



Queen of the Burning Fields

Book Three of the Danny Lee series

Mara Lee

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Author's Note

"Queen of the Burning Fields" is the third book in an ongoing series: The Danny Lee Series. Book one of the series is entitled, *"Half-Wed Moon,"* book two, *"Deny the Dark."* I would highly advise reading both book one and book two before tackling book three, *"Queen of the Burning Fields."* All the books include recurring characters, they literally pick up where the last book ended, and they are sequential. That being said, I hope you enjoy *"Queen of the Burning Fields"* and are as fascinated with Danny and her many suitors, as I am.

Sincerely,
Mara Lee

Prologue

“You fight like a girl! I can’t believe I’ve even bothered to come out today. Deplorable, ridiculous, embarrassing, this is a ludicrous display.”

Ridiculous, she’d show him ridiculous! Quick as lightning, Danny twisted sideways and tossed her dagger. It hit its mark dead center.

Achilles let out a great sigh and looked down at his chest. There was a sharp dagger sticking out of it.

“Ridiculous, huh?” Danny sneered at him. “*I’m* not the one who looks like a pincushion.”

“This?” Achilles yanked the dagger out of his chest. “You didn’t even hit the heart.”

“I could have,” Danny muttered, “if I wanted to.”

“You couldn’t hit a target if it were plastered to your forehead,” Achilles snapped. “You’re slow, lazy and out of shape. This demonstration has only proven my point all too well.”

“I hate you.”

Achilles laughed bitterly. “Join the club, little girl.”

God, nothing worked on him. He was as cruel, annoying and obstinate as Danny remembered him to be.

Achilles had been one of Danny’s *Rashas*—teachers—when she was a pup. He had been one of many instructors chosen by the Grand Dame, Roberta Wick. She had chosen him for his expertise ... and for his dominant will. Danny had always thought she had given her to his keeping out of torment. It was a punishment. However, now she knew the Grand Dame had a greater purpose. She had known (always) that Danny’s will would and could crush all others. She was too powerful and keenly intelligent (even as a child) to be contained. So instead of crushing her or containing her, she gave her a conduit, an outlet for her power and strength. She used Achilles and the others to train Danny and to magnify her already natural talents. The knowledge of Grand Dame Roberta’s strategy did not make accepting any easier. Then again, acceptance was not part of Danny’s nature, never had been, and probably never would be.

“Even the true Achilles had a weakness,” Danny crooned, having regained her bearings and evened out her turbulent emotions.

Achilles snorted. “One has yet to find mine.”

It gave Danny something to work toward. She’d find his weakness yet. And then ... well, then there were all sorts of delicious, wicked and painful options open to her. And she looked forward to administering each and every one of them upon his merciless soul.

“FOCUS!” he shouted, slapping Danny soundly across her face.

She growled and snapped at his hand. He promptly grabbed her by her throat, holding her firmly in place.

“Mmmmmfffff.” Danny tried to wriggle free, and gasped when Achilles applied more pressure to his hold.

“Now, you will remain obedient and respectful. You will listen and learn and know your place. If you do not obey, and show any form of defiance...” he tightened his hold even further, “I will be forced to take drastic measures. Do not,” his eyes deepened and

his voice thickened, “make me take drastic measures to keep you in line, little girl.”

She was going to kill him. No, she was going to make him suffer first, and then, then she would fucking kill him.

Danny’s vision was getting spotty and she felt a slow well of panic building. And then, then she felt it ... the pulse of power and the heat of flame. It became stronger and stronger until it began to seep out of her pores.

“What...” Achilles released his hold on her and jumped back. “Little girl ... rein yourself in.”

Danny barely heard him. His voice was muted and low and sounded as if it were coming from the bottom of a deep well. The fire was burning brighter now and the flames were licking at her already tormented body.

You will take them all out with this temper of yours. You must learn to control the flame, or it will own you.

Now here was a voice she recognized. It was pulsing in her head. Control, how did she control it? How did she control something she didn’t even understand? Her entire life had been about control and now ... now she was completely losing it.

Know yourself ... know yourself and be free of the bindings. You need only know that you control the power, not the other way around and all will be right. Breathe deeply and sense the calm, you are the calm; you are the peace which strengthens all.

“Shut the fuck up!” Danny roared. She dropped to all fours as a wave of power rolled over her. Peace, calm? How could she be calm? How in the world could she feel any sense of peace in this insanity? The fire was building and the power wanted to explode out of her. Could she just let it?

We are going to have to deal with this problem. Unfortunately I did not foresee this lack of control. Do not worry, my dear one ... I will take care of this.

Another pulse of power hit her high and hard and sent Danny sprawling. She lay immobile on her back, staring at the ceiling, panting hard and trying to get her heart beat back to normal.

“Interesting, there were flames in your eyes, child,” Achilles face appeared above her. “A new talent?” He sneered at her then. “Although I do not know how much use it shall be to you unless you are planning a barbeque.”

Oh, she was planning a barbeque all right ... and first on the menu, fried Achilles.

Chapter One

She stumbled into her room, sweaty and bloodstained and ready to do battle. Fighting Achilles hadn't taken the edge off. In fact, it had just raised her bloodlust. She wanted to sink her teeth into his neck and rip his throat out.

"You smell like blood... I like it."

Danny whipped around and found herself face-to-face with a very unwanted visitor. Damn it.

"What are you doing here?" Maybe it was time she tried some of her new talent out on birdie boy.

Capshaw cocked his head to one side. He didn't seem intimidated by her aggressive stance or her cold words.

"I asked you a question," she said, voice cold.

"I heard you. I was just deciding whether or not to answer you, since the question was presented in such a rude fashion."

"Listen here you..."

"Oh fine," Capshaw interrupted her. "I am here on my master's orders. He seems to believe that you need some instruction. And as he is unable to attend to you at this moment, he has sent me in his stead."

"And the reason you can withstand Earth and he cannot, is?"

Capshaw seemed to ponder her question for a moment before answering. "He is my master. I draw my powers from him. His strength is my strength. He cannot be at his full power, nor can he draw upon the Burning Fields if he is away from the source for too long. I, however, can be sustained by his magic."

She was beginning to understand. If Asmodai ventured away from Hell he would be weakened considerably. However, as long as he remained in his world he could invigorate his servants and lend them his power. It made sense. Of course she would much rather it be Asmodai standing before her now than his annoying bird servant. Then again ... her demon prince had bestowed upon her a really awesome power, a power that was exceedingly difficult to control and beginning to become taxing—as she kept burning people alive. Yeah, the entire burning people alive bit was going to have to stop. The smell of charred flesh was making her nauseated.

"You seem deep in thought, human."

"Danny."

"Yes?" Capshaw stared at her with blank, unblinking eyes.

"No, my name is Danny, use it."

"Oh, I see, you were perturbed by me calling you human."

"Perceptive, aren't you? Yeah, I have a name, you can use it."

"Of course, if you desire so."

"Why are you being so ... amiable?"

"Am I? I am merely trying to abide by your wishes and fill your needs."

Something strange was going on. "All right, spill it."

"Spill what?"

"Exactly, what is going on here? Why are you being so agreeable? And what the hell

is your motivation?"

"It is exactly as I have said. My master has sent me forth. He has felt your distress and he has sent me to ease you."

"And how do you plan on doing that?"

"By teaching you control."

She was plenty controlled. "Thanks, but no thanks."

Capshaw began to hop from foot to foot. "You seem to believe you have a choice here, you don't."

Danny felt the familiar heat of anger and resentment boil up within her. "I always have a choice, shit for brains." She saw his blank look and knew she had wasted a perfectly good insult on him. "*You* don't seem to understand! You can't just walk in here and dictate my life."

"Then you wish to continue burning your companions alive and sending them down to the pits?"

The heat was replaced by cold. She had only been defending herself. She would have been killed if she had not done something. Of course, frying someone alive and leaving nothing but ash was disconcerting and let's face it, gross.

"They weren't my companions," she bit out coolly.

"Semantics. You have no control over your fire. You wield it clumsily and are stumbling in the dark."

"Well I wouldn't have this fucking problem if someone hadn't gone and dumped it on me," she shot back, pissed off.

"But now you have the fire, you must learn to control it. I can help, *viесе*, I am bade to help you."

She didn't want any help. She especially didn't want any help from some strange giant crow. Yet ... the smell of burning flesh and the memory of fire washing over her was not a pleasant one. She had been infused with a magic she was unfamiliar with. As elemental as she was (inherently so, due to her wolf nature) fire was not her element. Yet here she was drowning under flames that had been thrust upon her.

"You see the wisdom of my words."

"I didn't say that."

"I can see the knowledge on your face."

She rolled her eyes. "Fine, fine, I'll admit I'm having a bit of difficulty handling the fire. Only a bit, mind you."

Capshaw's eyes seemed to twinkle with merriment. "I believe that is as close to acceptance as I will get from you."

"Smart deduction, birdie boy." Danny wrinkled her nose. "And how do you plan on helping me control the fire?"

"You must first understand the nature of your fire, before you can begin to wield it properly."

Understand her fire? Yeah, she certainly didn't understand her fire. Hell, she was a wolf ... what the fuck did a wolf know of fire? As a *magi* she was infused with elemental power ... and still the fire was elusive.

"The kiss was a gift, human ... but you abuse it sorely."

"A gift?" Danny felt a familiar anger burn in her stomach. "You call frying people alive a gift? You are fucking insane." She focused her thoughts. *If you can hear me,*

Asmodai, the same goes for you. You're a fucking lunatic! There was nothing, a complete stillness met her words and she sighed. Had she really expected an answer?

"Yes, a gift!" Capshaw was practically shrieking now. "How many humans do you know who are given the ability to share in powers such as the master has? His power is not given, nor is it shared," Capshaw hopped forward, "but he shared with you. He bestowed upon you a kiss, and his kiss breathed power into your puny human body."

"If you call me puny one more time..." Danny's hands knotted tightly together. She was shaking in her attempt to keep from slugging Asmodai's ambassador.

"I tell you the truth and you feel anger." Capshaw seemed genuinely bewildered.

"Do you really not get it?" Danny scowled at him. "Telling someone they're a puny human is not exactly a compliment, asshole."

Capshaw seemed to raise a brow. It seemed like a decidedly odd facial expression on a crow. "Is asshole a compliment?"

"Excuse me?"

"I asked you if asshole was a compliment."

"No," Danny scoffed, "asshole isn't a compliment."

"Then, you are telling me not to insult you, yes? But you insult me in turn?"

Okay, she hated twisted logic. She especially hated twisted logic when it made sense. "Listen here, birdie boy."

"Again ... somehow I doubt birdie boy is a compliment."

"Enough," Danny shouted. She could hear the frustration in her voice and knew she was a second away from slugging him.

"Fine." Capshaw sniffed and fluffed his feathers. "I will attempt not to insult you if you will promise me the same."

Danny thought on this a moment and finally nodded. It was fair, sort of. "I can promise to *attempt* not to insult you. I can't promise that I won't insult you." Danny shrugged. "It's about the best I can do."

"Fine."

"Great." Danny pulled off her sweaty, bloodstained shirt and smiled bitterly. "Now ... before we get started I need to know a couple of things..." Danny shook out her hair and turned to face a stone-still Capshaw. "Hello ... I was speaking to you. Oh, you've got to be kidding me." Danny planted her hands upon her hips and cocked her hip to one side. "I didn't know crows could get a hard-on."

Capshaw seemed to shake himself out of it. "I am still alive am I not? I can still feel."

"Can you?" It wasn't as if she wanted to begin to contemplate what he actually was. He was a talking crow from Hell. What did that really make him? Was he really alive, or was he just reanimated? Or was he something entirely different? Perhaps he was only made alive by the magic of his master. "If you are going to stand there all stupid-eyed then you may as well just leave. I need to get out of these practice clothes and then I need to take a hot shower. If you can't handle some nudity, some very human nudity, then I suggest you make your exit now."

"I somehow doubt my master would approve of my presence during your bath ... so I shall take my leave, for now."

"Great, the door's over there." Danny pointed to the exit and walked into the bathroom without a second glance back at him. "Just when I thought my life couldn't get

any weirder..." She stripped off her pants and tossed her underwear aside. Her clothes were stained with blood and so was her body.

Danny turned on the shower and stepped under the delightful spray of warm water. Her body temperature had begun to get back to normal, and she no longer felt as if she were burning alive every day. She didn't know if she had Asmodai to thank for it, but if she did, she wouldn't thank him anyway. It was his fault she was in this predicament in the first place. No, she wasn't about to thank the stupid sonofabitch.

I am aggrieved to hear the rancor in your voice.

She growled, but continued on her business, rubbing the soap over her body. "Mmm, you're aggrieved by the rancor you hear in my voice, but me calling you a stupid sonofabitch doesn't register? Good to know." Silence met her words. Either he was so pissed he couldn't speak, or he had no idea what she was getting at.

I am reaching out to you, amour.

"Maybe I don't want you reaching, did you ever think about that?" The problem was she did want him. She wanted him so much she could feel it physically. But she would be damned if she told him. Danny was pleased she had locked her shields tightly, and that she couldn't feel him probing her mind. Some things had to be kept secret, very secret. She had much too much to deal with right now, and thinking about her love-hate relationship with Asmodai was already giving her a massive migraine. "I can't talk to you right now, Asmodai ... I have really big matters to deal with."

Like what?

"Did you hear me? I just told you I don't have time to talk to you. I have exactly five minutes to take my shower, get dressed and get downstairs, so piss off."

Shower...

She knew what was going on in that mind of his, and that thought alone brought a scowl to her face. She was going to have to tune him out entirely. Even this small interlude was too much.

"All right ... the touching moment is over. Goodbye, Asmodai." Danny abruptly cut him off. She severed the tie she felt with him, and although she knew he was there lurking right there beneath the surface she was so secure within her fields he was unable to penetrate even a bit. It was a small victory, but she reveled in it nonetheless. Her mind control was becoming stronger and she was nearly flawless in her ability to switch her shields on and off.

Danny finished rinsing out her hair and stepped out of her shower. She dried off and took a moment to study her reflection. Her reflection stopped her short. Oh, it wasn't anything new, not really. She still looked like herself. Same dark hair, same almond shaped eyes and smooth skin ... and yet ... there was something more, something stronger lingering there.

"Danny, Danny, Danny, is that really you?" she murmured, eyeing herself critically. Smoothing a hand over her hair she turned side to side, taking her face in from every angle.

"Are you finished yet?"

"Damn it." She had almost forgotten about birdie boy standing outside of her door.

"There is work to do and you laze about the bathroom."

A familiar burn of anger shot through her body. The hell she was lazy. Danny quickly worked her hair up into a bun and stuck her trusty silver sticks through the dense

mass to keep it up. She walked out of the bathroom and scanned the bedroom, mentally taking note of where the clean clothes were and how long it would be until she would have to do laundry. She hated doing laundry with a passion. Frankly, she would almost be tempted to stay in wolf form if it would keep her from having to do laundry.

Danny pulled on a faded black T-shirt which had seen better days and a very beat up pair of jeans. She knew Alex wasn't going to be pleased with her very casual attire (he'd become a real stuffed shirt about clothing and proper attire since taking over the dual Alpha role) but really she didn't give a shit. If he wanted her to play "dress up" then he would have to do her laundry for her. Otherwise she was going to live in her jeans and T-shirts for the rest of her stay.

When she exited her room, Capshaw was waiting for her, hopping from foot to foot impatiently. She held up her hand to ward off anything he might have said and gave him a look, *the* look.

"I have to get to the hall to meet with Alex, and *you* are not invited."

"We have work to do."

"Which we will have to get to once I'm finished with my meeting with Alex. You did drop by unexpectedly. You can't just think I'm going to drop everything when you pop up."

"My master..."

"Will have to wait." *Bastard, she'd make him wait forever if she could.* Too bad she'd probably end up barbequeing more people if she didn't accept his ambassador.

"I do not like this."

"Great, you don't have to, birdie boy." Danny reached the door to the great hall and pointed to the large overstuffed chair. "*You* can wait here. Oh, and I wouldn't suggest talking to any of the wolves," she knew her eyes were glimmering, "they may try to make a meal out of you." She laughed when she saw the shot of fear that flashed through his eyes. Yeah, he'd better be afraid.

* * * *

Alex was waiting for her. Sitting in the Alpha's chair he was wearing his perpetual scowl. Danny knew this scowl well ... it was almost always reserved for her.

"Dennison, you're late." Alex looked her over, his scowl deepening by the moment.

"Yeah, well something," *someone*, "...unexpectedly took up my time, sorry."

"We have meeting times for a reason. Am I to take your tardiness as a shirking of your duties?"

Lord give her patience. Alex, since taking over the dual Alpha position had become almost unbearable. He was riding her unmercifully, putting her through practice and classes and leaving her almost no time to rest. She was fairly certain this meanness was due to her continued resistance to his advances.

"I would never shirk my duties to you, to my Pack," Danny spoke coolly, doing her best to mask the anger she felt.

Alex slashed his hand in the air. "Well, this display does not back up your words, Dennison."

"Well, your display backs up my opinion that you're a fucking arrogant, overbearing, asshole." The words were out before she could take them back. She stiffened. The insult was grave and she felt absolutely no remorse. He was an asshole. She watched as his eyes

widened, his mouth tightened into a taut unyielding line and he leaned forward in his chair. She was fairly certain he was about to strike.

“How dare you!”

Danny straightened her shoulders, if he was going to attack her, he already would have. She was impressed by his ability to hold back.

“You are my *Clannahd* and you stand there and insult me. Do you think because of our history I will overlook your impertinence?”

Did she think he would overlook her impertinence? Well, in a word, yes, she did. “I apologize for my impertinence, my Alpha.” Okay, that was acceptable. And certainly came out better than, you’re a fucking asshole. “I was impertinent, and you are gracious to a fault.”

Alex leaned back, his expression unchanged. “Not for a minute do I believe you mean the words you now speak,” he snorted, “however, I know how difficult it was for you to utter them.” Alex brushed one hand through his hair. “I did call you here for a reason, Dennison.”

“The reason would be?” Her words came out bitingly and she wondered why it was she could never just shut up, or at least censor herself.

“Don’t push me,” Alex snarled. “My patience is not endless, not even where you’re concerned, Dennison. We have a convoy entering our territory. I’ve called you here because we must prepare. The Pack will have needs of your particular talents.”

“Convoy? What convoy?”

“The Fae have approached us.”

Asmodai’s words came hurtling back at her, “*The Fae will play a part of what is to come.*” Danny clenched her hands into tight fists and took a calming breath.

“I see by the look on your face t you know more than you have let on.”

“No.” The response was immediate. Alex narrowed his eyes and crooked his finger at her. “Alex, I...”

“Come here, Dennison.”

Danny sighed. She walked calmly and coolly toward Alex. She kept her breathing even and made sure her steps were light and unhurried. When she was standing in front of him she bowed her head. In part because she knew it was polite, but mostly because she didn’t want to see the censure present in his eyes.

“Dennison.” This time Alex said her name quietly, but it was filled with heat and something stronger, something much more dangerous.

When she lifted her gaze to meet his, she swallowed. His eyes had changed and the expression on his face was positively feral. She didn’t even have a second before he was upon her.

Alex’s body pressed down squarely upon hers. His grip had the strength of iron, and he was presently holding her down completely. She felt his breath, hot, against her neck, and she forced back the moan that was bubbling up within her throat. She wanted to feel more of his heat. Then she felt it ... the insistent caress that took her breath away. He was working his way up her leg, kneading her skin and raising goose bumps. God, it felt good. Her beast basked in the sensations assaulting her body and made it clear it appreciated Alex’s every touch. She needed it ... she really needed it. Just this once, it wouldn’t matter, couldn’t matter, if she slipped up just this once. She could allow her beast this one moment, couldn’t she?

NO. No she could not let herself go. And she could not fall into this trap, not with Alex, never with Alex. It would never be just one moment. If she allowed her beast the satisfaction of Alex's touch, she would find herself chained and shackled to him forever. He could say otherwise, but Danny saw the truth which lay ever present within those large, expressive eyes of his. His *Kyra*, Alex would have her as his *Kyra*—his mate. And if she allowed him any liberties (even the ones normal to her kind) he would take that as acceptance, and would begin the process of caging her.

Danny began to struggle. She kicked her legs and screamed in frustration when Alex merely wrapped his leg around the back of her knee to keep her in place. There was no doubt he was physically stronger than she, but if he wanted to play dirty, fine, she was up to the challenge. She took a couple steadying breaths and smiled slyly.

"What are you..." That was all Alex got out before he let out a howl of pain and jumped back. "Do not assume your physical strength will have me, Alex. Brute force alone will not be enough to make me yield." Danny drew her power back. She had just given him quite an electric shock and she knew it had hurt.

Alex's jaw worked back and forth in obvious anger, but he inclined his head, acknowledging her words. "I would never force you, Dennison."

"Oh, Alex," she got to her feet and shook her head, "don't you see? You will never understand. Do we need to have his argument every time we are together? Your very nature demands obedience and total submission. I can give you neither."

"Dennison..."

"No, Alex, listen, really listen to me. You are my Alpha, and sometimes," she cleared her throat and forced the words past her dry tongue, "my friend. I give you my fighting arm, the powers inherent within me, and loyalty, you will have my loyalty. The Pack will have my loyalty, but..." Her words dropped off.

"You will never give me what I want the most." Alex spoke and his voice was cold.

She knew what he spoke of. "No, Alex, you will never have it." He could never really have *her*. She was not a commodity that could be bought, sold and bartered. She was her own person, Dennison Lee, and she would create her own story, and live out her own life ... by her own rules. She watched to see if her words would resonate, maybe they could finish this here, and now, but all she saw was grim determination fill his face. It was as if her continued rejection of his advances spurred him on. Lord have mercy on her. Or, perhaps she should say, Lord have mercy on Alex, because if he continued this way she was going to seriously rearrange his face, or worse.

"This is not the end of things, Dennison."

God, didn't she know it. "Tell me about the Fae, Alex." Perhaps she could change the subject, or get back on track. They had somehow managed to unhinge a bit from their original topic of conversation.

"I still believe you should tell me what *you* know of the Fae." Alex's eyes impaled her.

"There is little for me to tell. I've already disclosed everything. I told you what occurred when I rescued Daniel. The Fae have entered our plane and they seem intent on shacking up here."

"Why did you pale and stiffen when I mentioned the convoy?"

"I was merely a bit surprised."

"You lie," Alex said simply.

"I resent that."

"Resent away, Dennison. I can scent the lie upon your tongue. There is no mistaking it."

Stubborn man, stubborn wolf. "Fine, I was told the Fae would be making an appearance."

Alex cocked his head to one side and regarded her intently. "Who told you this?"

"I'm not at liberty to say."

"Dennison."

"No, Alex, I won't back down on this. I will not divulge the source of my information." That was not something she wanted to delve into now ... maybe never. She was still dealing with her feelings and her anger toward Asmodai, and she certainly did not want to start in with Alex about it. "There were few words exchanged on the matter, Alex. I was told they were to play a part in my life, and they were not to be trusted."

"Is your source a seer?"

A seer? More like a thorn in her fucking side. "No. Just a knowledgeable person."

"I see."

Did he? Did he really see? Somehow she doubted it. Hell. She hardly had a handle on what was happening in her life, how could she expect that Alex would get it.

"I will need you by my side."

Danny nodded. Of course, as Alex's *magi* wolf it would stand to reason she would be in the delegation that would meet the convoy. She would be able to sense any errant magic, hell, she'd just be able to sense magic period.

"When are they expected?"

"Two days hence."

Shit. "Uh, two days from now, two days from now would be a Saturday?"

Alex nodded. "So glad you know the days of the week, my dear."

"Ha, ha, very funny." She prepared for the storm that was surely going to meet her words. "I can't manage Saturday."

"Excuse me?"

"I said, I can't manage to meet the convoy on Saturday ... uh, think you can manage to get them here on Friday, or maybe Sunday if they're too busy?" Danny saw by the look in Alex's eyes her idea wasn't flying. "Mmmmm ... think that won't work?"

"And the reason you cannot manage Saturday would be?"

Damn it all. Danny took a deep breath, and here she went into the fucking fire. "I have a prior engagement."

"Stop dodging my question, Dennison."

"Not dodging." Not really, Danny thought. She rolled her eyes. Fine, he was going to find out eventually. "I have to make a visit to..."

"*Blood Noir!*" Alex shouted, cutting her off.

"Well, if you already knew the answer, why ask?" she said sarcastically.

"Absolutely not!" Alex roared, going off as if he hadn't heard her. Or perhaps he had, but decided to overlook her impertinence due to his raging anger. Danny really hoped it was the prior rather than the latter.

And here came the migraine. "This has nothing to do with you."

"It has everything to do with me. As my *Kyra* candidate, you cannot be seen with that monster."

Oh God! “First off, I am not, let me repeat that, not your anything. Secondly, it is my life, mine. You have no say over whom I decide to see, or date.”

“You are...”

“A free person!” Danny continued. She sneered. “However, due to the nature of this meeting on Saturday, I am willing to admit I may have to rearrange my plans.” God, and now Savior was going to give her shit. Oh well, the lesser of two evils it was. Although in the case of this race, both Alex and Savior were coming up neck to neck. “I’ll call *Blood Noir* and see if other arrangements can be made, okay?”

“No, it is not okay. You are not allowed to go anywhere near him.”

Danny went on as if she hadn’t heard a word he had said. “Then we can have our meeting with the Fae, and hopefully I won’t incinerate any of them, or maybe I can incinerate one of two of them and play it off as an accident. Wouldn’t that be cool? Do you think they’d fall for it? I bet they would. It’s not like they know about my power. One mean little Fae medium well, or do you like your Fae well done?” Danny had to laugh at the expression now present on Alex’s face, it was clearly disbelieving.

“Did you hear me, Dennison?” Alex asked finally.

Danny blinked several times and shot him a broad smile. “I’m sorry, what? Were you saying something?” She was absolutely with him, and had heard every annoying, domineering, arrogant word he had said to her. But to watch the bewilderment wash over his face was worth playing dumb. It was totally classic. “So, if I can rearrange my meeting, then we’ll be all set for Saturday.” Danny smiled, turned on her heel and began to walk away from him. “Terrific, great, this has been super fun. Let’s do it again sometime, okay?”

“HALT!” Alex roared.

Danny sighed deeply, but stopped.

“You are not dismissed.”

Stupid, obnoxious rule. She turned and glared at him. “Okay, what do you want? What other pearls of wisdom do you have for me?” At this point she didn’t really care to be polite. Alex walked toward her. His eyes held hers and his gaze seemed to devour her whole. She really hoped he wasn’t going to jump her again. She’d had enough of a workout for one day. God, it was pathetic. How out of shape was she that she couldn’t manage a sparring session in the morning and an attack from her Alpha in the afternoon?

“I’ve voiced my intent to the Grand Dame, Dennison. You should know this. It will determine much of what is to come.”

Cold seeped through her veins and she felt as if suddenly time stilled completely. “Alex...”

“No, this must be said. It has been put off for much too long. Your duties to this Pack extend far beyond your capacity as a *magi*. You are a wolf, Dennison, and your wolf nature will not be denied.”

“I’m not trying to deny my wolf.”

“Are you not? It is not in the nature of the wolf to be alone. You live a solitary life, it is unnatural.”

“I live the way I must.” And it was true. She had learned (through very hard and brutal lessons) it was safer(much) for all around if she lived alone.

“You will never feel truly whole without us.”

Sadly that was also true. As Alex said, the nature of the wolf was to roam and to live

within packs. The part of her that was *magi* could easily live as she had done these many years, but the wolf in her demanded the closeness and comfort of her own, of her fellow wolves. She had beaten down the cries of her wolf, but in doing so she had stifled a very crucial part of her soul.

“My words ring true.”

Danny remained silent, knowing her silence was answer enough.

“The Grand Dame has accepted my intent and it will be addressed.”

“Alex, don’t do this.” The cold was back, and it was accompanied by a slow burn, a familiar slow burn.

“It has to be done. You have resisted me at every turn.”

“So your solution is to go to the Grand Dame?” What? It was like he was five years old and going to the teacher to tattle on a fellow student. Alex reached out and grabbed her by her shoulders and shook her—hard. “Get your hands off me.”

“You are infuriating!” he shouted at her. “I have tried everything; asking, cajoling, playing to your intelligence and even your ego, I’ve tried force and even a bit of pleading, nothing works. You deny me at every turn. Why?”

Danny was taken aback by the true desperation she now heard in Alex’s voice.

“Alex...”

He let go of her and began to rub his temples. “Why?” he asked again. “I know you feel something for me. I know that once ... once I saw in your eyes what I have longed to see these many years.”

Of all the many talks, arguments, heated debates and downright battles, Danny had never heard the desperation and true confusion she now heard in Alex’s voice. He was always demanding and yelling and ordering, and usually all of it was directed toward her. He never just asked her, or seemed to be genuinely interested in her needs, wants and desires. One truth deserved another.

“I did once see you in another light, Alex.” How did she tell him this? God, she just had to do it. Why was she hesitating? She never hesitated in running off her mouth, and yeah, it usually got her in trouble—big trouble. “When I was a young, impressionable pup I thought of you differently. I even thought of,” she took a deep breath, “I thought about us. But that was a very, very, long time ago, Alex. I’m not the same pup. I will never be a pup again.”

“Your feelings have changed that much?”

Was he kidding? Danny snorted. “Yeah.” Oh hell, yeah! “Time changes *everything*, Alex. Are you trying to tell me you’re the same wolf I knew when I was a youngling?”

“I have not changed much, Dennison.”

Well dang it all. Perhaps that had been a really bad example. He was right. He hadn’t changed much. He was still a domineering, arrogant, ass. He was an Alpha, what the heck did she expect? “Well, I have changed. I don’t have stars in my eyes anymore. Those stars were shattered long ago.”

“Are you trying to tell me I shattered those stars?”

“Not just you, life, Alex, life shattered a lot.” Danny saw small grooves between Alex’s eyes appear as he mulled over her words.

“I had not realized how cynical and hard you are.”

“Seriously?”

“I assumed you were merely being a bitch.”

“I am a bitch,” Danny replied, a small smile forming on her face.

Alex gave her an answering smile. “I assumed you were being obstinate merely to ... to ... aggravate me.”

“Believe me, I wouldn’t go to all that trouble just for you.” And it was true.

“I cannot give up on this, Dennison. I cannot give up on you. I won’t lose you.”

Danny said a prayer for patience and fortitude. She gave him a level look and spoke from the heart. “You can’t lose something you never had, Alex.”

Chapter Two

Birdie boy was sitting pretty, large wings folded under him, in exactly the same spot as Danny had left him. It was such an odd sight that it gave her pause, if only for a minute.

“Are you ready now,” Capshaw asked, sounding very put out.

Danny stiffened immediately. She didn’t like his tone of voice. “Hmmm, well, I’m not sure, I still need to wash my hair, and do my facial, oh, and my nails are getting unmanageable. I think I need a manicure...” Capshaw blinked a couple of times and opened his mouth to speak but Danny rushed right on. “Oh, the expression on your face is priceless. Seriously, can you see me getting a fucking manicure? Come on, we’re wasting time.” She left a sputtering Capshaw gawking in her wake.

* * * *

She would never admit it, but it was harder than it looked. Oh, she was used to conjuring up magic, or calling power, but this sort of wild energy, dark power, was foreign to her. She was having trouble getting a handle on it. Just when she figured out one thread-line, another appeared out of nowhere. So much untrained magic was sapping her own energy.

“Can you feel the root of your power, *viese*?”

“Don’t call me that,” Danny snapped.

“Dennison Lee, can you feel it?”

“I don’t know. It just feels out of control.” She was telling the truth. The magic coursing through her veins was pounding and brutal. It gave her no reprieve, and demanded her obedience. She was not used to being obedient.

“You must open to our master, Dennison. You are shuttered now, are you not?”

Her shields were locked tight. “I don’t want to.” And she hated how petulant she sounded. But truly it was fear that rode her now. How could she open up? Now when the magic was controlling her?

“He is the source, Dennison Lee. And if you deny the source, you will never truly understand the power.”

She started to deny his words, but she couldn’t. In her bones she knew he spoke the truth. But she could do this. She could let him in slowly and if she kept the reins on him, so to speak, she could make certain his presence didn’t overwhelm her.

“All right.”

“Good, good. Now focus the power to one point. Imagine the fire beginning in your fingertips and building slowly. When it gets to the point where the fire seems to consume you, drop your shields and accept our master.”

Accept ... accept... God this was going to be difficult. Well it wasn’t as if she had much of a choice in the matter.

Danny took a deep breath. She concentrated and for once allowed the wild magic to flow through her. She brought it down then, and imagined the fire meeting in the palms of her hands.

“Not bad,” Capshaw murmured. “Can you draw the fire closer? Try to bring it from your palms to your fingertips?”

Danny clenched her hands into tight fists and tried to move the fire ... it didn't want to budge, it remained now balled tightly within her fist. Her body was heating up rapidly, she felt suddenly as if her brain was frying.

“Now, drop your shields.”

She could do this. She had to, her sanity depended upon it. She dropped her shields. At first the fire seemed to burn even brighter than before. And then it came, a quiet, an unspoken calm, almost an acknowledgement that she shared her flesh with the flame, much the same as she shared her body with the wolf.

You are beautiful here.

It was him. Her dark prince. *Hello, Asmodai.*

How long I have waited to see you here, my amour.

Where is here exactly? Are we, ah, in Hell? She could hear his rumble of laughter within her head, and could almost see that beautiful smile which would now grace his face.

No, my amour. We are not in Hell ... not quite. We are in the Burning Fields.

And...? The fire has a source, my amour. We draw upon the Burning Fields to continue to supply the flames which sustain our eternal Hell. All wielders of the fire must take their strength from this place of flame and ash. I am a prince of Hell and you, my amour, you are my queen.

What? I skip princess, pass Go and collect my crown? Danny knew her voice had some bite to it.

There has only been one woman ever to wield our flame. Only one other queen and she perished long ago. Our flames are too bright, the heat incendiary. We have not found a woman capable of—

Tolerating it? Danny finished for him.

In a word, yes. But you, my remarkable one, you can take it all, and beyond that, you can wield it.

Did you know all of this when you gifted me with it, the power?

I knew you were strong.

Did you know? Danny asked again.

No. Asmodai finally admitted.

And you went for it anyway? So like the men in her life. They just went ahead and did whatever they felt like doing without consideration to her wants and desires. Self-serving, they were all in the end just self-serving.

And now you are angry at me.

Danny let out a long-suffering sigh. *Truthfully? I'm just tired, Asmodai. I'm tired of being tossed back and forth and being fought over like some damn bone. It's sad, but your actions are not surprising to me, not anymore. I'm so used to it by now I can barely muster up the energy to do anything about it.*

So you are not angry with me?

Was she mad at him, well yeah, she was; could she really do anything about it, not really. So what point did her anger have other than to give her a headache?

No more damn gifts! she said finally, and heard him chuckle.

No, no more gifts ... I do not believe I could take the stress.

*You? You take the stress, oh funny. I'm the one burning people up left and right.
But I am the one left to worry for your safety, and cannot be there with you.
Oh, Asmodai.*

You are my queen, Danny, you are the only amour, you were destined to reign at my side.

Had he been speaking to Madchen? *Why do I not hurt?* And it was true. Her skin felt warm, but she was hardly burning up.

Your corporal body is still on Earth, my amour. Your spirit now rests in the Burning Fields.

And I got here by dropping my shields? Right?

No. You also had to locate the source of your flame. It drew you home, brought you to its center.

I cannot stay here, Asmodai.

No, I am aware of that ... you cannot stay here, now.

Huh?

You cannot reside here now, but one day, my amour...

Uhm, do you know something I don't, Asmodai? Like, am I making an appearance in Hell anytime soon?

Look around you, my amour. Would being queen be so bad?

Danny took her first real good look around. It was in fact awesomely beautiful. There were flame red trees that were burning brightly, hotly. The sky was orange and red, and swirling with intense power. There was no sun, but the fields seemed to be lit from within, and everything was visible in its bright intense glory. Birds flew gracefully through the sky, their plumes as fiery as their surroundings. It was lovely, and undeniably incredible, but queen? Good God, she was a mess, how in the world could he for a split second imagine she could be a queen of anything?

I can't rule, Asmodai. Her response was simple and honest.

You were born to rule. It matters little or not whether you wish to. Your existence testifies to the truth of my words.

What about free will?

What about it?

Don't I have a say in my own damn life? Frustration was seeping through her as panic began to set in.

Creation—

Oh no, no creation talks, can't deal with deep shit right now.

And you do not consider all of this deep, my amour? You are a true paradox, full of contradictions. One of the many reasons you call to me.

I call to you because I'm a stubborn bitch? There she had said it.

He laughed. *You call to me because I could and have lived lifetimes, and never in my existence have I come across one such as you. I believe I will never truly understand you, and this fact delights me.*

Wasn't much she could say to that. She frankly didn't even want to try.

We could be happy, Danny. Asmodai's words were a soft caress, a broken beseeching plea.

Happy? It was such a foreign thought to her. Oh, she had had moments of calm, of pleasure ... but true happiness, had she ever had true happiness. The strange days she had

passed in Hell with Asmodai ... she had been happy then. The odd comfort she felt in Savior's arms, those too were happy moments. A happy life ... a truly happy life, though, she did not know, and did not think she could ever have.

I don't know if I know how to be happy, Asmodai.

Oh, my precious one.

Don't feel sorry for me. I'm just saying happy, well, I always thought happy was something of fairy tales ... or well, what "normal" people have. I'm a split soul, Asmodai, where does a split soul find happiness?

Do you not believe you are deserving of happiness?

Ooooh, now that was a loaded question. She wanted to have her freedom, her hard won independence and her life. If she could obtain those things would it be enough? Would she finally be happy? And Asmodai asked a very good question. Didn't she feel worthy of happiness?

I want to be free, she said, settling on the safest route she could think of.

None of us are truly free amour. But we can find a semblance of it ... we have the pretense, the pretense of it all.

I don't want to pretend. I want to live free ... to have a choice, the choice to do what I wish, the choice to choose who I will.

And who do you choose?

Oh God, oh God, oh God! Who did she choose? What did her fickle, broken, stubborn and scarred heart tell her?

It takes you this long to answer?

And there was sadness staining his words.

It's just ... well, it's complicated, Asmodai.

It would not be if you were here by my side, now.

But I'm not. I live on Earth, and have things to consider. My choices, they seem to affect much more than just me these days.

Your Alpha, you pine for him?

Alexander? No, she could not let herself feel anything more than she already did for him. His world could never be hers. She did not want it to be hers.

Then there is someone else...

Savior, yes, he scared her. She could feel so much for him ... she *already* felt so much for him. There was an aching, a yawning empty, longing pit in his eyes she longed to fill. And she wanted him to fill that same emptiness in her.

The vampire, Asmodai said coolly.

Yes, and he has a name, Asmodai.

I care little for the vampire's name, my amour. Is this creature of death the reason you pull away from me?

Creature of death? Ha, you should talk.

I am a prince. Can your vampire say the same?

A prince, no, he probably wasn't a prince, but there was a lot about Savior she did not know, many secrets that she had left to uncover.

You will not stay with me? And he asked the question as if he already knew the answer.

You knew the answer to that question before you asked, Asmodai. I can't stay here. Danny laughed. *But I'll visit. It seems I will have to.*

Asmodai sighed. *Yes, you will have to re-energize in the Burning Fields. Otherwise your power will grow wild and unwieldy. As you grow more accustomed to your flames you will not have to come here as often.*

A good thing too. Somehow Danny didn't think she wanted to take too many jaunts to the Burning Fields. There was something comfortable and soothing about this place, it did indeed call to her new power. And the added benefit of seeing Asmodai, well that wasn't too bad either. She could rail all she wanted to, but when she saw him her heart did a leap and her soul began to sing wildly within her. Yes, Danny knew the more often she came, the more she would want to stay, and that was why she had to learn to control the power, and leave this place behind her. She could not afford to stay here for any real period of time.

You are already withdrawing, I can sense it.

She couldn't deny it. She was pulling away from him. She had to. *I have to leave now, Asmodai.*

No, my amour, my own, please, please stay with me. And the panic was back in his voice, the true desperation.

Danny felt tears threaten and she swallowed them back. She could do this. She had to do this, for both of them.

I'm leaving now. Do not try to pull me back. Danny began to withdraw her power. She closed each portal within her mind one by one, making sure the fire receded. She took control of the many threads and began to tie them together, knotting them tightly, making certain she left nothing loose.

DENNISON!

She ignored Asmodai's cry and focused entirely on dampening the fire. Just like that it was gone. The flames drew back and Danny knew the moment she left the Burning Fields.

"You saw our master?"

Blinking a couple of times and shaking her head, as if to clear it, Danny finally focused on Capshaw who was hopping up and down excitedly.

"Have you been here the entire time?" she asked.

"Of course, I could not leave you unprotected while you were speaking to our master."

"I need to go now." God did she need to go. She needed to run, it would clear her head.

"We are not done," Capshaw shouted as she rushed for the door.

"Yes, we are." At least for now they were done. Danny ran down the long corridor and pushed open the heavy wooden door that led outside, to freedom. She stripped off her clothing while she ran, reveling in the feel of the wind caressing her naked body. The moment Danny broke through the forest the shift was upon her. Her body rippled as smoothly as lapping water and she welcomed it. Once she was fully in wolf form she took off. She did not know where she was going, her wolf did not care. She just needed to run. She just needed to give her wolf the glory it deserved.

* * * *

Alex's *Magnus* was waiting for her, standing imposingly on the front porch of the house. Carlton West was not a classically handsome man. His face was too hard, too

broken to ever be considered truly handsome. But there was strength, fierceness in his face, and that in itself was beautiful. To a wolf, the characteristics humans would find ugly were often appealing.

Danny cocked her head to one side and stood, hands on her hips, waiting for him to speak. She was naked as a jaybird and really didn't give a hoot. It wasn't anything he hadn't seen before and wouldn't see again. Usually she liked to cover up as soon as possible. Yeah, yeah, she was a strangely modest wolf. But she knew his brazen staring was more of an intimidation tactic than anything else, and she wasn't about to play his game.

"You could use some more meat on your bones."

"My meat is none of your damned business," she shot back. When he smiled, she scowled. "Is there something you want, West?" Her scowl deepened when he remained silent. "What? Gone mute?"

"You will not be our Alpha's *Kyra*," he finally said.

It was so unexpected Danny found she was momentarily struck dumb. "I'm sorry, what?" she asked when she could find her tongue.

"What the Alpha wishes, will not be so."

"Why do you say that?"

Carlton gave a Gaelic shrug. "You will not be tamed."

It was an adequate, if not blunt statement. "Is there a point to this rather bizarre conversation?"

"Merely that I have been observing your interactions with our Alpha, and I see much. I see his mounting anger at your refusal of him and your mounting frustration with his pursuit."

"Hmmm ... been observing all of this, have you?"

"Yes."

"And why would you care one way or the other? Why would my actions mean anything to you?"

"Quite simply, you are our *Roit*. And you hold the attention of our Alpha."

"Really, nothing else to say?"

"And I would give you an alternative, an 'out' if you will, to your current dilemma."

Now this would be good. "Oh?"

"Me."

Huh? "Excuse me?" All right, this conversation definitely warranted clothing. Danny held up her hand. "I'm going to go upstairs and put on some clothing."

"And then we'll speak?"

She sighed, sure, what the hell. "Yes, then we'll speak."

* * * *

She settled into one of the large overstuffed chairs that graced the den, and began to sip on a Jack and Coke. Somehow she just felt she would need a drink to get through what Carlton West was about to tell her. "Okay, so shoot."

Carlton still wore that small, mysterious smile upon his face. It was an odd smile, and Danny wished she could read him. "It is as I said outside."

"Uh, you didn't say much outside, Einstein. You told me that an 'out' to my dilemma would be to choose you. Uh, choose you to what?"

“To mate.”

Fuck. Just what she *didn't* need to hear. “Why in God’s name would you want to mate with me?”

“Everyone else wishes to.”

Well what a crappy answer. Her look must have said it all because he began to laugh in earnest. His laugh was actually a pleasant surprise. It was joyous and booming and somehow made his face younger, freer.

“Don’t know what you’re laughing at,” Danny spoke through gritted teeth.

“The expression on your face was quite amusing.”

“So glad I could amuse you,” she shot out sarcastically.

“You do, quite constantly in fact.” Carlton leaned back in his chair and eyed her appreciatively; eyed her as a man eyes a woman he’s interested in, or in their case, as a wolf eyes his prey. “Can you deny the Alpha has been pressing his suit?”

Deny it? She wasn’t trying to deny it. Everyone knew Alex was pressing his suit ... hell, he’d been pressing his damned suit for years. It wasn’t a secret and damn if the entire community didn’t know what his stupid intentions were, now especially since he’d gone and gotten the Grand Dame involved.

“I’m not denying it,” Danny answered curtly.

“And you are not pleased.”

That was to put it mildly. “No, I’m not pleased, but I’m not pleased by much.”

Carlton grinned, “Yes, I gather.”

She wasn’t about to make excuses for her behavior. She was, quite simply, who she was. Could she grow, did she hope to grow? Of course she did. But she wasn’t going to sit here and pretend she was all nicey-nice when it was obvious she wasn’t. Not to mention that the *Magnus* would see right through her pretense.

“To stop the Alpha’s suit you must mate yourself with a suitable wolf. A wolf who can hold his own amongst the dominant throng, but a wolf who will not curb your, shall we say, independent nature?”

“Oh, and I take it you’ve decided you’re the wolf for the job.”

Carlton inclined his head. “Yes.”

“Well, how super sweet of you, but you see, I don’t want a mate.”

“You have little choice in the matter.”

And there it was again. *Little choice in the matter* ... she stinking hated that phrase. “I have every choice in the matter. I will do what I wish.”

“You are contracted to the Striker Clan, are you not?”

“You know I am.”

“And now you are part of the Stone Claw Clan.”

“Not by my choosing.”

“No matter, in essence you belong to both clans.”

It burned her throat to say it. “Yes.”

“Do you have a choice in your duties to the clans?”

Aargh, she was beginning to detest this conversation and hate the stupid logical *Magnus*. “Not really, although,” she chuckled, “I give Alex a time of it.”

“Yes, I can see that. Do you not realize the solution to all of your problems would be to take a suitable mate?”

“And do you not see I don’t want a fucking keeper?”

“It would not have to be like that, Dennison.”

“Of course it would. All dominant wolves are alike.”

“You do not know me.”

True, she knew very little about Carlton West, but he was a dominant wolf and that alone told her much. “I have enough headaches in my life, and I certainly have enough, uh, choices right now when it comes to...” her voice dropped off.

“Lovers? I do not doubt you have your choice of lovers. You’re strong, powerful and able. What’s more, you are extraordinarily beautiful. But merely satisfying your lust will not be enough, certainly not enough for the Grand Dame.”

“And you are? You’re enough?”

“The only way you will stop the Alpha’s suit is by presenting the Grand Dame with another choice, a choice equal to the Alpha in almost every way. You know she will not take into consideration any of your other lovers, and she certainly will not accept one of the dead.”

Sad but true. Danny knew the Grand Dame Roberta Wick would never consider pairing Danny with Savior. Wolves and Vampires ... they rarely mixed. In fact, one of the only ways they survived in these tumultuous times was by ignoring one another, and keeping their power bases separate. Sometimes they tried to solidify their power by sending tokens, much like Alpha Ford had sent his sister to Master Vampire Rickart, but it was always politically driven, and rarely worked out. Vampires and wolves, their natures seemed to be too similar to co-exist harmoniously with one another.

“I see you are considering my words.”

“Listen,” Danny finished her drink, “I’m not about to bind myself to you. I don’t care what the Grand Dame has to say, I’m not some trinket you boys can just bounce back and forth.”

“Mate, not bind.”

“What?”

“Bind is a word those creatures,” Carlton spat out the word creature as if it were foul, “those creatures use. We are wolves, and wolves mate.”

“God, whatever, bind, mate, tie up with string and bow for good measure, I’m not doing any of it with you.”

Carlton leaned forward. His strange green and yellow eyes glittered brighter than any gem. “This is the best and only way for you to be free of the Alpha.”

“So, I trade one form of slavery for another.”

“I would never make a slave of you. I would no more curb that wild nature of yours than I would cut off my own arm.”

“Nice visual. I’m going to tell you the same thing I tell Alex, all the fucking time. You talk about choices, well, you don’t have any. Your nature would demand obedience from me, and I would never give it to you. And eventually,” Danny snorted, “I would kill you, or at least maim you really, really badly.”

“Think you are strong enough to take me, do you?”

Danny smiled evilly. “Oh, I know I am.”

Carlton leaned back and laced his fingers together. “Perhaps, perhaps you are. But no matter, this is not about pitting our strength against one another, this is about uniting. I am not an Alpha, Dennison, but I am dominant enough to be a good mate for you. The Alpha presses so hard because, as you said, he has little choice. His wolf cries for you,

and the more you resist, the more he pursues ... it is the way of things. However, if you were paired, well paired, then he would have no choice but to give up his pursuit. He cannot break a mated pair, a dominant pairing, that is.”

She didn't want to take into account anything Carlton West said, but it was all logical. Short of a physical challenging of mate rights at the All-Clan, a wolf could not take what was already mated, not even an Alpha had that right. Of course, many Alphas used underhanded tricks and outright assassination to get what they wanted—whom they wanted. Few would question an Alpha, as an Alpha's word was often law.

“How do you know the Grand Dame would even accept you?” Danny saw by the look on his face that he thought he had won. Wow, was he ever going to be disappointed when he realized she would rather have a root canal than mate with him.

“Why would she not? I am strong, able, intelligent, and a *Magnus*.”

“Think highly of yourself, do you?”

“I am merely honest with myself and others.”

Danny actually liked his straightforward response. She felt much the same about herself.

“Okay, I'm going to give it to you straight, West. I'm not in the market for a mate. Thanks, but no thanks. I don't doubt that you think what you say about giving me my freedom and all that jazz is true, but I don't for a minute believe if we actually were mated it would happen.”

“Are you calling me a liar?”

God, she didn't need any more of this macho shit. “No. I am merely telling you I have every reason to distrust your words, all the words I have heard uttered from dominant wolves over the years. My experiences haven't been good ones.” She thought of Draco's cold, hard eyes and stiffened. Yeah, dominant wolves were not high on her happy, happy, joy, joy, list right now.

Carlton's face softened. “You haven't met the right wolf.”

Perhaps he was right. She hadn't met the right wolf. But, if she were truthful with herself, did she really want to? She thought of Savior, his fathomless beautiful eyes and his welcoming embrace and she yearned, longed, ached. Asmodai's hauntingly beautiful face came to her mind as well, and brought a small smile to her face. Did she really want a wolf? Could she ever truly find her place with a wolf?

“You should smile more often. You have a beautiful smile, Dennison.”

Danny sighed. “I don't have much to smile about.”

“I believe you make things much more difficult than they need to be.”

“Look here, Dr. Phil...” She stopped suddenly. Why *was* she being such a bitch to him? He hadn't said anything she didn't already know, hell, he was actually being a lot more polite and cordial than a wolf in his position needed to be. He was sitting with her in a parlor, for heaven's sake, discussing a proposition with her, not attacking or trying to ram said position down her throat. “Okay, maybe I do. I guess I'm not used to doing things the ‘easy’ way.” Wow, was that ever true, and she couldn't believe she had just shared that with a virtual stranger.

“Will you consider my proposal, Dennison Lee?” Carlton asked formally.

Danny stood and shook her head. “I don't want to give you any false hope, West. I wasn't joking when I said I'm not in the market for a mate. I'm not going to change my mind.”

Carlton grinned. "I can be very persuasive."

"I'm sure you can. Why don't you go and try some of that persuasion out on some interested wolf."

"Why? I've already found the wolf I'm interested in."

Danny laughed, she just couldn't help herself. There was something oddly charming about the domineering Carlton West. Something that made her think perhaps he was serious about not trying to kill her spirit. Of course, in the end she just couldn't take the chance.

"Well, it's been interesting." That was the truth. She definitely felt as if she knew more about the *Magnus* now than when they had begun this weird conversation. She headed for the door.

"Dennison." Hand on the doorknob, Danny turned around to face the enigmatic *Magnus*. "Do consider what I have said."

The fact that he was asking her to consider his words, not telling her she had to, not attacking her, brutalizing her or forcing her in any way, made her much more apt to listen and to take him seriously, not so serious she would mate with him ... but listen, yeah, she could at least listen to him.

Danny nodded and walked out of the room. Lord, she was starving. *Deep conversation* always made her hungry. God, she just wanted a bacon cheeseburger and the biggest deep-fried onion flower she could find.

Chapter Three

Danny finished off the last bite of her cheeseburger and was contemplating ordering another when a welcome and familiar person walked into the diner.

"I had heard news of your return." Sabine smiled warmly. "May I?" She gestured toward the open chair across from Danny.

"Of course, sit down. It's good to see you, Sabine."

Sabine's smile broadened. She looked at the plate in front of Danny and wrinkled her patrician nose.

Danny laughed heartily. "What? You don't like a couple thousand calories? They have salads, would you like a salad?"

Sabine gestured to the waitress, and when she came over ordered a turkey pita with a side of fruit salad.

"You look lovely, Danny, and it really is wonderful to see you again. How have you been? I'm assuming things have been ... interesting over at the Stone Claw Clan."

"Interesting, yeah, definitely."

"Has any time limit been set as to your stay at the Stone Claw Clan?"

"Good question, not really. I'm sort of here indefinitely. There is an All Clan scheduled, but until then I'm, well, stuck. Yeah, it's been fun."

"Oh look, you are so enthusiastic."

"That's me, Miss Enthusiasm." Danny sighed. "I don't know, I've been ... listen, can I talk to you, Sabine, really talk to you?"

"You know you can."

"I don't want it to seem as if I'm losing my mind, but hell, I feel as if I'm losing my mind. Ever since I returned..."

"That actually brings me to a question, Danny. Where were you?"

Okay, so how much did she actually tell Sabine? Was she actually prepared to confide all in the *Airok*?

"I was in Hell." Wow. This was the first time she had uttered it, the first time she had told anyone the absolute truth about her situation.

"I see." And the way Sabine said it made it seem as if she really did see. "And how did you find it?"

"Hell?"

"Yes, I have never been."

Danny blinked and sucked in a breath as a sudden terrible thought came to her. Oh no, absolutely not, she couldn't, and yet there it was, that thought, the remembrance of Satain's words, his edict to her. Sabine was strong, powerful and beautiful. Her magic was potent and her abilities varied. She would have the strength to withstand the fire, wouldn't she?

"Danny, are you still with me?"

"Yes, sorry, my mind was wandering a bit."

"Wandering where?"

Oh, just thinking about how you might withstand the transition to Hell, and if you would like to marry one of Satain's sons. "I was just thinking about my time in Hell,"

well that was sort of the truth.

“You were gone for quite a while. They, we, were worried for you.”

“Well, as you can see I’m fine, okay, sort of fine. Well, besides the fact that I can fry people alive, things are going great.”

“Excuse me?”

“I seem to be able to uh, burn people to a crisp. I am working on it, though. I think with a couple more lessons I should be right on track.”

“This new power...”

“Was thrust on me by one very handsome but annoying devil.” Danny motioned to the nearly empty plate in front of Sabine. “Would you mind if we took this conversation some place more private?”

“Not at all, I was thinking much the same thing.”

Thank goodness. There was something unsettling and rather off-putting about discussing Hell and the devil in a greasy spoon diner.

* * * *

Sabine’s home was as lovely and welcoming as Danny remembered it to be. She was now situated on the large couch in the day room, as Sabine called it, sipping some fragrant tea and wishing instead for an alcoholic beverage.

“Do you not like the tea, Danny?”

Danny tried not to grimace. “It’s fine.”

“Just fine? The tea is a special blend. I mixed it myself. Only the finest leaves were used.”

“It’s the best tea I’ve ever had.”

Sabine laughed and it was a sweet, tinkling laughter that pleased Danny’s ears.

“Which isn’t saying much, is it?”

“No,” Danny shrugged, “I’m not much of a tea drinker. The only tea I enjoy is a Long Island iced tea.” Danny saw by Sabine’s blank look she had no idea what she was talking about. “Don’t tell me, you don’t drink.”

“I certainly do, just not...”

“Spirits, I got it. God, you really are a *good girl*, aren’t you?”

“You say that as if it’s a bad thing.”

“Not bad. It just strikes me as a little strange considering who you are.”

“And who am I, Danny?”

“Is this a rhetorical question?”

“Who am I?” she asked again.

“You’re Sabine, the *Airok* of your coven and the local cat lady.”

A small smile split Sabine’s face. “You remembered.”

“Of course, the story made me smile, and it gave me something to hold onto, something to relate to.” Danny searched for the right words. “I’ve always been on the outside, Sabine, like yourself. I was born into two conflicting worlds, and not truly belonging to either one. Others of my kind fear me, hate me, or want to possess me. I’ve been fighting my entire life it seems. When you told me how the people of the town view you and your eccentricities it made me see that there are others out there who are on the outside. I guess it made me feel as if I wasn’t so...”

“Alone?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“But you aren’t alone, Danny. You have me, you have Eloise, and you have Thad, and of course there is your vampire.”

“My vampire.” Danny chuckled. “Savior isn’t my anything.”

“Are you so certain of that?”

“Well, not in the way you mean, he isn’t. I’m still trying to figure out what Savior is to me.”

“An honest answer if ever there was one.”

“I’m realizing I have to be honest, at least to myself, if I’m going to get anywhere. I’ve spent a lot of time running from certain truths, and look where it’s gotten me. I’m right back where I started from. Do you know how long I worked on getting my freedom? How many years I spent figuring out a way to leave the Striker Clan?”

“Did you really think you could ever leave, though?”

“Honestly? Yeah, yeah, I did. I thought I had it all figured out.”

Sabine chuckled. “We never have things figured out, not really. We are, after all, only human.”

“Now there’s the kicker. *Are* we human? Are we *really* human? You’re an *Airok*, I’m a wolf and a *magi*. Can we really claim humanity?”

“Now, Danny ... that is a silly question,” Sabine leaned forward, and graced her with a serene smile, “we are *Otherworlders*, yes. We belong to a people that reside in several worlds. However, ‘If you prick us, do we not bleed?’ We age, we grow brittle and soft and we eventually die. Perhaps we cannot claim full humanity, but the best parts of us,” her smile broadened, “are human. It is that same humanity which tortures you so. If you were less human you would not care about your friends, or your lovers. You would not feel for your brother as you do, and you certainly would not be sitting here having this conversation with me. It is a narrow path we walk, one that continually shifts and changes. We can only do our best to navigate that path.”

“I don’t think I’ve even found the damn path, Sabine. I’m still looking for the breadcrumb trail.”

“It takes some longer than others to find their way. You have a difficult time of it, Danny, for you are not only a split soul, you are a powerful magic wielder. You were born with powers many cannot and will not ever be able to fathom. You not only must balance the two halves of your soul, you must focus, direct, and keep in check the powers that I’m sure threaten to overwhelm you at times.”

Danny rubbed her temples and tried to soothe the headache she felt coming on.

“The Fae are coming, Sabine. They’ve contacted Alex and they’re coming.”

“The same Fae who kidnapped your brother?”

“I don’t know.” God she hoped not. She would be hard pressed not to make minced meat out of them. “I only know a convoy is coming. Alex has requested my presence when they arrive.”

“Of course, he would. Do you fear the Fae, Danny?”

Danny thought back on Asmodai’s words. She remembered the awestruck look in her brother’s eyes as he lay chained and manacled, and she remembered her own feelings when she took in the beauty of Lady Theraline. “I think I’d be a fool not to fear them.”

“Yes, I agree. The Fae are complicated. They can fool with their beauty and deceive with but one glance. Many underestimate them. They see only the outside glory and they

overlook the inner mechanizations. The Fae are more dangerous in that way. They do not even need Glamour to trick you, often their mere presence alone is enough to overwhelm.”

“I can keep their Glamour at bay.”

“I don’t doubt it. I also believe that is one of the reasons your Alpha would call for your presence at the meeting. He cannot possibly conduct business if he is Fae struck.”

“I have to call Savior and ask to postpone our date.”

“Your ... date?”

Danny growled. “Yeah, my date,” she hated how ridiculous it sounded, “have a problem with that?”

“No, not at all, I think it is quite sweet.”

“Well I wouldn’t go that far,” Danny mumbled under her breath. “We were supposed to have a date on Saturday, but the Fae are due to arrive and I can’t be in two places at one time.”

“Of course not. Well, I think the Master Vampire will understand. You do have obligations to fulfill to your Pack.”

Obligations to her Pack ... she most certainly had those. Danny buried her head in her hands. “My life is so fucked up.”

“I’m sorry, what? I didn’t quite hear you.”

She lifted her head and knew her face had to show some of the angst she was feeling. “I said my life is so fucked up. I mean, look at me. I’m the *magi* inherent to one clan, the *Roit* of another. I’m being pursued by an Alpha, dating a Master Vampire and oh, let’s not forget that I happened to get back from a mini vacation in Hell ... in which I happened to sort of fall for a devil.” She let out a deep breath and then rushed on, “My best friend is dead, my brother hates me, and I’m stuck with the ability to incinerate people. You just can’t make this shit up.” Sabine started to laugh and Danny frowned deeply. “What the hell is so funny?”

“You.”

“Excuse me?”

“I mean, what you said is funny. No, you really are a mess...” Sabine finished helplessly.

“You think my life is funny?”

“Danny, when you say it like that, then yes, it comes off rather...” Sabine bit her lip, “comedic. Don’t you see ... it *is* worse than a soap opera, if the soap opera had all paranormal players, and you’re right, you cannot make this stuff up.” She shook her head. “I apologize if my laughter offended you. You must be feeling very overwhelmed right now. I did not mean to mock your plight in any way.”

“Are you for real?”

“What?”

Danny snorted. “I asked if you’re for real? I’ve never met anyone so, well, prim and proper before.” Well, one other person, but she was long gone. “You’re perfect.”

“I’m hardly perfect. No one is.”

“Okay, you’re as close to perfect as I’ve ever seen.” Danny watched a delightful blush crawl up Sabine’s neck and settle on her cheeks, staining them red.

“Well, thank you. But I’m far from perfect. I’ve done some ... questionable things during my reign as *Airok*.”

Danny could believe those words. There was fire, knowing, keen and sharp intelligence in Sabine's eyes that would back up what she had just said. She would have to have a strong backbone, be an excellent strategist and be damnably powerful to have been able to hold onto her position for this long.

"If I negotiate passage through the Stone Claw Clan, will you be by my side when the Fae arrive?"

Sabine's eyes widened and she drew her hand to her chest. "You would have me there?"

"I can't think of anyone I would rather have by my side, or anyone more qualified for that matter."

"I would be honored," Sabine spoke and her voice was grave.

Danny grinned slowly. "Okay, so I have a lot of work to get done before Saturday. I have to call Savior, have my mandatory sparring session with Achilles, deal with one very annoying bird and his ever-present master and keep Alex off of my back, literally." Danny clucked her tongue. "No sweat, right?" Fucked up life, what the hell, it was her fucked up life.

* * * *

Danny rushed through the clearing and stopped abruptly in her tracks. The sight that met her eyes made her blood run cold and her body freeze. There, staked out in front of the house, was Carlton West. His body was stretched between two poles, and his head was hanging limply to one side. He had the appearance of a broken doll.

Danny took her human form, shedding her wolf self quickly. She ran to Carlton, and cupped his head within her hands.

"West," she asked, using the nickname she had given him, "can you hear me?" She noticed then that his hands and legs were shackled with silver and she growled. Because of her *magi* abilities she was able to tolerate silver. However, the same could not be said for most wolves. "West, West, who did this to you?" She began to work furiously to remove the shackles.

"Step away from him, Dennison."

Danny spun around and came face-to-face with Alex. He was flanked by Titus and Wesley, two of the Stone Claw Clan's top protectors.

"Alex." Danny struggled to keep calm. "Alex, tell me you didn't do this." Alex's expressionless face was answer enough. "Damn you, how could you?" Danny turned back to Carlton. His eyes were flickering. "West, it's me, Danny, can you hear me?"

"Hello, Danny." Carlton's voice was weak and raspy.

Danny rested her head against his and murmured, "Thank God."

"Step away from him, Dennison, I will not ask you again."

"Why, Alex, just tell me why." She kept one hand on Carlton's face as she turned to look at Alex. She knew by the tightening of Alex's mouth he was furious, and her closeness to Carlton only fueled his fury. Carlton needed her touch. He needed the comfort of a fellow wolf. And his needs at this moment were more important to her than Alex's anger.

"Did you think I would not find out, Dennison?"

"Find out about what?"

Alex strode forward. His eyes were cool and never left Danny's face. "Your talk

with Carlton, his perfidy, his plan to take you from me.”

“Are you fucking serious?” Danny screamed. She could feel her body heating up but could do nothing to dampen her fury, in fact, she did not wish to dampen it. Was this monster really Alex? Oh, she knew her Alpha was hard, and cruel even, (she had borne witness to his cruelty, and had felt the stinging blow of it herself) but this evil, this evil was beyond her. “You tortured him because we spoke?”

Alex was on her then. His face was a mere inch from hers when he spoke. “I set him up as an example!” he roared. “I made my claim, he ignored my word, and my word is law. Those who defy me will be punished. There can be no mercy in this, Dennison. The stakes are too high.”

“You ... *will* ... let him go.” Danny’s voice was deceptively soft. She could feel her anger fueling her fire and knew it was barely restrained under the surface. “You will let him go *now*, Alex.”

Alex curled his hand around the back of her neck and pulled her closer. His grip was bruising. “Or what?”

Even in the midst of her fury she felt hesitant to truly let loose on Alex. He was here, standing with his men and she knew the consequences of his losing face would be great. She could do it. She felt it in her bones. If she truly wished it, she could free her power completely and God help anyone who stood in her way.

“Alex,” she curled her hands into tight fists, “I give you this one chance. You know what I am capable of. Release him, Alex. Please do not make me do something we will both regret.”

“Dennison...” The hold on her neck softened.

This was her chance. She had to make him hear her. She had to make him see reason.

“If we do this now, Alex, there will be no going back, do you understand? We can do it, but do you truly wish to air this in public? You asked me once if I would ever forgive you ... and I tell you now what I will never forgive. I will never forgive you if you continue down this path. If you allow him to suffer, if you are the cause of any more of his suffering, I will despise you forever. Do you understand me, Alex? Do you hear me, because I assure you my words are truth.” Danny watched the many flickering emotions cross over Alex’s face, and she saw the moment he recognized her words and accepted them.

Alex kept his gaze steady upon her. “Titus, release the *Magnus* now.”

Danny nodded slowly. She watched as Titus carefully unshackled Carlton. The moment he was released he fell to the ground. Danny rushed to his side. His back was sliced in over a dozen places. Each wound was long and blistering. She pressed her hand against his skin. It was hot to the touch. She knew these wounds, recognized the foul scent left behind.

“You whipped him, you used silver. God, Alex, have you no mercy in that cold heart of yours?”

“No, Dennison, where you are concerned, there can be no mercy. I have already told you ... the stakes are too high.” And with those words, and one last look in her direction, he walked away.

* * * *

Danny applied the salve generously on Carlton’s wounds. She moved her hands

slowly, gracefully over his flesh and chanted, adding the healing words she knew would help quicken his recovery. Some of the deep wounds had already begun to blister as she knew they would, wolves healed much faster than a normal human would, and could take much more damage than a human body could sustain. However, the black crust that had begun to form over some of his flesh was not a good sign, and could only mean some of the damage done by the silver was permanent.

"You will scar," Danny murmured.

"It'll only add to my appeal," Carlton said, wincing a little.

Danny chuckled. "Oh yes, very rugged." She stilled her hands then. "I..." she swallowed, "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For this."

"*You* didn't whip me."

"But I'm the cause of it."

Carlton scoffed at her words. "How do you figure?"

"If we hadn't spoken then Alex..."

"The Alpha did what Alphas do, Danny. You are not responsible for his actions, nor are you responsible for my pain. If anything, I should thank you for cutting short my punishment."

"You are much too gracious, West."

"I just don't want you to add another weight to your shoulders ... or carry the burden of my pain in your heart."

Danny drew back. "How did you know?"

"It's not hard to see, Danny. You take everything upon yourself. You hide behind a hard shell, but you do so because you care ... sometimes too much. You take on a new burden each day."

"Paging Sigmund Freud." Danny kept her voice light, but her heart had begun to beat faster at his words and his obvious insight into her soul.

"I don't need to be a genius to read people," Carlton said, right before he gasped in pain.

He needed comfort, the closeness of a fellow wolf. He needed more than she was providing now. Danny brought her mouth to his ear and blew gently, watching the soft hair of his neck ruffle gently.

"Danny ... what are you doing?" Carlton's voice was rough with his need.

"Helping you, West." She slid her hands down his arms, kneading his flesh gently, working out the knots.

"Don't do this out of pity."

Danny laughed. "Pity is hardly the emotion I feel right now." And it was true. Her beast was rising, joyfully dancing within her, telling her how right this was, and how much she needed it. Here was one of her own, and her beast recognized him, welcomed him, wanted him with a growing, fierce need. "You want me," Danny murmured, as she licked the outer rim of his ear and pressed her breasts against him teasingly.

"You know I do." And with one sinuous movement he had flipped onto his back, his arm firmly wrapped around Danny's middle.

"Don't hurt..."

"Shhhhh, I'm fine, better than fine now," he said, smiling. He arranged Danny so

that she was sitting astride him and palmed her full breasts. “Do I take this to mean you have agreed to my prior proposition?”

Danny leaned over and bit his neck. “Hardly. I’m just giving us both what we want, what we need. In fact, I’m quite amazed you can even think about the proposition after Alex strung you up and flayed you within an inch of your life.”

“Can’t blame a guy for trying.”

“No, I guess you can’t.” Danny scooted down and captured one of Carlton’s nipples in her mouth. She laved the hardening flesh, enjoying the gasps and small sounds he made as she teased his skin. “Would you like more?”

“Yes,” he growled out.

Danny grasped his cock. He was beautiful, hard, perfectly formed, a gorgeous specimen of man. Tightening her grip, she began to pump him within her hand, keeping her motions slow and steady. He grew harder still.

“Your cock is beautiful, West. I believe I need a taste.” She straddled his legs and took his hard flesh into her mouth. He tasted wonderful, salty, and entirely male. Relaxing her throat she allowed him even further into the welcoming recess of her mouth.

“Danny... Danny...” Carlton reached for her.

Danny eluded his grasp and continued to suck and torture him. She gently cupped his balls in her hand and rolled them delicately within her palm. He was groaning loudly now, his balls tightening, and she knew he was close. Never missing a beat she reached beneath him and inserted her index finger into the tight puckered hole of his anus, he roared, arching helplessly under her, his cock jerked, pulsed and exploded within her mouth. Danny drank him all down.

“Jesus.” Carlton swallowed, flexing his hands.

“We are not nearly finished, West.” She continued to stroke him, noticing he was still hard. God, it was definitely one of the things she appreciated about *Otherworlders*, shifters in particular, they didn’t need as much time to “recuperate.” Positioning herself, she guided his hard shaft to her wet opening. She loved that he was allowing her to take control, to set the pace and the direction. It was very liberating for her, not to mention, rare. Most dominant beings would be screaming their frustration by this point, not lying relaxed and ready under her.

“Now,” Carlton demanded.

Well, perhaps she had spoken too soon. Danny grinned, and sank down on his cock. Oh yeah, oh hell yeah. Her pussy clasped his cock as if never to let it go and her muscles clenched delightfully. She began to ride, slowly at first, keeping her movements even and languid, enjoying the expressions that filtered over his face. When his cock grew ever harder within her and his hands gripped her hips demandingly, she sped up, drawing closer and closer to the eye of the storm.

“Jesus, you’re good,” Carlton groaned, pinching her nipples almost to the point of pain.

“Oh yeah, do that some more.” Danny threw back her head as a fine tremor began to work its way through her body. She was close ... they were both so close. Her beast was nearly at the surface, and she was clamoring for release. Danny felt the tremors become stronger and more insistent. She heard Carlton’s heavy breathing and his short, labored panting and knew he was there. His cock pulsed once, twice, three times within her pussy and with a bellow of satisfaction he released his seed into her. Danny’s own body

answered his call. Her orgasm was fast, furious and consuming. Spasms shook her, and she gave herself one minute to bask in the glow of a wonderful release, before climbing off him. "So great, thanks."

Carlton grinned. "Thank you."

"Let me see your back." He leaned up and Danny inspected his back. The wounds were now all healed, there were, as she had said there would be, several scars, but no sign of infection. "Looking good."

"And I have you to thank for it."

"It was my pleasure, really it was. I needed it as much as you did." That much was true. Since returning from Hell she had not given her wolf any release. Save her runs in the forest, her beast had had no satisfaction. It had been clamoring for freedom. It had needed the comfort of one of its own. Now that she had taken the edge off with a bout of sex play she felt infinitely better, and ready to tackle her next hurdle. "Stay out of Alex's way."

"I do not plan on getting in the Alpha's way at all. Yet somehow I doubt he will take kindly to this development."

"What development? We had sex, end of story. I helped you heal, you took the edge off my growing restlessness and we're both good. End of story."

"You *know* he will not see it that way."

"Yeah, I know. But a girl can hope, can't she?" Danny pressed a soft kiss to his forehead.

"What was that for?"

Danny shrugged. "For being you, I suppose. For giving me some hope and making me believe perhaps not all dominant wolves are total assholes."

Carlton chuckled. "Till the next time, milady?"

Well, why not? It actually was the perfect solution, at least to one of her problems. She needed to keep her beast fed, and since she could not be with Savior all of the time and Asmodai was out of the question ... what did she do, or whom did she do? Carlton West was handsome, virile, on a pretty easy keel, and what's more, Danny was beginning to like the wolf. As long as they could keep their relationship strictly casual, it might not be such a bad idea.

"We'll see. I need a shower, and you, you should take it easy, West."

Carlton gave her a short salute. "Watch your back, Danny."

Danny could see Alex's cold eyes in her mind and she shook her head. "Watch yours, West ... watch yours."

Chapter Four

“The hell with you!” Danny slammed the phone down and when that didn’t satisfy her, threw it across the room, watching as it hit the wall and shattered. “Nice, Danny, really mature,” she muttered, coming to stand over the many broken pieces of what had once been her telephone. “Damn annoying bloodsucker,” she said to no one in particular, “seriously, it really is entirely your fault my phone is broken.” Okay, so she had tossed the phone against a wall, *he* was the reason she had done so in the first place. Yeah. That was a nice, safe, reason for her childish behavior. She had just gotten off the phone with Savior and had nearly pulled out all of her hair during their short-lived conversation. Savior had refused to bend, giving her a vehement “no” to her request to move their date to another day. His voice had been cold and unyielding and he had all but accused *her* of scheming to get out of their meeting. “Obstinate fuck,” she spat out. She just couldn’t help it. She was still really pissed off.

So she was stuck between a rock and a really, really, hard place. She had duties to her Pack which she could not shirk. She had to be by Alex’s side when the convoy arrived, she was his *magi* inherent and he and the Pack needed her expertise. But she had also made a promise to Savior. She had agreed to the time and place of their first date, and in doing so had planted herself in a potentially messy situation. Okay, who was she kidding—this was more than a potentially messy situation, try TNT.

Ashleya.

Oh, now you want to talk. Danny let one of the barriers in her mind fall away and, despite her reservations, allowed Savior in.

Are you still angry with me?

In a word—yes! You made me break my phone, you bastard.

I made you break your phone? There was a definite edge of amusement in Savior’s voice now.

Well, you drove me to it.

Ahhhh, well, I am sorry I made you break your phone, ashleya.

You don’t mean it.

Savior chuckled. *No, I don’t. I don’t see how I could have made you do anything, my dear. I’m here, you are there. I take no credit for your broken apparatus.*

Fine! Be that way. What do you want now?

I felt distinctly ill at ease at the end of our conversation.

Did you? I wonder why.

Are you being sarcastic?

Definitely, this is me being sarcastic.

I have difficulty telling sometimes, ashleya.

Okay, let’s get to the point, Savior. I still want to be mad at you. Savior’s chuckle turned into full-fledged laughter and Danny couldn’t help herself ... she joined in. That *had* come out silly.

I felt the need to speak to you again, ashleya. I could feel your true discomfort and I believe I better understand the complexity of the situation you’re facing with the Fae and your Pack. I do not wish to further complicate your life, and so I am willing to reschedule

our date.

What do you want?

Pardon?

You heard me, what do you want. If you're being so accommodating then you definitely want something, I want to know what.

My goodness, can I not do something for you merely because I wish to, out of the goodness of my heart?

No.

So cynical.

Uh-huh, I am. We've established that already. I want to know what the hell your plan is, Savior? Why the sudden change of heart?

I would have you by my side during the Capthodox.

I knew there had to be a catch. And she had known. Savior wouldn't have changed his mind so quickly unless he wanted something from her.

It is not so much that I'm asking of you, ashleya. You had expressed interest in the Capthodox anyway. I am merely asking you to stand by my side when we convene.

And...

And what?

What does "standing with you" encompass, because I know it has to be more than just standing by your side.

Quite simply, you will stand as my companion. It is true. You bear my mark, my ashleya.

So you want to show me off like some prize pet.

Hardly, I want to give you the honor you deserve.

You want to honor me by parading me in front of your bloodsucking friends, sounds fabulous, Savior.

I will neither mince nor bandy words with you, my ashleya. Here it is. If you wish to reschedule our date then you will stand by my side during the Capthodox.

She could totally keep arguing with him. In fact, she could drag the argument out and prolong the annoyance of having to debate companion status with him, but what would be the point? He obviously wasn't going to budge and she didn't need the added pain.

I'll attend the Capthodox, Savior. We are going to have to go over the formalities though. I want to know exactly what I'm getting myself into, okay?

All right.

We'll iron it out on our date.

It sounds like a wonderful way to spend our date, ashleya.

Whoa, are you being sarcastic now?

Perhaps a little.

Danny grinned. All right, don't want to be accused of dishing it out but not being able to take it. Just remember, you're the one demanding my presence at the Capthodox, so you're the reason we have to take time out of our date to negotiate.

Demand, I am hardly demanding.

Aren't you though? Using the fact I can't make our date on Saturday to get something out of me.

The way you put it, it sounds so cold-blooded.

You are, cold-blooded that is.

Oh, now I am hurt.

Really, somehow I doubt that.

Savior laughed a robust laugh and it echoed fully in Danny's head. *Fine, my dear, I'll take all the responsibility for the fact we must "negotiate" during our date.*

Great, that's all I wanted to hear. Danny finished braiding her hair and put on a pair of beat-up sneakers.

So, Friday?

Friday, what?

Why for our date, of course.

Uh, Savior, Friday is tomorrow.

Yes, and your point would be?

I'm not headed to Blood Noir tomorrow. I'm certainly not ready for our date.

You must "ready yourself" for our date, ashleya? Why can you not just arrive tomorrow ready to have some fun?

Have some fun? Somehow Danny thought Savior's idea of fun was different from her idea of fun. *All right.* Danny sighed, why the hell not? It wasn't as if her life wasn't screwed up already.

Wonderful. I shall see you tomorrow. Does eight o'clock meet with your approval?

Eight o'clock is fine, Savior.

I cannot wait to see you, my ashleya. You are the light of my soul.

Okay, so she was kind of excited to see him too. She would never tell him, but she had missed the bastard. Oh, he was still definitely a bastard, and an annoying bloodsucker, but he was *her* bastard and annoying bloodsucker.

Okay, gushy moment over. I'll see you tomorrow. I have things to deal with now. Like telling Alex she could make the meeting on Saturday and giving him another piece of her mind for torturing poor Carlton.

Until tomorrow then.

Yeah, until then. Danny felt Savior's departure immediately. It was as if something inside her had broken off, or withered away. She was decidedly unsettled by the feeling. She didn't like the fact that his mere presence made her "glow" she didn't want to "need" him this badly. Needing someone really sucked. Danny didn't want to be dependent on anyone. God, she missed the good old days when her bitchiness was enough to keep everyone at bay, and she had no one but her plants. Plants didn't talk back to you or give you any sass ... unless you put a spell on them (and okay, let's face it, putting a spell on a plant was really pathetic, it was worse than being a cat lady).

Danny took a couple of deep breaths. It was time to face Alex.

* * * *

He really was magnificent. His skin was smooth, unblemished and glistening with the evidence of his workout. His muscular body was encased in a pair of black workout pants and nothing else. He had tied his locks back with a length of leather cord and his body was a study of true perfection.

Danny took a moment to appreciate him, to drink him in. His movements were surprisingly graceful and fluid. He truly was a gorgeous man.

Too bad he was such an ass.

"Alpha," Titus called out and pointed in Danny's direction.

Alex executed a perfect roundhouse kick, knocking his opponent down, and turned to face Danny.

"Don't let me stop you," Danny said. She didn't want to be the cause of his shortened workout.

"We were finished," Alex replied. He held out a hand, and helped his opponent to his feet. "Not bad, Andrew, next time, make sure to keep your chin up. You have a bad habit of looking down. Concentration is good, but not at the expense of awareness of your surroundings or your opponent's intentions. Stop worrying so much about technique, and let the movement flow through you."

Danny smiled a little at Alex's words. They took her back. She remembered her first sparring session with Alex. He had knocked her flat on her ass. He had held nothing back and really gone to town on her. When she was totally incapacitated and staring up at his smug face, he had smiled and helped her to her feet, much like he was doing now with this pup. The constructive criticism he had given her that day had stayed with her, and had made her a stronger, more thoughtful fighter. Yeah, it was moments like this that really brought it home to her why he was Alpha, and why she had been drawn to him when she was young.

"Care to go a round?"

Danny blinked. Alex was standing in front of her. His deep eyes were fixated upon her face. "Now?"

"There's no better time than the present," was his reply.

She was no longer the same young pup who had taken a beating from her Alpha. Not to mention, the idea of being able to possibly beat the shit out of Alex in a sanctioned fight sounded frigging fabulous.

"Sure, why not." Danny pulled off her tank top and stripped off her jeans, standing in front of him in her bra and panties. She kicked off her shoes and made sure her hair was secure. "We're not going furry, are we?"

Alex's gaze was intense. He shook his head. "I hadn't planned on it."

Okay, good to know. She wasn't sure if she'd be able to take him in human form. He was bigger and yes, stronger than she was. But Danny knew she was resourceful and she'd hold her own. He wouldn't take her down without a huge fight. She'd make him work for it.

Danny crouched low. Alex had moved back and begun to circle her. He was definitely gearing up for the attack, looking for an opening. Two seconds later he found one. Rushing her on the right, his speed took her by surprise.

"I forgot how damn fast you are, you bastard." Danny panted as she struggled to free herself. He had one arm locked around her waist and was trying to get a good foothold. If she was going to get free it had to be now when he was still trying to find foot position.

Alex brought his mouth to her ear. He licked her and whispered, "You feel incredible, Dennison."

Danny thrust her elbow back, and pressing her attack, used her free hand to deliver a blow to the side of his face. It wasn't particularly strong, but it surprised him, and he loosened his hold. She jumped free and promised herself she wasn't about to fall prey to his speed again.

"You aren't going to win this one, Dennison," Alex murmured.

"Deeds, not words, motormouth," she taunted, quickly jumping back when Alex

tried to tackle her. She had seen that one coming, and hadn't expected him to be so rash. Taunts didn't usually work on him. He was usually much more controlled.

Suddenly she was face down sucking in dirt. Alex had grabbed her ankle and deftly flipped her over. The force of her fall had her chest aching. Now that had stung. She gasped as pain shot through her. Alex had his hand on her neck and he was bearing down—hard. Damn it. In this position she could do very little, time to be a bit innovative and maybe a little sneaky to boot.

Danny partially shifted her hand and tried to find her mark. At first she was flailing worse than a fish out of water. His grip was punishing and very precise. And the fact that he was straddling her back didn't help matters any. Concentrating, she focused her energy and imagined his form as it now was. She could see the position of his body in her mind's eye and knew where she had to strike. With concerted effort she brought her arm up, struck low and to the right and caught him on his thigh. She held on, keeping her claws sunk deep into his skin. It had to hurt like a bitch, but what the hell, he'd heal.

Danny took that moment to wriggle and roll to her side. She scrambled to her feet, panting and taking in deep breaths of much needed air. Her glance went to Alex's leg. His pants were torn and blood was running in rivulets down his leg. The punctures were deep, but the flesh wasn't torn so badly. He'd be good as new in no time.

"Not playing nice, Dennison," Alex growled.

Danny shrugged. "Have to use what I have at my disposal, a very smart wolf once told me, *in the face of sure defeat one must never forget strength of will and sheer fortitude will have it over physical strength and brute force.*" Danny grinned slowly. "Do you remember, Alex? You told me that when I was a pup, staggered by how much larger my sparring partners were."

"I haven't forgotten what I told you, Dennison."

"Good, then you'll know never to underestimate me, or what I'm capable of."

"Oh, I know what you're capable of." Quick as lightning, Alex reached out and grabbed Danny's braid. Twisting her hair around his hand he pulled her toward him. "And you should know what I'm capable of, Dennison Lee, and you should never underestimate what lengths I will go to where you are concerned."

Danny struggled and gasped when he jerked her closer. The pressure on her scalp was intense. Fuck, he was going to pull out her hair at this rate. "I think too much power has gone to your head," she grunted, trying to use the elbow trick on him again. He was ready for her this time and with his free hand secured her, twisting her arm behind her back.

"In this situation, one cannot have too much power."

"God, you sound like some sick dictator. What the hell has happened to you, Alex? The Alex I knew would never have tortured Carlton West." Danny groaned as Alex thrust his knee into her back and bore her to the ground.

"What I did was hardly torture, Dennison. He received a much needed lesson, and my Pack received a much needed warning."

God he was strong. Okay, she could do this, she just needed some leverage. Danny reached around with her free arm and tried to wrap it around his leg. She just needed to get a good hold. She realized too late she had given Alex the perfect opportunity to fully immobilize her.

Alex released the hold on her hair. Grabbing both of her arms, he pulled them tightly

behind her back, yanking hard.

Danny groaned. So this had to be what the rack felt like.

"I believe this round goes to me, Dennison."

"Not on your fucking life, Alex," Danny shot back with bravado she did not feel.

Alex sighed deeply. "Your stubbornness will be the death of me. Yield, Dennison, or I will be forced to do something I do not wish to do."

"Fuck you, you egomaniacal bastard."

"I cannot have a member of my Pack show such disrespect." Alex wrapped both of his hands over her right forearm and quickly pulled upward.

Danny screamed as searing pain invaded her body. She heard the pop and crunch and felt her arm go completely limp. Alex stepped off her and she lay on the ground fighting the torrent of pain that bombarded her like crashing waves.

"Oh God, oh my God!" She took deep breaths. She just needed to remember to keep breathing. Damn it all, she really, really hurt. She gasped when someone touched her shoulder and rolled to her side. "Don't touch me, don't frigging touch me."

"Please, let me help."

Danny looked up and saw April, the clan's new healer, standing over her. She knew her own eyes were cloudy and hazed over in pain. She'd had worse injuries before, but broken bones and dislocations always seemed to hurt the worst. Maybe it was because the pain was immediate and it always felt like you were being burned alive, while being stabbed over and over again.

Danny got to her feet, looked at her arm and grimaced. This was going to suck. "I can handle it," she told April.

"I need to..."

"Yeah, yeah, you can do all your stuff, after I do mine." She found a large boulder and situated herself against it. She took a couple of deep breaths and placed her arm into position. She began to count to ten, and when she got to eight she rammed her arm into the boulder using it to wrench her arm back into place.

Shit. Shit. *Shit*. That had hurt worse than she had expected it to.

"Now may I help you?" April asked.

Danny nodded. "Yeah, I won't argue against some help right now." She swallowed and bit her lip. "Kay, not having so much fun here."

"I could have helped you with it. You didn't need to give yourself bruises and hematomas to boot."

"No point, this was just as effective." Danny could feel Alex's eyes following her. He hadn't said a word since he had "won." Her head felt blurry and she was trying to wrap her mind around the fact that Alex seemed to be a completely different person now. "Yeah, great job, Danny. You really gave him a piece of your mind," she muttered.

"Excuse me?" April stopped walking to look at her.

Danny shook her head. "Nothing, wasn't speaking to you. Just thinking out loud."

"Well, let's think inside, shall we?"

Danny chuckled and let herself be led inside. "Sounds good to me, sounds really good."

* * * *

Danny scowled at the cast on her right arm. She had done away with the sling the

second April had put it on her, but the little healer absolutely refused to let her get rid of the annoying cast. She knew she wouldn't have to wear it for long. In fact, her body was already healing itself. She just hated restrictions and she absolutely hated something that immobilized her in any way.

"Dennison."

"Go away."

"You cannot avoid me, Dennison."

"Not trying to avoid you, just don't want to talk to you now, or ever, for that matter."

Danny groaned. Goddamn it, her arm was itching and she had no way of scratching it.

Alex strode purposefully into the room. "Why did you come to the ring?"

"Excuse me?"

"Why did you come to see me?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You obviously came to see me for a reason. You interrupted my session to tell me something."

"I didn't interrupt anything. You said you were finished."

Alex shrugged. "Does it matter whether I was finished or not? You came to me, why? Talk to me, Dennison."

"I can't believe you!" Danny clenched her good hand into a tight fist and tried to keep her anger in check. "You are fucking unbelievable." She thrust her cast in his face. "You did this, asshole, remember?"

"Your injury has nothing to do with my question."

"I think I hate you, Alex," Danny said.

"Again, it makes no difference how you feel."

Danny shook her head, bewildered. Where had this cold, heartless man come from?

"What has happened to you?" At his silence, she continued, "you have always been serious, Alex, contemplative and sometimes even cruel. But you have never been evil. For all of your seriousness, your heart has been good. I've always been able to respect your decisions, for the Pack, if nothing else. And I've never doubted your abilities as Alpha."

"And now you do?"

She sighed. "I don't know. I'm seeing in you now something I've never seen before." *Maybe once before.* Yes, there had been a definite coldness, lack of empathy or caring in his face, in his eyes, when he had walked away from her broken form lying on the cold ground some six years ago. But now, now the transformation seemed complete, and it was shockingly terrible. He was robotic and cold, so very cold.

"You doubt my ability?"

"Do I doubt your ability to lead, Alex? I don't know, I truly don't know. You can rule, certainly. But can you *lead*? In this state I'm not sure if you can." And she was horrified to realize she meant what she said. "You can rule with an iron fist, and if you instill enough fear into people, you can certainly bring them to heel, but leadership takes more, and I've always believed that you had that ... more. What set you apart from the other Alphas, Alex, was your ability to *feel*. You haven't forced or brutalized your subjects into following you, you have instilled faith and they have followed you out of love, and true earned respect." Danny looked at him, *really* looked at him and asked again, "What has happened to you?"

Alex stiffened. "You, you happened to me, Dennison." Danny frowned and Alex continued. "You truly do not know what is at stake here, do you? I can see by your expression you don't. Have you never wondered why the Grand Dame sent you to me?"

"I needed a Pack far enough away from hers, and an Alpha who wouldn't 'break' me."

"In part, yes, but you were always meant to be mine. The Grand Dame had us paired from the moment of your conception. She saw the potential in your mother to produce an extraordinary daughter, and you did not disappoint. You were the product of many hopes and dreams. There has never been a wolf like you, Dennison, and unless you produce a daughter, there never will be again, you will be the last of your kind. You are a gift, a true gift. But you have done nothing to realize your true potential. In fact you have done everything in your power to run and to hide from yourself. You have denied your wolf, turned your back on your Pack and dismissed me. But you can only run for so long."

"I know that, Alex."

"I don't think you do, Dennison. You are still fighting. You are still attempting to run from yourself. You are still denying me."

"You equate my denying you with running from my wolf? What a crock."

"Is it? As long as you refuse me, you can deny your true wolf self. You can pretend you are not truly wolf, you are not truly an animal at heart, that you do not need to mate, breed and live amongst the Pack."

"And this was part of your lesson?" Danny asked, holding up her arm.

"You agreed to the fight."

"Didn't think you'd try to maim me," she growled out.

"Really? I am certain if the tables were turned you would have done the same thing."

Would she? She had punctured his leg, was that wound so much more different from the one he had inflicted on her? Could she truly blame him for pressing every advantage and using all his physical strength to incapacitate her? Again, the wolf in her understood his actions, but the woman railed against such brutality and cruelty. God, would she never be free of the struggle? Would she have to fight her dual nature forever?

"I will be at your side on Saturday, Alex," Danny murmured, suddenly tired and extremely resigned. "That is what I came to tell you."

"You spoke to the creature."

"I spoke to Savior, and let me just tell you he was very agreeable." Okay, that was stretching the truth just a little bit. He was somewhat agreeable. Well no matter, since he hadn't dislocated her arm, he was definitely on the lower rung of her "Top 10 hate list" than Alex was at this moment. In fact, Alex took the prize right now. He was numero uno, the top cheese. Too bad she couldn't just take him out ... right?

No, no, she had to stop having those thoughts. That was a *very* bad place to put herself. Yes, Alex was an asshole. Yes, most of the time she hated him, and yes, her life would probably be easier without him. But no, she could not begin to entertain thoughts about eliminating her Alpha. Because, in the end, he was her Alpha. And she owed allegiance to her Alpha no matter what.

"The creature allowed you to reschedule your appointment. How magnanimous of him," Alex said sarcastically.

Danny ignored the sarcasm. "Wasn't it though? So, I'll be by your side Saturday, arm in cast and all."

“Do not think I am going to apologize for that, Dennison.”

“Didn’t think you would, didn’t ask you to, doesn’t mean I’m not going to remind you every chance I get.”

Alex smiled slightly. “I would expect nothing less from you. I’m assuming you do not want a rematch.”

Danny snorted. “I think I’ll take a rain check.”

Alex inclined his head. “When you are ready...”

“I know where to find you,” Danny finished.

“I will leave you to your rest now, Dennison.”

Rest, yes, sounded like an excellent idea, even Danny’s beast was agreeing. She would definitely heal faster with just a little bit of sleep. She had a really bad tendency of pushing herself and her wolf too far, too fast.

“Dennison?” Alex stopped and called her name right before exiting the room.

“Yes, Alex?”

“I did not mean to ... hurt you quite as badly as I did.”

And she knew that was Alex’s way of apologizing without really apologizing.

“Okay, Alex. It’s all right.” And even though it wasn’t, she felt strangely compelled to give him a measure of peace.

God, she *was* going soft.

Chapter Five

Why the hell was she freaking out about this? It was like any other outing. This was just another night.

Danny yanked the pins out of her hair for the umpteenth time and swore. She hated it. Her hair looked like it had been set with a blender and she was out of ideas.

"This is totally stupid," she muttered, staring at her reflection. Why was she behaving like some idiotic high school kid with her first crush? It was just Savior. *Just* Savior, God that was laughable. Savior, with his beautiful eyes, incredible smile, amazing body and devastatingly deep soul ... there was nothing *just* about him. "Okay, I'm just going like this, if he doesn't like it, too bad!" She pulled her hair into a ponytail and wrinkled her nose. She had been going for Angelina Jolie, what she got was the ugly sister of Sandra Bullock. Yeah, she was looking way too Nancy girl for her liking. She could add some more black eyeliner, but was that too aggressive for a date? Oh God, she was just getting worse. What the hell did she know about dating? She didn't even know what sort of makeup was appropriate.

"Dennison?" The soft voice called from the door.

"What?" Danny barked, turning around. Why was someone bothering her now? She was having a mini crisis. She didn't need anyone witnessing it. April was standing in the doorframe, eyes wide. "Oh, hey, what are you doing here? And why didn't you knock?"

"I did knock, Dennison. You, uh, didn't answer."

"Oh." Danny frowned. She *had* been in the midst of talking to herself. "Okay, what are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see how your arm was doing?"

"Actually, fine." Danny thrust her arm into April's face. "You see, good as new."

April gently took the proffered arm and turned it. She kneaded the flesh carefully and nodded in approval. "Looks good, is there any stiffness?"

Danny shook her head. "Nope."

"Wonderful. I guess I'll be going now." She turned to leave when Danny called her back.

"Hey, wait. I have a question to ask you."

"Yes?"

How did she put this? And was there anyway to ask without sounding like a complete imbecile? "Is my makeup stupid?"

"I'm sorry, what?"

"My makeup, is it stupid?"

April cleared her throat. "You look lovely, Dennison."

"Danny."

"Excuse me?"

"Call me Danny, I prefer it."

"All right, Danny, your makeup looks lovely."

"Lovely," Danny grimaced, "I want it to look, uh, look..."

"Yes?"

"Well what sort of makeup do you do when you go on a date," Danny asked.

“Well, our coloring is very different, Danny, I doubt what I do on my face would work on yours.”

Danny raked her gaze over April, really taking her in. The little healer had strawberry blonde hair and light green eyes. Her cheekbones were high, her complexion smooth and pale as porcelain and she had a splattering of freckles across the bridge of her pert nose.

“Well, goodie for you, you don’t need any makeup,” Danny ground out.

“That’s lovely of you to say, but we can all use a little help once in a while.” April grinned and came to stand by Danny’s side. “You seem a little flustered, Danny. How can I help?”

“I want to look approachable, but I still want to be me.”

“Can I see what you have?”

Danny brought April over to the counter where her makeup was spread out. It looked like a refugee camp. There were bottles of mascara, eye shadow, lip liner and lipstick, some with caps on, some half empty, most haphazardly strewn about.

“My goodness,” April murmured, fingering a bottle of liquid liner. “Let’s see what we can do about this.”

* * * *

“Wow,” Danny murmured, “how did you do it?”

“It wasn’t difficult. You didn’t need a lot.”

“Even so,” Danny continued to stare at her reflection, amazed at the transformation, “I couldn’t do it.”

April smiled. “I’ve had some practice.”

Danny raised an eyebrow.

“Sisters, I have three. We’ve always played dress-up and done one another’s makeup.”

“You’re good, really good.” Sisters, what would it be like to have sisters? There had been no one in Danny’s life she could lean on for “girlie” things. How would her life be today if she had had someone like April to play dress-up with, to talk about boys with ... to rely on?

Danny sighed and shook such thoughts away. It didn’t do any good to think about things she couldn’t change, it just depressed her. And God knew she didn’t need to be depressed right now.

“Thank you, but it’s like I said, you didn’t need much ... you have a gorgeous face, Danny.”

Danny snorted. “Thanks, April. I couldn’t have done it without you, really.” It was true. She had plenty of experience schlepping on makeup. It always came out a little costumey, but she had never really cared before. It was just makeup, and it was just going on her face, no big deal. Tonight was different though. She was meeting Savior for a date. And she didn’t want to just schlep on some face paint and call it an evening. She wanted to look nice. She wanted to look ... normal, like a normal girl would look on her first date with her suitor.

“Do you need anything else?” April asked.

“Uh...” Danny thought about the outfit she was going to wear tonight. It was black, skintight and very sexy. “What do you think about that?” she asked April, pointing to the

outfit that was laid out on the bed.

“What is it?”

Danny scowled. “It’s a bodysuit.”

“Oh?” April frowned slightly.

“You don’t like it,” Danny said coolly.

“No, I mean, yes, I mean, it looks very ... uh ... nice.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Well, this is what you are going to wear tonight?”

“Uh-huh.”

“It doesn’t really go with the makeup.”

Danny blinked. “Doesn’t a bodysuit go with anything?”

April laughed. “I’ve never heard anyone say that before.”

“So, it’s a no, right?”

“Can I see what else you have?”

“Help yourself.” Danny led April over to her closet.

“There isn’t much here.” April frowned as she perused the near empty closet.

“I have more clothes in the drawers.”

“What sort of clothes?”

“Jeans, shorts, tank tops, some old sweaters...”

“Stop, stop already.” April held up a hand. “Don’t you own a dress?”

“I may own one.”

“One dress?”

“I’m not a dress sort of girl,” Danny grumbled, putting her hands on her hips defiantly.

“So I gather. Well, let us see what we can do, all right?” April began to rummage through Danny’s closet. She pulled out some tops and some pants and presented such a silly picture, head buried in clothes, ass sticking out, Danny just had to laugh. “No laughing. Or I’ll leave you to fend for yourself,” April said.

Danny nodded, but was still grinning when she said, “Fine.”

“My goodness, you really aren’t a dress sort of girl.”

“Listen, dresses just get in the way. They really don’t suit when you’re running through a forest, chasing down a demon or summoning some upper level entity. Not to mention, where the hell would I put my knives?”

April turned slightly, and raised an eyebrow. “Your knives?”

“Uh-huh, they’re like an American Express card, you know, ‘don’t leave home without it’, I’ve got to have my knives.”

“Have you thought about a holster?”

“Yeah, I couldn’t really conceal it under a dress.”

“Depends on the dress, Danny. I’ve known men who could conceal enough of an arsenal for a small war under their kilts.” April sighed. “Listen, how about I take you shopping in town?”

“Shopping?”

“Yes, shopping, you go into a store, look around, try some stuff on and then if you like it, you buy it ... shopping.”

Danny narrowed her eyes. “Look, Miss Smarty Pants, I know what the hell shopping is. I was just surprised you offered to take me shopping.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Well, if you haven’t noticed, people hate me.” April laughed. Danny frowned. “No, really, they hate me. Not like I fucking care, but, well, why would you want to hang out with someone that is universally disliked ... oh, and is repeatedly the object of attempted assassination?”

“Danny...”

“Come on, April, spending time with me is actually suicidal.”

April handed Danny some items of clothing. “Try these together.”

Danny looked down at the skirt, leggings and top and blinked. “You want me to wear the skirt over the leggings?”

“Yes.”

“Listen, I’m not trying to be difficult ... okay, maybe a little difficult, but I didn’t buy the leggings to wear with a skirt, they’re totally different items.”

“Trust me, it’s the rage right now.”

“I don’t want to be, *the rage*, I want to be me.”

“Try it.” April’s voice brooked no argument.

Danny was pleasantly surprised at April’s hard tone of voice, maybe she wasn’t such a goody-two-shoes after all. She had a little backbone to her.

“Fine, I’ll try it on.” Danny quickly donned the proffered items. She took in her reflection in the full-length mirror and blinked in surprise. She didn’t look totally horrible. In fact, it actually kind of worked together.

“You look fantastic.” April grinned. “I’ll take you out this weekend, and we can work on getting you some mix and match pieces, okay?”

Shopping with April? Mix and match pieces? What the hell was a mix and match piece?

“All you need are a couple of items to spruce up your wardrobe, Danny.”

“I don’t think about my clothing too much.”

“I can tell.”

“Hey!” Danny wrinkled her nose when she saw April’s grin. “We’re wolves. What the hell do we need fashion sense for?”

“I believe a very wise woman once said, are we not also women?”

Danny hated hearing her words thrown back at her. “Cute, real cute.” She checked the time and groaned. “I’ve got to go.”

“To the vampire,” April spoke solemnly.

“Yeah, to the vampire.” Danny was clearly saying, *want to make something out of it?*

“How do you do it?” April asked. Her eyes were troubled and her voice was soft with bewilderment.

“How do I do what?”

“How do you cavort with the dead? How do you,” her voice broke, “love it?”

Love him? How did she love Savior? God, if she could answer that question wouldn’t her life be so much simpler? She wouldn’t feel so torn. She wouldn’t want to run and hide half the time. Yes. She could see it. She could see how the defenses she had built up were now like stone fortresses blocking everything and everyone in her path. But she didn’t know how to break them down. And just when she thought she was taking a step forward she seemed to take two steps back. Everything was so ... hard. How long could she continue fighting ... fighting herself at every turn?

"I need to go," she finally said. When she reached the door she turned back to face April. When she spoke her voice was a near whisper. "It's not about *doing* anything. Sometimes I guess it's just about feeling. And I suddenly find I don't have control over everything." She sighed. "And maybe that's a good thing."

God help her ... and maybe she was making the biggest mistake of her life.

* * * *

The music was pulsing and exploding from every corner of the packed room. Under dim lights men and women swayed and dipped low, their bodies entwining like clinging vines. In small nooks and secretive corners shadows lingered and carried out dark deeds.

Danny drew her protective cloak around her. It was a cloak she always carried with her, one sewed together from the remnants of her very aggressive, obstinate and defensive soul. She could do nothing but hold it close, it was her security blanket. She didn't know how she would survive without it.

"Hello, pretty." The voice that spoke was sultry and followed by an accompanying caress.

Danny slashed the intruder with an icy glare. "Get your hands off me." Vampire, he was obviously a vampire, she knew the moment he touched her.

"I would do as the lady asks. And, if you do not, I will remove your hand myself, and take it as payment for your atrocious behavior."

"Hello, Savior." Danny snorted. "Your members seem to be lacking in the area of good manners."

Savior raised one patrician brow. "Indeed. There is little excuse for his poor behavior. The only defense he has is he is new to my domain."

"Master," the fledgling, having realized his mistake, was now on his knees, "Master, I did not realize she was..."

"Mine? Yes, she is mine, and you dared to touch her, dared to make overtures to her."

"I did not mean, I did not mean to..."

"A little too late for your pitiful excuses, don't you think?" Savior pulled his minion up by his neck and stared coolly into his eyes. "I could flay you within an inch of your death, here and now, why should I keep you with me?"

"Master, all that I am is yours. I will never make such a mistake again. I am your willing servant."

Savior cocked his head to one side and a small enigmatic smile crawled up his beautiful face. "What say you, my *ashleya*, shall I keep him with me, or do I end his existence?"

"Ending his existence here would probably be messy," she said dryly. "Go on, give him another chance. His hand didn't stray far." Of course, if it had, she wouldn't have given Savior the opportunity to take his fledgling out, she would have done it herself.

"My *ashleya* is very forgiving. Go now, I'm tired of seeing your face in my presence." The moment the vampire was gone, Savior turned to Danny and dazzled her with the full magnitude of his beauty and brilliant smile. "*Ashleya*."

"I'd almost forgotten how uh, interesting your place is, Savior."

"I'm so glad you like it."

"Didn't say that." She cast her gaze around the room. "Have you done some

remodeling?”

“A little.”

“Yeah,” her voice was dry as dust, “I can tell.”

“Do you not like my choices, *ashleya*?”

Danny shrugged. “It’s not my place. I don’t really care what you do to it.”

“Ah, love, you seem a little, shall we say, grumpy?”

“I’m not grumpy,” she grumbled.

“Come, love, I’ve had a lovely meal prepared for us.” Savior took her by the arm and led her through the heavy throng of people.

“Steak?”

He laughed, a rich, hearty laugh. “Perhaps.”

Yeah, she could really go for a steak right about now. In fact, she’d do just about anything to have one ... a nice, juicy, bleeding steak. Oh yeah.

“Welcome, my love.”

Danny looked around. They were now alone, no longer surrounded by the mass of creatures both dead and alive, and the room they were in was lovely. Situated in the middle of the room was a table laden with food. Golden goblets and a truly beautiful dinner service finished off the impressive display.

“God, that smells good.” Danny made a beeline for the table. She lifted the lid off the first tray and began drooling there and then. The tray held a dozen succulent steaks. “Oh, Savior, that is a work of art.”

Savior laughed. “So happy to know it takes so little to please you.”

Danny continued taking the lids off the dinner trays. There were steaks, chicken breasts swimming in a rich brown sauce, fried shrimp and whipped potatoes, to name but a few of the delicacies teasing her heightened senses.

She popped a shrimp into her mouth and moaned in delight. “So good.”

“Please.” Savior motioned for her to sit.

Danny took a seat and her gaze darted furiously around the table. She didn’t even know where to start.

Savior began to load a pretty dinner plate up with food. Once finished, he placed the plate in front of her.

“Please, my love, eat.”

A small smile cracked her face. “Don’t mind if I do.” Danny began to shovel forkfuls of food into her mouth. She was certain she probably looked like a chipmunk, what with her cheeks stuffed as they were, but frankly she didn’t care. “So,” she said around a mouthful of whipped potatoes, “let’s talk about your vampire shindig.”

“My what?”

“Your *Capthedox*.”

“My love, we haven’t even finished supper.”

“Didn’t know you were eating.”

“Your pleasure is my pleasure.”

Danny snorted. “My, my, aren’t you proper.”

Savior bowed his head slightly. “I try.”

“So, let’s get our business out of the way.”

“So serious, my *ashleya*. If you wish to discuss the *Capthedox* right now, we shall. What is it you would like to know? What burning questions do you have, for I know you

do have them.”

“What does it mean to stand as your companion?”

“You do get straight to the point.”

“No need to mince words.” Danny stuffed another shrimp into her mouth. “Well?”

“It means you shall act as my companion, my dear *ashleya*. As you already stand as such and bear my mark.”

“You’re telling me everything and yet nothing at all. What the hell does standing as your companion *mean*, Savior. What is expected of me?”

“Very little. You will not be at the Capthedox in a manner such as I, or the other masters, for that matter. You are more like an honored guest.”

“Guest, my ass,” she muttered. “You told me holding a *Capthedox* is rare. Why now?”

“We are bearing witness to an honored addition. Sergei Valdor wishes to bring his newest companion to the Council and have her acknowledged.”

“You’re holding a party because some vampire got some?”

Savior cleared his throat. “What a lovely turn of phrase; got some.”

Danny rolled her eyes. “Whatever. We’ve already established I’m not nearly as eloquent as you. Can we get on with it? What’s the deal with this Sergei guy? Do you always hold a *Capthedox* when some vampire gets a new companion?” She would think that was a lot of trouble for such a mundane occurrence.

“Nay, *ashleya*, we do not always meet when one of our own brings a friend into the fold.”

Yeah, Danny thought. He definitely spoke prettier than she did.

“But Sergei is different. He is of a very old and much honored line. He has not had a companion in over three hundred years, and the Council remains curious about the woman who captured his heart.”

“Uh-huh.” It still seemed like a lot of trouble in Danny’s mind. But whatever, they were vampires. They weren’t to be understood. “So I’m going to be your arm candy.”

“You, my flower, will be a sparkling adornment; there is no beauty greater than yours. You shall bring light to the otherwise dim hall.”

“La la la, blah, blah, blah.” Danny made a gagging sound. “God, it’s worse than I thought. It’s like you’re bringing me for show and tell.”

“You seem less than pleased about this turn of events, *ashleya*. You aren’t thinking about backing out?”

She would love to back out ... but she couldn’t, she wouldn’t. She had given her word, and although it had been established that she was a bitch and much too stubborn for her own good, her word was something she lived by. You had to live your life with as much honor as you could.

“I’m not backing out.”

“Wonderful.” Savior’s eyes were all but glowing. “I am exceedingly happy. It is as I have said, your presence will be the flame that melts all those around you.”

“Enough with the flowery words, Savior. I don’t think I can take anymore. You’re making me gag.”

“My words are making you ill?” He looked genuinely bewildered.

“What you’re saying is making me gag. I don’t deal well with all the, uh, poetry shit.”

“Ah, I see now, you are uncomfortable with my sweet words and endearments.”

“Yeah, exactly.” Somehow he could always put it in perspective, and it always came out better when said by Savior.

“I cannot help myself, *ashleya*. When I see you, I am compelled to wax poetic.”

Danny saw the gleam in his eyes and frowned. “Now you’re just pulling my leg.”

Savior grinned. “Perhaps just a bit, my love. I must admit there is a certain fun in watching you squirm. And you are perhaps the only woman I have known who would prefer to fight her man, rather than hear him praise her beauty and talent.”

Oh, how nice of him to have a laugh at her expense, Danny thought. “I don’t like false platitudes, Savior. They are a waste of valuable time.”

“And what would make you assume they are false?”

“Men in any shape or size, and of any creed, only give when they wish to get something in return. No man praises a woman without thinking he can get her into the sack, or without wanting to get her into the sack.”

“You are such a cynical thing, my love.”

“Cynical?” Danny shrugged. “Maybe, I tend to think of myself as being a realist. I live in the here and now, and deal with tangibles, Savior. I think we’d all get a lot more done if we were realistic in our way of thinking.”

“You are a fine one to talk.”

Danny narrowed her eyes. “Excuse me?”

“Do you not still rage with your beast?”

“One thing has nothing to do with the other.” Danny spoke, and her voice was dry as dust.

“I believe you are very much mistaken, *ashleya*. You speak of realism and being honest with yourself. If you were completely honest with yourself you would feel less torment over your split soul. Do you not still fight your wolf? I can see the fight in your eyes, my love.”

“Didn’t realize that part of our date would be spent on your couch, Doctor.”

“This insight you get for free,” Savior said with a smile.

“Can we drop it? I’d like to finish my dinner in peace.”

Savior gave a Gaelic shrug. “Your wish is my command.”

“If only that were true,” she muttered. She could tell by the look on his face he had heard her whispered words.

“Are you done, my love?”

Danny looked down at her now empty plate and nodded. “For now.”

“Wonderful, then I have something I would like to show you.” Savior offered her his arm.

Danny took the proffered arm and swiped a roll from the table with the other.

“Do not worry, you may have as much food as you would like, my love. We will return.”

“Great.” As she brought the roll to her mouth she winced. Her shoulder was beginning to protest movement. The pain had come on suddenly and left just as quickly as it had come.

Savior stilled immediately. He turned to her in the darkened hall. “What happened?”

“What?”

“What happened to you, *ashleya*?”

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You winced just now."

"It's nothing."

"Do not lie to me."

Even in the dim light of the hall, Danny could see his eyes. They seemed to burn with unsuppressed anger.

"I'm not." She wasn't. It really was nothing. A little ache here and there could hardly be considered worthy of a discussion.

"You suffered some pain. What happened?"

"For fuck's sake, Savior, it was *nothing*. Alex and I had a little misunderstanding. We're good now."

"The Alpha ... did this?" There was a cold, hard edge to Savior's words. And Danny did not like what she saw in his eyes.

"Savior," she said warningly.

"The Alpha hurt you."

"My Alpha." Danny stressed the "my" intentionally. Savior had to understand this was something that would be dealt with, but by Alex and herself.

"I will..."

"Do nothing," she cut him off. "This is none of your affair, got it? Wolves fight, Savior. Hell, vampires fight. All dominants struggle for control. This is nothing new, and I have suffered worse. You will stay out of it."

"You are my companion."

That had not been determined yet. She still wasn't able to admit any absolutes to herself. No, she wasn't comfortable yet, not entirely. She wasn't sure what she was to Savior. But she did know one thing, she had to keep some of her guard up. She couldn't allow him in all the way.

"Stay out of it," she said again.

"I protect what is mine, *ashleya*."

"I don't need your damn protection, Savior."

"You will have it all the same. You bear my mark. You are tied to me, and I will not relinquish my claim."

"Claim, you can goddamn claim all you want to, Savior, but it won't change a thing. I have free will, read my lips, I have f-r-e-e w-i-l-l." She punctuated each letter and poked him in the chest while doing so. "And your stupid mark, it's just a damn scar, it doesn't mean anything." God, maybe if she said it enough she could make it so.

"You think not?" Savior grabbed her arm and drew her to him. "You are greatly mistaken if that is your thought, my love. You and I are tied together. Nothing on earth nor in the heavens will make it different. You are mine!"

What about Hell? Did Hell count? "I don't belong to anyone." She pulled away and glared at him. "This isn't like a land race. You can't just stake a fucking claim. The more you press this, the angrier I get and the more resistant I become."

"Yes, I can feel your resistance."

"I bet you can."

Savior bowed his head then. "I believe you are right, my *ashleya*. It does not seem this is the best way to go about it. I find though, with you I cannot seem to help myself. There is this ... burning fire and roaring monster that lives within me, and when I think of

someone hurting you, or the thought of your possibly leaving me, that monster comes out.”

Okay, a nice honest response, and sort of sweet. “Just leash him in, Savior,” she said dryly. “You’re here, I’m here, we’re exploring ... well ... exploring some dynamics in our lives. It’s all good. Why make problems we don’t need?”

“I bow to your superior wisdom.”

Superior wisdom ... yeah, she liked the sound of that. “Now what was it that you wanted to show me?” Definitely time to change the subject.

Savior’s smile was positively radiant. He motioned to the large steel door they were now standing in front of and cocked his head. “After you, my love.”

Danny frowned and gave the door a shove. It remained unmoved. “Very funny. Do I need to say some magic words? Or better yet, should I get a battering ram?”

With a flourish Savior produced a key. “All you need is a key, the right key.” He handed the key over and Danny inserted it into the small lock. “Now, my love, try it now.”

With a sigh, Danny pushed the door open. What she saw took her breath away. “Holy shit!”

Savior laughed. “Quite the reaction.”

There were books everywhere. Packed into every corner, every crevice, there were books. It was like a library on steroids.

Moving her hands delicately over the cover of one dusty edition of *Demon Calling*, Danny could not stop the awe she knew had to be apparent on her face. It was almost too much to take in. “How?” was all she managed to get out.

“I have been here a long time, my *ashleya*.”

“Not an answer, Savior. This room, I’ve never seen anything like it.” She hated to admit it, but it was true. Even the local covens didn’t have a room like this, and she had seen her fair share of impressive Knowledge rooms—the rooms that the covens stored their Grimoires and other assorted books. “How have you managed to collect all of these?” Her eyes lit up when she came across a beautifully bound edition of *Weathering the Storm*.

“I guess I am a bit of a collector.”

“Of rare and very powerful books,” Danny murmured, as she checked out an incantations book she had been looking for for several years. “I’m going to take this one, okay?”

Savior inclined his head. “Of course. That is why I brought you here, my *ashleya*. I wished for you to see if there was anything you could use.” He chuckled at her expression.

“Anything I could use? You’ve got to be kidding me, Savior. You had to have known I would go bananas in this room. Why has it taken you so long to bring me here?”

Savior gently caressed one of the leather bound volumes. “These have been a source of great comfort to me, *ashleya*. When you were not here to fill the void, there were times I believed only the great wisdom, knowledge and power of those who came before ... and knew more, could keep me from true oblivion.” He turned away from her then. “Time can be pestilence. Eternity,” he laughed mirthlessly, “there is nothing God given about eternity. Indeed, He mocks us, *ashleya*. When the dark knows you better than you know yourself, what do you do? How do you bear it? Perhaps this was the part of me that I

wished to keep from you. Am I not allowed a secret? You see it now, my love, now when we are beginning to explore these deeper feelings. I wanted to share this with you now."

"Why, Savior?" Why would he hide this from her? This vulnerability was ... *beautiful*. There was something so very human about it. "You could have shown me before." *You could have told me this before*, was what she wanted to say, but she held her tongue.

"Why do you continue to keep parts of yourself from me?"

"This isn't about me," Danny snapped. Why was he turning this around on her?

"I think this is very much about you, *ashleya*."

She didn't think, she just acted, and threw the heavy book she was holding at his head.

Savior materialized at her side. His breath teased her ear. "Now that was not very nice, my love."

"Blow me."

"You are quite impossible," Savior said right before he wrapped his hand around her neck.

Okay. She was getting really fed up with men grabbing her by her neck. Danny elbowed him in the stomach, stepped down on his foot and sprang out of his grasp. It wasn't the best of moves, nor the prettiest, but it got the job done.

"Stay the hell away from me." Now she was just mad. All sense of understanding and pity had gone the way of the Dodo.

Savior sighed; his body had gone completely rigid. "You just will not give an inch, will you *ashleya*."

"When you manhandle me, no!"

"Nay, you will not give an inch, ever." He frowned then. "I begin to wonder if it is hopeless."

Danny blinked. "What?"

"I am beginning to wonder if this, this is hopeless."

"Now what are you talking about?" She took several more steps back. Although she wasn't sure why she did so, there was nothing menacing about his face now. In fact, there was almost a simple resignation written plainly across it. "Listen, hot shot, who the hell wants or likes being grabbed by the goddamn neck? Are you really mad because I defended myself?" She had never seen such a cool and detached look on her vampire lover's face before, it was startling and rather unsettling.

"I wished for us to have a beautiful evening together," Savior said softly. "I wanted you to see a part of me that has been hidden these many long years. It seems even my careful planning can be undone by your fury."

Her fury? Sure he had pissed her off, but it was his fault. He was the Neanderthal that had gone and grabbed her. Why was he acting this way?

"Savior," Danny began, only to be cut off.

"I find myself suddenly tired." Savior's voice had become even softer, it was now a mere whisper. "We can do this some other time."

Danny blinked owlishly. Had he just gone and dismissed her? "All right, what the heck just happened here?" She was truly and absolutely bewildered.

"I have come to some realizations this eve, and they require some ... thought."

"So you're getting rid of me," Danny said bluntly.

“I am asking you to give me the time I require to work some things out.”

“Fine. Have all the time you want.” She headed for the door, and stopped when she reached it. She turned halfway and asked, “Are we,” she hesitated a moment, “through?”

“No, *ashleya*. We are not through. We are, as I said, taking a bit of time. Time, may I remind you, you always seem to want.”

She nodded curtly and left, and though she knew she should be happy about this development, she felt oddly bereft.

Chapter Six

This was what she had wanted. She had wanted to make her life less complicated. She had wanted to get rid of the domineering, overbearing men who tried to control her. She had wanted fewer emotional ties. Savior had just handed to her on a silver platter everything she wanted. He had given to her what she had been dreaming of for months: freedom.

Hadn't he just given her freedom? It sounded as if he had just severed ties with her. No one actually asked for time and meant it, right? When they said they needed time that was a brush-off. So, Savior had just dumped her.

Danny laughed a brittle laugh. Dumped her? It was laughable. They had never even established what they were to one another, and here she was thinking of it as a breakup. Humans broke up. Humans cared about relationships and emotional stuff like that. But Danny wasn't fully human, she never had been and she never would be, and Savior definitely couldn't be classified as human. So why in the world were they trying to have a human relationship?

Oh God, a sickening thought hit her. Was this all her fault? Had she been trying to make Savior into something he could never be to her? Was she trying to see traits in him he could never possess? Had she been unwittingly looking for the human in him when it was so obvious he could never have the humanity she sought?

"Well, fuck me," she muttered. She knew she could be an obstinate bitch sometimes, but it hadn't hit her until just now how unreasonable she could be to boot. Well, sometimes she realized the unreasonableness of her nature, but usually she pushed the thought aside because frankly it got in the way of kicking someone's ass. The old saying, *it's easier to blame someone else than yourself*, well, it was a saying for a reason. There was definite truth to those words. No it didn't excuse Savior's Neanderthal behavior. He shouldn't have grabbed her (unless she wanted to be grabbed, or they were in the midst of some really kinky sex) but here she was thinking he should see how caveman his behavior was, and how ridiculous he was acting, when it was suddenly so clear to her he couldn't see, he literally couldn't see. Just as Alex was driven by his wolf and his Alpha nature, Savior was driven by his beast. Savior's beast was not the wolf, but it too craved blood and was ruled by baser needs.

"Hello, Danny, what can I do for you?"

Danny stopped short. There in front of her was Carlton West. He was propped up by pillows and had a book in his hands. She hadn't even realized she had made her way to his room. That was how distracted she had been by her tumultuous thoughts.

"I'm sorry," she said as she turned to leave.

"Stay, Danny. Come, take a seat."

She hesitated for a moment before making her way to the side of his bed and sitting down.

"You look troubled."

"I'm not," she said quickly.

Carlton snorted. "Uh-huh, right. What happened?"

"Nothing you want to hear about, believe me."

Carlton placed his large hand over hers; it was warm and oddly soothing to her frayed nerves. "Let me decide for myself, talk to me, Danny."

For some reason, perhaps it really was a complete meltdown of her nerves, she told him. She spilled out all that had transpired this eve (holding back only any mentioning of Savior's remarkable, secret room) and bared it open for Carlton. She finished in a rush, and didn't even realize she had been squeezing Carlton's hand until he extricated it from her bruising grip to cup her cheek gently.

"It is better, you know."

"What?"

"You are well rid of him, Danny."

"What do you know of it?" she snapped. Her heart felt uncommonly bruised and sadly shaken.

"I know we should not have dealings with the dead. Your creature is not one of us, Danny. He simply cannot understand all that you are, and you, you will never be able to understand the death and dark he clings to."

Death and dark? She had swum in that pool. She had entered a place of unimaginable dark and she had almost been tempted to stay in its embrace. The dark seemed to call to her. She did not always wish to hear it, in fact, she often railed against it, but the truth remained, a piece of her craved that dark. Was it not evident by how easily and how strongly Asmodai reeled her in? A part of Asmodai held her fast, a part of him made her love and need and feel fiercely. She could deny it till the cows came home, but denying would not make the truth any less true.

"You know nothing of this, West," Danny murmured pulling back from his caress ... and he didn't. For she could never tell him, she could never tell him that she, a wolf, a creature of the elements and of the earth, felt a piece of her longing to call the dark home. She would be an abomination. Hell, she was already falling into the category of total abomination.

"I know you seem upset over this latest turn of events when you should be celebrating your release, your freedom. Your creature cannot hold a place in your life, and the sooner you understand and come to terms with it, the sooner you will feel the rightness of the situation, and find some liberation."

Danny was mulling over his words when she felt his hand snake down to mold itself around her breast. She turned an amused face to meet his.

"I thought to take your mind off your worries, Danny girl."

"Oh?" Danny inched closer. Well, why not? He was here, she was here. He had already proven to be a very good lover. There could be nothing wrong with having a fuck buddy, wasn't that what humans called those they used for friendship and occasional bouts of sex? "I hate to think I was disturbing your peace, and just when you seemed so into your book."

Carlton threw the book aside. It hit the wall with a soft thud. "What book?"

She laughed and quickly straddled him. "I find myself in a very odd mood tonight, West."

"And what sort of mood would that be, Danny girl?"

Danny latched her mouth onto Carlton's neck and bit, hard. When she pulled back, there was barely controlled fire dancing in Carlton's eyes, he was obviously highly aroused.

"You are more wolf than woman tonight," Carlton whispered, his hands pulling, and kneading her full breasts.

"Yes, I believe you are right." Danny pulled the thin coverlet off Carlton and smiled widely when she revealed his naked form. "I like how you think."

"Clothes are bothersome," he said simply.

"I agree." She trailed her fingers down his chest. "Especially when one is eager to get beneath the wrapping." Danny stripped quickly, and watched as his eyes drank her in. Her beast was already beginning to hum. It was singing a familiar song, a needed song. It knew what she was about to engage in and it urged her on. She moved down his body until she came to the hard flesh that proclaimed his manhood. It stood ramrod straight and was as perfect as a carved statue of a Grecian god.

Danny blew gently across the rounded head, and smiled when she heard Carlton's quick intake of breath. "You are beautiful, West."

"Men are not beautiful, Danny," he said, his voice gravelly.

Danny shook her head. "Oh, you are so wrong, West. Men can certainly be beautiful, you are beautiful." She licked his satiny flesh. He was smooth and perfect.

Carlton arched his back and let out a groan. "I ... I ... I am a wolf. A wolf does not wish to be anything but its own creature. I do not wish to be beautiful," he finished hoarsely.

"Too bad." Danny sucked the tip of his cock into her mouth. She felt his hard flesh jump the second it hit the wetness and warmth of her. She took a little more.

"Mother take me," Carlton gasped. "You are incredible."

Danny didn't break from her assault on his senses. She continued to suck, adding her tongue to the fray. When he had grown impossibly large within her mouth, she relaxed, and allowed him to slip (with some work) down her throat. Her mouth was incredibly stretched, full, and it was wonderful.

Suddenly she found herself on her back, Carlton had seamlessly flipped her over. *He* was now straddling *her*.

"Your mouth is exquisite torture, Danny girl. But I need more." There was heat in his words.

Danny smiled impishly. "Patience is a virtue, West."

Carlton sought out her wet heat. He inserted two thick fingers and smiled when her flesh enveloped him immediately. "Patience never met you, Danny Lee."

Danny gasped and arched up to meet his seeking fingers. "Lord, that feels good. More, West ... give me more." She saw his eyes go molten.

"Whatever the lady wishes," he said, adding two more fingers to play.

Her body was rapidly overheating. She could feel the flames licking her body, and she wanted more, she wanted it all. She reached up, and digging her fingers into his arm, dragged him down toward her.

"I want you to fuck me, West, fuck me hard!"

"Spread those pretty legs of yours," Carlton growled. Danny did as he bade, and let out a scream when he was inside her. Fast, furious, shockingly hard, he had entered her like the warrior wolf that he was.

"Carlton..." Danny locked her legs around his waist and pressed up to meet him. She raked her nails down his back and let out another short scream as he began to pump in and out of her aching body.

“Molten lava,” Carlton ground out. “Yes, Danny, use those claws on me.”

The fire was building. It was becoming unbearable. Danny heard the hot, slick, slap of flesh as they came together and the fire raged on.

“So hot, on fire, I’m on fire...” Danny gasped as Carlton’s mouth met her neck and his teeth dug into her supple flesh. Teeth, blood, flesh. Yes, she wanted it. Her beast was crowing with happiness and triumph. It was being fed, in more ways than one, and it approved. Carlton’s body pressed even further and Danny moaned in pained delight as he hit her cervix. “Yesssss...” she hissed, ignoring the flames that licked her body and threatened even now to overtake her. “Yesssss...” One, two, three spasms shook her body as her climax ripped through her.

Carlton growled against her neck, fangs sank in deeper and claws extracted. With a roar of triumph, he erupted.

* * * *

Danny stroked Carlton’s sweaty brow. She smiled into his laughing eyes. She felt good. Loose, sated and very, very good. Her body was still on fire, in fact, it was worse now than it had been a moment earlier, but still she smiled.

“That was wonderful,” Carlton murmured.

“Yes, yes it was.” Danny frowned when a sudden sharp pain shot through her. She rubbed her temples. A painful migraine had just taken hold.

“Are you all right?” Carlton asked, placing a hand on her shoulder and squeezing gently.

Danny waved his concern away. “I’m fine, just a bit of a headache.”

“Did I fuck you too hard?”

She rolled her eyes. “There isn’t a fuck I can’t take,” she shot out tartly.

“Well, well, was there a challenge in your voice?”

Danny grinned then. “Listen, thanks, it was terrific, but I should get going now.” She blinked when the hold on her shoulder tightened.

“Stay,” Carlton said softly.

“I can’t.”

“Yes, yes you can.”

“West, what did I tell you the first time we did this?”

“It was just sex.”

“Exactly.” Danny moved out of his grasp. “My mind hasn’t changed, nothing has changed.” The pain was becoming worse, she now felt as if there were blows being dealt to her head in short succession, and the fire, oh God, the fire was horrible.

“Danny?”

She heard Carlton calling out to her, but the voice was dim and muffled ... and then there was nothing, nothing but the fire.

* * * *

He cannot have you.

Danny remained absolutely still. She was standing on the edge of a mountain overlooking a sea of tumultuous fire. Her migraine was gone. In fact, she welcomed the heat. It filled her body.

I will not allow him to have you.

Hello, Asmodai. Danny did not need to turn around to know that he was at her back. She could feel his power, his scorching heat, as it assaulted her. *You couldn't just use the damn phone?*

You wished to come as much as I wished to have you here. You would not be here otherwise. You could not come to the Burning Fields unless you welcomed the fire.

I did not ask to be burned alive, Asmodai. You were shredding my mind like lettuce. I did not ask for you to do such a terrible thing. Asmodai's silence was answer enough for her. *Why, Asmodai? Why did you hurt me?*

You were with that ... man, he spat out.

You're jealous? This is about fucking jealousy? You ripped through my mind because you were upset that I had sex with West? Are you for real?

He cannot have you, you are not his.

I'm not yours, either. Dammit, Asmodai, it's just sex. I need it. My wolf needs it. I'm not turning celibate because we happen to be having a, uh, long distance relationship. Long-distance relationship? She almost felt like laughing at how ridiculous it sounded. They were having something, and whatever they were having was extremely dysfunctional. Dysfunction, yes it was definitely the story of her life.

I need you, he said simply.

Danny stiffened. His words tore through her. She did not wish him to need her. God, she didn't want anyone to need her. Needing people sucked.

Asmodai...

No, my love, listen, I am sorry if I hurt you. It was not my intent to cause you harm. What I said before was true, if you had not had your defenses down and had not welcomed some of the fire, you would not have been able to transition to the Burning Fields. But, I did cause you pain. I worsened the transition by forcing your passage too quickly. I did not think, I could not see past the rage, my love.

How did you know I was with West?

You and I are linked. You have my fire, my love. I can find you, even in the darkest pits, and you will always be able to sense and find me. When you are vulnerable, as you are when you are engaged in love play, your barriers are down, and I can link even more intimately with you. I reached for you, and found you in the arms of that man.

Well, this development sucked ass. She really hated the idea of Asmodai being able to spy on her and play sick little voyeur. It was totally creepy. She knew, once bonded they would have a link. She had a link with Savior. Yeah, she understood a certain link would be established. It was the invasion of privacy that pained her so much. There could be a link, but there could be wall too, right? That's what barriers and fortresses and walls were for. She had to have some privacy. Her mind had to belong to her, and there had to be rules before you entered it Otherwise, what would she have? How would she survive the total ruination of her world? It was in her mind that her world was controlled. In her mind she could pretend she had a total lock on it all. Now Asmodai was taking it all away from her. He was telling her if he pulled enough power, exerted enough control, he could bring her low ... he could bring her to his side. How then did she have any control? It was all a lie. She was a lie.

You are still you, my love. Do not doubt yourself.

How can I not? You just read my mind ... again.

Yes, because you doubt yourself, you are vulnerable. When you are full strength and your heart and mind are one, you are a force to be reckoned with. I cannot penetrate you then, I cannot get to you.

She wanted to believe. God, she needed to believe that was true. She would lose her mind otherwise.

Please don't pull me down here again, Asmodai. If I wish to come, I will. Otherwise you must let me live my life.

I burn, my love, and I fear this flame will eat me whole. I need you with me. I cannot bear the emptiness.

Danny turned to face him then, she turned to face her dark prince. He was so beautiful, so *sad*. She began to reach out to him, and then stopped. She could not afford to touch him now. She could not afford to *feel* now. It would only make the parting all that much harder.

I must leave now, Asmodai.

My love, my amour, my only one.

No, Asmodai. You know I cannot remain here. You bringing me here only makes the pain worse. You know it, I know it. Please, let us not do this to each other.

I cannot let you go, not completely. This is all I have, my amour. This is all I have of you. I cannot ... I cannot...

His voice broke, and Danny lowered her eyes. She could not bear to see the torment present on his face. It broke what little was left of her heart.

Goodbye, Asmodai. Bitch, God, she was such a damn bitch. How could she do this to him? How could she do this to herself? But she did, she cut him off and left him.

* * * *

"Danny, Danny, can you hear me?"

Someone was talking. Someone was calling to her? Who was it, what did they want, and why in God's name were they bothering her?

She just wanted to sleep. She wanted to sink away and let the problems of the world disappear. She was getting so tired of taking one step forward only to be forced two steps back. She could just sleep forever ... just sleep.

No, my amour. I will not let you use me as an excuse. You will wake up now.

Sleep, I just want to sleep, Asmodai.

You will wake up now, Danny, my Danny. You will wake up and you will go on.

Will it ever end, Asmodai? Will this terrible wrenching of my soul ever end?

My love, my beautiful love ... wake up ... wake up ... wake up...

Danny let out a short scream as her eyes shot open. She blinked in surprise. "Sabine? What are you doing here?"

"Oh, thank the Goddess." Sabine's face was ashen.

Danny frowned. "Alex?" Alex was standing right behind Sabine, his face was equally white. "What are you guys doing in my room?"

Sabine laughed and let out a deep sigh. "I think you are going to be all right, Danny."

Danny started to sit up and groaned. Wow, her head ached. She felt like she had a horrible hangover.

"Slowly, take it slow." Sabine put one comforting hand on Danny's back and helped her sit up.

“You guys still haven’t told me what you’re doing in my room.”

“The Alpha called me here when he had no luck in rousing you, Danny,” Sabine answered.

“Rousing me?”

“You were in statis, the deepest of sleep.”

Danny looked past Sabine, Alex was still standing still and silent, his face still white.

“Could I speak with you alone, Sabine?”

“No,” Alex answered.

“Alex, don’t be an ass. Give me some privacy, please?”

“I need to know what happened to you, Dennison.”

Danny nodded. “And I’ll talk to you about it later. Right now I’d like to speak to Sabine alone, please.” Alex seemed to waver, so Danny pressed forth. “Listen, Alex, I feel as if I’ve been hit by a Mack truck. I don’t want to argue with you, I really don’t. Thank you for watching out for me, ‘cause I’m sure you did. And I promise I’ll talk to you a bit later, okay? I just need to talk to Sabine about a couple of things.”

“You are my *Clannahd*, and I will respect your space.” Alex’s eyes narrowed into small slits then. “But we will speak of this later, in private.”

All right, she owed him that much. “Fine, and, Alex,” she took a deep breath, “thanks.”

Alex inclined his head shortly before leaving the room. The moment he was gone Sabine turned to her.

“What happened, Danny? Where were you? Were you in Hell?”

“Not exactly.” Danny ran a hand through her much disheveled hair. “Have you ever heard of the Burning Fields, Sabine?” She could tell by Sabine’s expression she hadn’t. “Don’t worry, I hadn’t either until I sort of unwittingly entered.”

“The Burning Fields,” Sabine murmured, frowning fiercely.

“Hey, seriously, don’t sweat it. I read every book I can get my hands on, and I hadn’t heard of the Burning Fields.”

“That’s where you were?”

“Yeah. Apparently I need to visit every so often to replenish my new found power.”

“It is a part of Hell?”

How to explain this? Heck, she wasn’t even one hundred percent certain what the Burning Fields were yet, they were still an unknown entity and she was just beginning to find her place within them.

“Sort of ... I think it’s more like the source of Hell’s fire. It’s actually really beautiful there.” She left off the part about it being peaceful and calling to her. That thought still didn’t sit well with her. “I’ve been twice. The first time I went, I actually entered on my own accord. Capshaw talked me through it, but I was able to find them on my own. This time, well, I was pulled in. I think it’s the reason why I went into statis. The trauma of being yanked into the Burning Fields was too much for my still untrained mind to take, and it shut down. It’s the only explanation I have for why I fell into a pseudo coma.”

“Yes, I believe it sounds about right, Danny. The mind can be a funny instrument, and it has an uncanny knack of protecting itself when it needs to. If it felt as if it was being threatened it would have taken the appropriate measures. It concerns me, though, how long you were under.”

"Couldn't have been long." She hadn't been in the Burning Fields for more than a half hour or so.

"Much longer than you think, Danny. Your Alpha could not wake you. No one could get through to you. They called me because they were desperate. They hoped my magic would be able to locate and call you back from wherever you were. Merciful Goddess, I was worried for you. I thought perhaps ... perhaps..." Her voice trailed off.

"It's okay, Sabine, I'm fine." And she didn't think Asmodai would force her down again, not now that he knew how her untrained mind fought against the abduction.

"How do you feel now, Danny?"

"Okay. My headache is still there, but not as pounding as it was before."

"I don't want to add to your strain but there are some things you should know before going before your Alpha."

Oh no, what the hell had happened while her mind was on hiatus? "Tell me."

"The Magnus came to your Alpha when he could not rouse you."

Shit, shit, shit! That was all she needed right now. Alex had whipped West the first time he had found out they had been together, God knows what had happened to West while she had been gone.

"Is he all right, do you know?" Danny asked.

"I believe so. He's being held right now, but he's alive."

Thank goodness. As long as he was alive there was still hope. She could negotiate for his release, or hopefully get through to Alex. She would prefer the latter, as she hated, hated, having to negotiate ... in the end she always lost something, and usually felt the chains closing in.

"What else? I can tell there is something else."

"Tara is being held. The Alpha waited until you woke to deal with her."

"Tara, what did Tara do?"

"She tried to kill you, Danny. When you were in stasis, she tried to kill you. If not for the Magnus, she would have succeeded."

Fucking splendid! It would be her first real test at *Roit*. "Damn it, why couldn't the bitch just stay away."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. She's the one who is out for my blood." Danny rubbed her eyes tiredly. "Crap. Now I'm going to have to kill the bitch."

"Yes, I think that is the only solution."

"Bloodthirsty are we?" Danny said, her tone amused.

Sabine shrugged. "Some do not learn ... and they never shall. If you do not kill her now, you'll just have to kill her later, why bother waiting?"

"Point well taken." Danny gingerly got out of bed. "Gotta go and face Alex now."

"Danny."

"Yeah?"

"Be careful, I sense something in the Alpha ... something very volatile."

Yeah, she sensed it too. It was barely concealed beneath his reserved facade. She worried for him. His beast seemed to be gaining the higher ground, and with each rung it climbed his humanity dropped another notch. Alex needed his humanity, they all did. She knew it was harder for the Alpha to allow any human tendencies to show. He had to remain strong, in charge, dominant for the Pack. Yet she also knew without his humanity

he would be nothing more than his beast, and there would be nothing to separate him from the wild animals. The successful Packs were those run by Alphas of tempered nature. They were able to balance their animal, and keep their beast in check.

“Alex is going through a rough time right now, he’ll get it together.” *She hoped he would get it together.* For the sake of the Pack he absolutely had to get it together.

“And he blames you for his rough time?” Sabine asked.

Danny shrugged. “I don’t know, perhaps. But he knew what it would be like when he roped me and pulled me back into the Pack. He knew how it would be. Dammit, I *told* him I would make his life miserable.” She always made people’s lives miserable. It seemed to be her calling in life. “I didn’t miraculously change brains, and all of a sudden decide I was going to become a docile, quiet and meek little wolf, and I certainly didn’t decide to mate with Alex. I’ve been nothing if not firm with Alex. No, he can blame me all he wants, but I have nothing to do with how he perceives this current situation. It’s entirely Alex’s little delusion.”

“Delusion or not, his beast is making good use of his current anger and jealousy.”

“I know. I know.” Now what to do about it? She had to help him get control of it. She was Pack. It was her duty. She had an obligation to help her Alpha in any manner she could. “All right, got to dress and meet with Alex. It seems I have a mess to clean up.”

Sabine nodded. “Yes, of course. Do call me if you have need of me, though.”

“I will. Are we still on for the convoy that is arriving?”

“Oh yes, I’m actually looking forward to it.”

She wished she were, but the last thing she wanted to do was meet with any more Fae, and frankly if nasty Theraline showed up she might have to singe some of her hair, if not set her entirely on fire.

Oh yeah, she *so* wasn’t looking forward to this meeting.

Chapter Seven

He was bathed in an orange and red glow. It surrounded him completely. The color was beautiful. His mood was not. The color only told her that her fears were correct, his fury was riding him and his beast was gaining ground. God, his aura was bright and furious. She had to find a way to bring him down. She had to find a way to bring him back. No, she did not believe he was lost yet, not him, not Alex.

"You look lovely, beautiful," Alex said finally.

Danny snorted, and before she could help herself said, "Thanks, but you must be blind. I look like crap."

Alex slashed his hand through the air, angrily. "You will accept nothing, nothing!" He shouted. "Not even a simple compliment."

"I don't need false platitudes, Alex."

Alex was at her side in a heartbeat. "What then do you need? What can I do to bring you to me?"

"You must let this go, Alex." Danny put her hand on his shoulder. It was impossibly tense. "I will help you any way I can, as a good Pack member owes allegiance to its Alpha. I will help you."

Alex grabbed her hand and brought it to his lips. "Dennison, my Dennison. Yes, help me, please..."

Danny gently pulled her hand out of his grasp. "Alex, you are pushing your beast too hard. The turmoil, the jealousy, and the rage you hold so close, it is eating at you now. You are feeding your beast with fury. You must, you absolutely *must* let this go, please."

"How?" Alex roared. "How can I let it go?" He began to pace back and forth. "Every time I think I may have a hold on it, I see you," he snarled, "with *him*."

"Don't, Alex, this has nothing to do with West."

"*West, West*," he sneered, "His name is not West."

"Don't be obtuse, I call you Alex, and I've taken to calling Carlton, West. It's no big deal."

"It is to me!" Alex rushed over and grabbed her arm and began to shake her. "Everything you do matters to me."

Danny took a deep breath to calm herself. Her beast snarled, it hated being manhandled, hell, *she* hated being manhandled, never mind her beast. Only she understood the importance of this meeting with Alex, with speaking with him rationally, and not starting a physical altercation. It was the only reason she held onto her temper, and didn't tear at the arm that was yanking at her.

"Alex, I've been with others." Okay, perhaps this wasn't the best way to get at him, but she needed to make him see. "Savior, you knew he and I, well, were together."

"A creature of death does not count. He has no bearing at all on this, on us. He will never be accepted by our community, and you, however long you try to run from yourself, always will be one of us. You belong with us, Dennison. In the end you would turn from him. Do you see? He could never really have you."

She did see. She saw all too well. Alex did not consider Savior a true threat because of his very nature. He did not believe a vampire and wolf could ever really be together in

any true sense of the word. He could be jealous of their physical pairing, but in his mind, Savior would never win her, and that overruled any jealousy he harbored toward the vampire.

"But the Magnus," Alex continued, "the Magnus is one of us. His wolf would call to you, and he ... he is a threat to me."

"He's not, Alex." Hell, he wasn't even a threat to her, that's why in essence she had chosen him. She didn't care about Carlton in the way Alex thought she did. He truly was just a means to an end for her. She needed to feed her beast, and Carlton was an easy and obvious answer to her needs.

"You are in his arms at every turn."

"It's sex, nothing more, nothing less."

Alex's grip tightened. "Why will you not give me the same then, Dennison?"

Oh, that was rich. "Because it would never be *just* sex with you, Alex. If I slept with you, I'd be, to use an old phrase, signed, sealed and delivered. Nothing is simple with you."

"It could be. We could make it work."

"No, we couldn't," Danny said simply. She wasn't trying to piss him off, nor break him down. She was only stating fact. "You are unbendable, and I'm just, well, I'm impossible, you know all of this. Between the two of us, we're a total disaster."

"The Grand Dame..."

"Is not part of this, she isn't."

"She saw the wisdom of this pairing."

Argh. She just wanted to scream. "Well, she doesn't have to spend the rest of her life shackled to you, does she? No, she is not part of the equation, Alex."

"She has taken my petition to heart, and in the end you will be my *Kyra*."

How to make him see, how did she work this? "Fine, by the same reasoning I can bring up my petition."

"What petition?"

She took a deep breath and readied herself for the storm. "If you continue to press suit, then I will have no choice but to bring up my own petition. I will present Carlton West as a potential mate."

"You wouldn't dare!" Alex yanked her to him. His eyes were alight with madness and burning desire.

"Try me." Danny hissed. "Just try me, Alex. I'm not some bitch in heat, and I'm certainly not one of your panting, salivating harem. You think I can't play the game? You think you're the only one who understands the rules? Push me on this, and you'll see just how good I am at pushing back."

"You wouldn't mate yourself to the *Magnus*."

"If it is a choice between your prison, and his, then I choose his."

"You don't really mean what you say, Dennison."

"The hell I don't. You said it yourself. I need a mate. Well, wouldn't this just tie up everything neatly?"

"I won't allow you to do this."

Danny laughed shortly. "You don't have a say. If I bring up a petition and the Grand Dame acknowledges it, then it's as good as done."

"I cannot take back my petition!"

"But you can stop pressing suit. At the next All-Clan you can tell the Grand Dame you made a mistake and you've changed your mind."

"She would know it is a lie."

"And?" Danny snorted. "Lie or not, she would have to accept your word as it stands. She would not continue if you did not continue."

Alex released her so suddenly, she stumbled. "Damn you!"

Danny righted herself. "Do we have a deal?" she asked calmly.

"That bastard will not touch you."

"By the way, I have another point to bring up. I want you to release West. I hear you've locked him up."

"The mutt can rot for all I care."

"Let him go, Alex."

"You care for him that much, Dennison?"

"Like I said before, it's just sex, Alex." Good sex, but she didn't have to tell him. "I need to feed my beast, and he's convenient, and no, I'm not feeding her with you. He doesn't ask for anything, and he doesn't make any demands of me. It's a nice arrangement. Let him go, let us continue as we were, and I'll have no need to ask the Grand Dame to sanction our mating."

"You cannot escape your destiny forever."

"My destiny?" She shook her head, "Alex, I will make my own destiny, and give hell with anyone who tells me otherwise."

* * * *

He'd been furious, but he had acquiesced. Danny knew she was going to be riding a very thin line and she had to be careful. Alex was near to the breaking point, and until she could help coax his beast down, she would have to tread softly. She had meant to try to help him now, but he had been unwilling to listen and she had to help free Carlton before she could work on Alex. If she hadn't gotten Alex to free Carlton now, the chances he would have remained alive for much longer would not have been good. She had a feeling he would have met with an unfortunate *accident* and would have quietly disappeared. She was not going to allow that to happen. He had done nothing. He was guilty of nothing but being with her, and she wasn't going to see him killed because of her.

"Hey, West, you look awful." Danny smiled down at Carlton.

"Danny?" His voice was clearly disbelieving.

Carlton was naked, dirty and bloody. He was sitting on the ground with bewilderment staining his face.

"In the flesh."

Carlton jumped to his feet and wrapped his arms around her. "Merciful mother, it is good to see you. Are you certain you are all right?" He pulled back and began to check her for wounds or any sign of harm.

"I'm fine, seriously. Hell you're worse off than I am."

"God's, Danny, I thought you were gone. One moment you were with me, and the next..." His voice dropped off.

Danny nodded. "I was gone, I know."

"You scared the living shit out of me." He thumped her on the shoulder.

"Hey, it's not like I set out to scare you. Something just came up and I had no choice,

I had to deal with it.”

“You were gone, Danny. You were totally gone. There was nothing. I tried to wake you, nothing. I looked into your eyes, and there was emptiness there. I had to call the Alpha in. I didn’t know what to do.”

“You did the right thing, West. It was complicated, and you did everything you could have done. I bear you no ill will.”

“I didn’t think I was going to see you again,” Carlton said somberly. “I was certain the Alpha was going to have me executed.”

“The Alpha and I have reached an agreement, West.”

“Hell of an agreement.”

Yeah, it really was hell, but what choice did she have? “It’s no big deal. Let’s get out of here.”

“I’m not going to be shot on sight, am I?” Carlton asked half jokingly.

“Listen, if you’d like to stay here in this smelly, dirty dungeon, you’re more than welcome. I, however, am going to soak in the tub and locate some grub.”

Carlton grinned. “The tub is big enough for two.”

“Yeah, it sure is.” Danny’s mouth curved up into a smile. “Know anyone who’d care to share a soak?”

* * * *

She felt pretty refreshed after her bath. A bath and a good, hard, fuck had done the job nicely.

“Going to face her, are you?”

Danny twisted her long hair up and secured it tightly. “Don’t have much of a choice. The bitch tried to kill me. Oh, by the way, thank you for stopping her. Being dead would have sucked.”

Carlton snorted. “Not a problem. I like having you around, and I think I should be thanking you. You saved me from either rotting in a dungeon, or meeting with some other very unfortunate end.”

“Then we’re even.” Danny liked being even. She hated owing people. It usually came back to bite her in the ass. Better to square things away and not have to deal with any potentially messy repercussions.

“You didn’t tell me what you had to give for my release.”

“Nothing to tell, West.”

“Don’t lie to me, Danny. We both know the Alpha would not have released me if you had not given him something. What did my release cost you?”

“West, it didn’t cost me anything. Let’s drop the subject, okay?”

“I’ll drop it now, but we’ll revisit it. I pay my debts, Dennison Lee.”

Well, she could respect that. She felt much the same. “Fine, fine, we’ll talk about it later, but I can assure you there is nothing to talk about and absolutely nothing to pay back.” Danny headed for the door; she stopped and turned to face him. “Are you coming?”

“You would have me there?”

“You’re the Magnus of our *Clannahd*, you have every right to be at my side when I deal with Tara.”

Carlton nodded curtly. “I’d be honored, Danny.”

“Don’t be honored, just be our Magnus.”

* * * *

Danny knew Tara didn’t consider her a threat. That alone had her laughing. The she-bitch was standing proud, tall and naked by Alex’s side. There was true haughtiness on her face and nothing in her stance to indicate fear or angst. You would think by the way Tara was holding herself, she was an honored guest instead of a prisoner.

“Alpha.” Danny bowed her head and waited. She waited while she felt the breeze stir and held herself absolutely still while Alex took the supple skin of her neck between his teeth and bit. She flinched slightly when the pressure deepened. Acknowledgment was acceptable, but marking sucked. Danny hated being marked. She doubly hated the fact Alex would do so here in front of the entire *Clannahd*. He was in essence telling everyone, *MINE*, and sticking a giant no trespassing sign on her forehead.

“Are you through?” She hissed, unable to keep the rancor from her voice.

Alex pulled back slightly, his eyes glittered and his mouth curved up into a small, knowing smile.

“You look well.”

“Feeling pretty well,” Danny murmured. “You just had to do it in front of everyone, didn’t you?”

“Oh, I most certainly did.”

“It still doesn’t mean anything,” she ground out.

Alex snorted. “To use your popular phrase, you just keep telling yourself that.”

Anger began to burn bright and hot within her. She was just about to give him a piece of her mind when she seemed to come to her senses, realizing where they were. She would not get into it here, but it was something she would have to deal with. Deal with ... it was as if she was always *dealing with* Alex. Oh, wouldn’t it be lovely to actually reach an agreement that didn’t end in death for one party, maiming for life, or servitude.

Yeah, in her dreams.

“Are you going to sniff at each other all night, or are we actually going to have it out?” Tara boomed across the wide expanse of the circle.

Danny bristled, but Alex went completely and utterly still. Danny could see the pupils in his eyes begin to change ... his beast was coming out. God, Tara really was an idiot. It was one thing to taunt her foe, but to taunt her Alpha? She had to have a death wish. Alex could snap her neck like a twig if he wished to. Of course, this kill was hers. He would not interfere. He would not allow her to look weak in the eyes of her Pack, and he certainly would not put her position of *Roit* in jeopardy. Oh no, he wanted her tied to the Pack as firmly as possible.

Alex turned slowly then to Danny. His lips curled, and when he spoke his voice came out in a growl, “Take care of the upstart.”

“You can be certain I will,” Danny said with a nod of her head, turning then to Tara, “I do believe we have reached a time of reckoning.”

“Whore,” Tara spat out.

Danny sighed. She had been called worse, much worse, and had punished for much less.

“Yours isn’t even an original insult, bitch.”

“I’m going to rip your throat out.”

Now here was a much more interesting threat. Danny smiled. "You are welcome to try." A flash of movement caught her eye and Danny stilled. There, on the outskirts of the battling circle was a young girl whose face she recognized immediately. It was Tara's daughter, the same daughter she had saved. She was just as pretty as Danny remembered her to be, even prettier now that her face wasn't pasty white and some corrosive spell was eating away at her. Now her face wore an expression of malice and fear. Both were emotions Danny knew well and understood.

A strange sensation overtook her and she sighed deeply. Taking a breath she directed her question to Tara. "Do you want to die?"

Tara was obviously startled. "What?"

"I asked you, if you want to die? I am owed your death for your perfidy, Tara. You tried to kill me. Hell, if I allow you to live, you will more than likely try again. Yet you did not succeed, and I'm still here. I give you this one opportunity, this one act of mercy." *Gods, mercy? She wasn't known for mercy.* "I will let you run. If our Alpha allows, this is my judgment. You will be cast out of the Pack and named *Agash*, but at least you will still have your life." *At least you will be there for your child.*

"*Agash*, it may as well be death." Tara hissed.

It wasn't much. That was true. If Tara was named *Agash*, she was named, *outsider, one who is meant to be shunned*. She would have nothing and no one from the Pack. *Agash* was not the same as having lone-wolf status. It was a complete and absolute severing of ties. She would bear the brand of *Agash* for the rest of her life, and all those of wolf kind would know her shame. No, it wasn't much, but she would be alive. How much was her life worth to her?

"Fuck you, and fuck your offer."

Well, there was her answer. It wasn't a huge surprise.

"This was unavoidable, Dennison," Alex said. He had taken his place on the stone throne.

Unavoidable? Yeah, it had been unavoidable. She just wished ... what the hell, what did she wish? Why did she wish at all? She had learned long ago wishes did not come true and the world was a place of cruel natures and even crueler intent. Wishing meant nothing ... did nothing.

"Does she have to be here?" Danny asked. Alex knew without looking whom it was Danny spoke of.

"She has a right, and if she wishes to exercise that right," Alex shrugged, "then she may. It is her mother."

Danny was defeated. There was nothing else she could do for her. She straightened her shoulders and allowed a sense of calm to roll over her. This was her position. Damn it all, this was her life. In the end survival was key.

"You think to win this?" Tara laughed. "You could not even hold your own against your *Rasha*, even the Alpha has taken you down."

Danny said nothing. Tara's arrogance would be her undoing. She had no idea what Danny was capable of ... no idea.

"Your claim, Dennison, your choice," Alex called out from his position.

"Claws," she answered simply. She didn't have to look at Alex to know he approved. She could feel the eyes of *Clannahd* upon her. Their eyes were burning torches. Their very thoughts were open to her.

Focusing, she allowed the forest to fill her. She welcomed the shifting winds and drew the scent of soil and earth to her. She was the earth, the wind, the very nature of the elements which called to her soul.

Her beast howled and rejoiced. A great cry of joy and adoration broke free as Danny felt the beginnings of her change. Her flesh tightened, pulled and stretched. Her bones made popping noises as they shifted and found their new place. The rippling of flesh to fur rolled over her until at last she lay complete.

“Your beauty still amazes me,” Alex murmured.

Danny acknowledged him with a head nod in his direction. She turned, her body moving fluidly, perfectly within its new shape. Tara had shifted. Her wolf was smaller, leaner than Danny’s, but beautiful all the same. She was snarling and snapping, already set to begin.

Danny’s wolf remained calm and unfazed as Tara began to circle her. She focused on taking in the scents of the forest, and filling herself with the power and wonder of the earth. The bitch did not know what she missed. Her anger and hubris would be her undoing. She focused on pure rage and ignored the call of Mother Earth. She would gain power from the forest if only she would allow herself to listen to its call. But no matter, it was out of her hands now. She had given Tara her chance. She would not give another.

With a single fluid move, Danny darted to her left as Tara raced by her. She took the snarling wolf in. Had the she-bitch really thought it would be that easy? Danny’s nonchalance should not be mistaken for weakness or lack of ability. Danny pressed her attack. Lurching forward, she captured Tara’s hind legs within the punishing grip of her mouth. She bit down until she felt flesh give and tasted the sweet essence of blood. Tara howled and struck out wildly.

Danny released her leg and moved back slowly, purposefully. She had made her point. She had tasted first blood. Tara would now know there would be no mercy shown this night.

Tara leapt forward, but the attack was expected, and Danny easily dodged the intended blow. With one giant swipe, she caught Tara in the middle as she rushed by. Her claws had hit true, and had hit deep. Tara’s side was bleeding from deep gashes. The scent of sweet blood filled the air and Danny felt her beast respond. It had been tempted by a small taste, and now it wanted more. The scents around them shifted as fellow *Clannahd* members let their change overtake them. Danny was aware that man and wolf now surrounded them, watching and anticipating their every move. She wouldn’t let it distract her though. She wouldn’t let anything or anyone distract her. Tara lunged, but she wasn’t quick enough, or smart enough to gain any foothold in this battle. She was thinking and acting purely on her fury and desperation now. There was no strategy. There was no thought ... merely action.

It was enough. It was not the way of Danny’s wolf to tease or torment (not usually). Tara was a fellow wolf. She deserved her end as such. Danny caught Tara by her neck and held fast. Tara was thrashing, she snapped and growled, but she could not break free. Danny held her in a death grip. One sudden move and it would all be over.

“No!”

Danny heard the shout. She recognized the voice of Tara’s daughter. Her one moment’s distraction cost her. Tara twisted and clawed Danny, taking fur and flesh with her. There was no hesitation. With her grip still firm, Danny dealt Tara her death. Blood

filled her mouth, sweet and abundant. The taste of meat was intoxicating, and it took everything in her not to revel here and now, in her kill.

Howls broke the night, triumphant howls, the fanfare given to the victor. Danny backed away from Tara's body and turned to face her Alpha.

"It was well done, Dennison. The victory is yours, and so, too, the spoils."

Danny knew he referred to Tara. The victor was always given the body of its foe. Their flesh was consumed and in doing so, the win complete. Yet in her soul she could not bring herself to complete the ritual here ... not in front of the eyes that watched her ... one particular set of eyes.

She shook her head.

"You do not accept?" Alex raised an eyebrow.

Danny concentrated. She needed to shift. She could not handle what was to come as a wolf. Her beast fought her. It felt cheated and wanted payment for a job well done. Her power was sluggish and Danny cursed the animal that bound her. She was Dennison Lee, and she was more than her wolf. She would control her animal, not the other way around.

Her change came violently as her beast protested and howled its dissent. She stood, panting, and sweating in front of her Pack.

"I grant you the rights of the victor." Alex spoke, this time to her woman and not her beast.

"I thank you for the great honor, my Alpha. I kindly decline. I cede the body to her kin."

Alex nodded. He understood. "Her body is ceded to her kin, as the victor has exercised her rights. Bianca, you may claim your mother's body."

Danny watched as Bianca stepped forward. Her eyes were bright with tears and her lips quivered.

"Do not think to find any thanks in me. My mother still lies dead, and you are the cause," Bianca spat out.

Danny hadn't expected any thanks. Of course, her actions had just allowed Bianca to bury her mother, as opposed to eating her. You would expect a little gratitude. But then, it *was* Tara's daughter they were talking about.

"Enough of your impertinence," Alex roared. "Dennison has kindly given up her victory rights so you may bury your mother properly. Instead of thanks or a proper show of humility, you stand there defiant and ill mannered. One more word out of you, and I will divide her body among the Pack, and to hell with your burial. We are wolves, what need we with human rights anyway?"

Bianca went wisely silent and still. She waited until several Pack members came to take away Tara's body before leaving the circle. Before she left she shot Danny one last malevolent look.

"And I just knew we were going to become bosom buddies," Danny muttered.

"She was always a problem," Carlton whispered, having come to stand by Danny's side. He rested his hand upon her shoulder, comfortingly.

It felt lovely. The warmth of his hand, and the comforting weight, but the dark growl Alex emitted warned her this was neither the place nor the time for his comfort.

"West, remove your hand," she murmured.

Carlton stiffened, but did as she bade, removing his hand from her shoulder.

"We have matters to discuss, Dennison," Alex said, from his place on the dais.

Danny nodded. "Yes, Alpha." She began to move forward when Carlton's hand to her forearm stopped her. The look on his face told of his displeasure. He did not want her leaving with the Alpha, not now, not so soon after she had dealt Tara her deathblow. He was probably worried, much like many, that the Alpha was being held in thrall by the intoxicating scent of blood and fresh meat. He did not wish her to be alone with him in such a state. "West, let go."

"Danny, his eyes..."

"I know. I see them. I can handle him, West." The look on his face was clearly disbelieving. "Seriously, I can. I'm not saying his wolf is not physically stronger than me, and that he couldn't do a whole hell of a lot of damage if he wanted to, I'm just saying I know how to handle him. I definitely know how to handle him better than the lot of you ... I've known him longer. Don't worry," she added, "I'll be fine. Thanks for the concern."

"I don't like it, Danny."

She snorted. She'd heard it all before. "You don't have to."

Chapter Eight

His desire was suffocating. It rolled over her, heavy and stifling. The hairs on the back of her neck stood to attention and she bristled all over. He was exerting his control. It was more than mere desire or the needs of her wolf calling to her, it was Alex, pushing his Alpha upon her. Here, in this room, stood the Alpha of the Stone Claw Clan and the Striker Clan. There was nothing else, only a subordinate wolf answering the call of her Alpha.

Danny gasped as a wave of heat and pressing want hit her full force. "Mercy have me," she muttered, struggling to keep on her feet. She had been prepared for Alex's anger, his lack of control, almost anything but this.

"Dennison." His voice was deep, soothing and beautiful, so very beautiful. "You were perfect, your wolf was perfect." He motioned for her to come forward knowing that she could not resist. She would not resist him.

She hadn't even realized she had moved, until his arms wrapped tightly around her middle. He pulled her flush against his body and made an approving noise from deep within his throat. He was more than pleased.

"No," Danny murmured, but it sounded weak even to her ears. "Alex, no."

"Mine." Alex nuzzled her with his head, before beginning to gently nip at the lobe of her ear.

Danny was fast losing control. Her entire body felt as if it were liquefying by the second. She wanted to drop to the ground now and ravage him. Hell, she wanted him to ravage her. It didn't matter. All she knew was need. There was so much need.

She gasped when she felt his hand curve around her breast, molding it. She pressed into his caress, asking without words for more. He didn't disappoint. A second later she felt her back hit the cool, hard stone of the wall and she allowed him to hoist her up, eagerly wrapping her legs around his waist.

Alex latched his mouth to her nipple and began to suckle hard at her tightened flesh. It was glorious. Her wolf was exhilarated and relieved at the same time. Finally, she was finally giving her body what it needed ... who it needed. Everything in her recognized him. Where once there was a dull thrum, there was now a cacophony of cymbals, drums, and trumpets sounding off.

"You are so fucking unbelievably beautiful," Alex growled, right before he resumed his attack on her breast.

His words seemed to break through the thick haze in her head and she frowned slightly.

What was going on? A groan tore forth from her throat as Alex located the soft folds of her pussy with his inquisitive fingers. Alex? Sex? She was backed up against a wall by Alex, and he was caressing her. Backed up against a wall? What the hell was she doing?

Danny gasped as Alex thrust two thick fingers into her aching flesh. Lord, it felt good. She couldn't stop the moans as he began to drive his fingers in and out, in and out. She wanted more, her beast wanted more.

"DANNY!"

Danny blinked a couple of times. Carlton was standing in the door, hands on hips,

stance menacing and eyes blazing. It was all she needed to pull her through the maelstrom of passion that had just overtaken her. She began to struggle against Alex's hold. Using force that on a human would have crushed bone, she hit Alex against his shoulder. He dropped her immediately, whipping around to growl at Carlton.

"No, no, Alex." Danny was in front of Carlton in a heartbeat, protecting him with her body and her words.

"A reckoning has long been coming between the *Magnus* and me." Alex began to walk forward. His pupils had dilated and bled to a dark yellow.

Fuck! This was bad. This was really bad. Danny shook her head. "Don't do this, Alex. You are more than your beast."

"Yes, I am." Alex smiled a decidedly evil smile. "I am Alpha. Alpha of the Stone Claw Clan. Alpha of the Striker Clan, and my word is law. You are mine, Dennison, my subject."

"Yes, Alex, I know." She had to keep him grounded. She had to keep him from letting go of his wolf. "You are the law, you are the moon which guides us. Please then, please be our leader and keep a rein on your beast. Do not let it dictate to you." She was not comforted by the rippling of his flesh. He was close, damn it all. He was so close to giving in.

"How dare you." Alex's voice came out hoarse and gruff, he was barely holding on. The need for Carlton's blood egged him on, and Danny knew he was a minute away from falling over the precipice.

"Move back."

"What?"

"Back, out, out now."

"Danny..."

"Shut up, and move, West. Don't you see? He's going to tear your throat out."

"You think I can't take him, Danny?"

"Merciful mother, this is not about proving your manhood, or your wolfhood or any such stupidity like that, West. This is about staying alive. Look at him. Really look at him. He's more animal than man right now, and he wants to make you into wolf chops. Do I think you can take him? No, I don't. He's our Alpha for a reason, do not press this, and *move your fucking ass out of the goddamn door.*"

Carlton moved then.

Danny, keeping her eyes trained on Alex, moved backward out of the room. Alex followed them, slowly.

He was stalking, and this was some deep shit they were in.

"Alex." Danny said his name the moment they were outside. She breathed in the night air and let the forest fill her lungs with life. "Alex, hear me, hear me now." Shit. Shit. She was thinking what to do next when the change took him. "No," she ground out. She just needed more time. She could have gotten to him if she had had a little bit more time. "West..."

"Yes?"

"Run." The word was no sooner out of her mouth when Alex rushed them. Danny jumped to the side and barely avoided getting gouged by one of Alex's claws as he went after Carlton with a fury. She jumped up quickly, and was shocked when she saw the familiar rippling of Carlton's body. "West, what are you doing?" she screamed, panicked.

If he went wolf, Alex would show him no mercy.

"I cannot hope to remain *Magnus* if I cannot stand against my Alpha on my own, Danny," Carlton bit out harshly as the change gripped him.

"I can reason with him. I know I can."

Carlton shook his head, narrowly missing his Alpha's blow. "You cannot fight this battle for me, Danny."

Danny wanted to pull out her hair in rage and frustration. She watched, seething, as Carlton's change overtook him, and then there was nothing she could do but stand back, watch and wait.

* * * *

She knew this was *the way*. She understood that wolves fought, especially dominant ones, and she knew better than anyone what dominant wolves would do when threatened with the loss of their mate. It didn't make this any easier. If anyone wondered at her disgust with the way of the wolf, one need only look at the display that was taking place in front of her.

The battle raged on. Alex and Carlton were well matched in size and strength, and if anyone were to have a chance with the Alpha, it would be Carlton.

This is what you drive them to. This is your fault.

Danny jerked back. No. No, this was not her fault. She was not the cause of this.

Of course this is your fault. No other could cause such madness in men. You drive those around you to commit folly. You are the siren who leads sailors to their doom. The downfall of men.

"Okay, shut up," Danny shouted, angrily. Now she knew that this couldn't be her mind talking to her, she never spoke so eloquently. So who the hell was speaking to her? "I've got to stop this."

"Don't move, Danny." Victor had come to stand by her side, and he was holding her arm in an abusing grip.

"Let go, Victor."

"You cannot interfere in this."

"This is ridiculous, Victor. Alex wouldn't..."

"Wouldn't what?" Victor sighed. "He wouldn't fight for his mate? He wouldn't protect his claim? No, Danny, Alexander is doing everything a good Alpha would, and he is doing everything right."

"I am not his fucking mate!"

"Perhaps not in your eyes, but the Alpha sees it differently."

"Yeah, and I've already told him his seeing it differently doesn't change anything."

"The *Magnus* said it himself, you cannot fight this battle for him. He must stand up to the Alpha himself, or no one will respect his position."

"The hell with that, and the hell with you!" Danny wrenched free of Victor's grip and was already making a dash toward the fighting wolves when she saw Alex go in for the kill. She screamed, "No," but was too late. When she reached them Carlton was still and Alex stood next to his body. "No, oh no." Danny dropped to her knees next to Carlton. "West..." She hesitantly touched his fur and sighed deeply when she saw him expel a small breath. He was gravely wounded, and it was obvious he could not shift, but at least he still breathed.

“Dennison,” Alex said softly. He reached out to touch her shoulder and jerked back when she stiffened.

“West, can you hear me? Blink if you can hear me. It’s going to be okay,” she swallowed, his breathing had become labored, “I promise, it’s going to be okay. Don’t die on me.” *Oh God, please don’t die on me.* Danny drummed some magic to her fingers, they were bright now with her power. She brought them to her lips and blew, the magic intensified and heat burned brightly within her. She brought her hands to Carlton’s damaged body and ran them over his soft fur. She willed her healing magic to flow through him, to make him better, to make him whole, but even as she did so she knew it to be hopeless. He was too injured, and she was not a healer by trade or notion. She was a *magi* and a wolf, and even her magic could not bring one from death’s door. Perhaps her prayers would help? Did the Almighty listen to those who were claimed as an *amour* to a damned prince?

Danny wrapped her arms around Carlton, as if to draw his hurt into her own body. She was there by his side, pressed deeply to him, when he breathed his last breath. She felt numb and cold. Her heart was frozen and her tears refused to come. Why couldn’t she cry? Was she so far gone she couldn’t even cry? No. She mourned in her own way. She mourned as she had learned to mourn, she mourned without tears. Tears were useless. They did not bring back the dead. “We will make the arrangements, my Alpha.” Victor’s voice seemed to come from very far away, and Danny could not even muster up the energy to raise her head.

“I had no choice, Dennison. You know I had no choice in the matter.”

“We always have choices, Alex,” Danny murmured. She stood then, her eyes still fixated upon Carlton’s still body. So much death, so much pain and hurt and fear. The way of the wolf was merciless and cruel, and it was her way, or at least, *half* of her way. She could not escape it, no matter how hard she tried, but God, at times like these she wished she could. “I’m going for a run, and don’t try to follow me, Alex.” She took off for the trees, letting her change take her over. She ran faster and faster, mindless of the trees, brush, brambles and the noises of the night. It was as if she hoped to erase all the bloodshed and pain of the evening with her run. Before she knew it, she had reached the familiar outskirts of town, and the doorstep of one all too familiar haunt. She hesitated, unsure, and fearful of her welcome. Padding to the back of the building she waited, resting her head on the cold slab of cement. Her heart hurt. If she stayed like this, would it hurt less? Did her wolf know less pain? Could she let the world fall away? Each carefully placed barrier she had constructed came crashing down under the weight of her anguish. She whinnied, and buried her head in her paws. She felt lost and tired, and as alone as she had felt when she had left her Pack those many years before.

Suddenly the thick door in front of her swung open, and bright light momentarily blinded her. She blinked and when her vision cleared, there, standing in front of her was Savior.

“Oh, my *ashleya*, what pain tears through you? Come, my love, come...” He held out his hand to her. Without hesitation, Danny trotted over. She walked into the warm light and let his scent waft over her. Here, in this one moment, she felt some of the stain of the evening wash away, and she was thankful for it, she was thankful for *him*.

“You cannot stay this way, my *ashleya*,” Savior spoke softly. He was running his hands through her thick, soft fur. Danny turned her head away, snubbing him. “Your wolf

is beautiful, yes, but so, too, is your woman. You must return to your woman, my love. This is not the way to take away the pain.”

Then what is?

“There is bitterness, resentment, and horrible pain in this world, but all of it shall pass with the dawn of a new day, my love, and as night falls, you will know the comfort of my arms.” He drew her closer still. “I will not abandon you.”

You did. You told me to leave. You didn't want me. Danny burrowed into his side and took shelter in his body. It was easy to forget he was not one of the living. He was warm (he must have fed) and his warmth drew her in.

“I said I needed some time, my *ashleya*, to think things through. There have been weighty things upon my mind of late, and I wished to contemplate them, and not burden you.”

Are you reading my mind?

Savior grinned. “Yes, my love, I am. You are very receptive and open tonight. There is no need to delve or to pry. In fact, you are sensationally lovely this way. I feel so very close to you.”

The Danny of a couple of hours ago would have bitten him, or royally chewed him out for being so intrusive (even if her barriers were down). Right now however, she didn't feel like fighting. Not to mention, he was right. She was open and receptive. She could feel her barriers, like paper, swaying back and forth. There was nothing standing between them right now. No fortress, no mental guards, nothing to hinder their complete melding. It did feel lovely.

“You do not mind, do you?” Savior asked.

Danny shook her head. *No, I don't mind. I thought you broke up with me, Savior. I thought we were ... well ... through.*

“You thought we were through because I asked you to leave?”

Uh, well, yeah.

“Oh, my little *ashleya*. No, nothing so trivial will ever separate us. We are one, you and I, and one we shall remain.” He laughed. “Yes, yes, I know how much you dislike hearing it, it seems so final, but it is the truth, my love. I have marked you, and you have not found a way to undo the mark, have you?”

Danny growled. He knew she hadn't.

“That is what I thought. So you see, my love, we are, for better or for worse, stuck with one another.”

Danny looked up into Savior's laughing eyes and couldn't help but crack a small smile. There was something so jovial and light about him now. He seemed almost boyish. She liked him this way. He wasn't often boyish. Then again, she didn't really ever give him a reason to be. She was hard and cold, and sometimes she felt as lifeless and dull as a statue. How could anyone love her? How could anyone want to be with her?

“You are life unknown, my love.” Savior continued to caress her. “Everything about you is alive. You may feel a certain coldness. It is to be expected, you live a harsh existence. My love, harsh existence does not mean you are cold, nor lifeless. Do you not see it? You are everything. I could not understand what it means to be alive if not for you.” He took her head in his hands, and looked deeply into her eyes. “You are life for me.”

How can that be, Savior? My life is royally fucked up. I don't even want it. How can

you want to be part of it?

“Ah, you have much to figure out about your power and your part in this twisted little play called life, and I wish to be by your side throughout it all.”

They will not accept you, Savior. It had to be said. The *Clannahd* and the Grand Dame would never accept Savior into the fold. He was one of the dead. The dead were not welcome in circles of life.

“We will make them accept, my *ashleya*.”

It's not that easy.

“And why not? You are a *magi* wolf. I am your bonded mate. If they wish to have you within their folds, then they must accept me.”

Bonded, not mated, Savior.

“What?”

We are bonded. We cannot be mated. Wolves mate, Savior. You are not a wolf, thus we cannot be mated.

“What arrogant creatures you are.” Savior laughed, it was a deep, rich laugh. “I suppose it is to be expected. We of the night clans are also arrogant. It comes with having too much power, and holding a certain disregard for the sanctity of life. For when you have an eternity, how can you care about the mundane passing of day-to-day? You believe only wolves mate? What do you call the relationships between vampires and their loved ones, the ones who have pledged an eternity by their side?”

Like I said, bonding, or better yet, stupidity. She was glad Savior took the last to be a joke, because it was meant to be such. He grinned, obviously finding amusement in her words.

“We are not so different, you and I. Not in the ways that matter, my *ashleya*. Wolves and vampires, we are both misunderstood creatures, and often portrayed quite negatively. We hold fast to our independence and our privacy and we're fiercely, sometimes to our detriment, dominant. Why then is it so hard to imagine we would mate? No, *ashleya*, do not mistake what we do now are a simple pairing. We are mated, you and I. I bound you, yes, but in my binding we have become a mated pair.” Danny snarled but Savior merely sighed. “You may not wish to hear it, but it is the truth nonetheless. I will always strive to be truthful with you, my love. For that is what you do to me. I would never give to anyone what I have given, what I give to you.”

I don't want to mate. Mating is a cage. I have seen what mating does to those who engage in such folly. Lord, I have lived it. Do you know what it means to be caged, Savior, really caged? Do you know what it means to know you have no say in your life? I have been used, like a puppet most of my life. Hell, I think my mother bore me for the express purpose of solidifying her position in her Pack. She knew she had a good chance of passing on some of her talent and bearing a magi wolf, so she rolled the dice and hoped for a pleasing outcome. Bang, she got me. I was passed on like hand-me-downs and told when, where and how I would conduct my affairs. I never complained. I know, shocking, right? Especially considering what a bitch I am now, but really, Savior, I didn't complain as a pup. I assumed it was my lot in life, that I was to be this ... this ... thing, this object to my Clannahd, and I accepted it. I usually accepted it. Danny snorted and turned her head away from him. She didn't want him to see the derision she knew had to be present in her eyes, and apparent even in wolf form. *But pups grow up, girls turn into women, and I came into my own. When I was old enough to know better, I began to*

wonder and ponder my rather fucked up existence. Why didn't I deserve a chance? Why couldn't I live free and not caged? Why did I have to listen and obey? Was it merely my wolf that mattered? Or did I have to make peace with both souls?

"What have you decided, my *ashleya*?"

I've decided the fates are cruel indeed, and that even when we think we hold our own hand of cards, we're playing from a rigged deck. Do you understand, Savior? I thought I had found a place for myself. I was making a decent, okay, a better than decent living. Maybe I wasn't doing all too honest work, but I made good money. I was independent, sort of, and I was...

"Happy? Were you going to say, happy?" Savior narrowed his eyes. "Were you really happy, my love? And it is all well and good, but what did you really have? Did you date, my love?"

Huh?

"You heard me, did you date? I think not. So, you had a life in which you stayed removed and remote and let no one and nothing touch you. You kept to your woman, but did you bring out your wolf? Again, somehow I doubt the answer is yes. Your solution has been to stifle your wolf. You took independence to mean, leaving behind all that which completes you, which makes you beautiful and special and incredibly unique. How can you truly survive without understanding and accepting both souls?"

I do.

"Do you, really? You speak of mating and bonding as an abhorrent thing, as something that would crush you, deplete you, break you down. My love, if you really understood both your natures, you would know you can have the mate bond and still retain your soul, still retain your independence. You can still be you. The bond does not take away that which makes you, it only brings you closer to the one who would enhance and magnify your existence. You will have a richer life and deeper understanding when you accept this."

You know nothing about the way of the wolf, Savior, nothing! Alex would drape me in silver chains and I'd choke to death on them.

"Did I ever say I wished you to accept the Alpha's proposal?"

No, but that is mating to me. To mate would be to tie myself to an acceptable wolf and to go on and be a breeding factory for the Pack. I'm nobody's bitch but my own.

"I understand, and it is one of the reasons I love you."

Shut up.

"What? You do not like me telling you I love you?" Savior's voice was merry.

Shut the hell up. I mean it.

"I love you."

Savior. She was positively whiny now.

"I love you, my *ashleya*, my own. You are the light that lives within me. Without you I would not have a reason to go on."

You and your pretty words.

"They are the truth, and nothing else. I would have a complete binding, my love, and I would have it in the way of the night clans. I do not ask you to take me on as a wolf, I ask you to take me on as a split soul. I would speak to both of your souls and ask them to recognize the truth and intention of my words. You can retain all, if you merely consider me."

Consider you for what? Seriously, Savior, do you think my wolf is going to accept mating with you?

"You are a *magi* wolf, *ashleya*. Your magic and power will keep your wolf at bay long enough for my claim to sink in. Eventually your wolf will find contentment with me."

Merciful mother, you really believe what you're saying, don't you?

"Absolutely. I know it."

And how can you be so certain I won't eat you alive at the first given opportunity?

Savior laughed. "I'd love to see you try, in fact, I do believe it would be an interesting experiment ... eating me alive."

Eeewwww, gross, stop being disgusting. No way, there is no way I'm going to be some weird guinea pig for you, Savior.

"You already wear my mark."

Uh-huh, and that is about as far as I'm willing to take it, buddy.

"You will be continually tormented and lost until you unify both halves of your soul, *ashleya*. Right now you are feeling only a small bit of the erosion, eventually there will be complete deterioration. You must find a way to balance yourself."

You don't think I know that? Her mind was in turmoil and she was raging inside.

"I think you know, I don't believe you *accept*."

Danny inched away from him. He saw too much. He knew too much. It was disconcerting. She didn't want to feel so open, and bare. She felt raw, and with each truth he spoke she felt a scraping on the open wounds.

"You can physically pull away from me, my *ashleya*, but you will never emotionally be free."

Now you sound like a talk show host. How cheesy can you get?

"Cheesy?"

Yeah, corny, silly, melodramatic, all that good stuff.

"I'm being honest."

Okay, honest and cheesy.

"Ashleya..."

So she was being a little juvenile right now. She had the right to be. She was scared stiff! She had thought she had won just a little bit of freedom and now, now, this. Oh, fine, so deep down, if she admitted it to herself she knew her delusions ran deep. How could she ever hope to have true freedom? She had hoped, though, she would find a measure of peace, and that her hard won independence would actually mean something. Goddamn it, she deserved a life, a real fucking life!

"Now you sound juvenile, my love," Savior said kindly.

I wasn't talking to you.

"Whom else would you be talking to? If you project your thoughts so loudly, who else would you expect to hear them?"

Stupid answer. Stupid vampire. *Why don't you just leave me alone?*

"Do you really want to be alone, my love?"

Yeah.

"Really?" Savior got to his feet.

Hey. Danny jerked her head around.

A large smile broke out across Savior's handsome face, making his beauty even

more stunning.

“Ah, I thought not.” Savior slid back next to Danny, and resumed his petting. “Now, my love, let us talk about this little situation on our hands. You must change back. You are becoming too comfortable in your wolf.”

I won't stay like this. I'd have to be long complacent within my wolf to remain in this form. It's just easier right now...

“There are things you do not wish to face.”

Yeah, really don't want to face.

“Things, namely ... your Alpha?”

Her Alpha. Ah yes, Alex. Lord have mercy Alex was becoming increasingly more complex (not to mention insanely violent), and dealing with him was becoming ridiculously complicated. Yeah, she didn't feel like dealing with him now, especially since he had just killed West ... her friend, her lover and her newly found confidante.

“There are weighty things on your mind now.”

When weren't there weighty things on her mind? *It's just that my wolf is peaceful, Savior.* She finally admitted. It was true. She felt calm and happy in her wolf and her wolf was lapping up the attention and adoring her undivided attention.

“This is why you must change, my love.”

He was right. She hated it, but he was right. It would be too easy to remain as she was, and there were things she had to do, battles still to be fought.

Danny relaxed her body and pushed back her wolf. It protested, snapping at her and whining pitifully, but she paid it no mind. She knew what she had to do now. With shifting bones and melting flesh, she fell back into her woman. She lay, curled up to Savior, his hand on her head, his body a comforting weight against her own.

“Welcome back, my love.”

Danny looked up into his beautiful face. “Hi.”

Savior reached out and gently caressed her cheek. His eyes were kind and his mouth soft when he spoke. “How are you feeling, *ashleya*?”

“I don't know, numb I guess,” she answered honestly.

“It is to be expected. Great changes have taken place in your life, as of late.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Of course, to listen to everyone else you'd believe she didn't have a choice in her life. Everyone spoke of destiny, of fate, of forces which she had no control over, and if they were to be believed, then her life was already mapped out for her. Why the hell did one bother, then? If she had no choice, why did she rally so? Why did she complain and fight and rage against something that was already set to be carried out? She did, and it brought her to the conclusion that she had to have some (if not just a very small part) of say in her actions, her deeds, her life, her free will had not been taken away completely ... not yet. One had to fight for one's freedom, right? Even just a small piece of freedom was better than nothing.

“Do you wish for me to go back with you?” Savior asked, interrupting her deep thoughts.

“Fuck no.” The words were out before she could stop them. She cleared her throat and tried again. “I mean, thanks, but no thanks.” God, Savior coming back to the *Clannahd* now? With Alex's beast so near the edge and the upheaval and shifting winds taking place, it would be a disaster ... worse than a disaster.

“I do not wish for you to be alone, my love.”

Danny smiled. “Thanks, but this is something I have to deal with. You were right, Savior. I can’t run from this. The more I run, the worse the repercussions are when everything catches up with me.” She pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Thank you for,” she searched for the right words, “thank you for being a ... friend.” It was so weird to think of him as such, but it was true. He had stepped into that role. He was no mere lover. He was a friend.

Savior gathered her hands within his, and pressed them to his lips in response. “I will always be your friend, my love, your friend and more. You have my heart, and you are the very blood which drives it.”

His heart. Danny swallowed. God, did she really want to be the keeper of one’s heart? She could barely care for her own, how could he expect her to care for his?

No expectations, ashleya, just love. It is given to you freely, there is no burden in this, there is only hope, hope for all the days which stretch before us.

What a sobering thought. At this rate, how many days did she really expect to have left?

Chapter Nine

The sun was cresting when she returned to the *Clannahd*. She passed the battling stones, West's body was gone, and all indications of the bloody fight that had taken place in the eve, had similarly disappeared. It was as if he had never existed.

"Danny..."

Danny turned at the sound of April's voice. "Hello, April."

"Are you, uh, are you okay?" Her eyes seemed to do a quick inventory.

"I'm fine." As fine as she could be under the circumstances. "I see everything was taken care of." She was aware her voice was cold and flat, but that was how she felt, cold and flat.

"Yes," April licked her lips, "I ... I ... kept some things for you, just in case you wanted them. They were cleaning everything out, but I thought you'd..." Her voice dropped off.

Danny knew what she was trying to say. "Thank you, that was kind of you." She looked around. "It's quiet." Perhaps too quiet for her peace of mind.

April nodded. "Everyone is getting ready for the delegation."

Fuck. The Fae, the Fae were coming. Under the weight of all the other pressing matters she had almost forgotten the nasty Fae.

Stupid Danny. Very, very, stupid of her.

"And Alex?" Danny asked, her voice tight.

"The Alpha is readying himself. He has been in meetings."

"All right. I'm going to my room to clean up."

"Danny!"

"Yes?"

"He wants to see you."

Danny snorted. "I'm sure he does. I'm sure he does."

* * * *

It was becoming an all too familiar scene. Alex, standing so beautiful and rock solid in his office, and her coming to him with harbored anger and all too much on her mind. Sometimes she wished things could be different, but she had learned long ago wishing didn't accomplish anything. She dealt in realities, hard, cold realities. This was her reality, standing before her right now, and what a reality it was.

"You've returned."

"Yes."

"I'm glad." Alex continued to stare at her. His eyes were intense and deep, they seemed to shoot right through her. "Are you all right?"

"Physically."

Alex nodded. His eyes never left hers. "It had to be done, Dennison. It could not have been avoided."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"We must. It lingers between us still."

“Still?” Danny shouted. “It just happened. You just killed him. How do you think I feel? How would you feel if someone took away your friend, if someone killed your friend?”

“I acted as an Alpha would, Dennison, no more, no less.” Alex’s voice was calm and collected.

“No, you acted like some dumbass, jealous shmuck.” Danny sighed. “And you killed him.”

“It was an honest and fair fight. He agreed to the terms the moment he met me in the circle as wolf.”

There was nothing she could say to that. Alex was right. Carlton had agreed the moment he had turned and met his Alpha as wolf. The fight had taken place on sacred, battle scarred, and consecrated ground, and it had raged, two wolves involved in the ultimate fight. The wolf in her understood. The woman was none too happy about it. The woman in her felt as if Alex had done something unthinkable and unimaginable. He had killed someone close to her. He had taken from her a friend, someone she had just become close to, someone she actually liked. He had done so, knowing how she felt and how she would feel after it was all said and done, he had done it, and to hell with the consequences.

“You know I am right. There is nothing you can say to lessen the truth of my words.”

Danny straightened her shoulders. His smug tone irked her to no end. “I know you are right about the fight being fair. You met as wolves, and you won, as a wolf would. You are our Alpha, and you won a fair fight as such.” Her eyes narrowed. “I also know you know, as our Alpha, you are stronger, more physically able and more powerful than any other in the *Clannahd*. You knew that West could not beat you. I asked for his life, Alex, I asked you to spare his life.”

“I could not.”

“You are the Alpha, you can do anything.” The minute the words were out she realized how ridiculous she sounded. She knew better than anyone position demanded sacrifices, great sacrifices. Alex was not above such sacrifice. He could not afford the luxury of doing whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted. He was the Alpha of two powerful clans and he walked a very fine line.

Danny jumped when she felt Alex’s hand on her shoulder.

“I could not do as you asked, Dennison. He had made his intentions perfectly clear, and he had shared those intentions with all those around him. He would have had you as his own, and after I had declared my suit, it was a pure flouting of my position and an insult I could not ignore.”

“I didn’t accept, Alex.”

“It doesn’t matter. The fact that he would have done such a thing ... well, I could not afford to be made a laughingstock in front of the clan. In addition, my actions have cemented my position in the Striker Clan.”

“Cemented your position,” Danny said dryly, “what position would that be? Tyrant perhaps? Or maybe dictator would be more apt.” Danny winced when Alex’s hold on her shoulder became painfully tight.

“I am neither of those things, and you know it. You are being cruel now, you are trying to hurt me.”

Yeah. She was trying to hurt him. Why the hell shouldn’t she hurt him? He had hurt

her. He had taken someone from her. He deserved more than a little pain in return.

"Let's drop it," she finally said. The more they spoke of it, the angrier and more volatile she became. She was almost afraid she would let loose something that she had yet to perfect, something she had yet to learn how to control and master fully.

"You do not mean what you say."

"Yeah, yeah I do. I don't want to speak about it any more."

"Dennison..."

"Alex," she glared at him, "just tell me what you want me to do when the Fae arrive, okay? I'm one of your *Clannahd*. Treat me as such. Tell me what my role is to be and let me carry out my duty, okay?"

"You are more than merely one of the *Clannahd*." Alex sighed. "You are our *magi* inherent, and you are my..."

"Don't!" She glared at him. "Don't you *dare* say it, Alex." She watched as some of the fire seemed to die out from his eyes. He dropped his hand from her shoulder and moved a couple of steps away from her. She was grateful. She needed the space.

"You will be by my side. I will need you to scout them out and set up appropriate shields."

"Of course." She was fairly certain the Fae would try something. It seemed Alex shared her sentiment and her concerns.

"Do you think they will try Glamour on the *Clannahd*?" Alex asked. He was suddenly all Alpha, and all business.

Danny nodded. "I see that as a distinct possibility. They are very proud of their abilities, Alex, and they seem to view this as a game."

"A game?" Alex asked, clearly affronted.

"Yes, a game. They're the Fae folk. We are wolves. They don't consider us in their league, let alone able to compete with them in power or in capability. I think they will try to toy with us."

The fire was back in Alex's eyes. "Let them try. They will see what happens to those who cross the Striker and Stone Claw Clans."

"Alex, what you're telling me won't mean anything to them. They have no fear of the clans because they do not even belong to this realm. Don't you see? It makes them even more dangerous. They have no fear, and that makes them believe they are invincible and above any possible consequences. They will do *what* they want, *when* they want, and they fear no repercussions."

"So we will show them otherwise," Alex said, his voice cold and final.

Danny nodded. "Just so." She agreed with Alex on this one. They had to remain strong and they had to be a united front. They had to show the Fae that the wolves were powerful, strong, and a force to be reckoned with. If they showed any fear, the Fae would destroy them. They would use their fear against them and they would annihilate them.

"You will do this for me," Alex caught himself, "us? You will do this for us?"

"I am Pack. I owe you my fealty. You know I will do this."

"They arrive at dusk."

It was a good hour, a very powerful hour. Dusk often heightened the magical portals, and made the use of magic easier. It didn't surprise her that they would arrive when their magic was at its fullest. At least hers would be too.

"I'm going to rest for a bit, Alex." She also needed to replenish her powers. She was

beginning to feel sluggish.

“Can I do anything for you?” He sounded sincere.

Danny shook her head. “No.” She bowed her head and waited. She felt Alex’s hand on her head, and then she felt his warm breath on her neck. “Alex...” she said warningly. She was waiting for her dismissal, not asking to be marked.

“Go then,” Alex said harshly. His voice was rough with need and unrepressed longing and desire.

Danny swallowed deeply and made her exit. She wasn’t about to test his patience any further. They were both at their breaking points. When wolves reached their breaking points, blood and death and pain followed.

* * * *

Danny holstered two daggers and studied her reflection. She allowed herself a moment of satisfaction and ego. She looked pretty good. She had sleeked back her hair and twisted it up, securing it with her silver pins. Applying minimal makeup, she had taken particular pains with her eyes, using mascara and liner (something she never did) to make them stand out strongly. She knew April would probably disapprove of her rather “assertive” outfit, but thought it appropriate for tonight’s encounter. She was making a statement, and the Fae would know it.

Having just turned around, a wave of dizziness hit her and she braced herself against the counter of the sink. Danny blinked once, twice, trying to clear her head and ward off the pain that had just hit her.

“What the hell?” She swallowed. “No way, no way am I feeling like shit right now.” This was not the time to feel crappy. She had a meeting to attend, a Pack to support, and Fae to ward off, she could not get ill. Another wave of dizziness hit, this time accompanied by nausea and Danny swore. “Fuck, fuck. No, absolutely not!” she said again, as if saying it would drown it out and push the sickness back.

Danny sank to her knees, suddenly weak. She dropped her head and took several steadying breaths. Her hands began to shake and she felt a shocking cold invade her body. It was then she realized she had to stop fighting. The more she fought, the worse the pain. She took several more deep breaths and allowed a calm to pass over her. The moment she did, her body became light and weightless and she knew the moment she was swept under and taken away.

* * * *

There was a river of fire running past her feet. It was tumultuous, and the flames leapt and danced as they rushed by.

Danny dropped to her knees and watched, fascinated, as the fire burned brighter and brighter. For a reason unknown to her, she was compelled to reach out and touch the burning flames. She submerged her hands and was shocked when a sweet tingling rushed through her.

Okay, she muttered, I’m somehow immune to the fire. Danny already felt considerably better since touching the fire. *What the heck,* she said, and sat down, dangling her feet in the river of flames. The cool, sweet feeling spread and took her over, it was delightful. She felt better than she had in a long while.

I did not bring you here, my amour.

Hello, Asmodai. He dropped down beside her. The folds of his black cloak fell in perfect harmony around him. He was, as she remembered, one of the most beautiful beings she had ever seen. I know. It was a different kind of pain this time ... more like fatigue and weakness.

Asmodai nodded. It is as I said. You need to replenish your fire, my amour.

This couldn't have happened at a worse time, you realize that, don't you? I need to be in a meeting.

You still may attend the meeting. Do you not already feel better?

Yeah, I do.

Time moves differently in the Burning Fields, my amour. If I will it, I can make certain you return almost exactly to the moment you left.

If you will it?

Asmodai inclined his head. Indeed. I must fold time appropriately if you are to return at the moment you left, otherwise there will be a great gap in time.

Danny remembered the last time she was hijacked to the Burning Fields; when she returned a great time had lapsed.

Okay. I need you to do that. I have a really important meeting with the Fae.

Yes, I know.

Danny narrowed her eyes. You know?

It is a situation I have been watching.

How?

How, what?

How have you been watching the situation, Asmodai? You're down here, and they're, well, they're at Court, or something like that.

Did I not tell you they would play a part in your life to come?

Uh-huh, and I have a bone to pick with you. You couldn't have clued me in a little bit more? Really, you were totally vague.

I cannot divulge more, my amour.

Danny grunted. Fat help you are then. I mean, come on. I'm going in totally blind.

Nay, you are not blind. I have made you aware there is more to the Fae than first meets the eye. They can deceive with their beauty and their grace. You know this about them, and thus you are in a good position.

A good position for what? I don't even know what the hell they want.

You will find out.

Great. Just great. Terrific, Asmodai. Thanks for nothing.

I do not know what you wish for me to say, my amour. I can tell you no more than I have.

Fine. Danny stood. She felt remarkably energized. Her body felt strong, powerful and vital. She loved feeling this way.

Careful, amour.

What?

You are heady with your power now. Be careful that you wield it wisely. You are filled with the flames of the Burning Fields and your power is especially bright and strong at this moment. You have dipped in the fire and know its strength. You are the queen, make certain you exert your control over the flame. Do not allow it to control you.

Control me how?

The flames are a living entity, can you not feel it?

She could. They seemed to breathe and speak to her. They wanted her to touch them, to feel their power, to love them ... to be queen to them. She knew this as surely as she knew it was an awesome power she now held within her hands.

They are living, thus they are capricious. They will beckon to you, especially when they feel slighted or ignored. If you turn your back on them for too long, they will make certain you feel their ire. Now you have given them what they want, they too, will try to see how much rein you will give them. They will see how powerful you are ... test you.

The fire will test me?

Of course, Asmodai laughed, you are their queen, they will want to see how much power their queen holds, and if they made the right choice in gifting you with the flame.

They didn't do anything, Danny snorted, you did! You're the one that gave me the kiss of death, so to speak.

All I did was imbibe you with a receptive magic. I gave you the ability to withstand the internal flames. I gave you my kiss. Yet you are who you are, and if you were not able to hold the flame, it would not reside within you now. The magic can only be wielded by one who knows the fire intimately to begin with.

So what the hell are you saying?

Asmodai shrugged and gifted her with an enigmatic smile. Merely that you resist something which is inherent. You cannot change what is ... no matter how hard you try, my amour.

All these stupid, insane riddles and puzzles. The men in her life seemed overly fond of them. Oh, she longed for the good ol' days when she could just summon a demon and be done with it. Demons got rid of people real fast. Why did being bad feel so damn good?

Demon calling is what brought you here in the first place.

Danny glared at him. I didn't call the stupid demon, dumbass.

Ah, right. You were sent to dispose of him.

Danny stiffened, remembering that evening, the evening she had been marked. It was true. The demon marking had brought her to Asmodai's attention. So in retrospect she was here (in part) because of a demon.

Why do you question it so? Asmodai asked of her.

The fire?

Yes.

Because I am of earth, of nature and the wild, and you have instilled within me some dark and terrifying power. I'm a wolf, Asmodai ... and what does a wolf know of fire?

More than you know, amour.

I hate when you do this.

What?

I hate when you're all mysterious and shit. It drives me crazy. I need answers, Asmodai, not more puzzles.

I wish I could give you more, but I cannot.

Can't or won't?

Does it matter? Either way, I cannot give you more than I have.

I need to get out of here.

Yes, yes you do. Asmodai sighed. You have pressing matters to attend to. Just remember, my amour, take everything they say and question it. It needs to be questioned.

Danny knew without asking he was speaking of the Fae. *Yeah, okay.*

Asmodai leaned in toward her and laughed when Danny quickly leaned back. *Are you afraid of me?*

Of you? Not really, no. Of the power you possess and possibly may send my direction, hell yeah. I'd be a fool not to be wary.

And you are no fool, he said with a small smile.

She'd like to think not, however, lately, the men in her life seemed to make her all sorts of foolish.

Relax, now, amour. All will right itself in the end.

That was what she was afraid of ... the end. The end seemed every day to be drawing nearer, and the thought it would take *the end* to make her life okay, gave her the willies. Did she have to die to make things right?

Oh, but it is not death, amour, it is life, it is rebirth, and you would be queen of it all.

Okay, she so did not want to think about it. *Thanks, but no thanks,* she said dryly. *I'll pass.*

Asmodai chuckled. *Your stubbornness will be your undoing, my amour.*

Perhaps, but so far it is my stubbornness which has, in part, kept me alive. No sooner had she spoken the words, did she feel herself melt away. She was floating, and below her she saw the river of flames grow dimmer and dimmer, until nothing remained but a mere shadow and rolling mist, and then nothing.

* * * *

Danny entered the grand hall and frowned when over a dozen heads swung her direction. She hated being subject to this much attention. She saw Alex, standing at the end of the hall, dressed entirely in white. His hair gleamed in the light and his presence was magnetic. He was in full Alpha mode. An Alpha's true calling card would always be his power, the power inherent to the leader of a Pack. An Alpha could, without speaking, command the attention of a room, and in the presence of Pack, he could and would control all. There were very few who could withstand the natural pull of an Alpha, most would be compelled to comply with any and all of his wishes. What made this more stunning still, was the fact that you would *want* to submit. You would want to give everything you were to please him, to make him happy. The Alpha was your moon, and you would do anything to keep your moon full and bright.

Yes, there were few who could withstand the full force of an Alpha ... Danny was one of the few, and it drove Alex crazy, she knew, to not be able to sway her, or to take her over completely. How many times had he tried to enforce his will upon her? How many times had he tried to influence her? She was certain it happened more often than even he was aware of. Yet here she was, still fighting, still free of his chains.

Danny was pleased to see that standing a couple of feet away from Alex was Sabine. She headed in her direction, making sure she stopped in front of Alex and inclined her head. She couldn't forget to acknowledge him. In his current state, he could decide to snap her head off—literally.

"Welcome to our hall, Dennison," Alex said by way of a greeting. He did not make a move toward her.

Danny was grateful he remained where he was. She didn't feel like fending off his advances right now, or airing their "dirty laundry" in front of the Pack, or Sabine. Not that the Pack wasn't very aware of the situation between Alex and herself, he hadn't been quiet in his intentions. She didn't think they were clued in, however, to the storm which happened to be brewing between them.

"My Alpha," she said, keeping her tone respectful.

"Patrol has come in. They've confirmed the Fae's presence at our border. They should be here at any moment."

"I can't wait," Danny bit out dryly.

"I see you invited the *Airok*," Alex said, "thank you for notifying me."

Oops, oh yeah, she had forgotten to tell Alex about inviting Sabine to the meeting with the Fae. Blast and damn, she had a lot on her mind, though. He could cut her some slack.

"Sorry, it slipped my mind."

"See that it doesn't happen again."

"Can't promise you anything there, buddy," she muttered, seeing by the look on his face he had heard every garbled word she had said. "Was that all?" Alex stiffened, but nodded. He turned away from her, effectively giving her the cut. She finished making her way over to Sabine's side. "Good to see you."

Sabine smiled. "It is good to see you too, Danny," her smile dropped a little, "there is something very strong between you and the Alpha."

"Yeah, hatred."

Sabine shook her head. "No, I don't think that's it."

"I know, I was just joking, sort of. I don't hate him ... I just intensely dislike him. He's continually the thorn in my side."

"He's very close," Sabine whispered, glancing over at Alex.

Danny sighed. "Yeah, I know. It's been a long time since I've seen him this close to his beast. Usually he's able to control it better." She had been a pup the last time she had seen Alex give into his beast ... it had been terrifying. One of his Pack had been brutally violated and murdered. His rage had been immense and he had allowed his beast to reign. The events which had taken place following his descent were violent, but he had sent a message to his enemies that remained present and strong to this day: one did not cross Alexander Holt, dare to harm one of his *Clannahd*, or step unwelcomed into his Pack.

"Have you tried a restorative?"

Danny shook her head. "Alex wouldn't let me bespell him," she snorted, "he'd claw my eyes, and cut my tongue out first." God. She could just imagine it ... relaxing Alex with a spell.

"Then the best you can hope for is that he will rein it in."

"He will." *He had to*. "He's a pain in my ass, but he's a good Alpha." *Usually*.

Sabine began to shiver. "Danny..."

Danny nodded. "Yeah, I feel it too ... they're here." It was a frightening feeling, this power the Fae wielded. The magic that breathed through the *Clannahd* was beautiful and electrifying, and it was what frightened Danny the most. She could see on the faces of the rest of the Pack they were affected. They did not know what it was that took them over, nor that they were being held in thrall, but their faces and bodies told the entire tale. "I need to move closer to Alex."

“Yes, I think that would be a good idea.”

Danny headed toward the front of the room. She caught Alex’s eye and saw by his rigid posture that he, too, felt the coming of the Fae. The moment she reached the dais, she began to say the incantation to ward the immediate area. Once she was finished she saw Alex breathe a sigh of relief. He had been holding quite a lot in. The Fae were very strong.

“It is a heady thing,” Alex murmured.

“Yes, it is. You okay?” It didn’t hurt to ask.

“I believe so. I feel much better since you protected the area. Before, I felt as if I were about to jump out of my skin.”

She knew the feeling well. Of course, better the “jumping out of your skin,” feeling to the, “being flayed alive feeling.” When the mean little Fae got angry, their lovely power became wickedly cruel.

The doors to the great hall opened, and Danny watched with narrowed eyes as the Fae glided into the room. They did seem to glide effortlessly. It was as if nothing lay beneath their feet but a sweet blanket of air. Danny looked for Theraline, and when she did not see her, let out the breath she had been holding. Some tension worked out of her shoulders and she allowed the beginning sparks of her fire to recede and die out.

They were truly spectacular creatures, so beautiful to look directly at them was nearly blinding.

Danny wrapped her magic tightly around her. She extended her power out, making sure to encompass Alex and all those who drew near her in its warm and potent glow. She tried to take in the entire hall, but felt what the swell of power did to her, and knew she had to reserve her magic for possible use later. She caught Sabine’s eye and then saw the pretty *Airok*’s mouth was moving slowly and soundlessly ... she was casting. Danny was grateful for Sabine’s presence. Perhaps they would be able to combine their power to deliver a stronger ward to the hall.

There were a good many Fae in the hall. Danny could count at least twenty from where she stood. She cast her eyes across the lot of them and was sickened to see that one was more beautiful than the next. It really wasn’t fair. No one and nothing should be *that* beautiful. The group seemed to be led by a Fae of incomparable beauty. In fact, he was so damn good-looking Danny was having a difficult time tearing her eyes away from him. She knew she was warding strongly, and yet, he still drew her gaze. He had hair that seemed to glow brighter than the sun. His eyes were crystal blue, clearer than the clearest stream, and bluer than the bluest sky. He was garbed in a golden robe which was draped over his impressive shoulders, and fell to the ground with a sweep of bright fabric. His nose, the chiseled beauty of his cheeks, everything about him was perfect ... and then he spoke, and everything seemed to still in the vast power and beauty of his voice.

“Greetings, Alpha of the dual clans.”

Her ward was in place, and still she felt a tingling in her body. He was strong. His voice was beautiful, but it wasn’t like the beauty Savior inspired. The Fae had a voice that commanded, and Danny knew it was all a facade. It was because of this she understood that the beauty of his voice was made to persuade, even demand attention. It was not a soothing beauty, or a patient one.

“Greetings,” Alex said. He, too, could command with his voice. It was the inherent power of the Alpha. Of course, Danny wasn’t sure if his power would sway the Fae any.

He was a wolf ... and they were something entirely different. "How shall I address you?"

"My name in your tongue ... it cannot be pronounced. You may address me as Thorpe."

Alex nodded. "I shall address you as such. Welcome, Thorpe, and companions, to the Stone Claw Clan."

Danny waited, wondering if they had brought tribute.

"We come bearing a gift for our entrance to your domain."

Well ... how surprising. Although it was custom and to be expected, the Fae had not shown much respect for the ways of the wolf and the clans up to this point. She was indeed surprised they had brought tribute.

Thorpe opened his hand to reveal a shimmering stone. It twinkled as if lit by a thousand stars.

"This is *Eastelstay*, or *Angel's Kiss*, it is a precious stone from our lands. We bring you one as a gift for our passage through your territory." Thorpe waited until Alex beckoned him over, to proceed to the dais. Once he was a mere foot away, he offered the stone to Alex.

Alex took the offering. He stared at it, as if mesmerized by its beauty and many facets.

"It is truly beautiful," Alex said softly, still staring transfixed at the stone.

Danny frowned. The stone *was* gorgeous, but it was a frigging stone. What the hell did the Stone Claw Clan or wolves need with a dang stone? She'd probably end up using the thing as a paperweight.

Thorpe bowed his head slightly. "We have come a great distance to speak with you, Alpha."

"Yes, and I must admit to a great curiosity as to why you have made such a long journey. We have never conversed before. We have remained peaceful, and separate in our lands up until now."

"Aye, 'tis true, 'tis one of the reasons we decided to come and to speak with you. We believed it time we, of the Court of the Fae, venture forth and explore. We have been too distant and too removed from other matters," Thorpe frowned, "we have been too distant from others. Our seclusion has kept us in the dark and made transactions between the worlds difficult. A bridge must be formed, and we must cross it."

"I'd believe you a hell of a lot more if you weren't throwing forth enough Glamour to light up New York City right now," Danny blurted out. The moment her words were out, Thorpe the Fae turned the full force of his magnetic crystal blue eyes upon her. She remained steadfast, although she worked on fortifying her mental barriers.

"Do you have the right to speak?" Thorpe said coolly.

"I have far more right to speak on this ground than you do. This is my Pack, my *Clannahd* and I am *Roit* here." Alex had not yet spoken. Danny hoped his silence meant he wasn't truly pissed at her runaway tongue, and sharp words. A sudden chill swept through her and she knew, instantaneously, the Fae was probing. She could feel his curiosity and his need to see inside of her. It wasn't painful—yet. It was just annoying.

"And you would be?"

Danny straightened her shoulders and shot him a cool, level look. "I'm Dennison Lee, *Roit* of the Stone Claw Clan." Thorpe the Fae smiled. His smile was stunning and made his already beautiful face, shockingly bright and magnificent. Danny wasn't sure,

despite the beauty of his smile, that she liked it.

“Ah, yes, Dennison Lee, we have heard of you in the courts.”

Great, she was Fairy Court talk. The news didn’t sit well with her. “Terrific,” she said dryly. “Glad to know I’ve entertained you some.”

“Oh, but you have, you truly have. We’ve have heard many interesting things about you.”

It just got better and better. “Just who would be spreading this news about little ol’ me?”

“There is nothing that escapes our notice, Dennison Lee of the Stone Claw Clan. Even the evening breeze whispers tales to our ears. We are the Fairy Court and we know all.”

“So, basically you’re telling me you’re not telling me who has been carrying tales.” Bet she could guess.

Thorpe’s smile widened. “I say merely what I say, nothing more, nothing less.”

“God, you are worse than he is,” she said, jerking her thumb in Alex’s direction.

“Alpha, shall we speak somewhere more private?”

Alex shook his head. “Our meeting takes place in the Great Hall, as customary.”

Danny watched Thorpe the Fae closely. The stiffening of his shoulders was barely noticeable. Anyone else would have missed it entirely.

“As you wish. May we clear your hall?”

“Not entirely.”

“But of course.”

With one look from Alex, the hall began to clear. Moments later, there were only the Fae, Alex, Danny, Titus, Victor, Gregor and Sabine.

“These are matters better to be discussed in private, away from these eyes...” Thorpe said again.

“This is as private as my hall will be.” Alex’s tone of voice brooked no argument.

Danny made sure to keep her eyes trained on Thorpe’s face.

“I see,” Thorpe said slowly. “Then, we have matters to discuss.”

“We do.” Alex narrowed his eyes. “One matter I would like to discuss is what the Fae are doing encroaching on my land and bearing no right of passage.”

“The land belongs to the eternal mother, not to you,” Thorpe said smoothly. His eyes had become sharp and bright as glaciers.

“That may be, but the mother gives her blessing to my stay, as well as to the stay of my Pack. She shows those blessings daily. This is my land, given to me by her. Can you say the same?”

Thorpe leaned forward. His mouth had gone tight with what appeared to be barely concealed anger. “We of the Light Courts have graced the mother’s land for as long as the stars have been in the sky. We were here before you were even standing upon two feet, wolf.”

“Ah, but has the mother shown you her blessings? I have to admit some curiosity as to why you would take off to Otherworlds if the mother blessed you on this earth.”

“You presume much, Alpha.”

“Perhaps, but I *am* the Alpha here, and you are a guest, given passage by me.”

Danny sighed. This was going downhill fast. She knew Alex wouldn’t be a pushover, which was definitely a good thing, and she knew the Fae would be arrogant dickheads,

but she had hoped they could avoid any major confrontation this eve. Of course, avoiding confrontation had never been one of her strong suits.

"I do not like your tone, wolf," Thorpe bit out. His voice was still beautiful, but his magic was pulsing outward. It was biting and sharp, and definitely meant to cause discomfort, even pain.

Danny strengthened her own shields and worked on tightening up her fields to cover Alex. Alex had felt Thorpe's pull. She knew this by the stiffening of his shoulders and the way his mouth had flattened to a thin, sharp line.

She needed more power.

Damn it. She really didn't want to do this. She didn't want to rely upon any connection to her Dark Prince. This was her fight, not his, and using his gift only brought them closer together.

Another pulsing wave of magic hit her hard, and she realized she didn't have a choice. She was expending too much energy keeping a constant shield, and she had little left. She needed more, and there was only one place to get the "more" she needed. Danny reached down deep, and began to pull forth her internal flame. She worked slowly, making sure to gauge how much power came forth, and how her body was handling the flux of magic. It wouldn't do her any good to go into a magic induced coma at this moment.

The flame obeyed, hesitantly. It was as if it was upset that it didn't get to take over and show its full magnitude. It lingered just behind, ready to jump through and overwhelm. Danny wasn't about to let the flame take over. She was sick of seeing the charred remains of someone she had just burned. She just needed a little kick of power; she didn't need its full use—not yet.

"Casting, little wolf?" Thorpe said. He had swung his gaze in her direction. "Aren't you fascinating. You'd make a truly interesting study."

What? Did she look like an amoeba under a microscope to him? "I'm not a science experiment," she said, proud at how calm her voice was.

"No, not an experiment, a study." Thorpe's expression had turned inquisitive. "Not casting ... not exactly. Where is this power coming from? I can feel it ... it's not of this place."

Danny began to shiver. For although there was a beautiful smile on Thorpe's face, his words were cold. She felt him, menacing and intrusive, pounding at her shields and trying to break down her inner most reserves. It was a violation she would not stand for much longer.

"Listen," the unvoiced "asshole" was in her tone, but she restrained herself, "you're being unbelievably rude right now. Back off, buddy."

Thorpe stretched out his hands in a placating gesture. "You are right, lady. I could not resist testing you but a little."

God, she hated tests. They pissed her off. Danny looked around and frowned. Alex and his bodyguards were currently standing frozen, eyes and body unmoving.

"Did you do this?" Danny asked, and then wanted to hit her head. Stupid question. Who else would have the power to freeze the Alpha and his men in their meeting place?

Thorpe smiled. "I thought we needed a little privacy."

So he had taken it upon himself to freeze her companion, why was she not surprised? "You are really beginning to get on my nerves."

"I suggest you not get on Dennison's bad side. You truly do not want to annoy her ... although she is so easily annoyed," Sabine interjected, sweetly.

Thorpe's beautiful eyes swung in Sabine's direction. They widened and his expression turned to one of true puzzlement. "How is it that you are not affected?" he murmured.

"Not so quick to catch on, are you?" Danny quipped.

Sabine shot her a look of exasperation. "I am the *Airok*," she said simply.

"Ah, another woman of considerable power." He walked toward her, eyeing her intently. "So pretty," his tone turned inquisitive, "and what of your lineage?"

Sabine stiffened. "My lineage is none of your concern."

Danny blinked, surprised. She was unused to Sabine being so short and curt. Of course, she did understand, perhaps better than anyone, feeling uncomfortable talking about the past and where she came from. Of course, the change in Sabine's demeanor and her curt voice had now made her curious. Truthfully, how much did she know of Sabine's life?

"Something about you strikes me..." Thorpe's voice dropped off. He was still staring at her inquisitively. "You are her companion?" he asked, swinging his gaze back to Danny.

"Friend," Sabine answered simply.

"Friend." Thorpe smiled. "Friend. You say it so easily."

"It is easy."

Easy? Danny snorted. Sabine thought being friends with her was easy? Lord, perhaps it was time the pretty witch got her head examined.

"It is such a human concept, friendship. Only humans would think something so fragile, worthy of any thought. I would think you above such frivolity. You are, after all, the *Airok*."

"And, you are so obviously one of the Fae Folk. Your ego knows no bounds," Sabine countered coolly.

Danny almost applauded. Sabine had almost sounded as short as she. Quite a feat.

"I do not believe I like the tone of your voice, *Airok*." Thorpe's voice had gone icy cold.

Sabine shrugged her dainty shoulders. "It matters little to me whether or not you approve of the tone of my voice. You have no sway over me."

Danny watched as Thorpe's eyes grew deeper and darker. His mouth tightened and she could fairly see the fury wafting off his taut body. Although she was proud of Sabine for standing up for herself, she hadn't invited the witch here to taunt the egomaniacal Fae and possibly start something icky on Pack ground. That was her job.

"Sabine," Danny started, but was interrupted by Sabine.

"Yes, yes, I know." Sabine inclined her head and sighed. "I am sorry." She spoke to Danny, but her eyes were still trained on the Fae, Thorpe. "I did not mean to offend."

"I think you very much meant to offend, *Airok*," Thorpe spoke and his voice was cool, though his eyes had lightened. "I shall overlook the impudence of your tone, however, as I still have business to attend to and do not have time to tarry with a surly witch."

Oh, now that just about did it. Danny stepped forward, but was again halted by Sabine, who held out her hand and shook her head. She was right, it wasn't worth it. The

Fae was an ass, but she had known he would be.

"If you have business, then let's get on with it," Danny spat out. *The sooner you state your business the sooner you can get the hell out of here*, she thought.

"Yes, I believe I have learned all I need to know for now." Thorpe cast his eyes around the room and within moments the occupants began to stir.

"Dennison..." Alex said, haltingly.

"Alex."

"There is wickedness here," Alex continued, eyes narrowing.

There was definitely wickedness afoot, and its name was Thorpe.

"We have decided to reside here for a while. There are things we must learn about this land, and its inhabitants." Thorpe interrupted Danny's musings.

"And where will you be staying?" Alex asked. His voice was cold.

"On the outskirts of this area there are woods that meet our needs. This is where we will stay."

Danny knew the woods Thorpe spoke of, every wolf in the area did. The woods, part of a land preserve had been the favorite running place and hunting grounds for the area wolves for as long as memory served. Now the Fae were moving in ... great, just great. Mother help them all!

"Wild Green Woods," Alex murmured. "You are to set up your post in Wild Green Woods?"

"I believe that is the name of the place. Yes, the woods are exceedingly fair. In fact, we were surprised at how lush and lovely they were considering how base this land is."

"I have just about had enough of your insults regarding our home," Danny ground out. Her temper was rising steadily, and her hands were bunched into tight fists.

"How have I insulted you? I merely pointed out how lovely your woods are."

"Yeah, and then you just had to get in a little punch about how basic and base our land is." Danny knew he understood what she was saying, even if the look on his face was one of protested innocence.

"Dennison is correct. In lieu of the fact you are requesting our permission to take up residence, I would highly advise against insulting our domicile." Alex's shoulders were ramrod straight, his tension was apparent.

"Permission?" Thorpe laughed. It was like the tinkling of many bells. "We do not request permission. No, our telling you of our plan is mere formality, and more for your benefit than ours."

"You are guests in my territory," Alex countered.

"Are we back to that?" Thorpe snorted. "You should be gladdened by our audience."

Why the audacity of the stinker! Danny was well accustomed to the ego of the Fae, but this was a new high for them. Their ambassador was a real piece of work.

"And if I say no?" Alex asked.

Thorpe raised one delicate eyebrow. "It would make nary a bit of difference ... and I would suggest against it. We are not ones to cross."

"I am Alpha here!" Alex roared. "And you would do well to remember it! You are no longer in Faerie. You are crossing my land, my territory."

"I grow weary of this. Yes, in this place you are Alpha. Do you think your position concerns us? We do not bow to your laws, nor do we hold your countenance. We are of the light and air, we are of the earth and wind and water. Our power is supreme. If you

test us, I can assure you you will not like the results. As I said before, this meeting is a mere formality, one that was given to appease your strange needs and customs. A small retinue of the court has already established themselves in the woods, and there we shall remain until we decide otherwise.” Thorpe turned his magnetic eyes to Danny and Sabine. “You are both welcome to visit.” He smiled a truly beautiful smile. “I shall keep a small home in this place and move between our worlds. I would be happy to receive you.”

Receive them? Why did that sound ominous to her ears? Danny looked over at Alex who had gone quiet. He was about to snap. She moved over to him and placed one hand on his shoulder. She willed him calm, and could see the tension begin to ease from his body. It was not completely gone, it would never be completely gone, not with the egomaniacal Fae running through their woods, but it was better. It seemed “better” was the best she could hope for at this moment. She would take it. She was learning she had to “take” a lot lately if she wanted to remain halfway sane.

“If you disturb my people, my woods or my way ... you will find out what this wolf is made of, and how we deal with those who defy us.” Alex spoke calmly and rationally, and somehow it was deadlier than if he had shouted the words.

Thorpe acknowledged Alex’s words with a curt bob of his head, before turning on his heel and floating out of the room.

Chapter Ten

The hall had long since been cleared out. Only Danny and Alex remained. Danny had sent Sabine on her way, promising to meet up with her soon to discuss important matters, and put their heads together about the Fae. Somehow it didn't surprise her that the Fae were setting up their domain on earth (pissed her off, though). What did surprise her was their want to set up so close to the wolf clans, they were definitely up to something. She was going to have to keep a very, very close eye out for any suspicious behavior. It was clear to her there was going to be a great deal of suspicious behavior. Hell, everything about them was suspicious.

"I would deny them entrance, but..."

Danny nodded solemnly. "You cannot. It is annoying beyond belief. I'd like to tell them to fuck off entirely, but they'd probably retaliate by blowing up Earth, or something ridiculously dramatic."

"This is not at all amusing, Dennison."

Danny sighed. She was absolutely exhausted. "I wasn't trying to be funny, okay, too funny, it's just a little defense mechanism." *Wow, and she had said it.* It was a defense mechanism. She had just admitted it to herself and to Alex. "Whether we like it or not, and believe me, I don't like it, the Fae are here. It seems to stay ... at least for the time being."

"What is it they want?" Alex murmured.

"Honestly, I don't know. The only thing I do know is they're not to be trusted."

"Their proximity to the clans is unsettling."

He put it a lot more diplomatically than she would have. "I agree."

"We need a sentry at the border of Wild Green Woods."

"Definitely."

"I'm sending Victor."

It was a good choice. He was strong, able and quick-witted. He would make an excellent sentry. Of course, she wasn't sure how he was going to take the news that he was being "exiled" to man the post at Wild Green Woods.

"Don't think Victor is going to like his new position," she said quietly.

"It matters little what he likes or dislikes, he will do it all the same."

Yes, he would. It was the way of the clans, the way of the wolf. He would obey his Alpha in all things (unlike herself).

"And he needn't worry, he will be returned soon. I do not plan on him making his permanent residence there. I merely need a good set of eyes and a keen mind to keep me apprised of the situation." Alex's eyes seemed to probe deeply into her soul. "What's more ... I trust him."

"Of course," Danny murmured. Trust, yes, trust was very important these days. There were strange goings on and plots in the wind. You had to have those you trusted surrounding you. Which brought her up to an interesting question ... who did she trust? Anyone?

My ashleya, can you hear me?

Danny recognized Savior's voice immediately. Wasn't that funny, she thought about

him, and there he was. *Yes.*

Is all well?

You were checking in on me? For some reason the thought comforted her.

Indeed. I wished to know you were all right, my love.

Aw, how sweet, and mushy. I don't do mushy well, Savior.

Savior's laugh echoed in her head. *Yes, my love, I know this well. However, I wished to make sure all was well with you.*

I'm okay. The Fae are gone. They're here to stay, it seems.

Ahhhh...

Ah, what? What does, ah mean? Do you know something I don't, Savior?

No, my love, I don't. I was just startled and a bit taken aback by the news that there will be more Fae in our land.

No more than we were. Alex is sending a sentry.

It is a good idea,. We need more eyes on them. They are a vicious lot.

There was nothing about the Fae that appeared outwardly vicious, but Danny knew better. She had seen them in action and witnessed firsthand what they were capable of. Yes, they could be a vicious and evil lot. Just because they were beautiful didn't mean they weren't wicked.

Their convoy brought a gift of entry.

Oh?

Yeah, it looks like a paperweight.

Have you tested it yet?

Tested it?

Of course, my love, it stands to reason they would have done something to the gift. They do not do anything without reason.

Stupid Danny. Her only excuse was she was in the moment and juggling the meeting as well as Alex's rising beast. That was the only excuse she had for not thinking about the Fae that perhaps the Fae had bespelled the gift they had given Alex.

Do not be so hard on yourself, my love. You had a lot on your mind.

I should have seen it. I should have known better.

Do not berate yourself. Just fix the situation now, my love.

Savior was right. There was no point in beating herself over the head with it. She might as well just deal with it.

"DENNISON!" Alex roared.

Savior's voice cut out of her head the instant Alex screamed her name. "Yes?"

"Where were you?" His eyes glinted angrily and he was before her in two giant strides.

"Umm, here."

"Are you trying to be funny?"

Funny? Hardly. "No, you asked me where I was. I was here. I didn't go anywhere."

"You were not responding to my call."

"Oh," she shrugged, "sorry, I was 'on a call,' so to speak."

"On a call? Whom were you speaking to?"

Could she lie? She took a deep breath. "Savior was checking up on me."

"Your creature," Alex spat out. "He is always thwarting me."

"Now you sound like some melodramatic villain from the eighteen hundreds. Give

me a break, Alex. He was just checking up on me.”

“You would not come to any harm with your Pack.”

Were they talking about the same Pack? This was the Pack that had nearly killed her years ago, the Pack that still wanted to kill her. Normally she expected she was going to come to some harm. She was usually looking over her shoulder for any surprise attacks.

Better just to avoid the subject all together.

“Alex, where is the gift the Fae sent you?”

“The gift? The gift of passage?”

“Yes. The thing that looks like a crystal paperweight.” Alex walked back to the dais, and momentarily returned with the large rock in his hands. It was still as beautiful as it had been when Thorpe had presented it to them. Strangely, Danny was still unmoved and unaffected by its beauty. It still just looked like a giant hulk of shining rock to her cynical eyes. “Please, may I see it?”

Alex began to pass it over and then stopped. “I don’t think so. I believe I shall keep it. It was given to me.”

“Alex, I need to see it.”

“No.” His voice had grown cold and firm.

There was something deep and dark within his eyes and Danny knew right away this cold man was not the Alex she knew.

“You are being worked upon. We must counteract the spell. I need to see the rock, and determine how they’re working their magic.”

“There is no magic here. You are jealous of the beauty I hold within my hands. You are jealous. No matter, you will not have what I now hold.”

Her growing concern for Alex’s state was coupled with the glow the rock was beginning to emanate. It had gone from a shining piece of rock to a truly magnificent, brilliant star come to life. It was throwing off immense light and power. It was the power that Danny was concerned with.

“Oh, the hell with it! I don’t have time for this shit.” Danny strode over to Alex and wrenched the rock from his hands. The look of surprise and stupor on Alex’s face was truly a thing to behold. A moment after the rock was taken from him she could see the haze lift from his eyes. It was remarkable. It was as if he’d had a veil lifted from his face. It was that apparent.

“Merciful Mother, what is it?” Alex asked.

“It’s obviously been tampered with.”

Alex ran a hand through his disheveled hair. “I could feel the change in me. I could see myself as if in a dream, and yet I could do nothing to take myself out of the dark place.”

“So you were still ‘present’ when the rock claimed your mind. You could tell what was happening?” This was good information to know.

“Yes. I watched it as if it were happening to someone else. It was very disconcerting.”

“I’m sure.” Danny murmured, studying the rock intently now.

“Why is it you are not affected?”

Danny shrugged. “Perhaps it’s because of my own inherent *magi* abilities. I am able to withstand the Fae, am I not? I believe it is the same thing. Their magic doesn’t seem to affect me, and so a gift given by them would not affect me either.”

"It should not have affected me." Alex spoke coolly. He was obviously very upset with himself.

"Don't sweat it, Alex. They are powerful bastards. They take everyone over." Danny placed the rock on the ground, and stood over it. It had grown very hot within her hands, but that wasn't why she had put it down. No, she wasn't bothered by the heat (especially not since she had been given "the kiss") but the power the rock radiated, that bothered her. She didn't like unknown magic, and she certainly didn't like being the one who didn't know.

"But not you. They do not affect you."

"One of the reasons you called for my presence at the meeting is because I'm not affected." Danny shrugged. "We all have our 'things.' I guess this is one of mine." *Her ability to withstand evil Fae magic, big whoop, she was so damn excited she could scream.* "Alex this isn't a big deal." She wanted to calm him down. She could feel the tension return to him. Hell, she could see it. His shoulders squared and his eyes narrowed. He was truly furious with himself. "You were bespelled at the meeting. The entire room was." *Okay, the entire room but her and Sabine.* She didn't have to bring up this point, though. Somehow she didn't think it would comfort him. "We need to get rid of this rock."

"We cannot."

"Huh?" He couldn't possibly want to keep this evil piece of stone around, could he?

"It would be seen as a horrible insult to dispose of a gift of passage. You know that, Dennison."

"This doesn't count. This thing is *bespelled*. Who the hell knows what else it's capable of!"

"Then you shall find out."

"I don't want to get near the damn thing."

"And yet you touched it right now," Alex pointed out, smugly.

"Only to make sure you weren't sucked into its shiny depths." She swallowed. Okay, that wasn't the greatest thing to have said. Alex's nostrils flared and his took a menacing step toward her. Why in God's name could she never keep her fucking mouth shut? It's like she had some sort of disease—the "paw in mouth" disease.

"You will uncover its secrets." Alex's voice brooked no argument. "You will see what else the stone is capable of. We need the information. It shall give us an advantage when dealing with the Fae at some later point."

She already knew it was powerful. She could feel it pulsing from its place on the floor at this very moment. Though she was not affected as Alex was when holding it, the brilliance was startling and intense. She didn't like it. She didn't like it one little bit. In fact, she wanted to pick it up and chuck the damn thing at Alex's stubborn, stupid head!

"Fine," she finally ground out.

Alex raised one patrician brow. "You will do your duty to the clans?"

Of course he would bring that up. "Yes, Alpha. I shall do my duty to the clans. I will find out what it is you wish to know." She probably should bring Sabine in on this one. Two twisted magic heads certainly had to be better than one.

"You are angry with me now."

Danny sighed. "A little, yeah." He was so damn arrogant, bossy and plain out domineering!

“Why?”

“It’s just you, Alex.”

“I make you angry?” He narrowed his eyes. “Just being me makes you angry?”

She mulled over his words for a minute. Did Alex being Alex make her angry? Well, hot diggidy dog, yeah. Alex just being himself did piss her off—usually. In fact, there were few moments when Alex was in “Alpha mode” that Danny didn’t feel like ripping off his fucking head. It wasn’t just him ... it was what he stood for—the power he exuded by just being him, the power that was inherent to his station. She could accept the station and inherent power (sometimes) because she understood despite her dislike he would be what he was, he could be nothing else. He was the Alpha of dual clans and that was just as it would be. Yet, accepting didn’t mean she liked, or even could take the fact cordially or meekly. Her nature, the nature which seemed to be inherent to Danny, would always rail against those who tried to stamp her down or tie up her wolf. Neither her beast nor her woman accepted dominance games. It was about the only thing her beast and her woman agreed upon. They would not be caged.

“You will come to me in the end, Dennison.”

Danny blinked, surprised. Alex’s voice had changed its timbre. It was now low, soothing and melodic. She felt an odd calm come over her and immediately began to rebel. He was doing his *thing*. He was doing the Alpha thing, and she hated it. She already knew what he was capable of. Perhaps it scared her a little, to boot, to know he could, despite her resolve and power, still manage to call to her—that his power would speak to her mind, to her body no matter what. She could and did stand up to him, but it took so much energy, so much of her own power to will him away.

“You will come to me.”

“Back off,” she growled, taking a couple of steps back. He continued to come toward her. He was stalking her. Damn it all, he was definitely stalking her. “Alex, come on.” She tried to make the tone of her voice cajoling.

“Dennison Lee, *Roit*, you will come to me.”

Damn it. Danny felt her legs, despite herself, walking toward him. When she was standing in front of him, she leaned forward, breathing in his scent. She wanted to drown in his scent. She wanted to surround herself in his power, in the beauty that was his Alpha power and call.

“My beautiful girl.” Alex reached out and placed one of his large hands on her shoulder. It was warm and solid.

The endearment sounded strange to her ears. “Alex?”

“Shhhhh, it is all right. It is all going to be all right.” Alex drew her unresisting body flush against him. He began to rub her back, kneading her taut muscles. “Mother help me, you are so beautiful.” He stared into her eyes intently. “Do you know how long I have watched you, watched and waited?”

Danny took a deep breath, trying to find her brain, which seemed to have suddenly fled.

“You ... you ... you,” she began to stutter and cursed herself and him, “...you sound like a ... a ... stalker. In fact,” she shivered when she felt his mouth at her ear, blowing gently, “...you’re acting like a stalker. Or maybe a serial killer.”

Alex chuckled. “Ah, the sweet words you utter.”

“You killed West,” she said abruptly, and felt him stiffen. He had killed her friend

and lover. She had to remember he had killed West. She had to hold onto her resolve. She just had to.

"I had no choice," he murmured. His hand had begun to wander down her back. He molded the curve of her ass and squeezed gently. "You know I had no choice."

"We always have choices."

"No so true, Dennison. Not so true."

"Let me go, Alex. Please, let me go."

He shook his head. "I cannot. It is the one thing I cannot seem to do."

"Please..." And she hated that she was begging, but she was. She knew in the full height of his Alpha power (as he was now) she had little chance against him. Unless of course she exerted some of her new found power. God. She just might have to do so. The thought brought a small shaft of fear shooting through her body. There was still so much she had to learn about her power. There was still control that she had to master. She was nowhere near the place she should be to wield such awesome magic. "Alex, if you do not temper your power back, I will have to fight it with my own."

"Dennison..." Alex pressed a kiss to her neck.

Her heartbeat quickened. God. He felt good. He smelled good. She wanted to wrap herself up in him.

She was weakening by the minute. The closer he came to her, the more she smelled him ... the more she wanted him. Merciful Mother help her! She dropped her shields and opened herself up to the power ... and to *him*.

Help me. I need strength.

You need only call. It will come, and it will obey!

Danny took a deep breath. Asmodai was here, if not in body, in spirit. She could hear him and she was renewed. She had shut Savior out. She had to. His was not the power she needed right now.

I don't want to kill him, Asmodai!

Are you certain, my amour?

Idiotic question! Of course I don't want to kill him.

Your life would be much simpler without the added complication of the Alpha.

Simple? You think killing Alex would simplify my life? I think you've been stuck in the fire pit too long and it's fried the circuits in your brain! Killing Alex would fuck up my life royally.

I think you are over thinking things, my amour. With just a bit of focus you could eradicate the Alpha from your life forever.

Eradicate Alex from her life? Danny let out the breath she was holding and shook her head. No. She absolutely could not do such a thing. What about the Pack? What about the clans? She would destroy them all. It would not just be his life she was taking. Without the call and control of their Alpha, the newer and less controlled wolves would go mad, or wither away.

Whatever you are planning, you should execute soon, it seems as if he has come to the gates, so to speak.

Asmodai was right. Alex had divested her of her clothes. Holy Hell! When had he done that?

"Alex! No! Stop!"

"You do not wish for me to stop." Alex took her lush breasts in his hands and began

to knead them.

God, it felt amazing. Danny moaned and dropped her head back. She was in heaven. His hands were incredible, and she wanted more of him.

Amour!

Danny frowned. Someone or something was interrupting them. Why the fuck were they interrupting during a time like this? She was a little busy. Alex had taken one of her nipples within his mouth and began to lave it with his tongue. When she gasped, he bit down, turning her gasp to a hiss of pain and pleasure.

“I will have you now,” Alex murmured against her flesh.

Yes. Yes. She wanted him to have her. She wanted his hands on her, his mouth on her ... she wanted to feel him moving within her. Nothing mattered now except him. Nothing mattered, the world had disappeared and now it was but them, and the magic that was happening between them.

My love, remember, you must remember who you are! You must remember the magic you possess. You are not yourself.

She didn't want to listen. She wanted to *feel*. *Go away. Go away and let me have this moment.*

Oh, my amour, I would give you what you wish if I thought for a moment this was you speaking. You are not, however, yourself. You are under the thrall of the Alpha and you must come back to yourself if you are to combat him.

Why would I wish to combat him? It feels wonderful.

Sex is just sex. You have said so yourself. You will hate yourself if you do this, my amour. You will hate yourself and you will hate him all the more.

Alex had pressed her down to the ground. The stone was cool on her back and she arched against his seeking hands.

I don't have to like him to have sex with him, she thought. It hit her then as the words filled her mind, exactly what she was saying.

Yes, yes, you see now.

She did see. She had to free herself of this haze. “Alex, let me go.” She began to struggle in earnest.

“My beautiful girl. My beautiful Dennison.” Alex's hand had found the soft fold of flesh between her legs. She was slick and wet with need. “You are everything...”

“No,” Danny moaned, “no, we can't do this.”

You must bring it forth, my amour.

I'm afraid. And it was true. She was afraid. She did not want to kill him, and she wasn't sure yet how to control her power fully.” What if she did something terrible? What if she couldn't reverse it?

Do not think, my amour, just do! You have little time. Call on the flames, they will obey you. You are their queen.

Alex's strength was incredible, and Danny knew Asmodai was right. She had to call on her power. If she didn't do this thing now, Alex would have her.

All right, she could do this. She could control her flame, her newfound magic. She just had to concentrate on channeling but a bit of it. Not too much, she didn't want to burn him alive, just enough to send him from her.

Danny took a deep breath. She shut Alex off. It didn't matter that his questing hands had almost found what they were looking for. It didn't matter she could still feel Asmodai

lurking just beneath the first layer of her mind. It didn't matter that the Fae had given them a magical gift which could contain any sort of wild power. Nothing mattered but her. She could feel the magic welling up in her. She could feel the intense flames beginning to burn brightly.

Okay, now she had to focus it. It wouldn't do to have it come shooting out of her head, or something ridiculous like that. She had to control the flame. As Asmodai had said, she was their queen. They had to obey their queen, right? Damn it. She was *so* fucked. Already she was questioning her ability. If she questioned her ability, how could she possibly control it with any measure of certainty?

No! No! She could do this thing. Just focus.

The flame grew larger and larger. The heat was suffocating now. The fire was spreading through her body, incinerating, taking over. Her insides felt as if they were melting. Too much, it was too much fire. As if in a dream she saw Alex's eyes widen and his mouth fall open in shock. He sprung away from her, and Danny watched as his body began to smoke.

Shit! Her breathing accelerated and her heart felt as if it were pumping fifty times its normal rate.

Danny tried to take some calming breaths. She had to bring it down, if she didn't she was going to set herself on fire. She concentrated on Alex and tried to draw some of the power back to her body.

Ah, there you go, my amour.

Danny ignored him. She could not afford to be distracted right now. It was working, though, Alex had stopped smoking, and he was now staring at his body in bafflement and wonderment ... okay, and a little horror.

"Not too bad," she muttered. Who the hell was she kidding? God, what a mess! Okay, so she now could stop before the point of incineration, but damn, she was still miles from where she should be with this newfound power. Merciful Mother, she was directly responsible for Alex almost going up in flames, and that the room still smelled ashy. It was obvious to her now, when she was being worked upon by other forces (such as Alex's Alpha nature) she had less control, and it took her longer to pull her magic together. Who could blame her, however? How did one concentrate when their body was being torn asunder by warring forces?

"You worked magic on me!" Alex roared.

Great, one crisis averted, time to deal with the next. Danny laughed bitterly. Story of her life, trying to avert one crisis after another.

Danny got to her feet a little unsteadily. She could still feel the great shuddering of her body as the flames moved through her and tried to gain a stronger foothold. She was done. They were not. Even now they screamed and battered her shields. They wanted to come out. They wanted more, more of her, more of everything.

"How dare you!" Alex was on her in a second. His hands on her shoulders were shaking her roughly.

"For heaven's sake, Alex, you're moving the marbles in my head." Danny grabbed his hands and tried to pry them off. He wouldn't budge. "Listen, you were taking liberties."

"None you did not allow."

"Doesn't matter what I allowed in the beginning. No means no. I told you no and

you went right ahead and tried to force my hand.”

“I forced nothing. You were a willing participant.”

“Until I wasn’t,” she shrieked. “That’s always it, Alex. You never know when to stop. You keep going and going and you always manage to cross the line.”

“You are a fine one to talk.” His eyes were blazing with fury and retribution.

“Yeah, maybe I do cross the line sometimes, but at least I don’t confuse the issues at hand.” Of course the issues were becoming more and more complicated as of late. It took a lot of juggling to keep all of them separate and arranged in a somewhat neat order. She had to have some order in her life, right?

“You wanted me. Your beast wanted me.”

“My beast, yes, my woman ... not so sure about that one, buddy. Alex, my beast is always going to be enchanted by you. You are my Alpha and you will call to me as such. I would be a pretty shabby wolf if I did not hear your Alpha call. My woman ... my woman knows better. You spoke about me working magic upon you. But what about yourself, Alex? Lately you’ve been working a lot of magic on me! You try to sway me every chance you get. You unleash your power onto me and very nearly debilitate me to boot. Do you realize how difficult it is for me to keep my mind focused and concentrated on the encroaching Fae, and the assassins who seem to lurk around every corner, when you are bombarding me with your Alpha call? I can barely see straight. No, if anyone is working magic here, it’s you!” Danny took a deep breath, frowning when Alex began to shake. “Alex? Uh, are you okay? Shit!” There were great waves of power radiating off his body. She reached out to touch him and jerked back when sparks of electricity began to shoot out at her. “What the hell?”

“You are mine, beast or woman, you are mine,” Alex growled. His voice was deep and rumbling. It had lost its human timbre and Danny recognized the beast as it crawled out. “We are wolves, Dennison. If you won’t come to me as a woman, you will come to me as a wolf.”

Danny took several steps back, clenching her hands into tight fists. “Alex, you’re not yourself.” She could smell the forest, deep and lush, fill her nostrils. This was not a soothing, cajoling power he radiated. This was a power that was all-consuming and dominating. His eyes had dilated and were bleeding slowly to his animal. The change was swift and merciless. His wolf broke free and swept the man away. “Oh, Alex...” she murmured.

Alex’s wolf began to circle her. There was nothing of the man remaining. He was his beast, and his beast now stalked its prey.

The attack took her by surprise. It shouldn’t have, but it did. One minute Alex was watching, circling, and the next he was on her. His claws dug deeply into the tender flesh of her belly and she let out a grunt of pain as they broke through and drew blood. She kept her breathing steady (quite remarkable considering the circumstances) and focused on keeping her own beast at bay. In this situation it would not do to bring her beast out. They’d probably maim one another before they even got to fucking. No. Alex’s wolf was more interested in her blood at this moment than anything else. He was too far gone. The very fact that he had changed so quickly and so violently attested to this fact. The old Alex would have been able to push his wolf away.

“Fuck.” Danny grit her teeth as Alex began to nip at her neck. This was beyond marking. He was playing with her ... playing with his supper. In another minute she was

going to be mincemeat. She formed a barrier in her mind and worked on making that field a reality. She drew the field out and created a shield, making sure to keep herself on the outer side of it. She didn't want to end up trapped with Alex's raging beast.

Danny watched as her field began to take form. Alex's hold on her neck lessened and his claws began to ease. Within moments she was free (relatively speaking), and Alex was growling and snapping at her within the confines of the field.

Shit. This wasn't what she wanted. Danny touched her neck, her fingers came away red. He had bitten her and drawn blood.

My love ... are you all right?

Danny let out a sigh of relief when she heard Savior loud and clear in her head.

Amour, my amour, is all well?

She blinked ... okay, now she had both of them in her head. Okay, well, she could handle this.

Danny, is the Alpha all right? Savior asked.

Yeah, Danny kept her eyes trained on a pacing Alex, *all things considering, yeah, he's all right. I trapped him in a force field. He's sorta pissed off right now. Pissed off?* Total understatement.

Amour, speak to me. What has happened? I felt the flames ... but you did not use them.

No, I didn't. I didn't need them. I was able to trap Alex. Frankly it is better than frying him.

Amour...

Danny, do you hear me? Savior asked, interrupting Asmodai.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Danny muttered. She suddenly wished she had call waiting for her brain.

My love, what happened?

Savior, listen I just need a...

Amour, I am speaking to you.

Yes, Asmodai, I know, give me one minute. Danny closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Just then the phone rang. Danny began to search the room. Where did Alex keep the telephone? She found it behind the throne atop a marble table. Now, the question was, did she answer it? Both Asmodai and Savior were still strongly present within her mind, each wanting to be heard. If answering the phone meant ignoring either of them for even a minute ... she would take it.

She picked up.

"Alexander, you were to call me the moment the meeting ended. I have been kept waiting. I do not take well to being kept waiting."

The voice was smooth as silk, but held an edge of steel. It was a powerful voice, an unmistakable voice.

"Grand Dame?" Danny whispered. Her body had gone cold, as if she had ice running through her veins.

"Dennison?" Danny could see in her mind the Grand Dame's face, cool, collected and strong. "Dennison, so lovely to hear your voice again after these many years."

Oh God. She could barely form a coherent thought. She had frozen completely the minute she heard the Grand Dame.

"What have you done to Alexander?" the Grand Dame asked.

"I ... I ... what makes you think I've done anything to Alex?" Danny reached out to both Savior and Asmodai.

Ashleya? Savior asked, quizzically.

My amour?

I've got to go. I have a situation to deal with. She almost screamed when they both simultaneously yelled out, *what situation*. This was too much. *I'm going, now! Goodbye!* She cut them off completely.

"Child, what do you take me for, a fool? It is obvious to me, if you are answering the telephone that Alexander is incapacitated." The Grand Dame's voice came through smoothly.

Danny took a deep breath. Oh yeah, she had a situation to deal with, a very big situation.

"We have a little bit of an issue on our hands, Grand Dame." Better to give her the bad news all at once. "Alex tried to claim me and I retaliated. He's presently trying to gnaw his way out of a force field."

"He's in wolf form?"

Danny could hear the bite in the Grand Dame's words, and bristled. "Yes, he is."

"His beast has taken over," the Grand Dame sighed, "yes, yes, I was afraid of this."

"You knew? You knew how close he was and you didn't do anything?"

"And what would you have had me do, child?"

"I don't know," Danny shouted, "something, anything. The Pack needs him. Fat lot he can do when he's half mad!"

"Dennison, you will modify your tone of voice, now."

Danny swallowed, properly chastised and more than little afraid. If there was one person on Earth who could scare the living crap out of her, it was the Grand Dame.

"Yes, Grand Dame."

"Better. Now, as I was saying, I feared Alexander's beast was surfacing. I had hopes you would help him."

"Help him? Grand Dame, if anything, I've worsened the situation. He seems feral when I'm around."

"It is his beast recognizing the scent of its mate."

"I am *not* his mate," Danny growled.

"Child, this is not something you can deny."

"The hell it isn't!" She began to pace furiously. "I have free will. I can make my own choices. I do not choose Alex."

"Your beast chose for you, child."

"I am stronger than my wolf."

"Are you?"

Danny hesitated before answering. "Yes, yes I am. I will not mate with Alex. I will not be caged."

"This discussion is over," the Grand Dame snapped.

"Grand Dame..."

"You will listen to me, and listen to me well, Dennison Lee, *magi* wolf. Alexander Holt, Alpha of the dual clans petitioned me. I have taken his petition under consideration. I was to announce my decision at the All-Clan, but due to the present situation at hand, shall tell you now. There will be a *Lunes*..."

“NO!” Danny shouted.

“Hush, do not interrupt me again. You and Alexander will join, and you will take him as mate. I care little what happens after you have completed the *Lunes*, but you will join with him. Do you not care at all for the Alpha, child?” The Grand Dame’s voice had softened.

“Of course I care. He is Alpha.”

“Yes, child, he is. If you do not do this thing, you will lose him as Alpha forever. The Packs will have to find a new leader. He will roam as his beast forever. Only you have the power to bring him back.”

Oh, dear Lord. It was too much, too much to ask of her. “Why me?” She hated how fragile and tiny her voice suddenly sounded. “Why must I do this thing?” Suddenly Alex’s voice came back to her, “*she chose you for me, why do you think she did this?*” Why had the Grand Dame given her over to Alex? She had always assumed the Grand Dame wanted to keep Danny’s power separate from her own and not mix their power bases. Was there something more to it? Did it go deeper than that?

“Does your beast not recognize his, child?”

“Everyone answers to the Alpha, Grand Dame. It is inherent within us to hear his call.”

“Perhaps, but you, you are different. You hear his call as a woman hears a man, as a lover acknowledges her intended. You do not merely see him as wolf. You see him as a man.”

“No.”

“Yes, child, you know this to be true. You have run from it these many years. You have shaken off the mantle of responsibility by feigning ignorance. Yet you cannot run forever, as you now see by this current dilemma.”

“I refuse to believe it.”

“Again, you may refuse to believe, it does not change the situation at all. I am making a visit to the clan, child. I will perform the necessary ritual for the *Lunes*. You will take Alexander into your body and you will be the vessel that he needs. It has been seen, witnessed and it shall be done.”

Danny shook her head in denial. No, no, she could not do this thing. She could not do what the Grand Dame commanded. She had fought so long and hard. How could this be happening to her? She cast her eyes in Alex’s direction. He was still prowling around inside her field. His eyes were shooting fire at her. There was no doubt in her mind he was furious. What put her on edge was his fury was base and animalistic. There was nothing reasonable or human about him now. He wanted to rip her apart, and she wasn’t so sure he wouldn’t do so, first chance that he got. And damn it all she couldn’t maintain the field forever. Yeah ... she couldn’t keep her Alpha trapped forever, too bad. That It would have been a neat solution to her current dilemma.

“It has been too long since I last saw you, child. Do not worry. This shall be a lovely reunion.”

Lovely reunion? Try slow torturous death. “There can be nothing lovely about this visit if you plan to carry out this prostitution plan.”

“Prostitution?” The Grand Dame laughed shortly. “You always were too precocious and melodramatic for your own good. No, child, this is merely the way it must be. This is nature speaking.”

“There is nothing natural about this, Grand Dame. You are forcing me. You are telling me I must fuck Alex.”

“Crudely put,” the Grande Dame snorted, “but in a word, yes. Do you not see? You must take him into your body, Dennison. You must let him release, and you shall bring him back. He has tormented himself, ridden the wolf for too long and has not fed, not mind or body. This is the main reason he is lost in his beast right now. His is not, however, lost forever. Alexander, the Alexander you know, is still beneath the surface. He will respond to the call of his mate. He will hear your call, Dennison.”

“Let someone else have the honor,” Danny snapped.

“Now you are beginning to get tedious. You know he will not respond to just anyone.”

“I’ve done nothing but bring him pain, Grand Dame.” Maybe it was time she tried another tactic. “Every time I am near, he becomes a different person. We can barely be in the same room without wanting to kill one another. I cannot be his *Kyra*. His *Kyra* would bring him peace. I bring him nothing but misery.”

“Oh, child, you have just said all that needs to be said. You bring everything to him. Your mere presence brings out the very root of his beast. There is nothing stronger, nothing more telling than that.”

“Grand Dame...”

“No, child, we will speak no more on this at this time. I shall see you soon.”

“But Alex... I can’t leave Alex like this.”

The Grande Dame chuckled. “No, you cannot.” She hung up.

Danny stared at the receiver in her hand in horror. Shit. Shit. Shit. She drew her eyes back toward Alex’s prowling form.

What the fuck did she do now?

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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