from her was rather ridiculous, as wolves prided themselves in treading without sound ... as still and silent as the unbroken night.

"I apologize if I startled you." He sounded genuinely apologetic.

Danny turned and graced him with a lopsided smile, suddenly feeling rather foolish. "That's all right. I forgive you. Are we needed now?"

Asmodai nodded.

"Hell, how long have I been sleeping? Time sorts of mushes together down here."

"That is a rather observant statement. Aye, time is relative. But it is one must measure ... I would say you have slept over a day and a half."

"*What!*" she shrieked. How was that possible? No. She couldn't have slept for nearly two days. That wasn't ... it wasn't ... possible. She had gone through a lot these last few days. Jesus, she had taken a road trip to Hell. But even with fatigue riding her body and

the lack of a moon ... a day and a half?

"You are concerned, you needn't be." Asmodai spoke softly.

"Really? I shouldn't be concerned that I've conked out for nearly two days in a coma-like state?" She rubbed her temples. "What's wrong with me?"

"There is nothing wrong with you." Asmodai reached for her and frowned when she skittered out of reach. "Nothing, absolutely nothing, my *amour*. You are a shifter by nature, and there is no moon to shift here. Your magic is hindered, your power slow, and you are weakened."

"But it has never been weakened to this extent..."

"Have you ever descended before?"

He did have a point. "My moon," she whispered, broken and in pain, "I need my moon."

"Yes," Asmodai stepped closer to her, "I know. I know you do, but I shall give it to you."

Danny moved further away from him. "You can't. You can't give me the moon, Asmodai. That is something you cannot give me. How could you even suggest otherwise?"

"I did not suggest. I can give it to you. It would be difficult, yes. And the power I would have to expend, significant. But I could give you a moon unlike any you have ever seen. It shall be stronger and more perfect than the moon you view on your Earth. It will be..."

"Stop!" Danny clenched her hands into tight fists and counted to ten. "Do you hear yourself? Do you hear what you're saying? A better moon, a stronger moon ... it would be a pale mockery. My power would know the difference. My wolf would know, Asmodai. You would not be able to trick it. It would never emerge for you, or your false moon."

"It would be real if I wished it so."

She shook her head. "Doesn't work that way. You want something, and you just get it. You can't make a new moon. You can't just wish the moon to be real." She snorted. "Come on, where are you..." She stopped abruptly. She had been about to say, "Where are you from?" until she realized the silliness of her question. She was talking to a Prince of Hell, pretty heady stuff. Did she blame him for not really understanding? Jesus, she barely understood her own life most of the time. How did she make this clear to him? "Asmodai, there is but one moon and you can't..."

"Ah, the egocentricity of humans. You truly are more human than I thought, my *amour*."

"Excuse me."

"I've forgotten how young you are, how very young. To utter a statement such as the one you just uttered, you must not have lived long nor traveled far."

"I've lived plenty." She jerked her chin up stubbornly.

"Compared to whom?" Asmodai smiled broadly, and his blacker than black eyes seemed to sparkle with delight. "Do you know how old I am, Danny?"

Danny started at the use of her actual name. He hadn't used it since their first meeting.

"I am very old, Danny, and I have seen much. In my existence there is little that has escaped my notice. There are many moons, there are many cycles and there are many

planets and universes beyond that of your Earth.”

“I’m aware of that, Einstein. I’m also aware of realms and portals and oh, dimensions and...”

“Yes, yes, you are putting me in my place.” Asmodai spoke lightly, his smile still present upon his face. “I know you are a *magi* wolf. I know how much power you possess and how those strive to possess you.”

“Don’t like how this sounds, Asmodai.” She wrinkled her nose when he seemed to ignore her completely.

“You certainly see more than the average human, my *amour*, for you are so much more than average. You understand how magic breathes, and how power surges through and energizes us but you are still just you. You have not lived the span of ages as I have.”

Danny held up a hand. “Fine, fine, I get it. There are other moons out there, and I said something stupid. So what, you’re going to steal some other planet’s moon and bring it down to Hell for me?” she sniped. Asmodai seemed to think the comment over. “That was just a joke, Asmodai.”

“No. What a novel idea. I did not even think ... yes, perhaps that would be a better idea than conjuring one for you. The necessary magic may even be easier to approach...”

Her headache was coming back. Danny sighed and shook her head. “Okay. Just for the record ... I don’t want you to steal some other planet’s moon.”

“You need one, my *amour*. You weaken by the day. You must shift under the moon’s persuasion.”

“I’m aware of that. But the answer isn’t to pilfer some other poor planet’s moon. There is a very easy solution to all of this. You just have to return me...”

“Enough, I have heard enough.”

“You’re being childish now.” Danny almost laughed at the expression on Asmodai’s face. He looked like a child who was being forced to eat his unwanted greens. His face was pinched and pained looking.

“I only wish to make you happy. My concern is for your welfare, my *amour*.” His voice had become cajoling and seductive.

“Oh no, no way,” she snorted. “No nookie right now. And it takes much more than a sexy voice to get me in the sack.” *Sometimes*.

“Nookie ... sounds intriguing.”

“Listen...” she was already exhausted and they hadn’t even begun their meeting yet, “...I’m ready to get this show on the road.” She almost wished that she was horny at this moment. Another distraction would almost be welcome to what she was about to face.

“Yes, I’m afraid that my father is not a patient person by nature.”

“No,” she said dryly, “he didn’t strike me as one who is accustomed to waiting on anything.”

“No,” Asmodai’s voice grew dark and heavy, “he has rarely had to wait. In fact there was a time once when he waited on nothing ... and all waited upon him, but that is a story for another time...”

“I bet it is,” Danny murmured.

Asmodai held out his hand to her. “Shall we go?”

She swallowed, took a deep breath, and accepted his hand. “Sure,” her mouth quirked, “what the hell.”

* * * *

Another night-less night, and day-less day. Another dark room and darker intentions. Danny stood, hand in Asmodai's, surveying the large cavernous-like room. It really was a monstrous room. It seemed to go back into eternity. The walls were stone, so was the floor. And the ceiling, which rose high above her head, was buttressed. In fact, it had the appearance of a statuesque cathedral ... on a much larger scale. It was a room unlike any other, meant to impress and intimidate. In Danny's opinion it succeeded in the former and failed in the latter. But then again, there was little that intimidated her these days.

Did she consider herself cynical? Maybe. She was certain people probably saw it as stupidity, sheer stupidity. But in the world that she inhabited you would have a short, short lifespan if you showed fear or submitted. Hadn't all those "games" that her early clan had played upon her taught her anything? She had grown up being attacked, jumped, and ambushed daily. Her *Rasha*—instructor—had said that the many attacks were for her own good. They taught her discipline and perseverance, both of which she would need when she was let out on her own. He had been right. She had needed it. But the years of abuse had taught her more than discipline and perseverance ... she had learned the mercilessness of the world and the desolate nature of being a split-soul. She had learned her lesson so well that she had taken it and held it close to her till this day. This lesson had kept her apart and made her wary of all who would try to get close to her. She had no friends, but she had plenty of enemies. Yes, her life ... her beautiful fucked up life, and couldn't she just wait to get back to it. Well no matter, fucked up or not, it was her life, and she was entitled to it.

"You think deep thoughts, *amour*. Thoughts that keep you from me."

"Thoughts that keep me from me," she muttered.

Look at them ... look ... they hold one another. He takes her hand, my lord, he takes her hand. She is wulfkin, as true as they come. We have not seen a wulfkin in so long ... so very, very long.

"They are at it again," Danny muttered to Asmodai, annoyance staining her voice.

"You can hear the kin?" Asmodai was astonished.

"The kin?"

"Yes, the voices that fill the hall?"

"How could I not? Jesus, they're fucking loud and they are really, really annoying. I'd appreciate it if you told them to shut up. In fact," Danny frowned, "I'll tell them myself. Hey," Danny shouted, "if you're yelling at me, don't. Shut up now and we will all be better off!" The voices became hushed and then turned to furious whispers. "I can still hear you."

"*Amour*," Asmodai tightened his grip on her hand, "use some tact, some caution, the kin are lesser, yes, but they are still part of my father's court. You cannot just..."

"What? Teach them some manners? I mean, come on, a century or two in Hell probably would piss anyone off, but give me a frigging break already."

"Interestingly put, indeed." Satain materialized in front of Danny and Asmodai and smiled enigmatically. "I see you are still facing down my children."

"If by facing down you mean, teaching them some manners, then yes, I guess I am."

"They are merely curious as to your presence. As they said, it has been a long time since a *wulfkin* has graced our halls."

"Terrific, so glad I could appease their curiosity. Now, could you tell them to stop talking about me as if I'm not here? If they would like to talk to me, they can face me and

actually ask me a question face-to-face, instead of whispering like a pack of sorority girls talking about the star quarterback and his large dick.” Danny looked between Asmodai and Satan. “What, too crude for you? Well, I’m sorry, your majesties, but I value my privacy, what little I have down here.”

Satain blinked and then burst out into laughter. His laughter seemed to ease the immediate tension in the room and all seemed to breathe a sigh of relief, even Asmodai, who lessened his grip on Danny’s hand.

“I should kill you,” he finally said. “But I find you a rarity, and I have seen your greater purpose ... so you shall remain alive,” his gaze sharpened, “for now. But do not think that my charity toward you will always be thus. If that tongue grows sharper, and those claws come unsheathed ... I will take action, and you shall not find me lenient toward you, not even if my son has claimed you as his *amour*.”

She was alternately insulted, and amused. His ego was huge, but then, he *was* Satan.

“Have I finally rendered you speechless?”

“No, just figuring out what I could say that would offend you less than what I had in mind a second ago.”

Again Satain chuckled. “I shall accept that.” Suddenly his face shut down and he was all business. “Now, since you are all present, we shall begin this.”

“All present?” Danny whispered. The second the words were out of her mouth, Apoll, Apocal and Ashed appeared.

“Brother.” It was Apoll who spoke, his eyes remained fastened on Danny. “It is good to see you again, *wulfin*.”

“Dennison, or Danny,” Danny said coldly.

“Dennison, then.” Apoll’s voice was amused. “Father.” He bowed respectfully.

“It does me glad to see you all together. And for such an interesting purpose. Please, be seated.” Satain swept his hand out and four chairs appeared.

“Where the heck am I supposed to sit, on the floor?” Her eyes widened when she saw Asmodai’s sheepish look. “Oh no, no way! I’m not sitting on the floor like some dog.”

“Is there something you would like to say to me, *wulfin*?” Satain turned back to look at Danny.

“First, I told your son, and I’ll tell you, I have a name, you can use it. Secondly, I have a real problem with sitting on the floor like a dog.”

“But is that not what you are?” He moved closer to her, his eyes seemed to glitter.

“No,” her voice was taut with rage now, “I’m not a dog and I’ll prove it to you here and now if you press me.” Danny gasped when she felt Satain’s hand around her neck. She hadn’t even sensed him move. He held her absolutely immobile, and his eyes bore into hers.

“Do you remember what I told you moments back? Just nod your head yes.” When Danny nodded jerkily, he smiled. “Good, good, I’m glad that we are finally on the same train of thought. I like you, Dennison, I do. But my goodwill does not go far. You will take your seat, the seat I designate for you, and you shall not argue.” He released her abruptly.

Danny stumbled back and leapt for him, just to be halted by Asmodai’s hand to her forearm. He kept her back. His grip was iron, and his eyes were blazing heat. He shook his head and said nothing. She took several deep breaths to calm her wolf and told herself

that she didn't need to try to get herself killed in the first five minutes of their meeting. She would always have another chance ... later ... as she was quite certain he would continue to piss her off. But she was not about to sit on the damned floor. No way, no how.

"Take your seats, we will begin now." Satain took his seat, a large golden throne.

Danny was startled when she saw that there was now a fifth seat before Satain. She walked with Asmodai and then sat next to him.

Satain finally spoke. "We are here to discuss the *amour*, and Asmodai's shocking lack of protocol."

"And the *Thess*, we will speak of it, too," Apoll said.

"Aye, my son, we will speak of the *Thess*."

Danny leaned into Asmodai. "The what?"

"*Amour*, please, not now."

"Yes now, what is the *Thess*?"

"Tell her," Satain's eyes gleamed evilly, "tell your claimed *amour* what the *Thess* is, son."

Asmodai's jaw clenched. "It is a blood challenge."

"A blood challenge?" Danny parroted.

Asmodai nodded. "A challenge among the blooded, among brothers," he added.

She was getting alarmed, and annoyed. "What would you challenge for?"

"Whom, is a more accurate question," Satain said. "Whom would they challenge for? Why for someone priceless ... someone of the absolute rarity."

"No," Danny said tightly. She shook her head strongly, angrily. "No. I am not a bone to be fought over by two dogs." God, could she never get away from it? She was in Hell, in *Hell*, and still there was a damned tug-of-war for her. One of these frigging days her arms were going to be torn from their sockets and there would be a King Solomon done on her poor body.

"Four, there are four blooded fighting," Satain chuckled.

Somehow she knew that he was getting a kick out of this, and it boiled her blood. She jerked her chin in Apocal's direction and snorted. "He doesn't even like me. You think he's going to frigging fight over me."

"You are an *amour*," Apocal said coolly.

"Well woop-dee-fucking-doo." She rolled her eyes. "I'm still a lowly, meaningless human in your opinion, isn't that right? Why would you fight over such an insignificant piece of humanity like myself?"

"There hasn't been an *amour* in..." Apocal stopped what he was about to say when he caught his father's eye. He turned his gaze back to Danny. "An *amour* is worth fighting for, worth anything, worth a *Thess*. But are you such ... are you truly an *amour*?"

"Do you doubt it, my son? Did she not survive the transition?" Satain smiled slightly. "And you have felt and seen her power, I am certain of that. Do you doubt her status, my son, truly?"

"No," Apocal whispered then.

"What?" Satain asked chidingly.

"No," he said, louder this time. "I do not doubt her status. She is an *amour*."

"The question we shall settle here and now ... is if she is Asmodai's *amour*."

“She is mine!” Asmodai shouted, furious. “She is mine. All that is me, the best of me, is in her. She is mine. Nothing, not even force shall make it otherwise.”

“Your brothers have a right to call a *Thess*.”

Asmodai inclined his head. “Aye, they have the right.”

“Then,” Satain swept his gaze over his sons, “do you issue a *Thess*? Do any of you issue a *Thess* upon your brother Asmodai?”

Apoll stood. He approached Asmodai. When he was standing in front of him, he shifted a finger, the nail morphing into a sharp talon, and slit his wrist. He dipped his finger in his blood and then smeared the blood upon Asmodai’s cheek. The line burned brilliant copper upon Asmodai’s flesh. Ashed stood next, and following Apoll’s lead, went through the formal ceremony. It was Apocal’s turn next. When he went to smear his blood on Asmodai’s cheek, Danny grabbed his hand. She had been watching with astonishment as Asmodai’s brothers did some weird thing with their blood, and enough was enough.

“Let go,” Apocal growled.

“No way, you guys are totally whacked.”

“Let go, now. I shall not be left out of the *Thess*.”

“Oh, really good reason for this nonsense ... you just don’t want to be the odd man out.”

“If you do not let go of my hand I will be forced to do something extreme.”

“Really? I’d like to see you try it, big boy,” Danny snapped.

“*Amour*, it is all right. Let my brother finish. This is how it must be.” Asmodai spoke quietly and with authority.

“No, Asmodai, this is stupid, really, really stupid. You can’t honestly believe that even if, and hear me say if, one of your idiotic brothers happens to beat you that I would go with him, or accept this ridiculous archaic ritual as binding.”

“You would have no choice in the matter, my *amour*. The winner of the *Thess* will bind you.”

“My heart...”

“Does not matter, it is your body that will be bound. You will feel the ties immediately and will not be able to break them. But you will deplete eventually...”

Asmodai turned accusing eyes toward his father. “Her physical binding will not change what is in her heart and such a broken bind will eventually destroy her.”

“Perhaps,” Satain shrugged, “but who is to say that her heart will not change. Who is to say that her heart is as true as you claim?”

Danny swallowed. They were moving into tricky territory—her heart. What *was* in her heart? Did she even know? Had she ever tried to navigate the confusing waters of her heart?

“She is mine, father.”

“Again, that is what the *Thess* will decide.”

Apocal took advantage of Danny’s stupor to shake free and complete the ritual. He moved back to join his three brothers facing Asmodai.

“You will not interfere, do you hear me, *amour*?”

Danny shook her head. “No way, I’m not allowing you to...” She stopped when her body went unnaturally still and her mind seemed to suddenly shut down. “What ... what ... what did...” she stammered, feeling suddenly awkward and unsure. “You did

something..." She could barely get the words out of her mouth.

Asmodai looked suddenly sad. "I had no choice. I've applied a slight freeze to your body, my *amour*."

"Let me..."

"No, this will be done." Asmodai turned then to his brothers. "Shall we, then?"

Apoll nodded. "Indeed."

Danny watched in stunned horror as all four began to morph before her. Asmodai nearly tripled in height and width, his beautiful features melting and changing. His hair disappeared and two horns sprouted from his head. His hands lengthened and sharp talons formed at the ends of his fingers. He was a glowing thing, a thing of nearly horrific beauty. One by one, Asmodai's brothers followed suit, each taking on monstrous proportions. And Ashed, quiet Ashed had huge black wings extending from his back.

"Oh my..." Danny knew her mouth was gaping open.

"Are they not beautiful, my sons," Satain said with pleasure and pride staining his voice. "Magnificent, they are magnificent."

And then they were attacking one another—correction, they were attacking Asmodai. Apoll, Apocal and Ashed were tearing and slashing at their brother. He was defending himself admirably, but it was three against one.

"When they are finished with him, they will turn on one another. Whoever is left standing is the winner," Satain said with a grin.

"Nut job," Danny muttered. She began to work on the spell. She was fairly certain she had figured out the core of the spell Asmodai had used on her, and she was beginning to unravel the threads. It was going to take a bit of time.

Danny gasped when Apocal (or at least she thought it was Apocal) sliced a chunk of Asmodai's skin off his side.

Fuck. She didn't have time to spare.

"They are quite determined. You should be honored. You are quite a prize," Satain droned on.

I can do this. I can do this, Danny chanted to herself. She knew she could do this. Yes, her power was sluggish, yes, her magic unsure, but it was still hers, and it would come to her call. She had no moon, but she could do without, she had done without before. She just had to picture the forest. She just had to smell the lush wood and the fragrant brush. It was hers. The beast recognized its home and it would recognize the power inherent within her.

Yes, yes, just a little more. Danny found the core and began to pull away at it. She began to work on her own strength. She was going to need it. She had no moon to call upon, and this would be painful and difficult. But it had to be done. It had to be done. She could not allow Asmodai to die. She could not allow them to do this to him. Yes he was arrogant and annoying and sometimes a downright pain in the ass but he was *her* pain in the ass and she wasn't about to watch him get carved up like a Christmas turkey.

"What are you..."

Danny only heard the beginning of Satain's question before she located her beast, sluggish but willing to fight. It was growling and pacing and she realized that this was her chance, perhaps the only shot she was going to get. She brought it all to her hands and let it sluice through her body. Her wolf tore through her and left her ravaged in its wake. It was beyond painful, it was torturous. But pain had to be forgotten ... there were other

things to deal with now ... much more important things.

And she was off. She launched herself at Apocal and tore his calf out. He screamed and stumbled back. His massive hand whipped down and nearly caught her but she was quick, and leaped away. She clawed at Ashed, and growled menacingly at Apoll, as if to dare him to take her on, all the while standing protectively before Asmodai. They were larger than her, perhaps even stronger, but the only way they would remove her from his side was by force. And if they managed to kill her ... then so be it, she was still not leaving him.

"It is finished!" Satain's voice boomed out. "It is finished. The *Thess* has been satisfied."

Apoll seamlessly morphed back into his former beautiful self. "Nothing has been satisfied. She interfered, it is not allowed, Father. The rules..."

"I make the rules," Satain thundered. "And I say that the *Thess* has been satisfied. Blood has been spilt. It is sufficient. She is Asmodai's *amour*. That much has been established. You shall not take her, not without a considerable means of force. If you do succeed ... you shall make an enemy of her. She shall hate you. What say you, my sons ... do you wish your *amour* to detest you? For I believe this one will hold a very long grudge. I do not believe her heart will change swiftly, if at all. You would never have what you truly wish of her." Satain looked at Danny then. "For this one ... this one gives, you cannot take what she gives by force. It must be handed over freely." He laughed. "I dare you to try to take it from her. So, let us settle this in a different manner. A manner that is more appropriate to our station."

Apocal, Ashed and Asmodai shifted. Danny remained wolf.

"*Amour*," Asmodai moved to her side and ran his hands over her fur, his eyes checking for injuries.

"She is greatly weakened," Satain said to his son. "She risked much for you. It was that risk that made me realize she would never submit to your brothers. She has great power, son. Great, great, power. It surges through her and illuminates everything. She located your spell ... and she dismantled it. Has anyone ... *ever* ... dismantled one of your spells?" Asmodai shook his head and Satain laughed. "I thought not. She is indeed a prize worth fighting for," his voice softened, "an *amour* worth fighting for. And I believe you were right when you said she would diminish if forced to submit."

"Father." Asmodai shook his head, as if anticipating his father's next words.

"You know what must be done. Her risk ... her sacrifice was great, my son. She knew that to take this form she would have to do so without her moon. There was always the possibility she would be too weak to shift back. She would be lost within her wolf."

Danny lay still under Asmodai's caressing hand. She felt so exhausted. Her entire body was wracked in pain. She felt broken.

"You will send her back, Asmodai," Satain said.

"No."

"You will send her back," he repeated. "Upon certain conditions, of course." Satain walked up to Danny. He knelt by her side and stroked her, smiling when she managed a small growl. "Yes, yes. You will always fight. 'Tis one of the things that is most appealing about you, Dennison." He continued to stroke her fur, unperturbed by her anger. "My son shall send you back to your world. You will have that returned to you. But ... you will take something back with you and you will do something for me. You,

Dennison, are the only human, or half-human we have had in our hallowed halls for longer than time has been time. You know what it is to have seen the dark and in response, to show it the light. You are both. Impossible, perhaps once, but no longer ... for you are indeed both. You will return to your Earth and you will search out others like you, others that are capable of holding magic and power, and who will survive the burning transition. When you do, you will send them to me. They will be companions to my sons, their *amours*. Do you understand?"

Did she understand? Satan wanted her to play matchmaker for his sons? What? Did she look like a dating service to him?

"I see you are unsure of my plan..." he laughed, "...don't be. And trust me when I tell you that this is the only way you will be returned to your Earth."

"She cannot take another shift," Asmodai ground out.

"I understand that." Satain ran his hands over Danny and smiled as she began to glow. "But, with a little help from me, she will be just fine."

Danny let out a groan. She was curled in a fetal position on the ground—and she was naked.

Asmodai conjured a blanket and laid it over her.

"I ... I..." Danny swallowed. She was still feeling shocky. "I think your ... your ... idea sucks."

"Oh?" Satain asked.

She sat up slowly, horrified by how weak and drained she felt. "I'm not a dating service. And, even if I were to help you, how do you suppose I find you these winning women?"

"You are a *magi* wolf. You cannot help yourself. You are drawn to like power and magic and like power and magic is drawn to you. You will need to do little ... I believe they shall come to you," Satain's eyes seemed to twinkle then, "if they haven't already."

"I won't pander for..."

"Silence!" Satain held up his hand. "You shall take her home, son, and you shall see that all my orders are followed through ... is that understood?" Asmodai said nothing and Satain nodded. "Good, I see that I am understood."

"You are totally crazy," Danny breathed out.

Satain cocked his head to one side. "I am Satain, king of the burning fields, and I believe that crazy is far too mild a word for what I am."

Chapter Ten

She was back in her fictitious room—the room Asmodai had made for her, and she was bone weary. Seriously, how much more of this crap could she take? A body was only made for so much.

“Danny...” Asmodai’s voice broke as he said her name.

She turned to face him. He was so beautiful, so stoic and impassioned. “You will not go against your father. You will take me home.”

Asmodai hung his head.

Danny swallowed. She moved closer to him. “Asmodai, you will take me home. You knew this would happen. You promised me...”

“Promises mean nothing!” he shouted. “They mean nothing. Promises are broken with each breath we take. What good are promises?” Asmodai fell to his knees. “Blessed darkness take me ... what shall I do without you, how will I continue?”

With infinite care, she dropped down in front of him. She cupped his cheek. “I cannot continue this way down here, Asmodai. I cannot live, not the way you wish me to, not the way I need to, down here with you. And am I wrong in assuming that you cannot survive up on Earth with me?”

“No,” Asmodai whispered, “you are not wrong. I am a *Darch Preise*—a Phantom Prince, I cannot live with you on your Earth.”

Danny nodded. “Then we’re a cosmically separated Romeo and Juliet. Well, except we’re not hormonally challenged teenagers and we’re not going to stab and poison one another respectively.”

Despite himself, Asmodai chuckled. “You think not? You think we are not hormonally challenged?” He ran a finger from her collarbone to her breast, smiling when she shivered.

“Asmodai...”

“Yes, what is it, my *amour*?”

Danny grabbed his head within both of her hands and pulled him to her. “Shut up and kiss me.”

Asmodai blinked owlishly before taking her mouth in an all-consuming kiss.

* * * *

Danny’s head was swimming in pleasure. Asmodai’s mouth was pure heaven, and his tongue, his tongue was paradise. He plundered, as a conqueror would, and took everything she had to give and then demanded more. His hands were gentle but insistent as they roamed her body, and she felt the warmth of her desire flood through her.

“My beautiful *amour*.” Asmodai moved his mouth to her neck, his lips gently nipping her rapidly heating flesh.

Danny drew closer still. She was burning with her desire, and she needed more, so much more.

“Oh yes ... you will have it all,” Asmodai murmured. He bore her back onto the ground and latched his mouth onto her breast. He laved her nipple gently and then bit the

tautened flesh, drawing a moan from her. His hand was already moving down her body, seeking, traveling, searching for that warm center which beckoned him. The blanket that had been draped over her shoulders was now strewn forgotten upon the floor and she was open and bare to him. "You are so wet for me." Asmodai dipped his fingers into the scalding heat of her pussy.

Oh lord. Danny gasped and arched toward his seeking fingers. She moaned in ecstasy when he found her clit and began to apply pressure to it. She was awash in sensation and they were building, oh lord, they were building even now.

"So sweet ... I must taste." Asmodai spread her legs further apart and moved between them. His breath was hot against her. He lapped gently at first, caressing the soft folds of her with his tongue. When she moaned in pure delight, he dipped his tongue deep within her pussy and began to feast in earnest.

"Oh my ... oh ... Asmodai!" Danny shrieked. He was tormenting her with pleasure. His mouth was besieging her. There was nothing that he left untouched, unknown. When his tongue found her clit and he circled it, stabbing at it mercilessly, she howled. The storm broke within her and she was tossed upon waves so strong they threatened to tear her apart. "Yessss ... ohhhh ohhhh..." It would not be held at bay any longer. She could not bear it any longer.

"Now, my *amour*!" Asmodai spoke against her wet, heated flesh, before taking her within his mouth once again.

The dam broke and she spilled over.

* * * *

There was no hesitation, there was no reprieve. Danny barely had time to register her pleasure before Asmodai thrust his cock deep within her waiting body. She was shockingly, incredibly full. Her body felt stretched beyond belief.

"You are my *amour*, the heart of me," Asmodai breathed from above her. He thrust deeper, watching her face.

"Asmodai..." Danny grabbed the taut globes of his ass and dug her fingers into his flesh. "More, give me more," she demanded.

"So greedy," he spoke with a smile, impossibly growing larger and fuller within her. "Yes, you will have more ... you will take it all." He wound her hair tightly around his hand and drew her head up toward him. His eyes were glowing with barely concealed fire when he spoke. "*A thiese, a bear a thiese. Un arte a thiese du moie.*" He slammed his lips down upon hers just as he slammed his cock as far as it would go within her welcoming body.

Danny felt a scream bubbling out, but could do nothing as Asmodai's lips were ravaging her own. She felt incredibly invaded. He pounded into her. But it was the strange *lightness*, the strange *air* that filled her mouth now that seemed to give her slight pause. She couldn't describe it, but it was real ... and it was within her. Just then, Asmodai's cock hit her cervix...

And she stopped thinking. She stopped doing anything but feeling, feeling, feeling him so incredibly hard and deep within her. Her body needed this. Her body needed him.

She wound her legs around his hips and her nails scored his back, she knew they would leave marks ... they were buried deep. He was swelling, incredibly, he was swelling and she knew that he was close ... thank God, for so was she. And they could

have this moment together.

Danny tore her mouth away from his and let out a roar as her pleasure rode her out.

Asmodai let out a shout, a scream, as his cock jerked and he spilled his seed deeply within her.

"We didn't last long," she murmured. There was a smile on her face. "But we came together."

"That we did, my *amour*, that we did." He swept a dampened lock of hair away from her face. "You are so very beautiful ... so very, very beautiful."

"What's with the sweet words ... you already got me in the sack," she said with a laugh.

Asmodai grinned. It was almost a boyish grin. "I never need a reason to give you sweet words, my *amour*. You *are* the reason. Every moment, of every day, you shall know those words ... know them, even if I cannot be there to whisper them gently in your ear." His face darkened then, the grin erased as suddenly as it had appeared. "You will keep my words ... know them ... believe in them, my *amour*, my Danny. No matter what time has wrought, you will always know me."

An uneasy feeling crawled up within her belly and she frowned. "Asmodai..."

"You will go back to find much has changed, my *amour*."

"What are you talking about?"

Asmodai slowly moved away from her. His face seemed guarded now, almost secretive.

"You're taking me back now?" Danny asked simply.

He stood. "Come with me." He held out his hand to her.

Danny took his hand and let him pull her up. She felt suddenly a little woozy.

Asmodai nodded. "You are indeed weakened. I was merely able to give you but a little of my energy with our joining. You need the replenishing effect of your moon and the revitalizing agent of your forest to soothe you."

His words were true. She did need her forest. Her beast was confused and lost. And even her magic seemed to wish to deny her.

"Danny." Asmodai spoke her name reverently. "All that I am ... all that is in me is yours. I shall know nothing, have nothing, be nothing, until you are returned to me. And, mistake me not ... one day, you will be returned to me. Until then," his eyes burned brightly with unspoken fire, "a part of me will always live within you."

* * * *

She was standing in front of the disgusting black goop that had nearly drowned her in her bathtub. It was still as black. And it was still as disgusting as she remembered. She had absolutely no desire to go bathing in it.

"As distasteful as you find it ... you must submerge yourself in the pool, my *amour*."

"Didn't your brother mention something about ... uh ... burning alive." Danny wrinkled her nose.

Asmodai smiled, but it was not a pleasant smile by any means. "Yes, he did. And one should never test the *magun*. However, my father has lent his power to you, and he has assured me that the *magun* will not burn you ... much. It is a necessary agent to return you to your place."

Danny nodded. Well, she couldn't exactly loiter around here all day, could she? Did

she or did she not wish to go home? Okay, she wasn't going to answer that one right now. She was just going to accept that certain things had to be, and sometimes life handed you some sucky cards. You played the hand you were dealt with and you accepted that the fairy tale didn't end happily—at least not for her. Many things didn't happen for her. But that didn't change what and who she was. She was Dennison Lee, *magi* wolf. And it was time that she went home.

"The Fae will cause problems, my *amour*," Asmodai said suddenly.

Danny spun around so quickly it was a wonder she didn't get whiplash. "What? What did you just say?"

"The Fae ... they will undoubtedly cause problems."

"How ... how did you know about the Fae?" She held up her hand to stop him.

"Wait ... wait ... I know, the whole, taking me in from the demon mark ... right?"

"Close," Asmodai answered. He sighed then. "They are strange creatures, the Fae. And they worship ... suffice to say, threats of damnation do not worry the Fae—much."

"Do they not worship..." Her voice trailed off.

"Yes, in their way. Their way is very different from ... the humans, and their power is quite staggering."

She remembered the portals. It took a great deal of power and magic to sustain portals as large as they had sustained.

"You wonder why I tell you this now?"

"Frankly, yeah, I wonder."

"You are, as I said before, going to return to a much ... changed..." He seemed to search for the correct words. "You will be returned and things will have changed. It would be most unfair, and unkind not to warn you that the Fae shall play a part in the time that comes next."

"How?" she asked bluntly.

"It is not my place to say."

"Bullshit."

"My *amour*..."

"My *amour* nothing," Danny spat. "You think you can just waltz up and tell me that the Fae are going to play a huge part of something when I return to Earth, just before I take a dunk in the gross black stuff? What sort of carnival do you think this is? You just want to sit back and watch the fireworks?"

"No ... I only wish..."

"You only wish for what? What do the Fae have to do with any of this? What do they have to do with you?"

"Nothing. They have nothing to do with me but they have everything to do with you, my *amour*. And thus, I make them my own. I can tell you nothing of their movements, nor what they have planned. For even if I wished to, I am forbidden. I cannot move, nor for lack of a better word, meddle, in such situations. But I shall tell you this. They are planning something and ... though their light may distract you, and their very essence seem to point to their beauty and goodness ... they will deceive you, and betray you. Cunning is part of their nature."

Danny remembered the malicious gleam in Theraline's eyes and nodded. "Yeah, I can see that."

"Know you must keep on guard, always ... for things are to occur ... changes in your

wind.”

“Okay.”

“And ... if it comes to that ... know that you may always trust in us ... trust in the bond. You are my *amour*. It is much more than a title. It is a gift, a power that we share.”

“Asmodai...” Hell, she was speechless. She was utterly, absolutely speechless. She felt a well of tears threaten and she pushed them back. She was not about to cry. She was not about to feel that much ... she couldn’t ... not now, not ever.

“I know,” Asmodai said. “I know, my *amour*. I feel it too. Go now, you must, there is little time.”

She stepped up to the pool. Taking a deep breath she tried to calm her racing heart. Just a nice little swim ... that was all this was ... just a nice little swim.

“*A thiese, a bear a thiese. Un arte a thiese du moie*,” Asmodai said quietly from behind her.

“What?” Danny asked just before she felt a hand push her into the pool. Within seconds she was completely submerged and the suffocating web of the vortex was pulling her under. Fighting only made it worse.

Danny relaxed her body, and let herself go...

She was swept away.

* * * *

Waking up from oblivion was always unnerving and frankly, she was becoming really weary of it. She was one big ache and damn it all if she wasn’t absolutely fucking starving to boot. God, she wanted a truckload of Arby’s, and perhaps afterwards she would wash it all down with a crater full of KFC.

Danny moved and let out a curse as her legs banged a very, very, hard surface. Lifting her head from its rather uncomfortable and prone position she felt her eyes widen. Well hell, she was back in the frigging tub. God, there had to be a better way to travel back and forth to Hell.

“I’m baaaaack,” she said in a singsong voice, gingerly standing up and taking in her surroundings. Nothing had changed. Then again, had she really expected it to? Danny wrapped a towel securely around her body and went in search of some clothes. She had to find Thad. She had to contact Savior. And then she had to get the fuck out of this place.

* * * *

It was one thing to wake up bent out of shape in a bathtub, it was entirely another matter all together to see three Alpha males and two furious vampires at each other’s throats ready to begin an all out war.

Danny blinked and rubbed her eyes. She *had* to be hallucinating because if she wasn’t hallucinating then Savior and Rickart were screaming at one another in a language she had never heard before and Alex, Draco and Garrison were literally tearing at one another with their shifted claws.

“This is probably what your brain feels like on drugs,” Danny murmured.

“*Danny?*” Thad screamed, racing across the room. His arms were around her in a second and his hold was almost painful.

“Ooomphh.” Danny laughed. “Okay, umm, yeah, I’m really happy to see you too,

Thaddie boy.”

Thad pulled away slightly. “Where have you been? Merciful night, where have you been, Danny? You cannot believe what has been going on since...” He stopped suddenly.

They were all looking at her and the room had grown astonishingly silent and still. They were staring at her as if she was an apparition. Okay, weird, strange and awkward moment.

“Hey, boys.” Danny waved. “This is ... uh ... an interesting scene.” In fact, she had never seen so many Alphas in a room—unless of course it was an All-Clan meeting. And All-Clan meetings were regulated, and there were definitely no vampires allowed. “I’m feeling decidedly underdressed,” Danny continued. She hadn’t been able to locate her clothes, so the towel had to suffice.

“*Ashleya*.” Savior was at her side in a second. He reached out and stopped himself. “My *ashleya* ... what ... where...” His voice broke.

“Are you actually stammering?” Danny was shocked. He was actually stammering. “Savior, what are you doing here? In fact,” she cast her eyes around the room, “what are all of you doing here?” She couldn’t believe that Rickart had allowed all of these Alphas and another master vampire into his territory.

Suddenly they were all surrounding her and all talking at once. Their volume rose and rose until she could almost see the rafters shaking with the force of their voices. It was overwhelming and frankly, totally unproductive. She couldn’t hear a thing they were saying.

“*Shut up!*” Danny shouted. She smiled, satisfied, when they all abruptly stopped speaking. “That’s much better. Let’s take this down a bit, and tackle one thing at a time. Savior,” perhaps it would be better if she started with him, “Savior, what are you doing here?”

“I’m here for you, *ashleya*. I am here for you.” He suddenly pulled her into an iron embrace. Burying his head within her hair he moved his hands caressingly down her back as if to assure himself that she was real, that she was actually with him. “I cannot tell you how worried...”

“Get your hands off my *clannahd!*” Alex growled. His eyes were beginning to burn ferociously and it was obvious that his beast was barely contained beneath his human veneer.

“Savior,” Danny swallowed, “I ... I’ve missed you too, but you must let me go now.”

Savior whipped his head up and tossed Alex a defiant look. “Think you that I’m afraid of this pup?”

No. He obviously wasn’t afraid of Alex. But she was exhausted and weary and she didn’t feel like dealing with the sort of bloodshed that would come from Alex going all wolf boy on her and Savior turning all bloodsucking demon.

“Please, Savior,” she whispered beseechingly. The bone weariness in her voice must have moved Savior, because he reluctantly released his hold on her. She pulled away, putting a little distance between them. She knew that it would help Alex to see that the possessive hold on her was now broken. She was hoping it was enough to dampen his beast and hold his Alpha at bay.

“Dennison...” Alex was still growling, although the fire in his eyes had died down some. “You did not listen to me...” At her puzzled look he continued, “I told you to deny

the dark...”

Danny chuckled, remembering now. “Oh yeah, you did say that, didn’t you? Sorry, Alex ... things came up, and well, that didn’t happen.” Danny looked past him to Draco, who was standing strangely still. “What’s *he* doing here?” she asked, and couldn’t stop the sneer that invaded her voice. She didn’t like him and she wasn’t about to pretend that she did.

“The situation concerned my *magi* wolf, and so I came.” Draco spoke simply but there was heat in his voice.

“I’m not *your* anything,” Danny spat out.

“You have caused quite a stir, Ms. Lee.” This from Rickart. His words were directed at Danny, but his stare remained glued on Savior as if measuring his every move. “I was quite afraid that we were going to have to deal with ... the situation tonight. And it was about to become ... ugly. I was not about to tolerate their presence much longer.” He shrugged his shoulders. “They make terrible dinner companions.”

Did he just make a joke? Danny blinked. There was a small rueful smile on Rickart’s face. Wow. She really had landed in some bizarre alternate universe. Master vampire Rickart Sven had just made a joke.

“Where have you been my *ashleya*?” Savior asked.

His question brought her back to the present. She sighed. “It’s a very, very, long story, boys. One that I’m afraid I won’t be able to get through in my extremely exhausted and hungry, did I mention hungry, state.”

“How thoughtless of me,” Rickart said. And within moments there were servers bringing out trays of food.

Danny rushed over and surveyed the spread.

“Fresh meat is coming momentarily,” Rickart added.

“Fine, fine,” she said, almost absently. She began to pile a plate full of various goodies. She popped an entire sandwich into her mouth and moaned in ecstasy. Had food ever tasted this good? The answer would be a resounding no. This was glorious. God, she had been frigging starving. Her poor, abused body seemed to sing the Hallelujah chorus with every morsel of food she put into her mouth.

“Uh, Danny?” Thad tapped her.

“Mmmmm-ooooohhhh.” Danny continued to moan in pleasure as she stuffed more food into her mouth.

“Danny ... seriously, this could be bad.”

Danny sighed, and turned from the table. What she saw made her put down the donut in her hand. Alex, Draco and Garrison were circling one another, their eyes glowing brightly and their bodies shimmering, wavering ... their beasts were riding them strongly, and it wouldn’t be long now.

“Alex!” Danny called out to him. His ears seemed to perk up, but other than that, there was no outward sign that he had heard her. “Alex, stop this, you can stop this.” He could. In fact, all three could stop this. They were Alphas and they had the power and the strength to dampen the beast. They could call the beast and they could put the beast to rest—usually. However, it was obvious that the beast had been riding them hard. It was barely concealed below the surface and it made Danny wonder how long Alex had been suffering through this. It was one of the reasons that having multiple Alphas in one area was rare ... more than one Alpha in an area meant bloodshed, and death. Dominants

would always strive to prove their dominance. Put into that equation the added force of the Alpha power ... and it was a recipe for disaster. Unless it was an All-Clan, most Alphas had strict rules about other Alphas entering their territory. All-Clans were different. The power of the full Pack, and the protection of the magic that came from having a *Heighect Seere*—a High Priestess in attendance helped to keep order and balance. “Alex!” Danny yelled his name.

“It will not work. Calling him will not work. The magic of *The Hollowing* will hold them back for only a bit longer. It has been taxed with their presence here for three weeks,” Rickart said from behind her.

“What?” Danny whispered in shock. “Oh my...”

“Yes.” Savior nodded, coming to stand by her side. “You have been gone for nearly three weeks, my *ashleya*. We converged upon this place with hopes of locating you but none of us could find even a trace.”

Danny swallowed. There was terrible pain written across Savior’s face. A pain she had never seen before.

“I called, and called for you. You never answered. I tried ... *ashleya* ... I tried everything. The Alpha, he too tried to locate you ... he could pick up not a bit of your scent.”

“You have all been here for three weeks?” she said in horror. God. No wonder Alex was out of his mind. Three weeks of forcing the beast back would make any wolf mad. She was shocked he had lasted this long.

“Nearly.” Savior reached out to cup her cheek. “I thought I had lost...” His voice dropped off.

Danny swallowed. The pain and loss she saw on Savior’s face was churning her stomach. Arrogance, dominance, ego, haughtiness and sheer superiority ... those were looks that she was used to from him ... this ... this was too much.

“It’s okay,” she finally murmured. “I’m fine. I’m back. Everything is going to be all right, seriously.” She jerked her chin toward Alex, Draco and Garrison. “But we have to do something about them.”

“What?” Savior asked simply. “What would you have us do?”

“What do you mean, what? They’re suffering, Savior. They are too close, and their beasts are rising.”

“Yes, of course, that much is obvious.”

Danny was disgusted. “We can’t just let them kill one another.”

“Why not?” At the disgusted expression on her face, he blinked and shrugged his shoulders. “It would seem like the most logical solution for the situation, my *ashleya*. Their beasts demand blood ... once their beasts have been satisfied, they will return to themselves. And if they happen to kill on another during the battle ... then so be it. It is the way of the wolf, is it not?”

“It is not the way of *this* wolf!” Danny pulled away from Savior and started toward them. It probably served them right if they did kill one another ... for being such chauvinistic cave-wolves. But she wasn’t about to let Alex possibly die for her transgressions. He had done nothing more than come to this place out of worry and concern for her and she wasn’t about to repay that care by letting him possibly get killed.

Savior grabbed her arm. “*Ashleya*,” he said warningly.

“Don’t!” She glared at him. “Don’t even think about getting in my way. Now let go

of my arm.”

“You are too weak. You cannot think to do anything in this condition.”

“He ... uh ... may be ... right,” Thad muttered.

“Oh, you still here?” Danny said biting. “I haven’t heard from you in a bit. By the way, this is none of your business.”

“Danny.” Savior used her name.

“Don’t you Danny me, Savior Knight. This is clan business and I have an allegiance to my clan, an absolute obligation to help out my Alpha. This has nothing, nothing to do with you.” She watched as he let go of her arm and nodded succinctly. “That’s better. Now all of you...” she glared at them, “...just stay out of my damned way.”

* * * *

The moment she had signed her reinstatement papers, and formally acknowledged Alex as her Alpha, she had become a member of his *clannahd* once again. She was now part of the family. For better or for worse, she was part of his family. She had a pull over him, as he would undoubtedly be able to sway her. It was the way of the wolf, to be able to hear the call of their Pack. And though she was both, woman and wolf ... for now she would use the wolf to bring Alex back.

Alex, Draco and Garrison charged. Their bodies seemed to melt into one another as they tore and ripped at each other. Draco and Alex were already half shifted, and Garrison was well on his way. Draco tore in Alex’s side, leaving deep gouge wounds in his wake.

She wasn’t going to be able to get close to them. They were too far gone. With her luck she’d get stuck between some cross claws and get her eyes torn out. A binding field would be nice right about now but she didn’t think she could manage to bring enough power to her hands. And even if she could, between the three of them they would rip right through her field.

Damn. She was going to have to do this the good old fashion way—on her knees.

Danny dropped to all fours. She crawled—slowly, over to them. When she was about three feet away from the ravaged man-beasts, she called out to Alex again. She would begin with him. He was her Alpha, and would feel her pull the strongest.

“My Alpha.” Danny kept her voice calm and collected. Any trace of anxiety would only fuel the rage further. “Hear me ... know me ... I come to you, a member of your *clannahd*, accept my homage. Come to me as my Alpha, as my ... master.” She almost choked on the last word but this was for the greater good. She had to remember that.

“Dennison...” Alex turned slightly, Garrison clawed his side. With a mighty swing Alex knocked the other Alpha away rendering him helpless—but not for long.

“Yes, it’s me, Dennison. I’m here, Alex.” She used his name softly, sweetly. She saw the fire recede in his eyes. He’d heard her and he acknowledged her. However often she would like to forget the hardship, pain and downright brutality of belonging to Alex’s Pack, she remembered with a soft heart, she always would, the first time they met. She had been a mere pup, already enduring a rigorous schedule of classes, tests and workouts in the ring. She had met him at an All-Clan, her first. She was already the apprentice of the Grand Dame Roberta Wick, who not only served as the *magi* inherent for the Sapriens, the noble family that ruled the Belle Ville Clan, but who was also the *Heighect Seere* of the All-Clan. The Grand Dame had told her of Alexander Holt, the Alpha of the

Striker Clan, and Danny didn't know at the time, but it had always been the Grand Dame's intention to send her to his Pack. She couldn't have stayed with the Belle Ville Clan, they already had their *magi*, and she was a *Heighect Seere* to boot, they didn't need a mere apprentice in their midst. But the Striker Clan was strong, powerful, large, and far away enough to the Belle Ville Clan to make them a perfect choice, at least in the Grand Dame's mind.

He had been so beautiful and powerful in Danny's young mind. She had seen him, like a golden god and been smitten. Oh, she recognized it now for what it was ... puppy love, but still ... it was a memory that brought a smile to her face. When he had taken his honored seat at the tribune (all Alphas had one) she had done her best to get close to him. She wanted to smell him, to breathe him in ... to learn him as best as she could. Little did she know that one day she would be part of his Pack, and fighting him for all she was worth. At that time she had been unaware of such machinations and still innocent enough to believe that she would have control and choice over her life and her body.

And she had wanted and desired Alexander Holt. He was the wolf in shining armor to her young eyes. Of course, now she knew better. Life had taught her some harsh lessons ... lessons that she was still learning—and fighting at every turn.

"Alex..." She soothed him with her voice. From the corner of her eye she saw the Alpha Garrison struggling to rise. He wouldn't remain down for much longer. Alex began to walk toward her. His body was shifting back to its human form as he walked. Danny saw Draco, in wolf form, rush Alex's back and without thinking, and ignoring her pain, shifted to wolf, knocked Alex out of the way and stood snarling at Draco, who was staring at her now with surprise and delight in his animal eyes.

Danny growled at Draco. She kept her eyes trained on him as he began to circle her. A wolf stalking his prey. Well, she was no one's prey. She heard a yelp and knew without looking that Alex and Garrison were fighting. The Alpha Garrison was too far gone to be brought back without some help and she didn't have time to help him. Maybe Alex would be able to bleed some sense into him. Right now she had bigger things to worry about. Oh, like the fact that Draco was eyeing her like she was some tasty morsel of food that he would like to bite into ... or better yet, consume.

Draco launched himself at her. Danny leaped out of the way before he could pin her down. Her plan was to keep moving. He was bigger than she was. In sheer size and strength, his wolf was more powerful than hers but she knew he underestimated her abilities. And his ego was sure to get in his way. She could use that ego to her advantage.

"Danny!"

She vaguely heard Thad call out to her, but she didn't turn, she didn't miss a beat. She didn't have time to pay him any mind, nor did she have time to see what Savior or Rickart were up to. She had to focus. Draco was out for her blood. He leapt toward her, extending his claws, and Danny skirted to the right, barely escaping his grasp. Her body was protesting loudly. Even her aches had aches. Draco took that moment to latch his mouth onto her hind leg. He dug in. The pain was excruciating. This was no little love bite, he was really going for it. Danny swiped at him. Draco let go, taking a good deal of her flesh and fur with him.

Holy shit that hurt. Danny suppressed a whimper. She was bleeding—a lot. But she had endured worse wounds. Of course, those wounds weren't usually inflicted right after she got back from Hell.

Danny swore when she felt her body shaking and shivering. She was shifting. Damn it all, she was shifting back. She had been too long without the influence of the moon and she really was weak, very weak. Draco's attack had weakened her even further. She was not able to maintain her wolf. Within moments she was standing as a woman in front of a snarling, triumphant Draco.

This sucked.

Suddenly Thad streaked by her and plunged a table knife into Draco's side. Draco snarled and bit Thad on his arm. He flung Thad away from him as if he were a fly to be swatted and growled.

Danny looked over to where Thad lay on the ground. His arm looked bad, but at least it was still attached to his body. He'd live. And he'd heal.

"Oh, I'm going to hurt you so bad!" Danny spat at Draco. She spared Thad another look. "And you, you stupid doof head, I'll deal with you later. God, what were you thinking?" Draco rushed her and she had a split second to throw up a small ward. Draco hit it head on and began to throw himself against it. He was furious and Danny was very aware that the pitiful amount of magic she had used to create the ward would be crumbling in minutes.

Ashleya

She was too grateful to hear his voice to even be angry that he had invaded her mind. *You know I hate to ask ... but I could use a bit of help here, Savior.*

Ashleya ... I, too, am dealing with a bit of a situation. Remember, we are not in familiar territory.

Danny looked back over her shoulder to see a ring of what appeared to be less than friendly vampires surrounding Savior.

Where the hell is Rickart?

I believe he left to deal with a wolf ... Cloverly? It seems that she was causing quite a ruckus.

Oh great ... terrific time to deal with relationship problems. What the fuck do the little vampire minions want?

I believe without the "protection" of the Master Vampire, they feel that it is open season upon an intruder in their court.

Are they crazy? You'll have them for dinner. Danny heard Savior's chuckle in her mind.

Aye, that I will. But, it will take me a moment to deal with the upstarts...

Danny saw the ward shimmy and she knew she didn't have much more than a moment. The second the thought was out, the ward dropped and Draco was upon her. He pinned her under him, drawing her vulnerable neck into his mouth and applying just a bit of pressure.

"Yes." Danny made certain her voice was collected and calm and that she kept her heart rate even and under control. "Yes, I can see that you're showing me my place."

Ashleya! Savior screamed at her mind

She ignored him. All her attention was for Draco, or for the wolf that Draco had become, for there was certainly more beast than man within him now. In fact, she saw little humanity within those glittering animal eyes of his. She had pushed him, taunted him and now his beast was calling the shots. She was surprised he hadn't ripped out her throat already. The animal wanted blood and flesh and the animal felt that need more than

any other. Perhaps the fact that they had shared some intimacy helped, perhaps that was what was soothing the beast, if but a little.

“Draco, I know you are still in there.” Danny winced when his teeth dug deeper into her flesh—or maybe not. She had to do something. She was going on the assumption that he didn’t want to kill her. But Draco wasn’t Alex. They had little history between them ... and with the exception of a moment of lunacy on her part, nothing to really tie them together.

Draco dug his claws into her side, rendering her immobile and Danny took several deep breaths as natural panic began to overtake her. She couldn’t release the tension to her beast since it was tired and weakened. She had nothing to take the pain away—and there was a lot of it. There was a lot of pain wracking her body.

Damned if she was going to die under Draco’s fangs.

Danny centered herself. The moment she relaxed she felt a strange calm and energy invade her. It seemed that her magic had not deserted her and her power was still there. But it felt strange. It was her, and yet not her. It was as if she were sharing her power with a greater power, her body with another unknown part of her.

“I will give you this chance to release me, Draco, but I will not ask it of you again.” Danny heard her voice. She knew it was her voice. She knew she was speaking, and yet the voice did not sound like hers.

What was going on? The pressure within her body continued to build and build. There was an extraordinary amount of power threatening to burst forth. She could feel it and she had absolutely no idea how to stop it. In fact, she didn’t know if she wanted to stop it. It was a heady thing, this power. So she embraced it and let it flow through her.

Her words had only managed to enrage Draco further. He clawed at her, and she felt his canines dig deeply into her neck. He was going to tear it out.

She didn’t think. She didn’t hesitate. She allowed the full magnitude of the new magic to burst forth. It overtook her completely, consuming her body in magnificent flames. She felt tight and wired, and every particle, every piece of her was shaken, burning.

“Merciful night...” Thad was staring at her with horror written all over his face.

“Stay away,” Danny cautioned. That strange lilt was still present in her voice. She could hear it. And she *felt* it. She didn’t *feel* right. Her head was thrumming with energy, and her body was shaking with power, so much power. And it felt so good. She wanted it to continue. Let the power take up everything. Let the magic eat away until there was nothing left but the beautiful storm of energy that was riding her.

“Danny ... Danny...” Thad took a step toward her and stopped.

“Are you scared yet?” Danny grated out. “You should be. You should be very scared.”

“Your eyes, merciful night, your eyes...”

“*Ashleya* ... shhhhhh ... it’s all right my *ashleya*. Look at me, know me.”

Savior? Was Savior speaking to her? Danny tried to get control of her raging thoughts. The fire felt so good. It was so soothing and seemed to speak to her of comfort and a known familiarity.

“Savior?”

“Yes, my love. Come back to me now. Come back.”

His voice, she knew his voice. What was happening to her?

Danny took a couple of deep breaths and began to feel the ebb and flow of the energy that was swirling within her. It no longer seemed to batter her defenses. It was her body. She could control it. She had to control it.

"There you are, my love." Savior smiled. "Welcome back."

"Savior ... what the hell just happened?" Danny sucked in another breath. Her head hurt. Actually it was throbbing like a motherfucker.

"What happened," Savior cleared his throat, "what happened was that you just incinerated the Alpha of the Stone Claw Clan."

"What?" Danny choked.

"Your eyes ... they're ... uh ... they're red ... really, really, red," Thad whispered, coming up to her.

Danny looked between Thad and Savior. Things weren't coming together. She felt as if she had been hit with a sledgehammer.

"I believe what our esteemed friend is trying to say, is that your eyes are not your usual hue, my *ashleya*."

She rubbed her temples hoping to ease the ache. Her eyes widened and she gasped.

"Draco." She remembered. She brought her hand up to her neck ... it came away wet with her blood. It had been real. He had attacked her, tried to kill her. The following events were still a bit hazy. She was having trouble focusing them. "Where is he?"

"It is as I said before ... you incinerated him, my love." Savior swept his hand out, indicating the spot where Draco used to be.

"I incinerated him?" Danny swallowed. She *did* remember the heat, the suffocating heat that had overtaken her. It had come on the heels of the power, the magic that had built up in her. "Oh my ... oh my..."

"Yeah, that about sums it up," Thad chirped. "Well, I don't think you have to worry about the Alpha of the Stone Claw Clan anymore. Oh, hey, your eyes aren't fiery red anymore, either."

Jesus, Mary and Joseph. She had just fried Draco. This was bad. This was very, very bad.

"Why do you worry, *ashleya*? This is a good thing. Did the Alpha of the Stone Claw Clan not bother you? And did he not threaten your Alpha?"

"Stay out of my head," Danny snapped. "And that is not the point."

"What then is the point?"

"Draco challenged Alex, yes ... but it was a challenge ... it would have been witnessed at an All-Clan. I just ... what I just did was ... oh God..."

"Dennison!" Alex grabbed Danny by the shoulder and spun her around to face him.

"Alexander." Danny dropped her head submissively. This was her Alpha that spoke to her and she had just committed a grave error. "I promise you I did not do this out of malice ... I did not..." She had spoken to Alex about killing Draco, she had. But when he had forbidden it, she had taken his words to heart. She did not seek him out. She did not try to hurt him. Her Alpha had given her an order and she had abided by it.

"He would have killed her," Savior said matter-of-factly.

"I know." Alex's jaw worked back and forth. "I know. However ... this will prove to be a bit ... complicated."

"You have killed the Alpha of the Stone Claw Clan." This came from Garrison. "The Tribune will have to be notified. There is his clan now to take into consideration."

Garrison's eyes were hard and cold. "And there will have to be an investigation. You cannot just kill an Alpha."

No. You couldn't just kill an Alpha. Not even if that Alpha was trying to kill you. He was still an Alpha. And everyone else ... they were just subjects.

"We saw him try to kill her!" Thad cried. "Look at her. Merciful night, look at her! She is still bleeding."

"It's all right, Thad." Danny put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed reassuringly. "It's procedure. I'm a member of the Striker Clan and I just killed the Alpha of the Stone Claw Clan. It's to be expected."

"But we're witnesses," Thad continued, "we all saw it and there is proof."

"The dead do not count," Garrison said coldly. "They cannot bear witness, and they cannot be present at the All-Clan. So you," Garrison shot Thad a chilly look, "mean nothing. What you saw ... it does not exist."

"I can bear witness," Alex countered. "I saw the Alpha of the Stone Claw Clan try to kill her. His beast had taken over. You know it as well as I." Alex's voice softened. "He would have destroyed her. It was self-defense."

"There are ways to incapacitate. But she took his life." Garrison clenched his jaw.

Yes. There were ways to incapacitate someone. But Draco's wolf had been bigger and stronger. She had no doubt that he would have killed her if she hadn't taken extreme action. She could not have gotten through to him. She had taken life before but never like this. And she felt remorse, she did. It was deep. And it hurt.

"I accept full responsibility for my actions," Danny said evenly. "The Alpha of the Stone Claw Clan attacked. I have no doubt that he would have killed me if I had not done something. I am sorry that it came to this, however, I am not sorry that I defended myself."

"Keep your explanations for the All-Clan," Garrison spat out, "you shall need them when facing the Tribune."

Okay. She really didn't like the Alpha of the High River Clan. She hadn't exactly felt all warm and gooey toward him before (choking his sister hadn't endeared him to her) but now, now she really didn't like him. It was obvious to her that he had a low opinion of women and if she had thought Draco was chauvinistic ... well there should be a whole new category set aside for Alpha Garrison Ford.

"I will," Danny said coolly. She hoped the Tribune had a more enlightened opinion than Alpha Garrison.

"We must notify the Stone Claw Clan. Arrangements must be made," Garrison said.

Alex nodded. "We will also need to contact the *Heighect Seere*. Perhaps she will be able to see a natural succession."

Contact the Grand Dame Roberta Wick. *Fuck*.

Garrison looked reluctant, but finally he nodded in agreement. "Yes, the *Heighect Seere* would be a wise consultant."

Danny knew that no matter how much of a chauvinist Alpha Garrison Ford was he would never show anything but respect toward the Grand Dame. She was the *Heighect Seere*—the Priestess, and such a position demanded a great deal of respect and honor.

It hit all at once—the exhaustion, pain and bone weariness. Danny still didn't know exactly what had transpired, or how she had managed to fry the Alpha of the Stone Claw Clan. She only knew that if she had to do it over again ... she would. She wasn't sorry

that she was alive. And she wasn't sorry that she had defended herself.

"*Ashleya*, you need to rest." Savior gently took her arm and pulled her into him. She accepted his weight, his presence, gratefully.

"Yeah, you look like you're going to drop," Thad murmured.

Alex started forward. "Come, Dennison, let me..."

"We have matters to discuss." Garrison interrupted him.

"They can wait."

"No, they cannot."

Alex clenched his hands into tight fists and nodded curtly. "I will join you shortly, Dennison."

"Don't worry about it, Alex." Danny gave him a small smile.

Alex shot Savior a positively evil look and repeated, "I will join you shortly."

"Fine, fine," she said, with a wave of her hand. "Then, if you don't mind, I'm going to take my leave of the both of you?" She looked over at Garrison. After everything that had transpired it wouldn't hurt to show him some respect and follow the rules.

Garrison straightened his shoulders, and nodded. "You may be excused. We may call on you later, Dennison Lee. There are still questions to be asked."

"Of course." Danny let out a deep sigh and turned to Savior. "I need a bed. I really, really need a bed."

Savior smiled brilliantly. "Your wish is my command, *ashleya*."

Chapter Eleven

"I shouldn't have done it, Savior." Danny shook her head in resignation. "There had to be some other way. There had to be..."

"There was no other way, my *ashleya*. If you had not acted, he would have killed you."

"But I could have ... I should have..." She dropped off helplessly. What? What could she have done? She hadn't been able to shift. Her magic had been slow to come to hand. When the strange power had filled her ... she had embraced it. She knew instinctively how to use it, and how to let it use her. She had felt the surging desire to survive and to defend herself ... and to destroy anything that would try to destroy her. No. She wasn't sorry she had saved herself but she was sorry she had thrust Alex into her mess—for she realized how very messy this had suddenly become.

"You are thinking too hard." Savior gently ran a warm rag over her wounds. He frowned. "You are not healing fast enough."

Danny shrugged. "He got me pretty good and I wasn't able to shift to heal myself. I'm not surprised that it's taking a while. Don't worry about it. I hardly feel it."

"Oh?" He lifted an eyebrow.

"Fine, I feel it," Danny chuckled, "but I've had worse, and I'm alive ... and that is all that matters to me."

Savior pressed a kiss to her forehead. "To me as well, my *ashleya*."

Having Savior pressed so close to her body ... Danny felt a familiar warmth spread through her. Yes, she was tired. Yes, she had a political nightmare to sort through but her beast didn't seem to care about any of that. It was coming to life, and it was telling her that it needed to be fed—and not by food.

"The dawn approaches," Danny murmured. She ran her hands down his back and inched closer.

"There is time," Savior moved his mouth down her cheek and then tickled her earlobe with his warm breath. "However, do you have it in you, my *ashleya*? Or would you prefer to sleep?"

Danny unbuttoned his pants, and reached inside to stroke him. "I can sleep when I'm dead." She increased the speed of her hand down his shaft. It was long and hard in her hand.

"Ahhhh..." Savior smiled. "Your hand is so warm ... deliciously warm."

"And you ... you are deliciously hard." Danny pulled at his pants. "Off."

Savior laughed. "Of course." He quickly stripped off his pants.

"The shirt can go as well." Danny watched with avid eyes as each item of clothing went. When he was naked her eyes drank him in. He was so beautiful. So different from ... no ... she wasn't about to go there. "You're beautiful," she breathed.

Savior grinned. "I believe you are the one that is beautiful, my *ashleya*."

"Trust me," Danny said, "you are one gorgeous guy." She moved up to him. He thrust out at her, long and hard, so very male. And she wanted him. She wanted to know it all.

Danny licked the head of his shaft. She smiled when Savior groaned. It was a

tortured groan of pleasure. She gently took the head of his cock into her mouth, sucking softly ... slowly.

Savior wrapped his hands within her hair, pulling her closer. "*Ashleya* ... my ... my *ashleya* ... ahhhhh ... ahhhhh yes..."

"You taste so good," Danny murmured. She licked her lips, wetting them before taking him deep within her mouth. He was incredibly large, and he stretched her beautifully. She took more of him.

"Ahhhh..." Savior thrust his hips forward. "Your mouth is ... is..."

Danny increased the motion of her mouth. She curled her lips over her teeth. She didn't want to bite him—much. She loosened her throat and let him slide even further down. He was hardening, pulsing within her mouth, and she breathed evenly out of her nose so not to gag.

"I'm going ... mother night take me, I'm going to come..." Savior ground out.

His words incited her and she sped up. She gently scraped her teeth over his sensitive flesh and his cock leapt. Running her hands over the taut globes of his ass she found the puckered ring of his anus and inserted one slim finger. Savior let out a hoarse groan. He stiffened and released himself into her welcoming mouth.

Danny pulled back. She licked her lips slowly. "You are yummy." Savior's eyes glittered, and before she knew what hit her she was on her stomach and Savior was straddling her legs, pinning her down. "Mmmmm ... heavy, aren't you?" she said with a smile.

"You are a very naughty wolf." Savior gently caressed her ass.

"So I've been told."

"Do you know what happens to naughty wolves?"

Danny grinned. "No ... what happens?"

"They get punished." Savior spoke right before he slapped her ass—hard.

"Ooommmphhh..." Danny moaned. "Do that again."

"My pleasure." He slapped her again. Her ass would be becoming beautifully rosy.

"Savior ... that feels so good..."

"I plan on making you feel even better, my *ashleya*, even better." Savior grabbed her by her hips and raised her butt in the air. He caressed the cheeks of her butt and skimmed his finger along her hot, wet slit.

"Please," she moaned.

"Please indeed," he whispered before inserting two fingers deeply into her dripping depths. "You're so hot ... mother night take me ... you're so hot..."

Danny's body was on fire. She wriggled impatiently, needing to feel more of him.

"Eager, aren't you?" Savior began to scissor his fingers in and out of her. When they were completely coated with her cream he smeared them across the ring of her anus.

"What is good for the goose..." He let his words trail off.

"Savior?" Danny tried to turn around only to have him grab her more forcibly.

"What ... what are you..."

"Do you not know ... I believe I am turning the tables on you, my *ashleya*. But do not worry ... this is going to be so very pleasurable for the both of us."

"I don't think..."

"Yes, don't think..." Savior slowly inserted two of his fingers into her ass. "Just feel, *ashleya*, just feel."

“Oooooohhhhh...” Danny began to pant. “That is ... that is ... more...” she moaned. “Please, oh please, more...”

“Yes.” Savior removed his fingers and began to insert his cock into her ass.

“Tight,” Danny moaned.

“Ahhh yes ... so tight.” He thrust himself further into her. And then he began to move. First shallow strokes, and then increasing in speed and force. He grabbed her hips, all the while continuing to pound into her.

Her body was pulsing, as if her heartbeat was everywhere at once. She had never felt so full, so invaded. She loved it. The fire was back and it was spreading. She wanted it to consume her, just as Savior was consuming her. It felt so good. Lord, it felt so good. He was getting bigger, God, he was getting bigger and he was stretching her to capacity. Her muscles clenched and throbbed and she couldn’t keep it at bay.

“*Savior!*” Danny shouted as her orgasm hit hard and fast.

“Mother night, yes.yesssss...” Savior hissed. He pumped one more time and emptied himself within her, collapsing against her back.

“Heavy,” Danny muttered, voice muffled by the bed.

Savior chuckled and rolled off her. He tucked a strand of damp hair behind her ear.

“That was...” Her voice trailed off.

“Magnificent, incredible, sensational, the best you’ve ever had, or ever will have?”

She blinked and then burst out laughing. “Are you being playful?”

“Playful? I’m not certain. Am I?” His eyes twinkled.

“My goodness. I don’t think I’ve ever seen this side of you.”

Savior’s smiled crookedly. “Do you like it?”

Danny caressed his cheek and planted a soft kiss to his lips. “Yeah, I think I do. It’s nice ... it’s human, very human.”

“Human.” Savior’s jaw clenched and his eyes went suddenly flat. “That is something I will never be again, *ashleya*. And if you hope for that ... you will be severely disappointed. Human ... I cannot be human.” He rolled away from her.

“Savior.” Danny reached out to touch him, frowning when he stood from the bed and walked away. “Savior...”

He turned to her suddenly. “Where were you, *ashleya*?”

“What?”

“The three weeks you were absent. Where were you?”

Danny straightened her shoulders. “Why do you want to know?”

“I think I have a right.”

“Oh, you do, do you?”

“Indeed. Do you not see what you have wrought? Your disappearance brought everything to a head. The Alpha of the Stone Claw Clan would not be...”

Danny jumped out of the bed. “Would not be what? Dead? Is that what you were going to say, Savior? Yeah, I killed him,” she screamed. Fury hit her hard, she didn’t think, she lashed out. “I fucking killed him. Is that what you wanted to hear? Are you happy now?” She dropped to her knees and hung her head. God. She *had* killed him. She had taken Draco’s life. She would carry that with her for the rest of her life.

“Danny...” Savior dropped down beside her. “I did not mean to...”

She looked up at him. “What ... what did you mean then? God,” she jerked her gaze away, “I can’t do this. I can’t fucking do this.” She stood and turned her back to him. “I

have endured enough,” she said harshly. Looking up, she continued, “Do you hear me? I have endured enough already!” She stiffened when she felt his hands upon her shoulders. “You have to go.”

“Danny ... *ashleya*...”

“Just go, Savior, just go. We’ll talk later. Right now ... right now I want to be alone.” For a minute she wasn’t sure if he would honor her request. But he did. And she knew the minute that he left. It was empty, her heart and she felt bereft and ... cold, very cold.

“Asmodai.” She whispered his name, as if saying it would make him appear before her. There was no answer. Nothing but the chill of silence and the pain of complete emptiness. “What now,” she murmured. “What do I do now?”

* * * *

She kept her hands folded neatly in front of her and her legs crossed demurely. Demurely—Jesus, it really was the end of the world. When had she ever been demure?

Her eyes were trained straight ahead and she made certain not to flinch under the weight of their stares. Alex and Garrison Ford were sitting across from her. They had yet to say anything.

She had gotten less than two hours of sleep before she had been called to a meeting with Alex and Garrison. After a quick shower she had trotted down to the main hall to find them both already seated and looking very, very somber. Alex had indicated she was to sit, so she sat. She had been sitting for at least ten minutes in total silence.

“We spoke to the Grand Dame Roberta Wick of the Belle Ville Clan,” Alex said, breaking the silence.

Danny nodded but said nothing.

“She was ... surprised by our news,” he continued. “There has been an All-Clan scheduled. Until then,” Alex took a breath, “I am to act as reigning Alpha of the Stone Claw Clan.”

Danny’s mouth dropped open. “I’m sorry. I think I heard you wrong,” she finally said.

“There is nothing wrong with your hearing,” Garrison ground out, “Alexander Randolph Holt will reign as the Alpha of the Stone Claw Clan until new arrangements can be made at the All-Clan. And there *will* be new arrangements made.” This last was said with malice.

She couldn’t remember the last time an Alpha had reigned over two clans. Perhaps the ancient ones had utilized Alphas for multiple clans ... but that had been during a lawless time when order was greatly needed and Alphas were few.

“You are required to make a trip to the Stone Claw Clan,” Alex said. “You will have to ... explain the situation to the *Clannahd*.”

That had been expected.

“And you will act as *Roit*.”

That was not. Danny shook her head. “No way. Absolutely no way. I am not *Roit*. Hell, I’m not even the *Roit* for my own clan.” There was no way she was going to act as the punisher of the Stone Claw Clan. The *Roit* was the right hand of the Alpha, the punishing right hand. *Roits* administered pain. Danny did not like Pack politics and she did not like structure. She was not about to bind herself to a position in a Pack that she

had no ties to.

"You have no choice," Alex said simply.

"No, Alex. I am not going to be the Stone Claw Clan's *Roit*." She rubbed her temples. "There are plenty of *Clannahd* in the Stone Claw Clan. There has to be someone to act as *Roit*."

"It has to be you."

"Alex..."

"By decree of the Grand Dame Roberta Wick, the *Heighect Seere*, you, Dennison Lee, will act as the reigning *Roit* of the Stone Claw Clan. So it was spoken. So it shall be." Garrison glared at her.

Danny sank back into her chair. Fucking A, just when she thought it couldn't get any worse. If the Grand Dame had spoken ... well ... Danny was stuck. She was *Roit* of the Stone Claw Clan. But why? Good Lord, why had the Grand Dame done this to her? What possible reason could she have for putting her in such a select and important position? And God, would the *Clannahd* even accept her? She had killed their Alpha. She doubted they would greet her with open arms. It had to be punishment. The Grand Dame had to be punishing her. It was the only explanation that made sense.

"I ... I ... how in the hell am I going to manage this?" Danny asked.

"You will have to quit that ridiculous job of yours," Alex said. There was a definite note of pleasure staining his voice now.

"Oh really, will I?"

"I cannot imagine you can be in two places at one time, Dennison."

Shit. He had a point there. Well, perhaps she could take a sabbatical. She just had to call Whitefeather and request some time off. Yeah. That could work. Okay. That was what she was going to do.

She had just thought of something. "What the heck are you going to do, Alex?" God. How was he going to administer to both the Striker Clan and the Stone Claw Clan?

Alex waved her concern away. "I have already spoken to Xander, he will oversee clan business for the time being. I shall reside with the Stone Claw Clan, their needs are more immediate. And there is bound to be some ... discord."

Yeah. She bet there was going to be discord. A clan without their Alpha—God, what a mess. Xander was Alex's *Roit* and very capable. No doubt he would keep the Striker Clan running smoothly until Alex's return.

"We will leave tomorrow, Dennison. We must make haste. News has already spread and..."

"All Hell has broken loose," Danny finished for him. "I'm sure." Her migraine had returned. "I don't have a choice here, do I?"

Alex cocked his head to one side. "You killed the Alpha of the Stone Claw Clan, Dennison. What choice did you think you would have?"

Shit. "Fine, fine," she threw up her hands. "Off we go to the Stone Claw Clan." *Shit and double shit*.

"You are entirely ungrateful," Garrison spat at her. "You murdered an Alpha. We could execute you here and now, girl, and yet you are alive and about to be honored with a great position. You should be down on your knees in supplication to us."

"Correction, I killed an Alpha, you sonofabitch. Murder implies intent. I did not intend to kill him. The fact that he was trying to eat me ... well ... excuse me for saving

my life.” She could take it up to a point. Alpha Garrison Ford had crossed that point. She watched him rise from his seat. There was murder in his eyes. She stiffened.

“Stand down, Garrison,” Alex said quietly, but with authority.

“You are no master of mine,” Garrison countered.

“No, I am merely one that wishes no more blood to be spilt. We have already lost one of our number ... do we wish to go for two? And shall we go against the Grand Dame?” Alex’s words seemed to hit home, and Garrison sat down once again. “Dennison ... what is to follow will not be easy.”

Danny nodded.

“You will be tested, and you will be challenged.”

Yeah, that made sense too. She was being named *Roit* of a clan whose Alpha she had killed. She’d be shocked if she wasn’t challenged. Actually, she was anticipating quite a number of assassination attempts.

God. It was like her childhood all over again.

“You will have to prepare yourself.”

“I’m prepared,” Danny snapped.

“Dennison...”

“I said, I’m prepared, Alex.”

“You treat your own Alpha with disrespect.” This came from Garrison.

“Perhaps I do, a little.” Danny sighed. “We have a lot of history, he and I. And, well, sometimes I take that for granted. Or maybe I exploit it a bit.” She frowned and turned to Alex then. “I apologize, my Alpha, for my churlish behavior and my disrespectful tone.” Danny almost laughed at the expression that filtered over Alex’s face. He was absolutely shocked. Well. She could acknowledge her faults—sometimes. Okay, rarely, she rarely acknowledged her faults, but when she did, she owned up to them.

“Your apology is heard and is accepted, Dennison Lee, *magi* wolf, member of the Striker Clan and *Roit* of the Stone Claw Clan,” Alex said formally.

Danny inclined her head.

“You may take your leave.” Alex spoke softly now.

“Thank you.” Danny stood and inclined her head to Garrison. “Thank you for your time, Alpha Garrison Ford of the High River Clan. I shall see you next at the All-Clan.”

“You most certainly will.”

She didn’t like his tone and she didn’t like his words but now was not the time to battle. What good did it do her to further enrage the Alpha of the High River Clan? He couldn’t hate her more than he already did. And she had way too much to worry about right now. With a curt bow to Alex, she left the room.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. She was so very, very fucked.

* * * *

By nightfall she was feeling better. Just a little better, but better all the same. She had taken a run to replenish her wolf and, God, it had helped. Just being outside had helped sooth her soul and balm her wounds. She had run to the brook that banked *The Hollowing* and stretched out on a large stone, letting the sun beat down upon her. There was a slight breeze and it ruffled her fur. Everything smelled wonderful ... everything smelled alive. And after all was said and done ... God ... she was happy to be alive.

She took a lot for granted (just how much, she was finally beginning to realize). She

could honestly say that sometimes she just couldn't help it. It was her nature. She had come out of the womb fighting, and her childhood had done nothing to soothe or calm her nature any. She had dealt with severe beatings and assassination upon assassination attempt right up until the day she had left the Striker Clan. Hell, one of the reasons she had left the Striker Clan was that she had become weary of defending herself—all the time. She had thought if she put a little distance between herself and the Pack, and perhaps took herself out of Pack politics things would calm down a bit. She had hoped (in vain) to have a life, an actual life. She wanted to live as a woman. She wanted the things that women had. And she desperately wanted a semblance of independence. Of course, she had learned the impossibility of such wants.

The moment she left the Striker Clan she learned just how different the human world was. She had been studying human behavior since she was a child, studying their ways, their environment, their odd rituals and ceremonies. But living it was quite different than studying it. She had never had to earn a living before. For no matter how difficult it was belonging to a Pack, Pack would provide all basic needs. They were, in essence, your family ... and family provided for you. She had nothing when she left the Striker Clan but a small bag of clothes. As conditioned by her lone-wolf status, the papers she had signed when she left the clan, she was to take nothing that was Clan with her. She had no money, she had no place to live, hell, she was literally a pup in a very, very, unknown forest.

She had spent the beginning of her indoctrination into the human world in a human homeless shelter—and people called them wolves. There were more wolves in the homeless shelter than in her own Pack. And God, the things they did to one another. Yes, she had learned just how vicious humans could be. It was just another life lesson she stored away, held onto, and learned from.

And then came Simone. Simone Alicia Brevard was what humans liked to call a *humanitarian*. Danny found that word to be really amusing. Humans terming a person who likes to do good a humanitarian. It struck her as really odd and seriously funny. But Simone had been a humanitarian and so much more. She was, in Danny's opinion, a bleeding heart. Simone passed out food at the shelter and one day struck up a conversation with her. For two weeks following she came back every day to check up on her and engage her in conversation. And then the unsuspected happened ... she invited Danny to live with her. Of course Danny had said no. How could she go live with some unknown human? But Simone showed some surprising backbone, she had chipped away at Danny's defenses until she had relented.

And so her stay at the shelter came to an end. She moved into Simone's lovely apartment. It was a large one bedroom, two bathroom place on a quiet block in the city. Danny slept in the roomy den, even though Simone had tried to get her to take the bedroom. No way was she displacing Simone from her own room.

Everything changed with Simone. Simone became her confidante, her best friend, the only person in the world whom she felt really connected to. She didn't consider Pack in that equation, because with Pack it was almost innate. You had to feel a connection. They were Pack and could be nothing less. And there were always strings attached to relationships within Pack, even friendships and no one would give without expecting something in return. The old ways were still present within *Clannahd* society. And whenever someone approached Danny ... it was with an ulterior motive. But not Simone,

Simone liked Danny for Danny. There was no hidden agenda. There was no plotting and furthering of one's position. She was in fact the first person to start calling Dennison by the nickname Danny. It was sort of their inside joke. Simone called her Danny, and Danny in turn called Simone, Simon.

It turned out that a lot of people came to Simone for advice or help and she would always help if she could. There was nothing that Simone wouldn't do for you. One day, Amy Aster, a young coven witch, came to Simone with a situation that she needed advice on. It dealt with a spell that she had inadvertently released and didn't know how to retract. She was beside herself. Simone had comforted the girl but there really wasn't anything she could do beyond offering her some sympathy—and chocolate chip cookies. It was like a light bulb went off in Danny's head. She offered to help Amy out with her little problem.

And so Danny's new career kicked off, her new, very profitable career. Wouldn't you know it, but there was plenty of *Otherworld* activity that needed to be dealt with, and plenty of inept people trying to deal with it. Danny began to make her living off other people's mistakes. Hell, it was what she had been trained for—except she was using her abilities for herself, and not for her Pack. She had felt a twinge of guilt in the beginning ... but she had gotten over it fast when she realized she was making a fortune, *and* the best thing ... she was her own boss.

Life seemed, for the first time in a long time, hopeful. She had set a course for herself ... independence, and she had gone after it and was succeeding. How could anything be better?

Then, on a freezing day in December, the police found one Simone Alicia Brevard, aged twenty-six, dead in a snow-bank, six blocks from her home. She had been beaten, raped, mutilated and left naked, strewn upon a blanket of cold. Danny had been on a job, and she had never forgiven herself for not being there, for not being there when her best friend, her only friend, had been murdered. Simone had died alone. She had taken Danny out of her loneliness into the light, but she had died alone.

The wolf was reborn that day. Danny spent three months tracking down the two men who had abducted her friend off the street and killed her. It turned out they were *Otherworlders*. One was half gnome, the other was half sorcerer. They were still just evil murdering bastards, and Danny had taken them out. They had made no excuses for their actions. To them, Simone had just been play, fun, a quick diversion. And she was only a puny full-blooded human. What did she matter? Danny had shown them how much Simone had mattered ... and then ... they disappeared, never to be seen or heard from again and the entire incident melted away ... faded from everyone's memory, until only Danny was left to carry the weight of it within her.

Simone had given Danny her estate. She'd left everything to her in her human will. Danny inherited the apartment which Simone had loved so well, and her sizable trust fund, which Simone had signed over to her. She took what her friend had left her and promised that she would never make such a mistake again—she would never let anyone get so close. She would never let anyone touch her heart the way Simone had. In her world there wasn't room for friendship. And there certainly wasn't room for love. People in Danny's world died—violently. Hell, even her own mother hadn't wanted her. Didn't that show that there was something defective about her, something that was wrong? She told herself that she didn't need anything more than she had. And she made it her mission

to look out for number one. She had her independence and that was enough. She had given everything to obtain it ... it would have to be enough.

Enter Thaddeus Whitt, the scrawny kid who had literally forced his way into her life. Followed her home from a job one day and would not leave her alone. Everywhere she went, every move she made, he shadowed. He was a frigging pain in the butt. And yet in his eyes, there lay a light, a light she had seen in Simone's eyes every day until the day she was taken from her. He had wormed his way in, and truth be told, he had wormed his way into her heart. She had put up shields as strong and impenetrable as Fort Knox, and he had still managed to find a hole to crawl through.

And hell if it didn't scare the living shit out of her. Because when you cared, you got hurt. It was that simple. Another glowing life lesson she had learned. And now here she was ... caring way too much about way too many. Damn it all if it hadn't been simpler when she had been a stone-cold bitch. All right, she was still a stone-cold bitch, but now she was a bitch with friends and lovers that she actually liked. It was sucky how things worked out sometimes.

When had she begun to go soft? And how the heck did she rectify it? She was headed back into a hell of her own making, and she would need all the strength, power, and attitude she could muster.

Wolves took no prisoners and whether she liked it or not ... she was a wolf. A wolf until the day she breathed no more.

Chapter Twelve

She found him sitting on the same rock she had stretched out on in the afternoon. In the moonlight his skin appeared to be alabaster and his features kissed by starlight. He was stunningly beautiful. It seemed she had no lack of beautiful men in her life. Too bad they were more trouble than they were worth.

Savior turned slightly. She knew he had sensed her presence, just as she had sensed his. Another delightful “perk” of the mark they shared.

“*Ashleya*.” His voice was smooth as brushed silk. “Have you come to say goodbye?”

Danny frowned. His voice sounded dull. He sounded so very sad.

“You are leaving, no?”

She took a seat next to him on the rock, swinging her feet back and forth. “I have to.”

“Have to?” A small, enigmatic smile appeared on his face. “I did not know that the great Danny Lee had to do anything.”

“Actions have consequences,” she replied simply.

“My, my, how you are growing...”

She scrunched her nose up. “You make me sound like I’m twelve.”

“In the light of my age you are.”

Hadn’t she heard this before? “Yeah, yeah, you are all sooooo much older than I am. You have seen so much more. You have done so much more. And next to you I am but a babe in the woods. I’ve had this talk before.”

“You are to go to the Stone Claw Clan?”

Danny nodded. “Yes, I need to explain things. And they are without an Alpha.”

“And your dear Mr. Holt shall act as their Alpha.”

“Temporarily, yes. Permanent arrangements will be discussed at our All-Clan.”

Savior nodded slowly. He still hadn’t turned to look at her. “Are you glad to be back, *ashleya*?”

“Yes,” she said without hesitation. For all her world’s faults, it was her world.

“You were in a different dimension. When you were gone from us, you were in a different dimension,” he stated.

Danny was startled, but she hid her surprise at his words. “Of a sorts, yes. It’s complicated, Savior.”

“There was someone,” he said. It was more statement than question. His words were spoken evenly, calmly and she could detect no malice or anger at her in his simple statement.

“Do you really want to know?”

“Yes, I believe I do.”

“Then yes, yes, there was someone.”

“Did you feel for him what you feel for me?”

She shifted her position on the rock. She was beginning to get a little uncomfortable with this conversation.

“I know, however much you deny it, that you do feel something for me, *ashleya*.”

“I do, yeah.” Danny sighed. “I’m just not sure what it is, Savior. Truthfully ... sometimes I think it’s,” she swallowed, “love, or as close to love as I can get or

understand. But sometimes ... sometimes I just hate you. Actually, I tend to hate you a lot more than I love you." She threw up her hands. "But then ... what's that all about. If I care enough to hate you ... does that mean I love you?"

Savior turned to her then. A myriad of expressions filtered across his beautiful face. "It is a problem."

Danny smiled slightly. "Yeah, it is a problem."

He reached out to caress her cheek. "It is a problem for me as well, *ashleya*."

She scoffed at that. "What problem could you possibly have?"

"To feel ... after having not felt anything for so very long ... could you not see how this would be a problem, *ashleya*? When I first saw you, the response was immediate. I wanted you. I knew I wanted you. You were ... the finest possession one could possibly have. Your power, your strength, your innate beauty ... you were an acquisition too irresistible to pass up." He saw she would speak and shook his head. "Let me finish, my *ashleya*. You speak of your world, well, let me speak of mine. I live in a world not too different from yours, little one." Danny snorted and Savior smiled. "It is true. My world has rules, order, punishment of the severest kind. I live in a carefully controlled box that is monitored from every side. And because of my status, the mantle that I wear, the scrutiny is even harsher. I have survived for a very, very, long time. I have survived times where the only hope for survival was the complete annihilation of your soul."

He clenched his hands into tight fists. "I gave mine up long ago. Handed it over like so much trash to be disposed of. And, *ashleya*, it was almost a relief to see it go. By that time, so much had transpired. I had borne so much, I was almost happy to be unburdened by such a trapping. Time passed with me merely going through the motions of my existence. There was little joy to be had in a world of constant dark, where one's soul was no more."

Savior took her hands in his. He caressed the palms and brought them up to his mouth so that he could press a kiss to her warm flesh. "And then a wolf entered my den of night and blood. And the world as I knew it changed. Yes, *ashleya*, my world changed. Not the moment, the time, or the situation, but my entire world, my existence. You changed everything. I truly did not realize I could feel anything anymore. But you proved me wrong. Since you have entered my night ... I feel *everything*. I feel so sharply that the pain sometimes humbles me. I am made because of you. You have restored a piece of me I thought long lost. But my existence comes with a high price indeed, *ashleya*. One that you already know, one that I have shown you. I am not human. I will never be human again. Nothing in this world or beyond will restore what was lost so very long ago. When you spoke of my ... humanity ... the pain I felt was, was, more of the knowing that there was something I was helpless against. Something that I could not control. I cannot change the very nature of my beast, or the very nature of what I now am. And I cannot make time reverse itself. The thought that you would wish a human companion ... someone more ... warm blooded than I, someone perhaps like the man you met, or even your Alpha, it was a pain unlike I had ever experienced." His grip tightened. "I cannot warm my body. I am, forever, the walking dead. Any *humanity* you may see in me is merely an artifice. For it can be nothing more."

"Would you like to know what I saw in him, Savior?" She needed to tell him this. He needed to know and understand because she did care about him, even love him in her way. And he deserved this much. Danny kissed his cold hands. "I saw you. It is what

drew me to him in the first place. In his eyes, I saw something that I see only in you. You and you alone were the reason I first felt anything for him.”

“But then...”

She sighed. “Things change, yes. You are a different person than he is. Your experiences make you who you are, and his make him who he is. What I felt for him is separate from what I feel for you.” She shook her head. “But I don’t want you to ever think that I ... I ... look down at you because you happen to lack a heartbeat.” She laughed. “I go all furry and apparently can incinerate people. We are all different,” she laughed a little harder, “some more different than most, but that doesn’t change the fact that we exist here, together. Am I ever going to be a meek, docile, creature? Uhhhh, that would be a no. My experiences have dictated otherwise. Will you ever be a warm, loafer wearing, martini drinking, human stuff-shirt, no. But you know what,” a sense of warmth and rightness flooded her, “that’s all right. That is fucking all right. I’m okay with that.”

“You are extraordinary,” Savior murmured, stroking her cheek.

“You’re not half bad yourself, for a bloodsucking bastard.”

Savior laughed. “Ahhhh the sweet words that you utter.”

“Listen, I can’t have us go all mushy all the time.” She winked. “We don’t want to ruin our image, do we?”

“No, we certainly can’t have that happen.”

“You realize that our heart-to-heart hasn’t changed the fact that I’m going to continue loving *and* hating you. And that I probably will fight you every step of the way. And that the only time I’ll ever be placid is when I’m in my grave.”

Savior nodded somberly. “I am quite aware of those little pearls of wisdom.”

“Terrific, just as long as we have that clear between us.” Danny pulled back, and folded her hands within her lap. “There is a lot of stuff going on in my life right now, Savior. A lot of shit that is going to take up the majority of my time and make, uh, dealing with you difficult.”

“So eloquently put.”

“Shut up and listen.” She cleared her throat and looked at him sheepishly. “I told you I can’t suppress it. I’m going to need you to ... leave me alone for a while. Just stay away and well, just stay away.”

“I can’t do that,” he said immediately.

“Don’t say you can’t. You mean you won’t.”

“No, my *ashleya*, I can’t. To steal your turn of phrase, it just doesn’t work that way. We share a bond, a mark that cannot be undone. I crave you, need you, as you crave and need me.”

“We don’t have to be together all the frigging time, Savior.”

“No, we don’t but we will need contact and proximity. There will be a sorrow in your body that you will not be able to ease unless we are together. Can you honestly tell me you have not felt it? During the time we have been apart, has there not been time where there was physical pain ... pain that you knew my presence could ease.”

Danny grit her teeth. *That* was true. Damn it all. His words did ring true. Sometimes she ached for him so badly she thought she would go mad with the want. She liked to shove it off as mere lust, or tell herself that she had just been without a hard cock for too long. But who was she kidding? The ache was very, very, real, and it was much stronger and much deeper than mere lust. She yearned for him—for him, not just his body, but for

Savior. And the more she wanted him, the more she resented him. He had done this to her. She had never asked for the mark. He had gone ahead and branded her without her permission. Taken the decision out of her hands ... like all the other dominating males in her life who thought that her words held no weight and her wants meant nothing.

"I cannot take it back," Savior said quietly. "And no, *ashleya*, I am not in your mind. I can merely see the emotions as they flutter across your face and read them well."

"If you could, would you?" Danny snorted when he remained silent and then nodded. "That's what I thought."

"Will you always hold anger toward me for it, my *ashleya*?"

"Honestly?" Danny wrinkled her nose. "I don't know. I honestly don't know. I'm sorry if that's not the answer you want, but it's the only one I have. You took my choice away, Savior. Can you not see how wrong that is?"

"Would you ever have come to me otherwise?"

"Well now we'll never know, will we? I mean, you all just fucking barrel ahead with no regard to my desires or wants. You don't consult me. You just run right over me. I have my own mind, Savior. If you want a mindless droid, go find yourself some zombie."

"Zombies decay quite quickly and usually their smell is utterly distasteful."

Danny ignored him, although her mouth quirked up slightly at his words. "I'm trying to show you that a relationship has to be mutual, at least a good one does. It's a partnership. And my decisions and choices should be just as important as yours." Danny watched Savior's face. He seemed to genuinely be considering her words. Well, that was sort of cool.

"I am unused to partnerships," Savior finally said.

"No, really?" Danny countered sarcastically. "You? You're unused to partnerships? I'm amazed."

"You mock me?" he asked, smiling slightly.

"Just a little."

"I want this with you, *ashleya*."

"Want what?"

"A ... relationship."

"I thought you already said we were in a relationship, and that I didn't have a choice. We are stuck with one another through the marks and all that jazz."

"I do not ... I do not wish..." he stumbled over his words.

Danny bit her lip and waited.

"I do not want a mindless droid," he finally said. "I want someone who will challenge me and walk on the same path as I do. It is one of the reasons that I ... that I found you so irresistible, my *ashleya*. You would not merely submit to me. You were not ... empty." Savior sighed. "But I do not wish to fight your anger for the rest of eternity because of the mark."

Hell. She didn't want that either, not really. Yes, she was still mad and it pissed her off that he had done something without her permission. But it was done and until she could figure out something to do about it (like erase it with some yet discovered magic) it was completely unproductive to scream, rant or basically bitch about it. That didn't mean she wouldn't still bitch. She was a bitchy person by nature. She accepted it. Too bad other people didn't.

"I can't promise you that I won't harbor some animosity toward you about it, Savior.

Or that at times I won't be positively evil to you because I'm pissed that you didn't consult me. But I don't want to fight you—well, I sort of don't want to fight you. We've gone over it, and we've discussed it and we both know each other's feelings regarding it. For now, I think that's enough. I'm going to try to accept some universal truths. And maybe by doing so I'll be a little more ... genial."

"Genial ... you, my *ashleya*?"

"Hey!" Danny smacked his shoulder. "I'm working on my ... well ... personality."

"Really ... and how is that going, *ashleya*?"

He actually had a sense of humor—when he wanted to. And it was rather adorable.

"Mmmmm ... like shit. But at least I'm working on it."

Savior burst out laughing.

Danny shrugged. "All I can do is try, right?"

"Indeed."

She turned somber then. "You realize that if you won't leave me alone that there are going to be problems, Savior." She held up her hand to stop him from speaking. "No, it's my turn to speak, let me finish. I heard everything you said. And I understand about the mark and our bond—whether I like it or not, I understand. But I'm entering the Stone Claw Clan. I'm going to be neck-deep in Pack politics. They suck, let me tell you. I am anticipating a less than warm welcome. In fact, I think some of the *Clannahd* will probably try to kill me at the first meeting. The dead are rarely welcome at clan, as you know. You will *not* be able to stroll through the Stone Claw Clan. Proximity and contact is all well and good, but you're going to get yourself staked or worse if you try to enter the clan. Bad things will go down."

"My, my, how little you think of my ability to defend myself," Savior said with a short burst of laughter.

"Oh, get over it, Savior. This has nothing to do with your ability to defend yourself, or how powerful you are. I'm well aware that you could probably take out the Stone Claw Clan with your itty bitty finger if you wanted to. But frankly, do you truly wish to start a war with the clans? You want to take them on? Because if you piss off the Stone Claw Clan you'd better believe that the Tribunal will come down on your head like a fucking sledgehammer."

"You are correct about one thing, *ashleya*."

"Oh? Do tell."

"If I anger one, I anger all. We are not so different, wolves and vampires. We, too, watch our nests carefully and keep track of nest activity."

"You guys help one another out?" Danny asked, a little incredulous. Somehow she found that hard to believe.

"At times, if the situation warrants such help. We are in the same boat, so to speak. And we too have our council."

A vampire council, now *that* was indeed interesting news. Danny found that tidbit fascinating. If she admitted it to herself, she knew very little of the nightwalker society. Oh, some knowledge was obvious as a *magi* wolf. But vampires could be very secretive (true, not so unlike wolves in that respect) and it wasn't as if they advertised their ways. It totally made sense that they would have a council. She wondered if it was at all like the Tribunal and if they met in a similar way to the All-Clan.

"Tell me what you're thinking, *ashleya*."

“What, not rooting around in my brain?”

Savior grinned. “Now that would be rude, would it not?”

Danny smiled, “Yeah, that would be rude. I was thinking, well musing on the fact that I don’t know much about ... uh ... your ways.”

“Mmmmm ... and are you interested at all in our ways?”

“Truthfully,” she nodded, “yeah, I am. What can I say, I’m curious. That’s part of my nature, too.”

“You are a *magi* wolf, it would make sense that you are interested in *Otherworld* customs and the rituals and rules of those different from you.” A strange light filled Savior’s eyes then and he cocked his head to one side. “Just how interested are you, *ashleya*?”

“What do you mean?”

“How interested, *ashleya*? Would you like to see more of our ways? Would you like to know more?”

“In what way?”

“Whichever you would like, *ashleya*. I have marked you. You are in essence tied to me, and thus you are already indoctrinated in part into our world. There is, however, a month from now, a *Capthedox*. If you wish, you could attend with me.”

“What is a *Capthedox*?”

“It is a meeting, a very, very, large and important meeting. Of course, sometimes they are quite boring. But usually...” he grinned, “there is something to be learned.”

Learned. He had said the magic word. Danny’s brain craved information and she loved to learn new things. She attributed it in part to the fact that she was a *magi* wolf and that she had been taught since young to take in great stores of information and constantly assimilate and accommodate new data. It was always amazing how in the most random of places and situations you could learn a new spell or have the possibility of a new magic.

“I’ve intrigued you.”

Danny couldn’t lie. “Yeah, you’ve intrigued me. But I can’t just say yes, not yet. I have to check on a lot of things. There are a lot of factors to be considered, especially now. I need to make sure that I don’t have any clan business.”

Savior inclined his head. “Of course, that is understandable. I am pleased, however, that you are considering it. I believe it will be most informative.”

“Will your council be there?”

“In part, the entire council rarely attends the *Capthedox*. Sometimes there is a council representative, and other times one or two members of the council will attend. Usually in those times when the issues are larger or more important.”

“Who decides how important an issue is?”

“Very good question, my *ashleya*. The grievance, issue, or bill is written and set forth before the council, or it is conveyed verbally. And it must be set and sent for observation before the *Capthedox*.”

“So ... basically what you’re telling me is that the council decides what is important enough for the council to deal with,” she said, grinning.

“Well ... yes.”

Lord. Vampire politics almost sounded more complicated than Pack politics—almost.

“You will come and visit,” Savior said suddenly.

“Excuse me.” Danny laughed. “Like, tea and scones, visit?”

Savior snorted. “If I cannot enter the clan, then you will come to *Blood Noir* to visit me. It is not so far.”

He made it sound so simple. Then again...

“You will let me court you as of old. And we shall get to know one another, not as two who are bound by a mark, but as two who wish to learn each other’s way and be in a ... relationship.”

“Who are you? And what have you done with Savior?” Danny asked, astonished. She swallowed. “You’re talking about dating. You want to *date* me?”

“Court, yes, I would like that. You are right, my *ashleya* ... I did not consult you about the mark but I am consulting you now. And I hope that what I do now, and what I display to you now will help to ease some of the anger you have toward me due to my earlier behavior.”

Dating Savior...

“Uh, what would we do, I mean, on a date together?” Danny almost laughed at how unsure her voice sounded. It was Savior. The same Savior she had fucked, multiple times.

Savior grinned a large grin, revealing his perfectly white teeth. “We could begin with something simple, *ashleya*, like dinner.”

“I’m not on the menu, am I?” Danny quipped.

“Only if you wish to be.”

She bit her lip. Oh, it was tempting, very tempting. God, when had she last been on a date, a real date? She couldn’t even remember. Heck, had she ever even been on a real date—no, she didn’t think so. The closest she had come to a date was fucking some guy when her beast was riding her hard and demanded release.

“Are you scared?” Savior asked.

She straightened her shoulders. “Of what? You? No way.” Scared a little that she would screw up a date—yeah, maybe. Hell, what did she know about dating?

“Then take the chance, *ashleya*.”

Take a chance. Live. “What the heck.” Danny smiled broadly. “Sure, I’d love to go on a date with you, Savior.”

Dating ... it was almost banal. She loved it. She, Danny Lee, *magi* wolf, dating Savior Knight, master vampire. Lord, what alternate universe had she just stepped into?

* * * *

Rickart Sven was resplendent in a gold brocade jacket, and shiny dinner slacks. He sat at the head of his long banquet table sipping blood from a pure gold goblet.

“It has been interesting having you here, Dennison Lee, *magi* wolf,” he said, eyeing her keenly.

Interesting, yeah that was one word for it. Danny was well aware of Savior standing stiffly by her side. She was still in Rickart Sven’s territory and she should follow protocol. Hadn’t she made enough messes already?

“Thank you for your hospitality,” Danny said simply.

Rickart tossed Savior a look that was full of hidden meaning. It was weighty. “It was my pleasure, Dennison. In fact, if ever you should need shelter in the future, do not hesitate to call upon me. I would be delighted to offer you my protection.”

“Thanks,” she said dryly. “I don’t need your protection. I can protect myself just

fine.”

Rickart’s brow furrowed but his smile remained in place. “Of that I have no doubt. You are very capable, you have demonstrated that admirably. But again, if the need should arise ... please call upon me. I have need of wolf among my ranks.”

Danny frowned. “What about...” she was named after some damned herb, “Ginger, Paprika ... Clover ... Cloverly. What about Cloverly?” She didn’t particularly like the antagonistic she-bitch, but there was little doubt to her strength.

“Cloverly is no longer with me.” Rickart spoke coolly, but Danny was certain that the flash she saw in his eyes was pain. “She has been summoned back to her Alpha’s side.”

Garrison Ford, that fucking asshole. He didn’t need her. He was just being pissy and trying to mess with Rickart’s world, Danny was certain of it. He probably hoped that separating his sister from Rickart would deter their romance. Ha. Good luck with that. From the sheer desperation she had witnessed on Cloverly’s face, there would be nothing that would keep her from Rickart’s side, at least not for long.

“The Alpha makes a statement,” Savior said finally. “Have a care and make certain you caution yourself.”

Danny knew that Savior had to be aware of the romance between Rickart and Cloverly. And that he was warning Rickart to use caution when dealing with the situation. A war between the High River Clan and Rickart’s nest would be ugly and very, very, messy.

“I do not need advice from you, Knight,” Rickart ground out. “It would seem you have your own wolf problems.”

“My, my, aren’t we testy,” Danny muttered. “Listen, I just wanted to come down here and thank you for your hospitality in letting me stay here for so long. As well as the care you have shown my friend Thad.”

“Again, you are most welcome,” Rickart said coolly.

Danny inclined her head. “I really should, uh...”

“Then go. You are dismissed.”

Danny raised her eyebrows. Oh-ho, she was dismissed, was she? Well, whatever, his haughty, egotistical attitude wasn’t worth making a fuss over.

“Goodbye then, master vampire Rickart Sven.”

“Until we meet again, Dennison Lee, *magi* wolf. And you, Knight, I shall see you at the *Capthedox*.”

“Indeed, until then.” Savior took Danny gently by her elbow and led her from the room.

* * * *

“Thad told me that he’s going with you,” Danny said accusingly the moment they were out of earshot of Rickart.

Savior nodded. “He is of my line. I believe that it is time he learned what it means to be of my line. He is still young, and has much to learn.”

“Who is going to water my plants?” Danny muttered.

“I am sure you will find some eager minion to water your household vegetation.”

“Excuse me, Mr. High and Mighty Master Vampire, I don’t have minions.”

“You could,” he spoke simply.

Danny rolled her eyes. "I don't need minions. Now, assure me that you'll take good care of him."

"We are speaking of Thaddeus now?"

"Yeah, we're speaking about Thad." Danny clenched and unclenched her hand. "He can be a pain in the butt but he's my pain in the butt, Savior. And ... he's my friend. I love him," she wrinkled her nose, "just don't tell him that, okay?"

Savior sighed. "How easily it comes to your lips, your love for him."

"Easy?" Danny scoffed. "Ask Thad if I'm easy, or if getting me to admit that I feel anything for him, is easy."

Savior waved her words away. "Of course in his presence you will not admit such feelings but you have acknowledged your love for him and your heart holds him dear."

Dear? Yeah, he was dear to her. She had never told Thad about Simone, hell she hadn't told anyone about Simone. But Thad, Thad was as close to her heart as Simone had been. He was truly her only friend. And she did love him. He was impossibly wide-eyed and annoying perky, and impish. He was as clingy as a spider monkey and had the appetite of ten truck drivers put together. But he was loyal as hell, had one of the purest and sweetest hearts, and held nothing back.

"If anything happens to him, I'll hunt you down and make sure you stay dead."

"You wound me," Savior said with a small smile on his face, "to think I would let anything happen to my child."

"He's not your child."

"He is in essence my get. I will care for him as I care for all of my young. You need not worry about him, *ashleya*, you shall see him often, as he will be residing with me, and you will be frequenting my establishment."

"I never said I would frequent your establishment, Savior."

"However shall we date then?"

Danny rolled her eyes. "We'll see how often I come around. Pack first, remember?"

"Ah yes, Pack first." His eyes glittered. "If I ache for you, and you do not come, I will have to find some other way to reach you."

Danny poked him in the chest with her finger. "If you assault me in my dreams, Savior, I'll frigging kill you."

"Assault." Savior wrapped an arm around her and pulled her close. "It would not be assault, *ashleya*."

Unfortunately he was probably right. There would be no assault involved. Danny was impossibly attracted to him and her sexual appetite was high. If he but whispered in her dream she would probably jump his bones.

"We're going to try dating like normal people," she ignored his chuckle and continued, "and normal people don't root around each other's minds and play mind footsie."

"I'm not completely sure what you just said, *ashleya*, but I believe I understand the general idea. And I shall tell you again..." he pressed a hard, brutal, kiss to her lips and then pulled away, "when you come to me ... all will be solved. What need we for poor substitutions then?"

Danny swallowed hard at the look of pure satisfaction and cunning knowing on Savior's face. Hell and damnation. Why did she suddenly feel like she hadn't thought this all through? And that Savior had a very big ace waiting for her up his sleeve.

Chapter Thirteen

Danny moped in the front seat of the car. She glanced over at Alex, who had his attention zeroed in on the road. Good little driver was he.

"I still don't see why I can't drive," she muttered under her breath.

Alex sighed, beleaguered. "We are not having this conversation again, Dennison."

"But..."

"Dennison," Alex said warningly.

"Fine." She crossed her arms, sank back into the soft interior and tried to keep the pout off her face.

"If you are pouting ... don't. It won't change my mind." Alex snorted. "It doesn't help that you're perhaps the worst driver on Earth," Alex added in a near whisper.

What? She was a terrific driver. It was the rest of the blasted world that couldn't fucking drive.

"Listen here, Mr. Anal Retentive ... I'm not the one going sixty miles per hour on the Interstate."

Alex's eye twitched and he stiffened. "Are you truly complaining about the fact that I'm following the law?"

"You drive like a damned old lady, Alex. Did you see that sign, did you? It said seventy miles per hour. You are going ten miles *under* the speed limit. What's that about?"

"I do not appreciate backseat drivers," he snapped.

"Ha, I'm not in the back seat, grandma."

"You are truly impossible."

And they were stuck with one another for the time being. Oh God. *This* was what your brain felt like on crack.

"We're going to kill one another before this is through, Alex." Danny began to tap her fingers on the side of the door.

"Stop that. And no, we're not. We'll be fine. All you have to do is listen and obey, Dennison, and we'll be fine."

Danny snorted. "Like I said, we're going to kill one another." She frowned suddenly. "Alex?"

"Yes?"

"That black Mercedes ... it's tailing us."

"Really?"

There was something in his voice that gave her pause. "Yeah, really." She narrowed her eyes. "Alex ... who is tailing us?"

"Gregor and Victor."

"Any particular reason?"

"They are accompanying us to the Stone Claw Clan."

That was unusual. "Will they be accepted?" There was usually quite a lot of red tape that new *Clannahd* members had to go through.

"Some exceptions are being made. These are difficult times, Dennison. It has been cleared."

“By whom?” She couldn’t imagine many Alphas being all right with this. Gregor and Victor were both dominants. Although they were subordinate to Alex they were strong and they were valued members of a *Clannahd*. Such strength had to be controlled and few Alphas would feel comfortable with the addition of dominant numbers. She seriously doubted that, say, Garrison Ford was pleased with Alex bringing Gregor and Victor to the Stone Claw Clan. And she was certain the Stone Claw Clan would be less than pleased with them as well. The fact that she was named *Roit* was already (she was certain) unacceptable in their opinion. Her appointment meant that she was pushing someone out of the way, or usurping their position. Oh yeah, there were going to be some noses seriously bent out of shape over this.

“The *Heighect Seere* saw the wisdom in this. She believed this to be necessary.”

The Grand Dame, oh yes, something was afoot. First the Grand Dame named Alex as Alpha of the Stone Claw Clan, then she demanded Danny act as reigning *Roit* and now she allowed, no, urged Alex to bring Gregor and Victor along for the ride. She was definitely going to have to speak to the Grand Dame Roberta Wick.

Danny frowned. It had been a long time since she had last spoken to the *Heighect Seere*. They hadn’t parted on the best of terms. The Grand Dame hadn’t approved of Danny’s decision to leave the Striker Clan. But perhaps worse still, was the fact that Danny had called the *Heighect Seere* a domineering, overbearing old biddy. Yeah, she could still be pissed about that but few, if any, had the history that Danny had with the Grand Dame. She was banking on that history to help smooth things over ... and perhaps help her get some answers.

“You haven’t named either one of them *Magnus*, have you?” Danny asked Alex.

He shook his head. “Neither Gregor nor Victor will be my second-in-command. That position is still filled by one, Carlton West. He will remain as *Magnus*. It will help with the transition.”

He hoped. Danny could see by Alex’s expression that he hoped it would help with the transition. *She* wasn’t sure it would.

“Have you met West?” Alex asked of her.

Danny shook her head. She had met many of Draco’s *Clannahd*, but his second-in-command had been absent during her stay.

“He is stronger than Victor and he is stronger than Gregor.”

That wasn’t so surprising. A *Magnus* was considered nearly as strong as the Alpha. He was a direct extension of the Alpha’s power and thus his strength had to be considerable.

“I take it he has been notified of our coming,” Danny said.

“He has.”

“Uh, how did he take it?”

“He is *Magnus*. He took it as a *Magnus* would.”

Which was to say that he was cool, collected and unruffled—at least on the outside.

“Who am I pushing aside?” Danny asked, her voice sounding hollow to her ears.

“Do not think of it like that, Dennison.”

“I think I have a right to know who is going to try to kill me.”

“You are being...”

“Ridiculous, hysterical, melodramatic, is that what you were going to say, Alex? No, somehow I don’t think I am. Can you honestly tell me you don’t anticipate a problem? I

incinerated their Alpha. Oh, and now pretty as you please I am stepping into the position of *Roit*.” Danny snorted. “If this had happened to the Striker Clan, you really see Gregor, or Victor or even Xander accepting it without a fight? Can you tell me that they wouldn’t retaliate, or try to kill me?” Alex’s silence was answer enough. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. So, humor me, and tell me who the fuck I’m pushing aside.”

“I do not care for your language, Dennison. Nor do I find your attitude endearing.”

“And I do not care for being given the runaround.” Danny sighed deeply and tried to keep her anger from taking over. The angrier she became the bitchier she became. And she knew that for all of her bitchy attitude none of it would help her get answers out of Alex. He wanted the docile Danny, the obedient and respectful Danny—the Danny that didn’t exist outside of his own fantasies. It was one of the reasons (among many) that she had long given up on her girlhood dreams of being with Alex, or seeing him as her Prince Charming. Alex would never accept her as she was. He would never take her with her faults—or what he saw as faults. He would try to stamp them out, hammer her down and eventually beat her into submission, if necessary. She didn’t blame him, not really (although she usually wanted to kick the shit out of him for being such a chauvinistic ass) he was an Alpha, and Alphas were all domineering cave-wolves.

A Pack was not a democracy. And it had to be led by a being capable of enforcing the rigid laws and ways of the ancient wolves—those ancestors that had roamed the Earth long before man knew them as *Otherworlders* and tried to annihilate them. An unbending and often brutal hand was needed—the Alpha was that hand.

Alex had been born with the blood of Alphas running through his veins. He knew his position and what was expected of him from infancy. His needs had always been secondary to the Pack—for he was responsible for the entire *Clannahd*. He was the moon in their world and he did not have the luxury of making mistakes, or what he considered to be mistakes. A mistake in the world of the Alpha could mean death to the Pack.

Danny knew this. And she didn’t like it, often she railed against it. Oh, she understood it. She was after all a wolf and always would be. But the knowledge that the mind was collective and that she would always be held under heel of an Alpha ... it did not sit well with her. The part of her that was woman, that was *magi*, would always demand a freedom and independence that the side of her that was wolf accepted.

It was a tug of war for her soul. And it sucked.

“I wish only to protect you, Dennison,” Alex finally said.

Danny blinked as his words sank in and broke through her deep thoughts. “Protect me? Protect me from what, Alex?”

“From that which you need not trouble yourself with. There is much that you have on your mind right now, and much that will continue to take up your time. Why deal with a matter that I, as Alpha, can deal with for you?”

Oh yeah. He would never, never, understand. “I don’t need you to protect me, Alex. And I certainly don’t need you to hold back information from me. This is my life we’re talking about ... and the possible attempts against it. I need to know as much as I can so that I can adequately defend myself. How do you expect me to watch my back if I don’t even know what is going to be coming after it? Help me, Alex,” Danny sighed, “help me to help myself.” Alex seemed to mull over her words. His hands tightened on the steering wheel.

“Do you know how difficult it was for me to let you go, Dennison?”

“What?”

“When you came to me ... and demanded your release, do you know how hard it was for me to let you go?”

Hard? Oh yeah, she remembered how hard it had been. Alex had nearly killed her.

After years of abuse and tedious work on behalf of her Pack, she had decided that enough was enough. She had gone to Alex and told him she wished for her release. He had denied her, laughing at her words and telling her that what she wished would never happen. And then she had brought up the *Lupus Pacte Royale* and all hell broke loose. The *Lupus Pacte Royale* was a law of the ancients. Few knew of its existence. But Danny, *magi* that she was, and intense student, had learned of the law when she was but a pup. She had stored the knowledge away for later use and promised herself that she would keep the secret to buy her freedom one day.

The law was simple—freedom was bought with a test of blood and flesh. It had been instigated by the ancients for those of royal blood, those strong enough to stand on their own. Through the ages it had been amended to include any wolf who wished to run alone.

But not just any wolf could claim the *Lupus Pacte Royale*. The fight for freedom was bloody and violent, and only a wolf of significant power and strength could hope to overcome the obstacles set forth by the law.

It was an unusually warm night when Danny had approached Alex and uttered the five words that would change her life, “*I claim Lupus Pacte Royale.*” She would never forget Alex’s look of horror, or the two hours that were to follow her solemn words.

Yes. Danny had more than earned her lone wolf status (in her mind) with all that she had done for her Pack those many years—all that she had done for Alex. But it wasn’t until she approached Alex that warm, balmy, night and had fought and paid dearly, that she actually walked away with it.

So, she wasn’t certain how Alex saw it as, “letting her go.”

Danny frowned. “You almost killed me that night, Alex. Was that hard for you?” She couldn’t help the bite that bled into her words—nearly dying would make anyone grouchy. “Because, I sure as hell can tell you nearly bleeding to death was pretty hard on me.”

Alex growled then, “The *Lupus Pacte Royale* was your idea, Dennison, not mine. Everything that happened that evening was wrought by you.”

A cold hard knot formed in her stomach. “When I lay bleeding ... you left me, making sure that no one would administer to my wounds.”

“It was not over yet, Dennison. If you had not been able to leave the Clan on your own, and had remained on Pack land...”

“I would have lost, and my lone wolf status would not have been granted,” Danny finished. Yes. He was right. The law firmly stated that after the test had been administered, if the one who had issued the *Pacte* could not leave the soil of their fellow wolves unaided, they would have lost. However, there was nothing that said wounds could not be doctored or administered to. The fact that Alex had left her to bleed and suffer ... oh, that was entirely his own decision, a decision he had hoped would have him named victor. “You could have seen to my wounds,” she said quietly, bitterly.

“You issued, in fact, a challenge. I had every right to do all that I could to come out the victor,” Alex answered simply, unapologetically.

Danny took a couple of deep breaths. It was over and done with. She had won. She

had claimed *Lupus Pacte Royale* and she had won. Of course ... here she was years later in the same car with Alex, and bound once again to the Striker Clan. So ... what had she really won?

And God help her if she had to go through it all again.

"You do not even know how difficult it was for me, Dennison, do you? You merely see your own pain."

"My pain was pretty intense," Danny ground out. "So excuse me if I'm not all rosy and shiny about the whole thing."

"My heart stopped when you claimed the law." Alex's voice had dropped to a near whisper. "I could do nothing. You had spoken words that could not be ignored or taken back. I had no choice. There was but one thing to do—proceed." Alex clenched and unclenched his jaw. His eyes went flinty and hard. "It killed something in me, Dennison. To do what I did to you ... and to leave you ... it killed a part of me."

She didn't know what to say. She didn't know what he wanted her to say. It had killed something in her as well. Her last memory before she lost consciousness was of Alex, walking away from her broken and bleeding form. She had woken, alone and cold and it had taken every ounce of strength and power she had in her to stumble out of the hall, and away from the clan. She had spent nearly a week isolated in the forest trying to recover. And when she was able to walk on two feet she left for good ... and never looked back.

"You will never forgive me for it, will you Dennison?"

Good question. Would she ever forgive him for nearly killing her? "I don't know, Alex. Part of me understands, as sick as it is, part of me understands. And the other part of me, the part that holds a grudge..." she smiled tightly "...forever, feels as if it could hold onto that raging anger until the moon falls from the sky."

"At least you are honest."

"Painfully so," she quipped.

"Have you ever wondered why I have not named a *Kyra*?"

Danny shook her head. "Don't do this, Alex. Don't do this." She did not want to talk about this, not now, not ever.

Alex ignored her. "I would have you, Dennison. I would have you as my *Kyra*, as my mate."

"It will never happen, Alex." She had signed papers. She was contractually obligated to the clan. But Hell would freeze over before she locked herself in a tiny cage for the rest of her life. And that was what life as Alex's *Kyra* would be—a cage.

"There is no one for me but you. There has never been and never will be a wolf like you, Dennison."

"A wolf, do you hear yourself, Alex? Yes, I'm a wolf, but I'm also a woman, a *magi*, and I will not live as..."

"A wolf?" Alex sneered.

Danny narrowed her eyes. "God, for someone so smart, you're awfully stupid, Alex. I live as a wolf every day. But I also live as a woman every day. It is the price one pays for a split soul. I am not ashamed of my wolf. And although we disagree, sometimes quite a lot, I know the wolf is the heart of me. I would never intentionally cause it despair. But what you offer is not a life, Alex. It never was and never will be. You want the wolf, but you do not want the woman, the *magi*."

“Of course I want the *magi*,” Alex scoffed.

“No, you want to *use* the *magi*, Alex. You don’t truly want me as I am. And believe me when I tell you that I will always be a split soul. No amount of beating, punishing, torturing will ever stamp out what I am, who I am. You would cage me, suffocate me, and in the end, you would kill me.”

“I would never hurt you.” He sounded horrified.

She shook her head. “You wouldn’t mean to, but you would. You would have no choice in the matter. You are what you are, who you are. You are the Alpha of the Striker Clan, Alex. And in the end...” Danny swallowed and turned away, “...your life would kill mine.”

“You are my *Kyra*, Dennison.” Alex’s voice was hard and flat.

Danny jerked her chin up and straightened her shoulders. “Saying it a million times over will not make it so, Alex. It will *not* make it so.”

Epilogue

The winding pathway was unfortunately extremely familiar. Danny's entire body immediately went into defense mode.

Alex stopped the car and cut the engine. He turned to her. "We run the rest of the way."

She knew this was the way it had to be but she didn't like it. She understood, however, the importance of meeting the *Clannahd* on four feet, instead of two, and showing them the dominance of their wolf.

"We run?" This came from Victor who had come up silently behind them. Gregor flanked him.

"Yes." Alex's eyes glittered with pleasure.

Danny watched as both Victor and Gregor began the change. First came the shimmy of magic that flew on the wind, and then the actual thrall, the pull of the wolf as it made its presence known and overtook the men. Within moments both Victor and Gregor stood as giant wolves shaking out their fur.

"They will keep at least five strides behind us. You, you will keep at least two strides behind me. Do you understand?"

Oh yeah, she understood perfectly. Power play and a show of position. "I understand."

Alex cocked his head. "Will you obey?"

Danny gnashed her teeth together. "For now."

"I take it that is the best I'll get."

Her lips quirked upward. "Hey, you're lucky you're getting this much. Hell, running *behind* you ... what an archaic..."

"Yes, yes, I know, it's archaic. Let us continue this conversation some other time, Dennison. The *Clannahd* is waiting."

"Fine." Danny snorted. She relaxed her body and began to hear, see, and feel the forest. She allowed a seamless melding of both woman and wolf and soaked in the essence of the earth.

It took mere seconds, and Danny was standing before Alex as a wolf.

"You are so beautiful," Alex murmured, drinking her in. "You are the most extraordinary wolf, Dennison."

Despite herself, Danny preened. Both woman and wolf approved of the compliment. Danny's sharp eyes took in Alex as he shifted. Like her, his change was smooth and seamless, unlike her, his wolf was nearly twice her size and golden in color.

Danny drank in his beauty. She couldn't help herself. It was strange to hear him exalt her beauty, because he was truly magnificent and his coat was certainly more unique than hers. Alex was an incredible looking wolf and the only wolf she knew of who could boast of truly golden fur.

Alex trotted over to her and nuzzled her with his nose.

She jumped back, but not before he managed to lick her across her face. She scowled at him and growled, letting him know exactly what she thought of his antics.

Alex smiled, tongue lolling out of his mouth, eyes glittering with pleasure. With a

sharp bark in Gregor and Victor's direction, and a quick knowing look in Danny's, he was off.

Danny didn't hesitate, she broke into a run, making sure she was exactly two strides behind her Alpha, knowing that Gregor and Victor were three strides behind her. Their procession was perfect. And the forest welcomed them.

* * * *

Danny broke through the dense brush to enter the clearing. She shifted immediately, coming to stand behind Alex in human form. Her posture was stiff and unyielding, and her gaze raked over the group assembled before them. She took mental note of the faces she recognized, like Sampson, and the bitch Tara whose child she had saved on her last trip to the Stone Claw Clan, and took particular pains to memorize each and every hostile face she saw—there were a lot of those.

"Welcome to the Stone Claw Clan, Alpha Holt." This came from a very, very large man with auburn hair and strangely piercing green and yellow eyes.

"West." Alex said the man's name with absolutely no intonation whatsoever.

So this was the *Magnus*. Danny could see it. Beside the obvious, his impressive breadth and width, there was an eerie light within this wolf's eyes, a light that Danny had seen before, many times over. This wolf had seen much and done more. Yeah, she could see *Magnus* in him.

"I would have proper respect for my station," Alex said.

Danny sucked in a breath at Alex's words. He had every right to demand due course, however, the question was whether the *Clannahd* would obey—would they listen?

Carlton West noticeably jerked at Alex's words but his face remained impassive, betraying nothing. There was a pregnant pause, after which he walked slowly up to Alex. When he stood in front of him, he bowed his head and leaned forward, offering him the vulnerable flesh of his neck.

Danny could not see Alex's face, but she knew that his expression had to be one of pleasure.

"I offer my life for yours, my Alpha," Carlton West spoke, head still bent and angled, "You are the moon and the forest which calls to us. You are the air which stills us and the wind which moves us forward. Our days flow with yours; your path shall be ours. I supplicate myself to you."

Alex nodded his head. He touched his fingers to the pulse beating slow and steady in Carlton West's neck. When he spoke it was to address the *Clannahd* present.

"I come to you as your new Alpha. Your *Magnus* has recognized me, so too shall the rest of you. There will be no waiting period, no calls for time nor understanding. I accept nothing less than pure acknowledgement of my words and total acceptance of my deeds. In return, all that I am will be yours. My hand and my able body will work on the betterment of the Pack and I shall be the support which shelters you. I am your Alpha, acknowledge me as such."

Danny waited with baited breath for some sort of action ... some sort of rebellion—she didn't need to wait long.

The attack took her by surprise. And she could only blame her absorption in Alex's words as the reason she did not hear the movement from the trees or the broken silence of the wind.

Pain sliced through her shoulder as claws hit her high and wide. It was the pain that got her moving, the pain that made her realize that she had better fucking defend herself.

Danny twisted her nimble body, and wrenched free. She screamed as she felt her flesh give and smelled the metallic scent of her blood as it filled the air. She felt as if her entire arm had been pulled out. From the corner of her eye she could see Victor moving toward her, and then she heard Carlton West's voice slice through the night.

"No, you cannot interfere." His voice was cold and authoritative. "If she cannot defeat her opponent, she cannot hold the position of *Roit*."

And he was right. Damn him. He was right. Having the title meant nothing if you could not hold onto it. If she wasn't strong enough, powerful enough to deal with this situation by herself, deal with it as a true *Roit* would, then she would be looked down upon, and challenged by the rest of the Pack. She was *Roit*. And she could do this.

Danny threw up a quick ward and let out a small gasp of relief when she heard the thuds and the cracking sound her opponent was making against it. It was holding—for now. She turned, getting her first good look at the person ... no, the wolf that was trying to kill her. He was large, and night black, and spittle was dripping from his mouth. He was lusting for the taste of her blood and flesh ... and he would get it as soon as the ward fell. She got to her feet unsteadily, weaving only slightly. Her left side was bleeding profusely, and she knew that the damage was grave. Her skin was prickling, the first sign of impending numbness, and her head was getting fuzzy.

Okay, okay. She could do this. She just needed a little bit more energy, a little bit more power and she could do this.

The ward crashed down and the wolf leapt at her. Danny constructed an energy spell and thrust small balls of electricity out toward her attacker. He growled and jerked as the shocks hit him. They slowed him down, but he was still coming after her, and it seemed nothing would deter him from his goal—to kill her.

Blood loss was making her dizzy and small white lights were flashing in front of her eyes. Danny thrust some healing power into her body to give her a little bit more fortification, a little bit more time. She leapt to her right as the wolf rushed her, still mercifully quick considering her condition, and managed to deliver a surprisingly accurate and intense roundhouse kick to her attacker.

The ground seemed to rush her then. Whoa, a little too fast for her severely wounded body to take.

She needed more power, she needed more strength. God, she just needed her brain to obey her for a minute more ... she could get the magic she needed if she had one more minute ... just one more minute.

You shall have what you wish ... you need only ask, and accept ... just accept and it shall be yours...

Danny jerked, startled as the soothing voice invaded her mind. But she didn't have time to think about it before her entire body seemed infused with flames, brilliant, burning flames. She was on fire, and she was burning up from the inside out.

Everything disappeared then, the clearing, the banking forest, the Pack ... and even her attacker. Everything disappeared ... and all that was left was the smoke, the fire, and the heat. Such intense heat ... it overtook her. Suffocated her ... welcomed and soothed her. Then it spoke words of comfort. *You know me. You want me. And you will have me.*

Danny screamed, long, wordless, as the fire enshrouded her.

And then there was nothing. Nothing but a black voice of emptiness and her own eyes, red and burning laughing back at her.

* * * *

“Holy earth mother.”

Danny heard the words as if from the bottom of a deep well. They penetrated slowly, and she tried to lift the fog from her brain. She opened her eyes. Alex was standing in front of her, his own eyes filled with stunned shock and incredible fascination.

“He’s gone, Hector is gone ... she burned him ... he’s gone...” the whispers continued, the words assaulting her.

My talented amour ... you are going to have to learn how to control that fire of yours ... you are going to have to learn how to control the fire or it will control you, consume you...

Oh lord. It *was* him. He had spoken to her. He was speaking to her now. Looking out at the sea of horrified and terror-filled faces, her heart seemed to stop.

Danny strengthened her resolve, but could not stop the quake that shook her belly. What terrible power had he bestowed on her? What had his kiss wrought?

“Oh, Asmodai...” Danny felt the fire build, “...what have you done to me?”

The End

About the Author:

Ever since I could pick up a pen, I have been writing. I became fascinated with fantasy at the age of eight, when my mother bought me a copy of ‘The Hobbit’. Not too long after that I became addicted to anything and everything about vampires. The duality of nature fascinated me.

But it was an event four years later that would shape my future career as an author of erotic romance. At the age of twelve I discovered my grandmother’s stash of romance novels, hidden of course, in her closet. I devoured them. My grandmother kicked me out of the closet. But alas, the damage had been done...I was a hopeless junkie—a romance junkie.

To this day I keep my love of fantasy, vampires and romance. What’s more, I have learned (through much practice) to meld the genres to create, for myself, the perfect environment to pen my erotic romance novels. I live, quite simply, for love, lust and the complex nature of the human heart. And I write to share my love, lusts and complex nature with others.

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